

Towards Christianity Without Authority: Pluralism, Skepticism, and
Ecclesiastical Power in Selected Examples of Humorous Newfoundland
Writing

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Abstract

In recent decades in Newfoundland, a sustained interest in Christian symbols, stories, and values has been paired with increasing criticism of Christian religious institutions and agents. Newfoundland's burgeoning tradition of professional humour has reflected this changing set of relationships to Christianity. This robust young humour tradition richly reflects the ongoing pluralization and secularization of Newfoundland culture, and abundantly exemplifies humour's distinctive potential as a means of addressing potentially contentious or vexing issues. Yet, surprisingly, literary criticism has almost entirely avoided the prominent stream of Newfoundland humour that addresses the island's religious legacy.

This project aims to begin to correct this substantial critical omission, examining points of continuity among a number of works produced over the past four decades. It focuses on the works' embrace of political and/or epistemological pluralism, typically married to religious skepticism and to misgivings about conventional arrangements of religious power.

Chapter One provides an historical and critical context for the project, introduces subsequent chapters, and speculates on ramifications of the pluralistic current that runs through the works in the study. Chapter Two examines religious jokes in Newfoundland joke books. It emphasizes the jokes' overall tendency toward (an often ambiguous) religious conservatism, as well as the books' latent pluralism regarding interdenominational relations. Chapter Three focuses on journalist and playwright Ray Guy's often fierce satire of Christian religious agents and institutions. It argues that Guy's satire utterly rejects the legitimacy of religious authority in the

civic realm, largely on the grounds that transcendent truthfulness is often invoked as a means of justifying otherwise objectionable power. Chapter Four explores the ecumenical religious humour of columnist and memoirist Ed Smith. It focuses on Smith's playful efforts to harmonize Christian faith and practice with a measure of religious uncertainty presented as a necessary foundation for humane coexistence. Chapter Five examines Ed Kavanagh's novel *The Confessions of Nipper Mooney*. Primarily, it explicates and examines the novel's liberal favouring of the individual moral conscience, and the symbolic association of its religiously dissident and/or marginalized protagonists with elements of the Catholic tradition. Chapter Six discusses Berni Stapleton's comic play *The Pope and Princess Di*. The chapter emphasizes the play's presentation of symbols' constant subjection to alteration and hybridization, and its cautious regard for valuable symbols (religious or otherwise) that nonetheless become destructive when viewed as sacrosanct.

Chapter Seven concludes the study by considering the works' participation in political, philosophical, and literary/dramatic movements that problematize long-established religious modes and support a secular-pluralist outlook. It reflects on the role of humour in movements for change and on didacticism and popular humour as features of publicly engaged literature; it discusses other works of Newfoundland humour that approach religious matters from similarly secular, though less overtly political, angles; and it speculates on some social implications of the ascendancy of liberal, pluralistic values, considering these Newfoundland works in a more general Canadian cultural context.

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1. Introduction

This study explores contemporary religious humour by Newfoundland writers working in a wide variety of genres. Through my discussion of diverse works that respond to Newfoundland's Christian legacy, I address the significance of humour as a feature of these responses, and illuminate a range of themes and ethical perspectives that have been prevalent in Newfoundland writing over the past four decades. Considering a range of literary but also broadly sociological questions, I address the extent to which these writers reject the Christianity that was once so dominant in Newfoundland, and the extent to which they seek to preserve it. I discern which aspects of Newfoundland Christianity tend to be rejected, and which are embraced, as well as how these combinations shed light on Newfoundland's religious legacy and what they suggest about changes in the island's culture. I discuss the rhetorical effects of Newfoundland humorists' frequent satirical depictions of Christian agents, institutions, and beliefs, and the implications of this ridicule for contemporary culture. And I consider how the writers' use of humour as a mode of imaginative engagement reflects both the broader popularity of humour in Newfoundland writing and a particular set of relationships to Christianity. By pursuing these matters, I strive to account for the striking prominence of religion-focused humorous writing in Newfoundland in recent decades, and thus to begin to fill a considerable void in existing scholarship on Newfoundland writing.

Through their humorous depictions of Christian beliefs, doctrines, institutions, and agents, and of various relationships to all of these, the works discussed in this

study depict Christianity in Newfoundland at an ecclesiastical and theological crisis point. The secularization of Newfoundland culture is reflected in various ways and to varying degrees in Newfoundland joke books;¹ in Ray Guy's satirical newspaper columns and his first play, *Young Triffie's Been Made Away With* (1985; published 1997);² in Ed Smith's columns, his memoirs (1991, 2002), and his *Brief, Twisted History of Newfoundland* (1997); in Ed Kavanagh's first novel, *The Confessions of Nipper Mooney* (2001); and in Berni Stapleton's play *The Pope and Princess Di* (2004). Like many other contemporary Newfoundland works, those under discussion here are generally characterized by resistance to ecclesiastical authority and to certain central aspects of Christian theology, though they may positively depict elements of Christian belief and tradition amenable to other philosophical or ideological movements. The humour in all of the central works in this study emphasizes incongruities in the religious order and encourages an unsettled response to religious knowledge. Through their common emphasis on humour that instills doubt, the works are united by two related premises: they reject, to varying degrees, the traditional exclusivity of religious truth claims and, by implication, the notion that a religion can possess any kind of absolute authority; and they favour pluralism of one sort or another as a protection against authoritarian religion and as a prerequisite for an acceptable ethics. In this way, the works have been informed by, and have informed in turn, an ongoing shift in Newfoundland public culture, away from religious values and authoritarian politics, toward secular values and pluralism.

1.1 A Legacy of “Closedness:” Some Features of Newfoundland’s Religious History

A problem posed by Catholic theologian Jean Vanier in the published collection of his 1998 Massey Lecture series *Becoming Human* lies at the heart of this study’s various humorous treatments of Christian belief and religious politics. Vanier describes a perennial struggle in communities to balance “closedness, having a clear identity that fosters growth in certain values and spirituality, and openness to those who do not live with the same values” (65). Some of the works under discussion seriously acknowledge this tension and grant closedness some esteem, but the general tendency of even these works is to present openness more favourably. This tendency is perhaps a predictable reaction to Newfoundland’s history, which has been marked by a good deal more religious, political, and geographical closedness than openness. The spiritual and social primacy of the churches in Newfoundland, combined with politically abetted denominational antipathies and the geographical isolation of most of the island’s settlements, facilitated a religiously conservative culture within which “openness” was largely overwhelmed (Pottle 81-82; Rollmann, “Religion”).

Due in part to a dearth of other formal social structures, community life in Newfoundland has largely been organized around the churches (Webb, “Community”). The churches brought together strong traditions, familiar stories, and built-in principles, and most people returned to them again and again through the weeks and the seasons for religious and social occasions. The churches’ high degree of influence facilitated strong bonds within coherent communities, while also laying the

groundwork for the antipathy and abuse that has come to dominate many contemporary Newfoundlanders' views of the island's religious legacy.

In addition to their central roles in the lives of Newfoundland communities, Christian churches and agents have been prominent players in Newfoundland politics since permanent settlement began on the island. Government agents were eager to develop allegiances with the major churches because of their capacity to influence large portions of the population (Greene 273; O'Flaherty, *Old* 204). The churches, looking to protect and advance their security and status on the island, were often eager to embrace and, at times, to exploit such allegiances (Fay 52, 54; Greene 2, 8-9; O'Flaherty, *Old* 203-04; Rollmann, "A Brief"). Despite such mutual interests, the agonistic climate facilitated by the island's religio-political machinations came increasingly to be seen as unsustainable (Fay 54-55; Gunn 178-79).

One nineteenth-century response to perennial, competing demands for government-sponsored privileges was the birth of Newfoundland's publicly funded, church-controlled, denominationally segregated school system. Part of a broader movement toward equality of government representation that was designed to appease competing religious factions (Howley 233; Rollmann, "Religion"), the system served to further entrench denominational divisions even as it may have smoothed the edges of political conflict for the time being (Long 23; Rollmann, "Religion"). A second effect of the denominational school system was to strain limited financial and human resources (McCann; Sweet 56). Gradually, as Newfoundland's culture secularized (Rollmann, "Religion"), the system's shortcomings became harder to justify and its

social divisiveness came to be seen as more and more of a problem (McCann; Sweet 53, 56).

The decades in which the works in this study were produced have been marked by a considerable decline in the public influence of Newfoundland's Christian churches. Two widely recognized series of events during these years signify distinct changes in the relationship of the churches to government and public institutions in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador,³ and in the relationship of the public to religious influence and authority. In 1969, the major denominations in the province, except for the Roman Catholic Church and the Pentecostal Church, agreed to the formation of an integrated school system as part of a provincial effort to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of education in Newfoundland and Labrador (Wilson). This move marked the first major step toward the demise of the denominational schools; it might also be regarded as a sign of acceptance of a religiously pluralistic culture on the parts of the denominational proponents of the integrated system. From 1969 until 1998, these integrated schools operated alongside separate Catholic and Pentecostal schools. But in 1997, a referendum on the question of creating a single, public school system for all children in Newfoundland and Labrador showed 73% public support for the change, and led to legislation ending denominational schooling in the province (Dion).

Beginning in 1989, The Mount Cashel Orphanage sexual abuse scandal raised serious questions about religious authority and accountability, particularly in the Roman Catholic Church. A Royal Commission investigation into alleged abuses tracing back at least to the 1950s led to highly publicized criminal proceedings,

numerous convictions, and civil suits against the Roman Catholic Church and the Christian Brothers of Ireland in Canada (Carter and Blom). Public probing of the matter revealed that such abuses had been widely suspected for years but had not been addressed, apparently due to fears of confronting the Roman Catholic Church with such scandalous allegations (cf. Harris). The legal processes surrounding the scandal took well over a decade to conclude; during that time, these abuses were never far from the public eye.

The public-sphere secularization of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador is marked by the transferral of authority from the churches to the government. Through this shift, the “closedness” of separated denominations and stable ecclesiastical hierarchies is, in part at least, replaced by an “openness” to a broader public and to dissident voices. In turn, proponents of this new openness, as well the administrative structures that protect it, begin to treat with a kind of “closedness” those who would defend the *old* “closedness.” This trend toward a secular public sphere has been concurrent with Newfoundlanders’ and Labradorians’ decreasing self-identification with the province’s major religious denominations (a roughly 10% decrease in each case from 1991 to 2001), as well as a significant increase (37% between 1991 and 2001) in the numbers of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians who identify themselves as having “no religion” (“Newfoundland”). Though these statistics may seem to suggest a secularizing trend on a private as well as a public level, the overwhelming majority of Newfoundlanders still self-identify as Christians, and it would in any case be presumptuous to interpret aggressively the personal, spiritual meaningfulness of such declines. Still, it may be safe to regard such

changes in religious statistics, in combination with the support of a distinct majority for secular schools and signs of widespread indignation regarding abuses of previously unquestioned religious authority, as tentative signs that an increasing number of Newfoundlanders have grown comfortable with being members of a secular public, whether or not they regard *themselves* as secular.

The works examined in this study present the historical roles of Newfoundland's Christian churches in a variety of lights. While the works tend to be unified by their objections to religious "closedness" as manifested by denominational animosities and authoritarian ecclesiastical politics, they are less unified regarding which aspects of the island's Christian heritage—or of Christianity more broadly—can be regarded positively. For instance, Guy's occasional, scant affection for Christianity is largely language-based; Stapleton mines it for symbolic richness and ethical principles; and Smith professes himself a Christian and particularly praises the churches' community-building capacity. Both the apparent unity of the works in criticizing religious closedness and their divergences on points of praise are consistent with the pluralistic outlook the works collectively tend to reflect.

1.2 Contemporary Newfoundland Literature Confronts Ecclesiastical Authority

Newfoundland's village-based culture has had powerful effects on the island's contemporary art-making: an enduring "folk" presence in the growing body of professional Newfoundland literature, drama, and song has been profound, if also profoundly flexible. One aspect of this legacy of community-based creativity has been the grounding of most contemporary Newfoundland writing in a specific culture that is

much more than an incidental backdrop. Such writing has consciously engaged with the island's often fraught political history, and generally has reflected an inclination to criticize and to celebrate particular elements of the culture.⁴ Such didacticism has been a prominent feature of Newfoundland writing over the past decades, one often applied to the island's Christian religious legacy.

The emergence in Newfoundland literature of open complaints about Christian religious power is strikingly, vehemently marked by Harold Horwood's polemical novel *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday* (1966). The novel centres on Eli, a boy who grows increasingly disenchanted with the religiously framed parochialism, hypocrisy, and austerity of the novel's evangelical Protestant outpost community. Bullied by his father and sexually exploited by a locally stationed pastor, Eli becomes a student to several marginal figures in the community who represent the idealistically rendered liberal values of the cosmopolitan world beyond. Though Horwood's novel is singular in its unrelenting moralizing, a measure of Horwoodian indignation is reflected in most of the works in this study, and in many other works of recent Newfoundland writing. A common, basic struggle is repeatedly depicted, that is the struggle between representatives of repressive, usually institutional power and those who are subjected to their direct or indirect abuses. Some writers, such as Horwood, criticize the marginal or oppressed for complicity or cowardice, but, generally speaking, the greater demons remain institutional.

Aside from those in my own study, striking examples of works that reflect such a politicized pattern of margin-favouring include a multitude of sketches by famed Newfoundland comedy collective CODCO. CODCO's satirical representations

of sexually repressed, compulsive ministers, nuns, and especially priests, began with the troupe's inception in the early 1970s. The troupe brought issues to the stage that had long been tacitly acknowledged but were not actively addressed or redressed until much later. CODCO repeatedly depict church agents whose struggles with their own desires lead to abusive conduct. Such satirical depictions provide an illuminating contrast to the troupe's equal penchant for legitimating marginalized desire (prominent among these being homosexual desire). Together, the two strains imply that abuse often results from a repressive relationship with desires or identities that of themselves are, or ought to be, acceptable. CODCO's brand of religious satire lived on and evolved in a variety of projects written and/or performed by its members, most clearly in work by Greg Malone, Tommy Sexton, and Andy Jones. The religious humour of CODCO and its alumni constitutes a rich though scattered body of material of sufficiently unique focus, form, and impact to warrant a study of its own.

Al Pittman's play *West Moon* (1980; published 1995) reframes marginality by presenting mainstream members of a Catholic religious community as marginal to the real-world loyalties of the church and its agents. The play centres on a conversation among the dead in a small outport community on All Souls' Night, shortly after the community has been abandoned by the living because of an economically motivated government resettlement program.⁵ The local priest's advice to community members supports the government plan: he works to persuade people whose families have lived in the community for generations that they need to move away for the sake of their souls, since those who remain will no longer have a church or a priest. The rift between the priest's position and the people's needs is emphasized by the suicide of

one local man inside the church. In the eyes of many in the play's community, the priest and the church have abandoned parishioners—whose spiritual needs are seen to be callously exploited—in order to serve a government agenda.

In Liz Pickard's satirical fantasy play *The ALIENation of Lizzie Dyke* (1994; published 1997), the titular character attends a Catholic girls' school and finds herself falling for a young nun, who also falls for her. Discovered in an intimate moment, the two are then treated in ways that situate them firmly outside the purview of acceptable Catholicism. A marginalized figure who rejects the church, Lizzie embarks on a fantastic journey of discovery and eventual fulfillment. Lizzie's literally alien journey eventually provides her with a sense of belonging that was wanting in the milieu of repressive Christianity and militarized, apocalyptic capitalism within which she was raised.

One more example of Newfoundland literary didacticism targeting Christianity and centring on the marginal is JoAnne Soper-Cook's novel *Waking the Messiah* (1999), which has a female protagonist with a multiple personality disorder who sometimes speaks as Jesus. Abuse suffered at the hands of her ardently religious Pentecostal father prompts the onset of her illness. She has a butch lesbian personality, as well as a Jesus personality that who is prone to resentment, envy, and lust, and she becomes involved in an exploitative affair with a therapist. The possibility in the novel that this traumatized, stigmatized woman actually is a reincarnation of Jesus symbolically extends Jesus' identification with people who were objects of scorn and mistrust, as she embodies multiple marginal social identities including mental patient and sexual deviant. At the same time, her manifestation of Jesus casts a mocking eye

on his divinity by radically humanizing him. The protagonist “becomes” her father’s god, and presents this god as nothing more than human.

The works discussed above are diverse in their satirical approaches as in many other respects, but are unified by their critical portrayals of religious authority and their focus on the sufferings and the worth of religiously targeted or marginalized characters. The abundance of such works suggests that those in my own study participate in a broader literary pattern. All the works in this study seem to favour a decrease in the institutional and moral power of the churches, and emphasize the right of individuals to choose their own paths without fear of recrimination. Against a disfavoured religious centre that consistently leaves its margins struggling for survival, the writers in my study repeatedly imagine a pluralistic world of intersecting, sometimes colliding voices, in which the former struggling margins form the very substance of the culture.

1.3 Critical Context: “The Particular and the Different” in Contemporary Newfoundland Literature

Given the startling quantity and frequently impressive quality of Newfoundland’s literary, dramatic, and popular-press output over the past several decades, the general dearth of critical attention to it is striking and lamentable. That being said, a modest body of criticism on Newfoundland writing has slowly developed over the past three decades, more rapidly in recent years as contemporary Newfoundland literature and drama has acquired a limited cachet in Canadian literary and theatrical studies. Though it has received little critical attention, Newfoundland’s Christian legacy has

been a prevalent thematic current in Newfoundland writing, particularly in humour and satire. Such humour responds to a key element of Newfoundland history and culture, and substantially contributes to Newfoundland literary themes that *have* been objects of critical scrutiny. By addressing humorous responses to religious authority, my project contributes significantly to the growing critical discussion of Newfoundland writing. And by examining several works' reflections of a shift toward a pluralistic outlook concurrent with Newfoundland's combined modernization, urbanization and secularization, my study contributes to a critical discussion of such perceptual shifts informing Canadian literature and culture more generally.

In an article on the often institutionally oriented satirical comedy of CODCO, Helen Peters discusses the troupe's politicized, comic depictions of often complex struggles and relationships. Peters argues that CODCO's comedy emphasizes the legitimacy and the value of diverse oppressed or marginalized groups, focusing on their multiplicity and insisting that such diversity cannot be "absorbed" into the mainstream (17). Peters' interpretation of CODCO's comedy recalls Linda Hutcheon's focus, in her book *The Canadian Postmodern*, on contemporary Canadian writers' emphasis on particularity and difference. Hutcheon notes that "feminists and ethnic writers," as well as writers strongly informed by region, have preferred "the particular and the different" (175) over the generalizing and the unifying (which have, in the views of such writers, too often been conveniently deceptive).⁶ Describing CODCO's comedy, Peters adds "homosexuals," "the disabled," the very young, the very old, and a variety of other groups to the list of those with resiliently particular experiences and "discourses" (17). My own project follows upon Peters' and Hutcheon's critical

concern with the representation of various marginal groups. Hutcheon's "postmodern" writers have much in common with the "pluralists" in my study, and with the "pluralistic activity" that, according to Richard Plant, has increasingly come to characterize Canadian theatre (200). To the ongoing critical conversation on representations of plurality and diversity in contemporary Canadian literature, my study offers an examination of Newfoundland works that respond to the island's religious legacy in ways that are unmistakably region-specific, but which nonetheless reflect a broader pluralistic pattern in Canadian literature and drama.

Much of the existing criticism of Newfoundland writing focuses on thematic concerns more thoroughly developed within the better-established field of Newfoundland folklore studies. Elke Dettmer describes as "folklorism" the use of traditional culture by people who have "become conscious, interested and knowledgeable about their own folklore" (169). Critics have repeatedly observed evidence of "folklorism" in Newfoundland writing (though they have not named it as such),⁷ perhaps most dramatically via the self-conscious celebration of traditional culture in literature, music, drama and visual art that characterized the "Newcult" trend in the 1970s (Dettmer; O'Flaherty, "Margaret").⁸

While a good deal of Newfoundland writing uses "tradition" nostalgically, often as a grounding point from which to critique contemporary practices and politics (Pat Byrne, "Tall"), critics have also observed that much contemporary Newfoundland writing is politically critical without being nostalgic, drawing instead on other, often quite contemporary vantage points (O'Flaherty, *The Rock*; Peters, "From Salt"). Some such works can appear anti-traditional, anti-folk, or anti-religious (O'Flaherty,

“Margaret” 637), and frequently depict struggles against traditional norms and traditional sources and patterns of authority. Such prevalent regional struggles are centrally depicted in all of the works in my study.

Though the term regional has often been employed in literary criticism in a fashion that belittles the potential extra-regional relevance or interest of a given work, some critics of Newfoundland writing have regarded regionalism as worthy of detailed exploration, and have made questions of regional character, identity, or themes an explicit scholarly focus (Gingell; Goldie, “Al Pittman;” Kirwin). Indeed, this regionalist focus is characteristic of criticism of Canadian literature more generally, representing one movement within a broader effort among critics to provide reasonably accurate generalizations regarding Canadian literature as a national literature.

Wary of regionalist arguments—perhaps because of their frequently condescending implications—critics such as Adrian Fowler (“The Literature”) and Albert Reiner Glaap have discussed Newfoundland works through the lens of universal human themes, for which regional settings are the package but not the point. In these critical works, as in those with a regionalist focus of one kind or another, and indeed as in much Canadian literary criticism since it became a recognized field of study, broad themes are a focus and broad generalizations a goal. Nonetheless, over the last fifteen years another strain of Newfoundland literary criticism, which challenges such a generalizing approach, has become increasingly prominent. Such criticism emphasizes literary sophistication and the peculiarities of individual experience, and de-emphasizes or subverts large, unifying cultural themes (Lynes;

Peters, “From Salt;” Mathews; Fuller; Chafe). A critical focus on particularity, idiosyncrasy, and formal nuance now competes with a focus on regional themes as the predominant critical lens on Newfoundland writing.

Within existing criticism, studies of Newfoundland humour and satire are relatively scarce considering the striking prominence of these modes in a wide range of genres over the past decades. A few book chapters and several articles have focused on works by particular, prominent Newfoundland humorists (e.g., O’Flaherty, *The Rock*; Pat Byrne, “Tall;” Lynes; Méira Cook; Narváez, “Folk Talk;” Peters, “From Salt”); but aside from a meandering, sometimes illuminating book by Newfoundland elder statesman Herbert L. Pottle, no extensive study of this central element of contemporary Newfoundland culture appears to exist. According to Pottle’s *Fun on the Rock*, the power of the churches, of the government, and of the traditional economic elite in Newfoundland came to seem less immutable over the course of the twentieth century, and hence became more vulnerable to humorous jabs. This is a useful if rough analysis, which acknowledges important cultural shifts that have, at least, facilitated the open publication of irreverence toward institutions such as the island’s Christian churches.

Even more than Newfoundland humour and satire, Newfoundlanders’ literary responses to the island’s Christian legacy have suffered a paucity of critical attention, considering the abundance of such work continuing to this day. The spectre of Christianity in Newfoundland literature is frequently mentioned by critics, largely via discussions of the tragi-comic works of poet and playwright Al Pittman.⁹ Though critical attention to the employment of Christian themes and materials is neither deep

nor detailed in these references to Pittman's work,¹⁰ in such references one begins to discern useful patterns that are developed in greater detail in my study. For instance, Terry Goldie observes an occasional tendency in Pittman's and Tom Dawe's poetry to depict Christianity positively as an integral aspect of a traditional culture under siege, though not to defend it in religious terms ("AI" 202). Goldie also describes an implication in Pittman's poetry that "the concept of sin has been displaced. There seems to be no established set of values" (206). According to Goldie's interpretation, a moral anchor seems to have been lost, a turn of events that threatens to lead to a kind of amoral drift. Glaap describes tensions in Pittman's play *A Rope Against the Sun* between an advocate of religious conservatism and an advocate of "educational progress" (63). And in an article on celebrated Newfoundland author Wayne Johnston's first, comic novel *The Story of Bobby O'Malley*, Jeanette Lynes echoes Goldie's and Glaap's observations regarding such gaps, tensions, and cultural shifts. Lynes' article argues that the parents of the youthful protagonist provide him with two very different, mutually competing, and ultimately inadequate worldviews: one parent is an uncritical Catholic, and the other a virtual nihilist (144-45). In my own project, I explore writers' various attachments to Christianity, ranging from religious belief to a nostalgic impulse such as Goldie outlines. I also discuss aversions to aspects of Christian doctrine, to the churches' institutional practices, to the denominational school system, and to interdenominational antipathy. I further examine how the writers respond to the ostensible moral crisis Goldie observes in Pittman's work, follow up on Glaap's observations regarding tensions between religious orthodoxy and secular education, and explore different works' presentations of the intersection of mutually

competing, possibly irreconcilable worldviews such as Lynes observes in Johnston's novel.

Given its emphasis on history, legacy, and issues that haunt a whole "people," my project has a kinship with a slightly older generation of Newfoundland literary criticism concerned with broad, thematic generalizations. Because of my own longstanding interest in the relationship between storytelling and ethics, I am drawn to works that demonstrate an obvious engagement with, and implicit evaluation of, broadly held beliefs, attitudes, and practices: often, the kinds of works described as "thesis-mongering" by Newfoundland-based writer and critic Lawrence Mathews ("Report" 9-10). While my project consciously, extensively engages with broad "Newfoundland" themes (often in "thesis-mongering" works), as well as with even broader sociological questions, I make an effort to bring together my attention to literary, cultural, and political movements with significant if secondary attention to craft and literary form: particularly the appeal and utility of different brands of humour in popular, journalistic, literary, and dramatic works that engage with Newfoundland's rich, fraught Christian legacy.

1.4 Outline of Chapters

The Newfoundland joke books I discuss in Chapter Two include jokes drawing on many aspects of Newfoundland history and culture, among which jokes involving religious politics of one sort or another are heavily represented. Social dynamics in religious communities, interdenominational animosity and prejudice, and the roles and power of the clergy, are all recurrent subjects of these mostly lighthearted jokes.

Common joke characters include “long-winded preachers” (Burke *Five* 14), prideful or presumptuous clerics, local strays or nonbelievers, overly ardent believers, children undergoing religious socialization, and disseminators of interdenominational antipathy. All of these are variously employed in individual jokes, though the jokes’ collection and repackaging in the joke books tends to have particular effects on presentation.

Observing several basic joke scenarios that recur with some frequency in the joke books, I discuss prevalent representations of religious authority, as well as of religiously defined boundaries of acceptable behaviour and belief. Further, I explore evidence of renegotiations of such boundaries as the power and roles of Christian churches and beliefs have changed, and as informally circulating individual jokes have been repackaged in collections with more or less deliberately constructed overall tones, produced and published after the onset of such changes. I argue that Newfoundland joke books negotiate between the demands of inherited beliefs and traditions, on the one hand, and a burgeoning cultural liberalization on the other. I maintain that the books participate in a cultural shift, as a diversity of jokes largely arising from, and reflecting the values of, a religiously conservative culture come to presage the more obviously pluralistic tone of the works discussed in subsequent chapters.

Newfoundland journalist and playwright Ray Guy, whose apostate religious satire is the subject of Chapter Three, is best known for his columns for the St. John’s *Evening Telegram* and other papers since the mid-1960s. Having gained his initial reputation largely due to his satire of Liberal premier Joseph R. Smallwood and his

government, Guy remained Newfoundland's premier popular satirist for several decades. Well before he turned his hand to drama and a smattering of literary publishing, Guy was lauded for the literary quality of his journalism: for the poetic richness of his language, as well as for his use of fictional or quasi-fictional scenarios as means of commenting on current issues. Guy's plays sustain his propensity for biting satire, as his first play *Young Triffie's Been Made Away With* amply demonstrates: the title character of *Triffie* is killed before the play even begins, and her father—Guy's most sustained religiously satirical caricature—is a violent, pedophilic, lunatic pastor with an apparent fondness for killing and mutilating sheep.

Though apparently willing to target just about anyone, Guy has generally reserved his harshest satire for politicians or other authority figures. Secular and religious authorities in Guy's work are generally depicted in similar ways: such figures are generally autocratic and are often obsessed with their own, frequently bizarre, visions for the well-being of "the people." Guy is suspicious of any strong authorities, and of lofty-sounding justifications for power. In his satirical assaults on Christian institutions and agents, as in his satire of governmental politics, Guy displays a related fondness for the open clamour of clashing ideas that characterizes political pluralism (cf. Held 187-92). In Guy's religious satire, this state of affairs seems to necessitate the removal of God from the public sphere, because of God's utility as an ultimate justification for authoritarian desire.

Ray Guy's satirical interest in authoritarian religion is reflected in the theologically liberal, ecumenically minded humour of newspaper columnist and memoirist Ed Smith, whose work forms the basis of Chapter Four. But whereas Guy is

prone to a bilious, Juvenalian response and flatly rejects the legitimacy of religious authority, Smith's Horatian satirical responses are generally characterized by playfulness and mitigated by an appreciation of the ostensible benefits of religious life. He is a religious insider, good-humouredly satirizing elements of a religion in which he participates. In a regular column published in newspapers across Newfoundland, in two memoirs and a comical history of the island, and in his freelance commentary, Smith writes with a playfulness that suggests patience with human folly, a sense of being susceptible to folly himself, and a prevailing concern for social harmony.

In Smith's religious humour, a sustained engagement with moral and ontological questions is apparent beneath a rhetorical surface characterized by humorous second-guessing, self-deprecation, and contradiction. Through this combination, Smith gives religious matters sustained consideration while rejecting a firmly authoritative position. Smith explicitly embraces a broadly ecumenical religious outlook, complementing the rhetorical effects of his humorous style. He commits himself to his own religious tradition while remaining open to believers of other ontological accounts. To an extent, he is willing to live with the paradoxes, as well as the religious uncertainty, that emerge from this double commitment, though his interpretation of Christianity is such that the paradoxes, if not the uncertainty, tend to be minimized. Smith's overall rhetorical practice encourages openness to the possibility of religious experience, while encouraging religious adherents to consider the likelihood that their religious traditions are neither perfect nor complete.

The ostensibly vast imperfection and incompleteness of the Catholic Church in 1960s Newfoundland is at the heart of the religious themes in Ed Kavanagh's first

novel, *The Confessions of Nipper Mooney*. The subject of Chapter Five, Kavanagh's novel focuses on the experiences of Catholic youths from the fictional farming village of Kildura, near St. John's. The story begins on the day of the death of Nipper's father, and follows Nipper from this point, through his primary years at a small Roman Catholic school in the village, then through his middle- and high-school years at All Angels Academy, a St. John's school run by the Christian Brothers. The novel's end is punctuated by Nipper's graduation and by the death of Brendan O'Brien, a local eccentric and mystic who has become a mentor to Nipper. Along the way, Nipper has to grapple with his growing disenchantment with a church that seems abusively authoritarian and disinclined toward self-correction.

Nipper develops bonds with several other, mostly stigmatized characters in various stages of alienation from the church; together they develop a sense of kinship outside the purview of institutional Catholicism. The novel's episodes of lighthearted humour among its protagonists, as well as its clearly non-humorous depictions of aggressive joking among antagonists such as some of the Christian Brothers, tend to support the protagonists' alienation and their growing kinship. Through the guidance of Brendan and the practical examples of several young dissidents and outcasts, Nipper gradually comes to trust his own moral intuition, to suspect the wisdom of his religious and moral instruction, and to love the diversity he has often been encouraged to despise. Kavanagh's novel comes closest of all the works in this study to the liberal romanticism of Horwood's *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday*: human diversity is celebrated enthusiastically, while forces that hedge it in are, at times, virtually demonized.

Whereas the religiously critical streak in Kavanagh's novel is focused on external, institutional sources of oppression, the characters in St. John's-based playwright Berni Stapleton's play *The Pope and Princess Di* are caught in oppressive emotional cycles, which have developed over a span of years, and whose relationship to institutional sources is often indirect. The play, discussed in Chapter Six, centres on Bernadette and Diana, two women recently diagnosed with breast cancer. During regularly scheduled hospital visits, they challenge each other's accustomed ways of viewing, and confront their very different submissions to patriarchal pressures and symbols. They are helped along on their healing journey by several strange characters, including the titular pair, who at various times are idols, spirits, symbols, and projections. *The Pope and Princess Di*'s characters grow gradually and messily toward healing, through often painful confrontations between new, challenging experiences and the patchworks of beliefs the characters have accumulated and come to rely on.

Blending realism, fantasy, satire, and warm-hearted caricature, Stapleton's play is the most thematically intricate work discussed in this project.¹¹ The play satirically challenges prevalent social norms and entrenched symbolism while keeping a critical eye on ways of understanding that would sweep in to replace them. It sustains a cautious appreciation of traditions, and a critical focus on the inevitable limitations of any world view. Through its humorous explorations of the power and pitfalls of symbols, the play argues against the immunity to criticism or change of any object of devotion, and gives earthly needs primacy; it subverts the traditional Christian emphases on transcendence and service to the godhead by demanding

service *of* the godhead in the here and now. The play refrains from endorsing a facile ethical pluralism (its characters are not self-aware enough for this), yet it presents freedom from unquestioning deference to any source of authority as a necessary prerequisite to well-being, and implies that whatever one may think of it, pluralism is simply the way of things: people will always have to grapple with the challenging or complementary impact of other ways of viewing than those to which they are accustomed.

Throughout the chapters, I refer with some freedom, though also with a consistent underlying rationale, to a range of terms more or less related to humour. For the purposes of the project, I consider humour to be a mode of speech or writing that invites a pleasantly surprised response through the creation or emphasis of incongruity. Humour, defined in this way, constitutes an anchor for related terms as they are used in this thesis. For instance, while satire need not be humorous (as long as it is somehow artful or stylized), in this study satire is treated specifically as a form of humorous ridicule. Accordingly, I explicitly note occasional instances in which ridicule ceases to be humorous, and otherwise use the term ridicule to refer to satire. Just as I sometimes use ridicule as a substitute for satire, I sometimes use terms such as comic, comical, comedic, or funny in place of humorous, as a means of avoiding tedium; they can be read as synonyms. Other terms used in the study have a looser relationship to humour. Occasionally, I use playful as a term to describe verbal wit that may or may not be funny, but which reflects some measure of the surprise and incongruity by which I define humour. Also, I use critical and related words to describe an apparent authorial position relative to an object of either satirical ridicule

or earnest objection: a critical depiction *may* be humorous, but this is not the point behind my use of the term. Other, more specific technical terms are used as they are needed, according to conventional definitions.

1.5 Closedness Under Openness: Pluralism and Shifting Intolerance in the Works in this Study

In the joke books discussed in Chapter One, an emergent embrace of liberty and openness coexists with residual affirmations of the coherence and stability provided by conservative religiosity; hints of a budding pluralistic outlook are recurrent but largely latent. In Ray Guy's religious satire, pluralistic implications emerge through apostate ridicule of religious authority and a generally thoroughgoing skepticism. Ed Smith's pluralistic orientation is more directly apparent, and his playful humour, his general sense of doubt, and his religious ecumenism are obviously linked to one another. In Ed Kavanagh's *Confessions*, often scathing depictions of an authoritarian Roman Catholic Church and its ostensibly hubristic agents are contrasted with congenial depictions of a range of alienated protagonists; the novel thereby delegitimizes the church's moral authority and celebrates diversity. And the frequently biting humour in Berni Stapleton's *The Pope and Princess Di* emphasizes the gaps and contradictions that permeate all worldviews, and cautions against abuse arising through overriding confidence in, or attachment to, an accustomed point of view. In all these cases, the generally high valuation of individual freedom, equality, and diversity suggests the influence of contemporary movements such as liberalism, secular humanism, feminism, and religious ecumenism. An operative embrace of pluralism, common

among the works, draws together these various influences under one unruly umbrella. This embrace is evident in the works' rhetorical support of variety in both lifestyle and belief. Yet, necessarily if paradoxically, this pluralistic "openness" imposes its own "closedness," its own limitations upon the very tolerance it values. That is to say, any authority that would hedge in such diversity by disciplining and constraining non-coercive deviance is depicted, more or less on all counts, as intolerable.

Two interrelated strains of pluralist thought reflect values embedded in the works under discussion. *Political* pluralism describes a political system and political activity characterized by competition for influence among many diverse groups,¹² and *epistemological* pluralism suggests that fundamental truths (truths capable of explaining the nature of things in a general sense) are plural and often "incommensurable" (Talisie 2-4). Neither of these pluralistic principles justifies claims to religious ascendancy, or affirms exclusive possession of truth. Both share as an operating principle the notion that settling on a particular account of reality is not in the nature of human beings,¹³ a principle that also underpins humour, with its reliance on incongruities, disjunctures, and foibles.

For dedicated humorists, people's resistance to agreement is not only inevitable but acceptable and even desirable. In a book on the social roles of humour, Michael Mulkey argues that it is in the nature of humour to celebrate "multiplicity" (213-214). In the works discussed for this project, this multiplicity constitutes sufficient grounds for being suspicious of any claim to the authority to dictate values and practices. This is consistent with Pottle's argument that an increased sense among Newfoundlanders that traditional sources of power are not immutable has

corresponded with a rise in humour targeting these institutions. Concordantly, the works discussed in this study tend toward anti-authoritarianism, and to reflect a corresponding reticence regarding moral or religious regulation.

At the same time, several of the works explicitly acknowledge the importance of people's need for rules and limits. And all of them, to some degree, reflect such a need by favouring particular, fairly consistent moral boundaries. These boundaries are aligned with the works' general rhetorical support of the non-hegemonic coexistence of multiple beliefs and lifestyles. From such an outlook, moral regulation premised on anything but the now privileged principles of tolerance and openness becomes problematic, and certain outlooks can accordingly be judged and, in some cases, rejected because of their incompatibility with the ethical demands of pluralism. In the works in this study, Christian denominations' traditional claims to adherence and obedience, especially paired as they have been in Newfoundland with power in the legislative realm, are judged on these grounds. The works exemplify a tendency, prominent in contemporary Canadian literature, to defend the legitimacy of various cultural margins against the hegemony of centralized sources of power.¹⁴ Works by Ray Guy, Ed Smith, Ed Kavanagh, and Berni Stapleton, as well as Newfoundland joke books in their more mitigated fashion, reflect Newfoundland's participation in the imaginative construction of a pluralistic world, a cultural movement that has played a significant role in the development of Newfoundland's—and, more broadly, Canada's—current social, political, and religious climate.

Notes

¹ Secularization is a controversial topic among scholars of religion. Scholars question whether secularization accurately describes contemporary cultural movements, and argue about which contemporary cultures are usefully described by the term. Scholars also debate what the term secularization even means, since definition has become difficult due to the term's application to a wide range of disciplines with differing points of focus. These points of focus include the institutional influence of religious bodies, church affiliation and attendance, religious self-identification, and novel adaptations of religious beliefs (Dobbelaere); such focuses yield different answers to the question of whether a given culture is undergoing secularization. For a quick overview of some of the main issues surrounding secularization as an object of scholarly debate, see Karel Dobbelaere's article on secularization in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*. Major contributors to the scholarly debate include Peter Berger, Thomas Luckmann, Rodney Stark, William Sims Bainbridge, and Frank J. Lechner.

In asserting that secularization characterizes Newfoundland culture in recent decades, I refer primarily to secularization on a "societal level" (Dobbelaere). That is to say, while the works in my study address a fairly wide range of religious and ecclesiastical issues, the cultural trend which I observe, and which, I argue, the works support, is the gradual loss of Christian churches' and explicitly Christian values' influence in public-sphere realms such as legislation, education, and the media.

² Although in *Voices From the Landwash* the title of the play is *Young Triffie Been Made Away With*, in the advertisements I have seen for several stage productions, in most general references to the play (except for some that specifically cite Lynde's text) and in the new film adaptation directed by Mary Walsh (who was involved in commissioning the play and who directed its initial, 1985 production) and co-written by Ray Guy, the title includes "*Triffie's Been*" rather than "*Triffie Been.*" On a manuscript of the 1985 version of the play, the title is *Young Triffie Has Been Made Away With*, which bears a closer grammatical relationship to "*Triffie's Been*" than to "*Triffie Been.*" Hence, I have opted to call the play *Young Triffie's Been Made Away With*, though I quote from the version in the collection.

³ Throughout this project, I discuss only Newfoundland, and not Labrador. Labrador is culturally very distinct from Newfoundland, and is part of the same "place" only in certain, very limited ways. Hence, post-confederation Newfoundland is described as an island rather than a province. The province of Newfoundland and Labrador is only mentioned in discussions of post-Confederation legislative policy or province-wide statistics.

⁴ For an engaging chapter on the role of the novelist as an ethically engaged public intellectual, and on an ostensible contemporary rift between the culture of "serious" literature and the literate public, see John Ralston Saul's 1993 book *Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West*.

⁵ The 1960s resettlement program in Newfoundland responded to a belief by some that the traditional economy and population patterns on the island were doomed

to failure, and an attendant belief that some form of urbanization and industrialization was a necessary response. See Webb, “Community.”

⁶ This is only partly true, given regionalism’s tendency to generalize the regional experience; Hutcheon is clearly focusing on differences *among* regions rather than commonalities *within* them.

⁷ Such literary “folklorism” includes the literary adaptation of dialect (Kirwin) and of conventional folk-tale genres such as the tall tale (Pat Byrne, “Tall”).

⁸ This cultural movement, described by Patrick O’Flaherty in a 1977 article as “tiresome and patronizing” (“Margaret” 637), drew Canada-wide attention to the Newfoundland arts scene (Dettmer 172).

⁹ Pittman’s first, 1966 book of poetry *The Elusive Resurrection* set the stage for a preoccupation with Catholic Christianity that spanned his career. Pittman is, to the best of my knowledge, the only significant practitioner of religiously-focused humour among Newfoundland poets—though even in Pittman’s poetry such humour remains sporadic and mostly slight.

¹⁰ The vast majority of the considerable body of existing scholarly work on Newfoundland religion has been historical or folkloric.

¹¹ This assertion excepts Andy Jones’ one-man show *To The Wall*, which I discuss only briefly.

¹² In David Held’s *Models of Democracy* (1987), political pluralism is described as competition for influence among many groups, in an environment that is structurally receptive to their mutual contention (187-92).

¹³ In his 2003 essay “Can Democracy Be a Way of Life?”, Robert B. Talisse suggests, “[D]isagreement over Big Questions is *endemic* to the human condition,” and is not merely the result of the shortcomings of particular systems (3).

¹⁴ Canadian literary works outside Newfoundland that offer religiously focused examples of this tendency include Timothy Findley’s satirical 1984 rendering of the story of Noah and the Ark, *Not Wanted On the Voyage*; Louise Halfe’s “Der Poop” poems in her 1994 poetry collection *Bear Bones and Feathers*; Tomson Highway’s semi-autobiographical 1998 first novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*; Margaret Atwood’s dystopian 1986 novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*; Antonine Maillet’s *La Sagouine*, a 1971 first-person narrative of the daily life of an Acadian washerwoman; and Adele Wiseman’s 1974 novel *Crackpot*, a mythically infused tale of the life and struggles of an obese, Jewish prostitute in 1930s Winnipeg.

2. Agonistic Amusements in Pluralistic Packaging: Religious Power and Boundaries in Newfoundland Joke Books

2.1 Introduction

Despite the relatively conservative slant of much of the religious humour in Newfoundland joke books as compared to the works studied in later chapters, the themes and the targets of ridicule that dominate these jokes are generally consistent with those in the later works. In addition, the joke books tend implicitly to endorse a pluralistic vision of inter-religious relations that foreshadows the other works' more obviously pluralistic perspectives. A number of jokes hinge on broadly shared religious knowledge, treating religion primarily as an aspect of culture and foreshadowing the various attachments to Christian culture in the works discussed in later chapters. Aside from such "religion-as-culture" jokes, religious jokes in Newfoundland joke books are generally characterized by the playful negotiation of boundaries of acceptable behaviour and belief. Some depict power dynamics within religious communities, typically centring on mild forms of deviance, their relationships to power and to religious truth, the insights they potentially reveal, and the limits that are set upon them. Others emphasize differences or antipathies among Christian denominations, often using stereotypes that are sometimes undermined as part of the joke. The joke books' humorous depictions of the sometimes uneasy negotiation of religious boundaries reflect common religious tensions between moral

rigour and personal freedom, between faith and doubt, and between socio-religious centres and margins—tensions that variously underpin works by Guy, Smith, Kavanagh, and Stapleton. Such frictions were alive in the Newfoundland culture in which most of the jokes were created or adapted as informal, piecemeal responses to lived experiences of Christian religion. And they continue to resonate, sometimes with explicit shifts in tone and emphasis, in the joke book producers' calculatedly nostalgic yet latently pluralistic collections of Newfoundland's humorous heritage.

As a form of popular literature that bloomed in the 1970s, Newfoundland joke books have flourished on the island and abroad; Bob Tulk's first book of *Newfie Jokes* alone "is said to have sold 100, 000 copies a year for five years" (Thomas, "Newfie" 142). These books capitalize on the association of Newfoundland with funniness that developed through the twentieth century. Some of them openly exploit the "Newfie" joke tradition that began to emerge in the first half of the century.¹ The most obvious examples of these are Bob Tulk's and (later) the Tulk Family's series of stereotype-soaked books of *Newfie Jokes*. Another, apparently more affirming strain of humour is favoured by a number of Newfoundland joke book producers. The most famous practitioner of this strain is "Uncle" Al Clouston, though J.C. Burke is similarly prolific and his tone is similarly amicable. Clouston avoids peddling obvious stereotypes;² instead, he markets a myth of Newfoundland that ascended in the early- to mid-twentieth century, largely through radio personalities such as Joey Smallwood and Ted Russell. It is a myth according to which Newfoundlanders' essential character is hardy, good-humoured, and clever, and in which these characteristics have emerged out of—even as a direct result of—the crucible of Newfoundland's politically fraught

and often perilous history. Clouston's marketing of a preferred version of Newfoundland identity leads to fairly elaborate preambles to many of the jokes he tells, and to a tone that encourages the general belief that all is well in Newfoundland. As it pertains to humour about religion, Clouston's affable stance limits the extent to which jokes that are vigorously critical of ecclesiastical power can be included: such jokes seem largely to have been filtered out of his works through selection and presentation. This is especially apparent when one compares his books to the Tulks'. On the other hand, Clouston's general affability tends to delimit the conservative ridicule also most apparent in the Tulks' books, in which the mockery of marginal characters such as the unbeliever or, conversely, the enthusiast, is considerably stronger.³

While joke books are an often depreciated and dismissed form of popular literature,⁴ the subjects of their humour, as well as some of the stereotypes they exploit, are fundamental to the development of professional humour in Newfoundland. For instance, the emphases on power relations, institutional privilege, and abuses and moral failures among the clergy that imbue so much of Newfoundland's published humour about religion are abundant in Newfoundland joke books, though in a generally milder form. Newfoundland communities have tended to be conservative, having regarded much of the existing order as "sacred," or at least as "basic" to their lives (Anthony P. Cohen 115-16). However, they simultaneously have sustained a prickly, often discontented relationship with status quo agents (Taft 92). Most published Newfoundland humour in recent decades has tended to emphasize this discontent without being very concerned about preserving the values and beliefs of a

waning status quo. Instead, they prefer the pluralism of an emerging ascendancy. While Newfoundland joke books reflect some of this discontent and this emergent pluralism, they also tend—either as a result of the jokes’ relative intimacy with their community sources or the book producers’ own predilections—to reflect the conservatism that has been a prominent feature of the island’s religious culture.

Due to their formal ambiguity, jokes cannot be considered clear means of conveying coherent points of view. Yet joking *is* a prominent way of negotiating meaning, exploring difficult social or epistemological problems, and tacitly discerning points of agreement and disagreement. And despite the ambiguity built into humour, many jokes have obvious political tendencies. Addressing the question of what the jokes under discussion “do,” I speculate on some likely characteristics of their oral circulation in communities, and address the impact of selection, collection and publication in commercial books. Throughout, I quietly draw on some useful, general ideas from humour scholars Edward L. Galligan and Michael Mulkay, folklorist Diane Tye, and Catholic theologian Jean Vanier.

From Galligan, I have borrowed the premise that good comedy typically emerges from a recognition of the prevalence of injustice in human affairs, and is, in part, a means of managing the resultant rough waters (152). At the same time, I try to heed Mulkay’s caution against a view of joking as instrumental speech with social change as its object. Mulkay argues that those jokes least bound by status quo values tend to be the most removed from structured social environments, and therefore are constrained, in terms of their potential political utility, by a murkier context and less certain interpretation (176-77). Conversely, those jokes that operate in intimate

relation to “reasonably well defined social contexts” tend by and large to “conserve the dominant pattern of social relationships” (177).

I use Tye’s study of “local characters” in Amherst, Nova Scotia, as a reference point for my cautious speculations on the role of religious joking within communities. Among Tye’s hypotheses is the double proposition that the existence and narrative elaboration of “local characters” within a community encourage mainstream residents to find ways to accommodate difference and sustain a critical consciousness of power, while also acting as a warning to residents not to deviate too far from the norm, given that local characters occupy the very edges of the community’s idea of itself.⁵

From Vanier, I borrow an idea related to Mulkey’s descriptions of social joking and to Tye’s description of the dual effects of local character stories. As I note in Chapter One, striving to balance “closedness” and “openness” is, for Vanier, crucial to the creation and sustenance of humane community. He cautions, “It is not easy to strike [such] a balance,” and asks, “Isn’t this the challenge of all religions and of all Christian churches?” (65). This tension is at the heart of this chapter, this project, and the jokes themselves.

2.2 Restless Conservatism: Jokes about Power and Roles in Religious Communities

Vanier’s observations about the tension between closedness and openness, stability and flexibility, coherence and scope, are richly reflected in the large body of jokes in Newfoundland joke books that focus on social and ecclesiastical dynamics within religiously-defined communities. Patterns of depiction among these jokes suggest a

favourable interest in the maintenance of coherent religious communities, within which roles and structures are defined with considerable clarity and consistency. Further, the jokes poke fun at non-attenders and non-believers who (to borrow from Tye as well as Vanier) occupy the outer edge of the community's capacity for openness. On the other hand, the jokes ridicule the clergy more than any other role-defined group, and they make fun of religious zealotry as an apparent excess of closedness. Overall, a mild, slightly nostalgic conservatism tends to characterize those jokes in the joke books that depict religious dynamics within communities—but it is a restless conservatism, one which acknowledges the potential for abuses of power, and which at least toys with the potential veracity of a variety of marginal positions.

Many ecclesiastical jokes in Newfoundland joke books involve confrontations between clerics and laypersons. In most of these, the cleric is the primary butt of the joke. Clerics are routinely depicted as know-it-alls, as arrogant or uptight, or as morally pushy and sometimes hypocritical: traits related to their role-defined difference from their parishioners. In an essay on the role of the priest as confessor, Anglican priest John Gaskell argues that, historically, such perceptions have been reinforced by the behaviour of the clergy. Gaskell describes the clergy as a group “who often do understand yet greatly disapprove, who constantly go on record as being shocked or upset at how ordinary human beings live, and who as constantly give the impression of difference or superiority.” He argues that while “such superiority is a delusion[,] [t]his false impression is . . . often to be found among church people” (152). Jokes targeting the clergy in Newfoundland joke books tend to reflect a common attitudinal tension regarding clerical power, routinely depicting both

suspicion and acceptance of clerical superiority among the jokes' parishioner characters. Folklorist Michael Taft writes, "There is a long tradition of jokes in Newfoundland which show disrespect for important community figures such as clergymen, teachers, doctors, politicians, judges and policemen." But Taft cautions those who would overestimate such anti-authoritarianism: "[A]lthough these symbols of authority are laughed at, they are at the same time respected and feared" (92). Overall, clergy-ridiculing jokes do not generally condemn clerics or favour any kind of overhaul of the traditional religious status quo, as most of the works discussed in subsequent chapters seem to do. Rather, taken as a body, the jokes call on the clergy to merit their unequal power by constraining their arrogance, moderating their hypocrisy, opening themselves to their parishioners, and generally staying tolerably close in their practice to the virtues they preach. Such a call for clerical worthiness presages Ed Smith's religious humour, which is exceptional among the works discussed in subsequent chapters in terms of the room it allows for something like traditional religious arrangements. The sheer quantity of jokes targeting the clergy, combined with the admonitions implicit in the consistency of their themes, suggest that clerics have been perceived as having a particular obligation not to deviate from religious mores because of their ecclesiastical authority and their heavy symbolic identification with the religious life of the community.

One regular scenario in jokes targeting clerics is the comic, temporary overturning of status differences between clerics and laypersons via depictions of clerics' ignorance in matters in which they have assumed themselves superior. In one such joke told by J.C. Burke (himself a minister of the United Church of Canada), a

minister's moral presumption is ridiculed, and his scriptural expertise unsettled. He goes to a parishioner's door to visit, hears footsteps though no one answers, and leaves the following message: "Revelations 3:20 'behold I stand at the door and knock: If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to them.'"⁶ The next week the woman he has tried to visit hands him a card that reads simply "Genesis 3:10." He does not know the passage, and has to look it up later. It reads, "I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself" (Burke, *Laughs Along* #22).⁷ The minister's presumption that he is being ignored is false, and he also fails to recognize the biblical passage cited by his parishioner, who undercuts the normal expectation that he will possess superior biblical knowledge. Yet, this joke reinscribes the distinct roles of the minister and the parishioner even as it temporarily unsettles them. The minister's choice of a joking Biblical reference depicts a messianic perspective and divine power, while the parishioner's joking reference is earthy, taking the point of view of a human responding to the divine. If the parishioner gains a measure of relative status in the joke, it is contained within a role that is generally fixed. Correspondingly, the cleric's authority is not seriously disrupted. The implicit reinscription of conventional status differences is a common tendency among apparently critical religious jokes in Newfoundland joke books. The tendency to present the ecclesiastical hierarchy as basically immutable, though its agents be subject to criticism, anticipates Ed Kavanagh's presentation of the Catholic hierarchy in *The Confessions of Nipper Mooney*. But while Kavanagh's novel generally favours rejection of a system presented, on balance, as oppressive and harshly resistant to

change, the jokes, taken as a body, allow for the acceptability, or even the desirability, of submission to an imperfect system operated by imperfect agents.

Among such imperfections as they are presented in the joke books, clerical pride is particularly prominent. This is consistent with the observation of humour theorist John Morreal that “people . . . who ‘put on airs,’ who act as if they are richer or more important than they really are, and in doing so take themselves completely seriously” (67) are common joke targets. Burke tells a lengthy joke in which a local priest attempts to correct the behaviour of a young boy, who in turn inadvertently draws attention to the priest’s arrogance and stand-offishness. The joke’s ridicule of the priest is reinforced by the age and inexperience of its vehicle. Though the boy initially demonstrates a lack of mannerly finesse by barging into the priest’s house with a salmon he has brought as a gift, he is ultimately shown to be more considerate and generous than the priest. When the boy is instructed to act the part of the priest—to see how he feels when the priest similarly barges in—the boy responds, “Thank you son, here’s fifty cents. Give the salmon to the maid and come and sit down and have a bite of breakfast” (*Treasury* 98). Rather than correcting the boy’s impropriety, the priest displays his haughtiness and lack of gratitude. Given that most priests and ministers in Newfoundland communities, as elsewhere, have been from outside the communities they have served, usually educated if not born and raised in faraway centres, certain gaps between parishioners and their clerics have tended to characterize Newfoundland communities historically. These include gaps in erudition and urbanity as well as heritage and belongingness—all this in addition to hierarchized role differences. In Al Pittman’s play *A Rope Against the Sun*, such differences take an

ominous turn, engendering mutual alienation and suspicion. In communities less characterized by antipathy than Pittman's fictional Merasheen, relief of tensions brought about by cleric-parishioner differences might be brought to bear through joking about the gaps, bringing the cleric "down a peg" in a way that does not seriously disrupt the status quo, and might help community members to reconcile themselves to the cleric's unique status and unusual power.

Preaching jokes constitute a genre of jokes that clearly reflects the cathartic and conciliatory potential of humour targeting clerics. That preaching jokes have circulated widely and in great numbers in Newfoundland is apparent from their prevalence in joke books. They likely spread readily from one community to another, and have been heavily selected for commercial joke books, because the experience they describe is easily transferable. Preaching jokes contain an anti-authoritarian streak that could have a cathartic effect on people who might sometimes be frustrated by the cleric but who cannot change, or do not want to change, the status quo. Ted Cohen writes, "If your [anti-authoritarian] joke works, you will make people laugh at your oppressor, and if you are very lucky . . . , you may make your oppressor laugh at himself" (44). While "oppressor" is too harsh a term to apply to the typical butt of preaching jokes, the power relations and the role of joking Cohen describes are appropriate to a discussion of such jokes. Cohen's last suggestion is especially pertinent to the genre because such jokes tend to be more playful than nasty: it is easy to imagine clerics laughing, for instance, at their own potential for long-windedness, especially since the circulation of such light-hearted jokes demonstrates a willingness to treat the matter lightly.

Christian parishioners have not typically been in a position to control the length or content of church proceedings to which they have been more or less obligated, a state of affairs bound to cause passing resentment even among generally contented parishioners. The joke books' presentation of such responses presages Ed Smith's playful depiction of his youthful struggles to pay attention to his own father's lengthy sermons. In Smith's memoir *Some Fine Times!*, this struggle is shared by many in the congregation, and is presented as an acceptable, even amusing feature of church life. A concordant joke told by Burke depicts the grim endurance of one parishioner, followed by a surprising request. In the joke, a guest preacher preaches far beyond his agreed-upon time frame. The local pastor, desperate for him to stop talking, tries to toss the hymn book toward him to remind him that his time is up. The hymn book overshoots its target and hits an old man in the front row between the eyes: "As the old fellow was passing into a state of unconsciousness he was heard to say, 'Hit me again I can still hear him. Hit me again I can still hear him'" (*Treasury* 36-37). Like Smith's treatments of church life, jokes about long-winded preachers encourage their circulators not to take clerics or their faults too seriously. Such a treatment discourages too much elevation or expectation of the clergy, while also encouraging reconciliation to the cleric's special role.

Some preaching jokes recall the temporary status reversals that characterize the "Genesis and Revelation" joke and the "salmon" joke above.⁸ Some of these are variations on long-winded-preacher jokes,⁹ but a few, such as the following in which a Catholic woman responds to a Papal edict, are more doctrinally specific and obviously irreverent: "A priest was passing on a message from the Pope that no Catholic women

were to use the Birth Control Pills. An old lady in the back of the church stands up and says "He no play-a-da game, he no make-a-da rules" (Tulk, *Newfie Jokes* 22). Such obvious questioning of the moral authority of the churches, lighthearted as it may be in this instance, is unusual in the joke books, but comes to dominate the irreverent humour of most of the works discussed in subsequent chapters. In those works, questions about the power of the clergy are substantially informed by ostensible doctrinal problems, as well as by the unsuitable behaviour of individual clerics protected by the power of the church. However mildly, the latter issue dominates most of the joke books' religious jokes targeting the clergy, while doctrinal issues are left largely unbroached. Overall, the joke books tend, in their depictions of clerics, to emphasize common tensions, mixed feelings, and miscommunications that have as much to do with community life, institutions, and power as they do with religious beliefs.

Such earthly concerns seem to underpin the ambiguity of the joke books' presentation of local clerics, who are sometimes depicted as haughty, and sometimes as down-to-earth, often depending upon the particular interactions in question. Like the above jokes targeting local clerics, jokes that depict relationships between parish-level clerics and their ecclesiastical superiors turn on the power and status of the clergy. But jokes depicting relations within the clerical ranks tend to ennoble parish clerics based on their day-to-day association with parishioners, while bishops are placed in a position akin to that occupied by the parish cleric in the above jokes. In a joke of this sort told by Clouston, a bishop informs a vicar of his upcoming visit to the parish. The appointed Sunday comes and only three people are in church. The bishop

asks, “Did you let it be known that I was coming?” The vicar responds, “No, but it seems the word got around” (*When* 94). In another Clouston joke, a Bishop’s self-importance is similarly attacked through Father Coady, a short-tempered southern-shore priest who is not happy to receive visits from the Bishop.¹⁰ The Bishop bemoans the lack of indoor plumbing at Father Coady’s rectory, and tells him, “the next time I come to visit you, you have the plumbing in.” Father Coady does as he is told, and after the Bishop visits again Father Coady sends him the bill. The Bishop indignantly returns it, but Father Coady sends it again, with the following note: “I didn’t want it. You wanted it. You used it. You pay for it” (*Come ‘Ere*). Senior clerics in the joke books are usually prideful, out of touch, and presumptuous, while local clerics may sometimes embody these traits but at other times are depicted in solidarity with parishioners, over and against bishops. On the one hand, parish clerics are objects of scrutiny and a paradoxical blend of suspicion and reverence that draws attention to gaps between the cleric and parishioners. On the other hand, they are social and spiritual advocates who know their parishioners and their needs reasonably well, and who may be seen to protect their interests in the face of remote, largely alien ecclesiastical structures and agents. While the open religious alienation that characterizes much of the work discussed in the following chapters is not similarly perceivable in the joke books, one can discern in them a measure of consternation regarding ecclesiastical power, specifically as it combines with a perception of gaps in point of view among the ranks within religious hierarchies, from bishops (where they exist) down to parishioners. Problematic combinations of religious power, inability to

relate to parishioners, and clerical attitude problems, are frequently depicted in the more openly critical works discussed in subsequent chapters.

The relatively small number of clergy-layperson jokes in which a layperson is the primary butt complement the conservative, conciliatory undercurrent of many jokes targeting the clergy. Jokes targeting parishioners typically emphasize a parishioner's ignorance or self-importance. Most such jokes gently affirm parishioners' place in the religious ranks, upholding the special status of the cleric and, thereby, the authority of the church.

Clouston (*I'se the B'y* 95) and Burke (*Treasury* 117) tell similar jokes in which the special status of the cleric is affirmed. The joke centres on a church meeting in which the prospect of a new chandelier for the sanctuary is discussed. In Clouston's version, the minister makes the proposal, to which the chair of the board responds, "I don't think the board will recommend that, Reverend, and for three reasons. In the first place none of us could spell it. In the second place if we got one, there's no one could play it. And in the third place what this church really needs is better light" (Clouston *I'se the B'y* 95). Given that the chair's position signifies his importance in the life of the church, distinctions among laypersons submit to a hierarchized division between the cleric and laypersons. The minister's status is positively linked to his apparent sophistication and arcane knowledge, while even a layperson with high status in the church community is characterized as a relative rustic, ignorant outside the realm of immediate concerns. At the same time, a typical, contrary undercurrent may be discerned, reflecting the dual-direction ridicule so common in the joke books. Here,

the minister's own haughtiness in proposing a fancy, foreign-sounding "chandelier" instead of a more basic, familiar light source may be an implicit target.

In addition to ignorance, moral flaws are used to target parishioners. Among moral targets, the most common is arrogance, just as it is in jokes targeting clerics. The joke books tend to suggest that a sense of humility regarding one's place is an appropriate standard for clerics and laypersons alike. Accordingly, Clouston tells a joke that targets a self-important parishioner who hopes to buy his way into heaven through generous donations to the church. He asks the minister how much more he needs to give in order to be assured his eternal reward. The minister goes home to think about it, and tells the man a few weeks later that the amount is twenty-five thousand dollars. Then he adds, "One more thing. Be ready next Saturday" (*When* 5). The joke contains no real implication that the minister is prescient regarding the man's fate—the suggestion seems to be strategic, designed to humble the parishioner, to bring in money for the church, or simply to entertain the minister himself. Intriguingly, the joke favours the minister's disingenuous response to the parishioner's spiritual pride. The minister's display of one apparent virtue (prescience) suggests different actual virtues: possibly charity, but definitely cleverness, as distinct from any moral merit. However one interprets the minister's motivation, the joke's appeal is based largely on a sense that the parishioner "had it coming." The cleric is elevated because he is, above all, clever enough to be the vehicle of a self-important man's come-uppance. A widely recognized political fatalism has characterized the culture of Newfoundland's working classes for centuries. Historian after historian has noted the common belief that little could (or, according to Anthony P. Cohen's study of one

community's political attitude, *ought* to) be done to disrupt the status quo.

Extrapolating from this generalized resignation, it is easy to see how a self-important parishioner could be an object of ridicule, just as the arrogance of parish-level clerics is humorously targeted while their connectedness and groundedness—their proper place one small step up from their parishioners—is celebrated in jokes targeting their haughty ecclesiastical superiors.

Some of the playful explorations of standards and statuses dramatized in the above jokes are at their clearest in jokes involving clerics' interactions with strays and/or unbelievers. In these jokes, the cleric occupies one marginal space (paradoxically, since they are also, in some sense, at the "centre" of the community), and the stray occupies an opposite, more obvious marginal space. These jokes are especially resonant in consideration of the emphasis on religiously marginal characters in Kavanagh's *Confessions*, but their playful dramatizations of boundaries, and of associated tensions between doctrine and individual perception, presage all the subsequent works in this study. Because of their marginal social location, the strays in clergy-stray jokes make particularly good vehicles for ridicule directed at the cleric. Conversely, the cleric can be used to ridicule moral or religious deviance, as a way of defining social boundaries and standards. As they appear in Newfoundland joke books, clergy-stray jokes are typically characterized by dual-direction ridicule, targeting figures on opposite margins of the ostensibly normal, and upholding a standard that is more socially than religiously conservative.

A staple interaction in clergy-stray jokes is the confrontation between a cleric and a church non-attender whose deviation consists of non-attendance itself rather

than any active sin or obvious lack of belief. Later, Kavanagh critically emphasizes the social rather than the religious motivation that might underpin such a concern about church non-attendance. In *The Confessions*, expressions of concern regarding one character's non-attendance transparently reflect a generalized anxiety about social deviance that is not treated with much sympathy. Clergy-stray jokes in the joke books, on the contrary, tend to gently imply that those who stray are rightfully brought back into the fold, though the common thread of dual-direction ridicule is usually discernible. In one joke, a "rather truant" parishioner who tells the minister he avoids church because it is full of hypocrites is rebuked by the minister, who tells him, "There is always room for one more" (Burke, *Treasury* 145). While this joke legitimates the parishioner's observation (church is full of hypocrites), it deflates the parishioner's use of this observation as an excuse for non-attendance, especially considering the joke's circulation among people immersed in a Christian world-view. That is, church is a place *of* and *for* hypocrites, as well as all other manners of sinners, so the presence of hypocrites in the church, far from being a reason to avoid it, may be interpreted as evidence that the church is functioning properly.

Another clergy-stray joke depicts the unqualified religious confidence of an evangelist challenged by an atheist at an open-air meeting. This joke combines a measure of religious conservatism with an undercurrent of anti-fundamentalist ridicule that legitimates a measure of religious doubt. Implying that normal religiosity occupies a moderate middle ground between no belief and no doubt, the joke focuses on figures who reflect these two poles. It has implications for what might be seen as a normal level of religiosity, and sets the stage for Kavanagh's critical depictions of an

ostensible “normal-is-good” fallacy. The atheist asks the evangelist if he truly believes Jonah was swallowed by a whale. When the evangelist affirms this belief, he is pressed about the possibility of such an occurrence. The evangelist responds,

“When I go to heaven I will ask Jonah.”

“But supposing he’s not there?”

“Then *you* will have to ask him.” (Clouston, *Best* 67)

While the strength of the evangelist’s belief might be regarded as a virtue, its ardency and detail is likely to be perceived as ridiculous, especially since it is paired with two unkind character traits. One is the pleasure the evangelist appears to derive from the prospect of the atheist’s eternal punishment in hell (marked in the book by the italicized “*you*”); the other is his greater apparent confidence in his own heavenly destiny than in Jonah’s. Like other jokes discussed in this chapter, this one stands as a reminder that while jokes may have ideological, religious, or social tendencies, joking grounded in social dynamics is typically characterized by an ambiguity that discourages those who would scrutinize such jokes for their possible social utility (as I do) from seeking an unproblematically instrumentalist view. Instead, such jokes invite consideration more in terms of their capacity to express possibly controversial positions or to release social or political anxieties in a lighthearted and ambiguous, and therefore relatively self-protecting, form. This lightheartedness and ambiguity might also be seen as a means of playfully exploring vexing issues with others, undercutting the urgency that might otherwise attend such questions while also discerning points of agreement and in-group dissent in a relatively safe fashion (Norrick 105-06). If, for instance, one considers ardent faith and ardent unbelief as opposite, possibly true

positions with considerable implications for the individual and the community, the circulation of jokes that express these possibilities provides an opportunity to acknowledge the potential truthfulness or falsehood of either or both. In turn, attendant anxieties about whether believers are living a lie or, conversely, whether nonbelievers are in fact endangering their eternal souls, could be acknowledged and also relieved for the time being in a moment of shared laughter at those with no doubt, and at those who doubt unreservedly. In a sense, such jokes are a way of managing anxieties about what lies beyond the edges of a socially accepted range of perceptions, in order, in all likelihood, to preserve the relative security of the status quo (cf. Mulkey 216).

Like clergy-stray jokes, jokes involving children in Newfoundland joke books hinge on the status of members of the religious community who are peripheral either in terms of their beliefs or their relationship to the community. Religious jokes about children mostly present children's cognitive foibles as cute deviations from standards of religious truth, deviations which in all likelihood will be corrected in the course of time. Yet some such jokes echo clergy-stray jokes' undercurrent of religious doubt, and some largely dispense with cuteness in order to depict less benign relations of influence and authority in religious communities.

In some jokes that affirm the social and spiritual worth of mainstream religious beliefs and moral values, children already have an intuitive grasp of the Christian values in which they will be further initiated. Moore tells such a joke, in which a young girl comes home from Sunday School and is asked by her mother, Winnie, what she has learned:

“I learned that you are going to heaven to be with Jesus,” said the little girl.

“What do you mean,” asked he [sic] mother?

“Well,” said the girl, “they said it in a song: Winnie cometh, Winnie cometh, to make up his jewels.” (80)

The joke implies that the girl’s unwitting re-write is admirable if erroneous. Similarly affirming the social and religious duty to honour one’s parents is the surprising response of one joke’s young protagonist to her Sunday School teacher’s question regarding “who would like to go to Heaven.” The girl does not raise her hand, and the teacher asks,

“Why Linda, why wouldn’t you like to go to Heaven?”

“Because my Mommy said to come straight home after Sunday School.” (Clouston, *I’s e the B’y* 53)

While these girls’ honouring of their mothers veers toward a violation of the first commandment (Exod. 20.3),¹¹ both girls are shown to have an intuitive understanding of the fifth commandment (Exod. 20.12).¹² Their follies are presented in a warm light in which children are naturally disposed toward the good. All is well in the world of these jokes: the cuteness and benevolence of children, and the social and spiritual worth of the familial and religious status quo, are affirmed.

Some religious jokes about children hinge on the question of God’s presence. These lack the moralistic connotation of the above jokes, and recall the playful ontological undercurrent of jokes involving nonbelievers. In one such joke, a boy tells the Sunday School superintendent that God lives in his bathroom. When asked why he

believes this, he responds, “Cuz every morning in our house, Dad comes and bangs on the bathroom door and shouts, ‘GOOD LORD! ARE YOU STILL IN THERE?’” (Clouston, *Best* 40). In another God-in-the-bathroom joke, a girl interrogates her mother on the question of the omnipresence of God, specifically God’s immediate presence in the room. When assured that God is in the bathtub with her, she pulls the plug and says, “Oops! There He goes down the drain” (Clouston, *When* 78). Jokes in which children tackle the mystery of God’s presence hold potentially unsettling belief questions within amusing, comfortingly ambiguous scenes, through which ontological questions can be acknowledged and also put to rest for the time being, without risking the discomfort or unsettlement that might arise from open questions.

In a third variety of childhood-innocence jokes, children’s perspectives are potentially unsettling, presenting a contrast to the innocuous naïveté that permeates the above jokes. These jokes depict child protagonists either possessing a raw kind of social wisdom, or misunderstanding a situation in a manner that exposes something generally unspoken. For example, in a joke told by Moore, a boy on his way home from Sunday School responds to his companion’s inquiry regarding belief in the Devil by telling him, “Don’t let them fool you. There’s no such thing as the Devil. It’s like Santa Claus: he’s your old man” (82). The boy in this joke conveys the variable character of fatherhood, focusing on the roles of benefactor and punisher. The boy’s equation of fathers with the Devil either misunderstands parental discipline or implies abusive or at least temperamental behaviour. In addition to recalling the God-in-the-bathroom jokes’ capacity to acknowledge questions about religious belief in safely

ambiguous packages, such jokes are indicative of the common use of religious language to describe human roles and relationships.

In another joke that similarly disturbs the notion that traditional authorities can be relied on to guide children properly, a young boy learns an unexpected lesson by observing a punishment meted out to his brother. A woman is advised by the local priest on how to correct her son Johnny's incessant swearing: "Take him by the slack of the pants and give him [the] tanning of his life. He won't swear again." Later, she asks Johnny what he would like for breakfast, to which he responds, "I'll have some of them friggin' corn flakes." She punishes him, then returns to the room to ask her other son what he will have for breakfast. He responds, "I don't want none of them friggin' corn flakes" (Tulk Family, *Even Funnier* 61). This joke humorously depicts how children learn, while dramatizing the potential for punitive acts to have unforeseen effects. The younger son remains untaught in regard to the problem of swearing, and the priest's vision of punitive justice fails to account for potential negative outcomes such as the propagation of fear that has no clear relation to the issue at hand. More irreverent than the God-in-the-bathroom jokes, these last two jokes are no longer very cute: by portraying children in possession of insights (or at least self-preserving instincts) learned outside the realm of what has been deliberately taught, and by drawing attention to flaws in the wisdom, and even the benevolence, of children's role models, they call into question the value of lessons passed on from the adult world. Like jokes that target clerics in confrontations with parishioners, these jokes can be viewed as a reminder to authorities—parents and clerics alike—to merit their influence and their ascendancy. They can also be understood as a lighthearted

commentary on power and its sometimes arbitrary relationship to truth and moral value. This theme peppers the works discussed in subsequent chapters, to such an extent that it amounts to a critique of certain structures of power themselves, rather than simply of agents within those structures.

2.3 Emergent Pluralism: Jokes about Religion as Identity

Religious joking can be a lighthearted, comfortably ambiguous means of exploring and also reinscribing boundaries of belief and practice, and may also be a means of articulating expectations of (and misgivings about) clerical authorities without seriously unsettling the status quo. Religious jokes also explore other kinds of religious identity formation, either through the humorous use of religious materials as culture, or through comic depictions of interdenominational friction. Because of their reinforcement of a shared heritage, the circulation of “religion-as-culture” jokes, within communities familiar with the scriptures, hymns, prayers, and church-based rituals and occasions that underpin such jokes, could be attended by a comfortable familiarity and “insider” feeling regardless of the positions of particular circulators relative to religious belief and practice. Religion-as-culture jokes have a more aggressive cousin in denominational jokes, which also use religio-cultural identity as the cornerstone of their humour, but which rely on animosities or gradated comparisons between groups, frequently utilizing denominational stereotypes. With either religion-as-culture jokes or denominational jokes, Norrick’s observation that “jokes help us get to know each other, and to signal rapport [or its absence]” holds true (106). Yet religious-identity jokes undergo a substantial shift through their collection

into trans-denominational joke books. While the butts of denominational jokes, even in the joke books, are often particular denominations, the overall effect of the collection and retelling of various denominational jokes in this new format is to direct ridicule at denominational animosities themselves, and at those who would espouse them. For its part, religion-as-culture joking in the joke books favours broadly understood Christian religious knowledge over locally or denominationally specific knowledge, and jokes that require specific background knowledge often follow preambles that accommodate the books' relatively unspecific audience and a detraditionalizing Newfoundland.¹³

An attachment to religion as culture permeates all the works studied in this project, even those most ardently critical of church dogma and ecclesiastical power. All the writers enthusiastically engage with the language, scriptural sources, and/or rituals and occasions of Christian religious life, and hence are generally reluctant to dismiss it utterly. Jokes rooted in shared Christian culture suggest a power in Christian religion aside from its spiritual and moral power: its mythic stories and familiar rituals, when shared or even commonly understood, help to shape group identity, a sense of one's place and people. Moore and Burke each offer the same religion-as-culture joke, which centres on the church as a locus of social rituals and, thereby, of the strengthening of community bonds:

When some of the church associations wished to raise money, the ladies would prepare a big feast (today known as a Jiggs Dinner) and sell them to the public at a TIME (a church supper). This feast was often called a Scoff.

One day an old church member was asked to paraphrase the following church saying for the Adult Bible Class: “Those who came to scoff remained to pray.”

Thinking deeply for a minute, the old fellow said, “Those who came to the TIME, stayed for the prayer meeting.” (Moore 81)

This joke, as it is told differently by Moore and Burke, is a good demonstration of the “in-joke” quality of good joking as described by Ted Cohen. The joke’s potential to amuse is lessened among readers for whom background information (supplied in the first paragraph by Moore but omitted by Burke) is necessary. As told among people known to be familiar with the terms, the above joke would begin with the second paragraph as in Burke’s version (*Five* 47), and listeners would automatically make the links that Moore provides for readers on whom he does not rely to have the necessary familiarity. Ted Cohen suggests that a teller cannot force an audience into the membership that will render a joke truly funny (40). Moore and several other joke book producers repeatedly attempt to widen their audience by explaining the backgrounds of jokes. The results are undoubtedly helpful to “outside” readers, and are sometimes pleasant, but are rarely very funny. Many religion-as-culture jokes in Newfoundland joke books follow an explanatory preamble because of the denominational or historical context they require—despite the fact that part of the humorous punch for an “inside” audience is the awareness that those on the “outside” cannot properly tell or hear this joke, since they do not have the appropriate shared knowledge. Such shared knowledge is the basis upon which jokes can act to

strengthen a sense of common identity, a basic characteristic of social joking that joke book producers regularly attempt to elide.

Another religion-as-culture joke told by Moore hinges on the centrality of the church to community life, while also targeting the legendary avarice of Newfoundland merchants: “A lay reader was asked to read Scripture but, without much education, used to have trouble with some words. One Sunday, while reading, he came to the text, ‘Walk ye not in jeopardy’. When he read this word, it came out as the name of a local merchant: ‘Walk ye not in, G.O. Pardy’” (80-81). The joke is partly at the expense of the parishioner; but he is treated gently, while the merchant is the target of the joke’s sharper barb. While the parishioner, attempting to pronounce “jeopardy,” has pronounced the name of the merchant in error, the joke provides an opportunity to express a perception that the merchants have not, in important respects, shared in the moral life of Newfoundland communities or had a sense of obligation to them. The local church in the joke is identified with “the folk,” over and against merchants who, among Newfoundlanders, commonly have been perceived to be agents of oppressive, outside power. This joke resembles the denominational jokes from the following paragraphs in its reliance on a gradated comparison between an in-group—the folk, the “Christians”—and an outgroup—the merchants. Such inter-group comparisons form the foundation upon which denominational jokes rely.

In denominational jokes, reinforcement of group identity through in-group likenesses is overshadowed by an emphasis on inter-group differences. Though some denominational jokes appear to indulge stereotypes and interdenominational animosities while others seem to undermine them, all rely for their humour on an

awareness of Newfoundland's historical climate of interdenominational antipathy. As religious struggles dissipated in Newfoundland, a measure of interdenominational animosity and suspicion lingered, only gradually replaced by a more ecumenical understanding of Christian religious identity that runs parallel to the gradual secularization of the culture.¹⁴ By the time Newfoundland joke books came into vogue, the seriously fractious character of denominational group oppositions had largely dissipated, though the circulation of denomination-based jokes certainly had not. The presentation of such jokes in widely read books—in which jokes aimed more or less from and at every group are read in succession without a well-defined social context—implicitly recasts their meaningfulness. Aside from such rhetorical effects of collection itself, many denominational jokes, as they appear in books designed to appeal to cross-denominational audiences, are presented as expressions of a mostly playful antagonism, in which denominational stereotypes are framed largely as an aspect of regional heritage, not to be taken seriously. Other jokes ridicule, or favourably depict open challenges to, antipathetic denominational attachments. The tendency to criticize interdenominational animosities is mostly implicit in the joke books. Still, they can be said to presage Guy's and Smith's work in their latent casting of doubt upon church attachments that risk unrest among elements of an increasingly pluralistic culture. In Newfoundland as elsewhere, in place of the political fractiousness of groups competing over religious truth, religious truth itself has largely come to be regarded as fractured and partial if not altogether elusive,¹⁵ and has lost much of its justification as a focal point of intergroup conflict.¹⁶

The interdenominational antipathies that have characterized Newfoundland have been sustained by three central elements of intergroup conflict as proposed by Vanier:

One [is] the certitude that our group is morally superior, possibly even chosen by God. All others should follow our example or be at our service. . . . [The second is] a refusal or incapacity to see or admit to any possible errors or faults in our group. . . . [The third is] a refusal to believe that any other group possesses truth or can contribute anything of value. At best, others may be regarded as ignorant, unenlightened, and possessing only half-truths; at worst, they are seen as destructive, dangerous, and possessed by evil spirits. (47)

These elements have been persistent in the rocky religio-political history of Newfoundland. The stereotyping that accompanied the island's interdenominational struggles has largely outlasted the political relevance of the struggles themselves; but according to Paul Mercer, open animosity is not a requirement for the circulation of ethnic jokes. Mercer writes that many ethnic jokes are "a way of letting off steam in a situation where two fundamentally different groups of people have to interact on a daily basis and still feel a need to retain their own group identities" (2). This observation helps to explain the persistence of denominational jokes in a Newfoundland now largely empty of serious interdenominational antipathy. One such joke told by Burke exploits a stereotype of covetousness among Methodists by defining a Methodist as "a person who keeps the Sabbath and everything else he can get his hands on" (*Laughs From* 4). Another invokes a common stereotype of

Pentecostals as ill-educated enthusiasts by depicting a Pentecostal minister concerned that the Devil will look over his shoulder should he actually write a sermon. He tells the local Anglican minister who is busily writing out his own sermon (bookishness is a stereotype of Anglicans), “Now, I don’t make any notes and when I get up to talk, neither me nor the devil himself knows what I’m going to say” (*Laughs From* 92). Christie Davies suggests that through ethnic jokes, “the people at the centre are laughing at what appears to be a slightly strange version of themselves,” and that such a “relationship may take a . . . religious form” (*Jokes* 1). Davies notes ethnic jokes’ role in defining community boundaries and in boosting the esteem of the joke-telling group. It is easy to imagine the use of the two above jokes for group distinction and affirmation even in the absence of conflict or hostility. But joke book producers have little control over the constitution of their audience, and the juxtaposition of jokes targeting the reader’s own as well as others’ denominations discourages taking any of the jokes very seriously.

Though some jokes exploit the lingering appeal of various denominational stereotypes, others question such stereotypes and the animosities related to them. Clouston tells a lengthy joke, apparently a true story originally told by the professor who taught the class in question, in which a young man, new at Memorial University of Newfoundland, takes a course in world religions. He learns the basics of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and, seeing truth and power in each, is vexed by the likelihood that this will make him have to reevaluate his views on Pentecostals (*We Rant* 100). One can see a relationship between the content of this joke and its ostensible source outside of “traditional” circulation, in an institution which, one might argue, is an

agent of value pluralism (Talisse 3). The joke is broadly ecumenical, its humour grounded in an incongruity of scale between the relatively momentous, varied religious perspectives to which the young man has gained some access, and his lingering ill feelings about Pentecostals as a particular local group. Talisse argues that different, mutually inconsistent or even incompatible religions can possess truth simultaneously, not because moral truth is agent-relative but because “the objective moral facts do not form an internally consistent set and hence actually conflict” (3). Though Talisse differentiates pluralism from relativism (3), and though the former seems better to characterize the above joke (whose protagonist is genuinely struck by the substance of each of the faiths about which he learns), in practice the two approaches to moral perception tend to blur into one another. For instance, an effect of either outlook tends to be that particular religious perspectives are expected not to hold any ultimate sway in the public realm (in this case embodied by the university). The ostensible desirability of this effect is affirmed in the joke, which reflects, in a more than averagely obvious way, Newfoundland joke books’ general presentation of the proper place of religious difference in the new Newfoundland.

Accordingly, Tom Quilliam and Tom Furlong tell jokes in which denominations are depicted on a path to friendship and even kinship, in classic ecumenical style. In Quilliam’s joke, a priest at a funeral tells a young altar boy to get three chairs for a family of Protestants standing nervously by the door. It is their friend’s funeral, but the community is entirely Catholic except for them. The young boy, who is partially deaf, misunderstands the priest and shouts, “Three cheers for the Protestants, . . . Hip, hip . . .” (25). And in Furlong’s joke, an Anglican Canon is

approached by a Catholic nun who says, “Good morning, Father. Or is it Brother, I never can be sure with all the different collars.” He responds, “It’s neither, Sister. I guess you could call me cousin” (Furlong). These two jokes do not necessarily emerge out of contemporary Newfoundland’s increasingly “cosmopolitan” social environment and ecumenical religious atmosphere. They may be older jokes that suggest, to often mutually antagonistic religious communities, that a measure of harmonious interaction might be called for. But within joke books published after such changes have begun to take place, and juxtaposed with a wide variety of jokes with a wide variety of targets, they work along with others like the previous joke to adapt village culture and values to this changing environment. Denominational animosities are thus viewed through an ecumenical or pluralistic framework, treated as aspects of heritage and history which are waning as they ought to.

There are many denominational jokes in the joke books in which animosities hinge simply on the fact of denominational distinction itself. Because these jokes lack any trait-based rationale for feelings of group superiority, and because of the effects of joke collection to which I have alluded, they effectively frame denominational animosity as an anachronism, essentially without meaningful content. Bob Tulk (*Newfie Jokes* 26), the Tulk family (*Newfie Jokes* 37), and Clouston (*Best* 17) all tell versions of a joke in which a Catholic (in two cases a Catholic nun) overhears a person or persons complaining at length about the predominance of Catholics in a series of locales, until the Catholic bursts out, “Why don’t you all go to Hell, there are no Catholics there!” (Clouston *Best* 17). Such jokes recall Tye’s description of conflict humour and its uses: told in open circulation, they undoubtedly find their natural

homes through a politics of sympathies and shared understandings, and could be used to bolster the morale and strengthen the sense of collective identity of the group identified by a joke's protagonist, at the expense of the group identified with the joke's butt. But when circulated on a mass level through joke books, the jokes lose much of their impact in this regard.

In Newfoundland joke books, jokes aimed at all of the island's predominant denominations are brought together by compilers with commercial aspirations, without apparent strong denominational biases, and in many cases with a clear interest in personal celebrity or at least name recognition. Norrick writes, "[W]e tend to assume that the teller of any joke which targets a specific professional, ethnic, or religious group accepts some of the negative stereotypes associated with the group." And on this basis, he cautions that "[a] teller of too many aggressive jokes may come to appear bitter and vindictive" (121). Clouston, committed to an amicable self-presentation, tells one denominational joke that entirely avoids the invocation of stereotypes, to the point of avoiding even the naming of denominations. In the joke, a clergyman of an unnamed denomination is asked to visit a sick woman of another unnamed denomination. When he discovers her affiliation and asks her daughter why they asked him to visit her, the daughter responds, "Well, Reverend, you see Mom has a contagious disease and we did not want our own minister to catch it" ("*Come 'Ere*" 70). If for no other reason than the need to entertain and a desire to present themselves as congenial to their readerships, joke book producers seeking to appeal to a broad public are likely to be cautious about the presentation of charged stereotypes, aside from those related to groups or attitudes clearly marginal to the sympathies of the

books' broad readerships. The only clear exceptions to this rule are the books of *Newfie Jokes* published by Bob Tulk and, later, the Tulk Family: their approach to religious stereotypes is to invoke many different stereotypes in about equal measure, creating a kind of rhetorical equivalency in which one identity is no more likely to be the subject of attack than a number of other, competing identities. In Newfoundland joke books as in Newfoundland literature, the targeting of denominational groups has tended to give way to a targeting of denominational animosity itself, which has come to be regarded as archaic and objectionable.

2.4 Conclusion

Many of the jokes in Newfoundland joke books can be traced to folk circulation, as Christie Davies discovered in his research at the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archives (*Jokes* 173). Within folk contexts, Ted Cohen's description of joking as a potential resource for facing topics that are "hard to confront, difficult to accept, and yet relentless in their insistence upon our attention" (40) is a powerful descriptor: their formal ambiguity, and the general levity that characterizes their circulation, accommodates the expression of potentially controversial statements, vexing spiritual or moral questions, or negotiations of group boundaries and standards, without seriously threatening the stability of the status quo in any of these areas.¹⁷ However, as Davies also discovered, the transition from folk circulation to publication in joke books is frequently characterized by the omission or "bowdlerization" of whole categories of orally circulating jokes (*Jokes* 173). Elke Dettmer's description of "folklorism" as the self-conscious use of folklore materials,

or Narváez and Laba's use of the term "folklore" to describe the commercial exploitation and reshaping of folkloric elements (3-4), are more appropriate lenses through which to view religious jokes as they appear in Newfoundland joke books. Most of these jokes dramatize a boundary of some kind, either a boundary that circumscribes acceptable limits of behaviour or belief, if only then to ask questions of it (imagine a circle), or a division between polarized behaviours or beliefs on opposite edges of the ostensibly normal (imagine a line). The "inside" of the delimited circle of behaviour or belief, in the first instance, or the pole closer to conventionally approved behaviours or beliefs, in the latter, tend to find favour in the overall tone of the jokes. Such is the case with jokes targeting both preachers and parishioners, as with jokes about children and clergy-stray jokes. In all these cases, the joke books tend to represent nostalgically a mildly conservative perspective on religious matters, and hence to legitimize the authority of religious institutions and agents, though only to a point: strict orthodoxy is typically unsettled in the jokes, and rigidly authoritarian behaviour among the clergy is consistently ridiculed. Further, the books' more obvious reframing of informally circulating denominational jokes has substantial ramifications for the joke books' overall conservatism. The obvious targeting of denominational animosities within the jokes themselves, as in a few instances of unabashed editorializing, casts an unsettling light on the books' often nostalgic presentation of Newfoundland village culture: a general refusal to treat this aspect of religious history nostalgically begs questions about omissions and presentation in other genres of religious jokes.

While it is probable that many of the religious jokes told in Newfoundland joke books find their way back into oral circulation, their humorous potential in contemporary Newfoundland largely depends on their resonance with a changed set of relationships to the churches (religious institutions are subject to more open criticism, and the power of the clergy is less secure), upon the understanding among tellers and hearers of new background knowledge (Newfoundland's religious "heritage," in addition to religion as it is currently experienced), upon a new negotiation of roles and boundaries (the place of religion and religious affiliation in Newfoundland society has changed, relationships with non-Christian religion and secular society are shifting, etc.), and upon the mediating function of the joke books themselves. Thereby, they will likely change, fall out of use, or blend with new jokes that address the new Newfoundland.

These cultural changes were already in process as Newfoundland joke books gained popularity in the 1970s. The books themselves have participated in the furthering of such changes via their presentation of religious issues and aspects of religious heritage in a nostalgic light that locates them in the past, and, at the same time, through a pluralistic lens that either complicates or delegitimizes them, depending upon the understanding of pluralism one espouses. One might, along with Talisse, perceive that pluralism grapples seriously with difference because "disagreement over Big Questions is *endemic* to the human condition," that it is "inevitable, irresolvable, non-contingent, and, in a word, permanent" (2-3). Or one might argue, with Paul Lakeland, that "the liberal metanarrative of pluralism . . . promotes a vision that differences don't . . . really matter all that much," and that

otherness as a meaningful category is essentially erased under religious pluralism, as thoroughly as it is forbidden under agonistic inter-religious relations (57). While one might contend that religious pluralism as it currently exists in Newfoundland is on a path toward such erasure (I am not equipped to argue this point), religion is still a sufficiently central aspect of life on the island, and its “big questions” still sufficiently pressing in many quarters, to render the former position a more accurate characterization of Newfoundland’s religious relations at least for the time being.

A host of other writers in Newfoundland have, since the 1970s, further developed and adapted many of the humorous negotiations of boundaries, standards, and statuses depicted in Newfoundland joke books’ religious jokes. The points of view reflected in their work tend to occupy various positions along a pluralist spectrum informed by changes within Newfoundland and by broader historical movements. Some seem to offer a religiously pluralistic outlook, while others are apparently secular. Often, the comforting restraint from open criticism that characterizes most of the joke books, as well as the free-for-all irreverence of the Tulks’ books, is replaced by a greater sense of urgency or at least of political engagement, a blend of giggles and vitriol. For instance, CODCO began to address fear-mongering and child molestation among the clergy via grotesque satiric portraits in the 1970s, well before the abuses that underpinned their satire were publicly acknowledged. And playwrights such as Berni Stapleton, Amy House, and Liz Pickard continue to use satire and other forms of humour in works containing both feminist critiques of patriarchal religious culture and compelling portraits of female protagonists within that changing culture. Following the joke book producers who have creatively adapted and recast earlier

humorous responses to religious life, these writers continue to adapt and recast questions about Newfoundland's Christian legacy through their humorous explorations of the politics of power, custom, and belief within the religious lives of Newfoundlanders.

Notes

¹ “Newfie” jokes are ethnic jokes about Newfoundlanders. Newfoundlanders are divided about whether such jokes are suitable, and about whether “Newfie” is an acceptable term of reference for Newfoundlanders. Nonetheless, the acceptance of Newfie jokes among many Newfoundlanders facilitated the creation and dissemination by Newfoundlanders of books of “Newfie” jokes that were sold *to* Newfoundlanders as well as to people from elsewhere. For a concise discussion of the rise of the “Newfie,” see Pat Byrne, “Booze,” 238.

² As if to distinguish his books from those, such as the Tulks’, that market what he views as negative stereotypes, Clouston does not regard his books as joke books. He describes them as collections of Newfoundland “folklore” humour—humour of the people, creative works that can be sources of pride.

³ Bob Tulk and the Tulk Family are anomalous among the main Newfoundland joke book producers: prone to the heavy exploitation of obvious stereotypes as well as to jokes clearly subversive of the status quo, they tend to reverse the moderating tendency of other joke book producers, in part, it seems, by placing fewer overall limits on selection.

⁴ Matthew Strecher argues against such depreciation, writing, “[M]any . . . works that have been viewed as ‘high’ or ‘pure’ literature have proved extraordinarily dull, whereas in equally many cases, writing of ‘mass appeal’ . . . proves to be of great interest” (357).

⁵ Tye's double view of the role of local characters recalls Michel Foucault's descriptions of the process of "normalization" in his essay "The Means of Correct Training." Foucault argues that "the power of normalization imposes homogeneity; but it individualizes by making it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels, to fix specialties, and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another" (196-97).

⁶ Newfoundland joke books are frequently published by very small publishers, or independently by the teller, who hires a printer. Hence, the grammar and syntax of the jokes tend to be idiosyncratic. I do not correct it, nor do I insert "[sic]", because its insertion would be so frequent as to distract. In addition, where unconventional spellings are clearly representative of language variants, I leave them be; only when an unconventional spelling appears likely to have been the product of editorial error do I employ "[sic]".

⁷ Like their grammar and syntax, the referencing in the joke books is idiosyncratic. That is, while most include page numbers, others number the jokes themselves, while still others include no numbering system. In my citations, a straight number indicates a page number, while a number prefaced by the # sign indicates a numbered joke, and the absence of a number indicates that no numbering system is provided in the book.

⁸ Temporary status reversals are a theme in Tye's study of local characters. See, for instance, "Aspects," p. 111.

⁹ An example of this kind is Burke’s joke in which a Scottish woman responds to her Presbyterian minister’s question, “And what shall I say more?” by telling him to “say Amen, man, and sit doon” (*Five* 14).

¹⁰ Clouston depicts Father Coady repeatedly, drawing on different potential uses of his quick-tempered persona, and ultimately reflecting the ambiguity of clerical depiction in Newfoundland joke books.

¹¹ “[Y]ou shall have no other gods before me” (NRSV).

¹² “Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you” (NRSV).

¹³ I borrow the term “detraditionalizing” from Anthony Giddens’ book *Runaway World*, which I cite in more detail in Chapter Three.

¹⁴ Citing Rabbi Gordis, Robert McAfee Brown suggests there is a compelling argument to be made that religious freedom, on which ecumenism depends, is a gift of “the secularists,” and that secular culture may be considered a friend to minority religions in need of protection from the intolerance that historically has tended to characterize established religions (212-13).

¹⁵ See Talisse, p. 3, re. value pluralism (the truth about values is internally inconsistent—it doesn’t add up to a coherent whole) vs. value relativism (the truth is “agent-relative”).

¹⁶ I acknowledge the incompleteness of such a portrait; it is meant only to describe a broad cultural current from the middle of the twentieth century until now. It is not simply so, and recent domestic and global trends suggest a possible return to an

agonistic, competitive relationship among groups making bold claims to religious truth.

¹⁷ The use of joking to protect potentially controversial expression in a buffer of ambiguity is well put by Christie Davies in his description of tensions within jokes about alcohol use: “Jokes about the inebriated can be interpreted as a warning . . . not to neglect the values of the rational world by allowing a potentially destructive drug to undermine their reason and self-control, but they can also be seen as jokes about the benefits of alcohol, as a means of escaping from an oppressively rational and work-obsessed world” (*Jokes* 104); “In consequence those who take a moral stand against alcohol are often uneasy, lest what they see as disgusting behaviour be regarded as merely amusing, a venal fault to be indulged and laughed away” (135).

3. “Unholy Writ:” Ray Guy’s Apostate Satire of Christian Religious Power

3.1 Introduction

Since his satirical voice began to take shape in the late 1960s, St. John’s-based journalist and playwright Ray Guy has been influential in the development of professional humour and political commentary in Newfoundland. To an extent, he inherited writer and broadcaster Ted Russell’s role as a mass-media voice of ordinary Newfoundlanders.¹ But as much as Guy’s work sometimes echoes Russell’s amicability and cultural pride, Guy is equally prone to depicting a comic-horrific world such as that frequently reflected in the work of CODCO, to whose “black comedy and brutal satire” his work has “strong affinities” (Fowler “Review”). After graduating from Ryerson’s journalism program in 1963, Guy began his writing career as a reporter for the St. John’s *Evening Telegram*. He soon gained a reputation as a satirical journalist, largely based on attacks on the Liberal government of Joseph R. Smallwood.² Guy’s features for the *Telegram* and other Newfoundland papers, and for the Halifax-based magazine *Atlantic Insight*, have been collected over the years into several popular volumes. The literary quality of his journalism has led one of his columns to be adapted as a children’s book, *An Heroine For Our Time*, and others to be anthologized in collections of Newfoundland and Atlantic Canadian writing. In addition, he has won a number of awards for his print and broadcast features, including the National Newspaper Award for feature writing (1967), the Stephen

Leacock Memorial Medal for Humour (1977), the Atlantic Journalism Awards Citation of Merit (1982, 1986, 1996, 1997), and provincially, the Ted Russell Award for Humour as well as an honorary doctorate from Memorial University of Newfoundland (2001).

Beginning in 1985, Guy turned his hand to drama, writing three satirical plays for the Resource Centre for the Arts Theatre Company in St. John's. His first, most popular, and most coherent play, *Young Triffie's Been Made Away With*, also contains his most elaborate, sustained religiously satirical caricature. *Triffie* has been produced repeatedly by companies in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, is published in the collection *Voices from the Landwash*, and is currently in development as a film. Guy's other plays, *Frog Pond* and *The Swinton Massacre*, are political satires set in the early years of Smallwood's premiership.

In accordance with his perennial obsession with politics, Guy's religious satire is political at its root: it is satire of relations among people and their institutions, only secondarily and cursorily addressing ontological questions. Guy's main current of religious ridicule involves the alleged propensity of Christian institutions and agents to embody and even amplify, rather than to correct and constrain, human failures to act decently. His satire mostly targets abuses meted out through institutional channels. It also tends, often frustratedly, to call ordinary people to stop deferring to abusive leadership. Guy's ridicule is repeatedly aimed at authorities that are, in some combination, autocratic and visionary. These traits, among religious or political authorities, routinely lead to neglect of the complex needs of the people in favour of the pursuit of power or a too-specific vision of the good. But power in Guy's work is

depicted as actually being quite fragile, because it operates within a formal democracy and ultimately requires consent. As a secular-humanist critic of religious power, Guy rejects transcendental rationales for socially detrimental acts, and judges religious agents in civil terms; as a latent pluralist with a decidedly conservative streak, he favours caution in decision-making, a self-conscious ethical skepticism, and the tolerance and accommodation of difference; and as a satirist and general contrarian, he routinely defies these very standards in rhetorical attacks on those whose intolerant behaviour he cannot tolerate.

In describing the political outlook that underlies Guy's satire, one can only describe a cluster of overlapping tendencies. Nonetheless, having a sense of his general political stance is crucial to an understanding of his satirical depictions of religious power. Several recurring themes in Guy's work can be seen to constitute the main currents of his political thought, currents that persistently affect his outlook on religious power.

In a column entitled "Down Comes the Old Church," Guy shrugs off any religious attachment, telling readers, "I've no inclination to get purple paschal prose over the passing of this rustical tabernacle—in fact, most of my churchy recollections are just as dreary, dismal, depressing and oppressive as they are anything else" (*That Far* 143). The narrator describes a few of his "churchy recollections" before ending the column as follows:

The old church is down.

Amen. So be it.

Ding dong. (145)

The column is simply dismissive, its narrator weary, even bored; the question of belief is entirely left aside. Elsewhere, Guy notes facetiously, “Unlike Joey Smallwood . . . , I don’t have a direct line to God.” And in setting the scene for one of his clerical caricatures, he suggests that in the absence of such divine revelation, he can only “anticipate the actions of the frail instruments of [God’s] wrath” (*Ray Guy’s Best* 50). Cumulatively, Guy’s repeated assaults on religious figures, in combination with his occasional disavowals of religious affiliation or insight, suggest that social rather than spiritual considerations are the proper grounds upon which religious beliefs ought to be defended or attacked. Further, they imply that religious belief, when attached to civil power, tends by and large to have antisocial consequences. Guy is indignant regarding high-minded rationalizations for acts that are, in his view, cruel or destructive on a human scale, and is impatient regarding what seem to be kinds of mystification that discourage people from clear-headedly appraising their true states of affairs.

This is the point upon which Guy’s humanism, which gives moral and philosophical shape to his secularism, is evident. Guy ridicules Newfoundland churches and clerics for acting in ways that fail to live up to the “common moral decencies” described by secular-humanist ethicist Paul Kurtz. These moral principles include various types of integrity, trustworthiness, benevolence, and fairness. Kurtz argues that these principles are found, and have been variously valued, throughout history and across cultures, and that no religion has proven either to improve upon them or to substantially increase correspondence with them among those under its purview. In fact, the absolute quality that religious belief tends to afford moral

principles is ethically problematic for Kurtz, who argues that ethics are properly viewed in relative terms. By this, he means that they only make sense relative to actual lives and relationships, and that they are not absolute. For Kurtz, even generally worthy principles must be weighed against other legitimate principles which may impose reasonable limits upon them (63-96). It is evident throughout Guy's work that when religious and civil-society interests conflict, religion should concede, largely because Christianity's typical conception of a moral universe defined in absolute terms seems to have caused more harm than good in the world of affairs.

Along with his secular humanism, Guy's instinctive conservatism emerges in a piecemeal fashion throughout his religious satire. Guy has been claimed by some as a traditionalist: Pat Byrne, for instance, has argued that Guy favours a kind of deliberate "backwardness" and is a "master of [the] technique" of reaffirming "traditional values" through depictions of the "refusal or inability to adapt" ("Tall" 317-18). Guy is conservative in terms of political process, advocating caution, consideration, and a skepticism about change. But he is not a social conservative. His conservative streak is reminiscent of pluralistic "Tory" conservatism as it is described by Canadian journalist, Senator, and conservative political advisor Hugh Segal. In his book *Beyond Greed*, Segal advocates tolerance and a broad conception of community in addition to caution and restraint (9-10). He writes, "The reach and embrace we offer others reflects the range and breadth of our definition of community" (120). Guy's satire tends to frame a corresponding acceptance of a variety of beliefs, interests, and needs as the only humane grounds upon which healthy communities can develop, and a cautious skepticism as the approach which best facilitates the balancing of a range of

interests and tastes. Religious agents in Guy's satire typically lack both tolerance and a cautious approach. Instead, they are depicted as opportunistic, rash, manipulative, and narrow, exploiting people's religious attachments to amplify sectarian tensions based on a feeling among adherents that they are beleaguered rather than enriched by difference. This effect increases the power and status of the clergy while discouraging the kind of pluralistic "reach and embrace" that Segal advocates.

Such assertions regarding Guy's pluralism and his aversion to sectarianism may surprise some who recall his early nationalistic excesses and nativist tendencies. But while these were probably sincere at the time, they were also responses to a perceived morale problem among Newfoundlanders. Once the "Newfoundland Renaissance" began to take off in the 1970s, and a sense of shame seemed largely to give way to proud public assertions of the merits of Newfoundland culture (a trend of which Guy was at the forefront), much of this strain of Guy's work fell away. For Guy, nationalism and nostalgia apparently were useful correctives when the people seemed demoralized, but promoting nationalism when it was already dominant seems not to have interested him. In keeping with Kurtz's promotion of a relativistic ethics, Guy's declining use of broadly generalizing affirmations of Newfoundlanders and their culture reflects a sense that the value of many ideals is context-specific and ought not to be defended absolutely.

3.2 Pastor Pottle and his Column Cousins: Divine Revenge and Moral

Hypocrisy

Ray Guy's clerical caricatures typically are paranoid, repressed, and obsessed with judgment, propagating bluntly conceived if elaborately articulated visions of divine revenge at the expense of ordinary human sympathy. His depiction of the fanatical, perverted Pastor Pottle, head of an independent church in *Young Triffie's Been Made Away With*, is Guy's most sustained satirical depiction of this type.³ Through Pottle and his column predecessor, the Rev. Barry Lee Phartley, Guy ridicules the ardent embrace of divine judgment and retribution. Pottle is also a medium for satirizing moral hypocrisy: while Pottle's moral code is rigid, his behaviour is cruelly depraved. Such hypocrisy is given a different twist in Guy's polemical column "Live and Let Die: Thoughts for an Easter Sunday," in which nominal Christians are derided for their alleged failure to recognize, empathize with, and intervene to offset enormous suffering in the world, suffering which the culture in which they participate has helped to create.

In the hands of Guy's Pastor Pottle, who himself causes a great deal of misery and embodies an extraordinary lack of empathy, the religious principle of divine judgment is manifested as a petty, vengeful impulse that justifies his own ostensible righteousness at the eternal expense of those he deems to be wicked. Pottle never ceases judging. He keeps a relentless watch on the sins and shortcomings of the residents of Swyers Harbour, the play's fictional locale. He describes the local merchant, for instance, as "stiffnecked and prideful, bloated with avarice, snatching the mite from the widow and the orphan" (134). But in his judgmental fervour, Pottle

also treats benign forms of difference, such as the reclusivity of one local man, with suspicion (134). And rather than morally engaging with those he has judged, he simply classifies them as evil and dismisses them. Pottle's repeated praise of "the blood of the Lamb," which draws on several such references in the Book of Revelation, provides an apt summation of his theological centre: it is the Lamb's *blood* in particular—his suffering, and his imminent revenge—that entralls Pottle.

To the Ranger who has come to investigate the recent killing and mutilation of sheep in the village, Pottle reveals the depth of his divine disgust, quoting Revelations 14.10 in specific reference to the people of Swyers Harbour:

“For the same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation.” “And they shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.” “And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up forever and ever.” “Praise the blood of the Lamb” (134).

Pottle is obsessed with this blood (he begins to bleat at the conclusion of the above-quoted speech). His devotion to a violent God comes to its most extreme conclusion when he attempts to kill his own son Billy (who does not know Pottle is his father) after discovering Billy has slept with his blood sister, Pottle's daughter Triffie. Pottle justifies the attempt by comparing it to God's test of the faith of Abraham (140). The depiction of Pottle's obsession with blood reflects Guy's general tendency to reduce the inner world of his target caricatures to simple reflections of their actions. Among political satirists, sincere explorations of motivations for abuse are typically scant.

This omission is supported by Noam Chomsky's structural perspective on political power, which Guy's approach to political satire often seems to reflect. Chomsky argues that the motivations of those in positions of real-world power, who thereby have the greatest capacity to abuse citizens, are largely inaccessible and largely irrelevant. It is adequate to know that those in power will do what they can to preserve and expand their power, and to recognize that certain kinds of abuses tend to arise from certain arrangements of power.⁴ The resounding personal flatness of religious caricatures like Pastor Pottle, as opposed to the mordant richness of Guy's language that emerges through Pottle's apocalyptic preaching, or to the vivid depictions of Pottle's worldly machinations, reflects Guy's lack of substantial interest in the psychological or spiritual backdrop of abuse, and his general preoccupation with political relations and social effects.

The Rev. Barry Lee Phartley, a fictional American televangelist in one of Guy's columns, whose preaching is characterized by a frenzy of terror and judgment, is a kind of precursor to Pastor Pottle.⁵ Guy's narrator imagines what the Rev. Phartley might say to warn the "recalcitrant prick-kickers" of Newfoundland of their eternal fates, were he to get fog-bound at Gander Airport after "having shot all the gays, expelled all the Jews and Democrats and having consigned Mother Teresa of Calcutta to hell's flames" (*Ray Guy's Best* 50):

"The fingers of their little children, friends," the Rev. Phartley, rotund and sweating in his vanilla-linen suit, would roar into the cameras, "Shall be held against EEEE-lekricly-driven emery wheels forevah!"

“And likewise,” Barry Lee would continue in a purr, “the tiny little toes of the wretched seed of them Commie-lovin' idolaters in Newfoundland shall be ground away to bloody nubs against the carborundum and, lo, there shall be no more OOOO-nanism and no more shall their little feet stray from the paths of righteousness. Hallelujah!" (50)

The celebratory tone of the final sentence, followed by a rousing “Hallelujah!”, frames such punishment as a subject for unabashed celebration. Both Phartley and Pottle are sadistic and possibly lunatic, fixated on a violent transcendent vision and numb to ordinary human sympathies. In his depictions of both preachers, Guy strings together images of divine retribution, the cruelty of which seems wildly out of proportion to their targets. Phartley’s target is the children—“the wretched seed”—of Newfoundland, whose feet can no longer “stray from the paths of righteousness” because they have been “ground away to bloody nubs” (50).

The similar dearth of basic human compassion in Pastor Pottle’s moral make-up is strikingly drawn out in an exchange with the local postmistress Aunt Millie. She offers her condolences for Pottle’s “trouble”—the recent, violent death of his daughter Triffie—but Pottle seems not to need them. He rejoices in Triffie’s heavenly destiny, a rejoicing untempered by any personal sadness at her parting: “Trouble? Oh, no. I rejoice in the Lord and am glad. Sin cannot harm her there. She has long been delivered from the pit of hell. Trouble? Fools and idolaters may think so, perhaps, but never the truly born-again” (123). Bemused, Millie responds, “That’s one way of lookin’ at tings, I s’pose. If you’re happy and you knows it, clap your hands” (124).

When Millie asks about Triffie's burial, Pottle responds, "Her earthly husk is of little concern to those who truly believe in the revealed word of God" (124), a rebuttal that displays a certain religious logic even as it reflects Pottle's unwillingness or inability to grieve the loss of his daughter: his version of Christian love centred on the soul utterly excludes ordinary human love for the person. This renunciation is emphasized by Triffie's intellectual disability, which seems to be featured primarily in order to emphasize the cruelty of various acts meted out on her by her father and others. For instance, at one point in the past, Pottle was so "concerned" about Triffie's spiritual state when she innocently took a piece of gum from an American serviceman that he broke two of her ribs. In Pottle's view, his daughter's personality and physicality were vehicles of sin, only putting her soul at risk, and as such, not worthy of consideration.

Gradually, the exchange between Pottle and Millie turns nasty: he makes accusing remarks about her violent, war-ravaged son Vincent, and when Millie responds with a surprising assertiveness, he retreats, describing her as a "soul-sickened Jezebel," a "fornicator with the anti-christ," and a "devil-ridden bitch," and "consign[ing] [her] filthy soul to the pangs of everlasting hell" (125). Pottle cannot sympathize with Millie's motherly concern or her understandable if ill-conceived defensiveness regarding her emotionally wrecked son's violent behaviour, because Pottle cannot relate to emotional intimacy at all, and can only respond to sin with rage and indignation. Pottle's loathing of worldly experience and everyday relationships is increasingly evident as the play goes on, as he justifies his own violence and eagerly proclaims the ultimate, divine violence to come. As indicated above, Guy's satire consistently favours social over religious considerations should the two come into

conflict; moreover, he routinely implies that they are likely to do so. Accordingly, Pottle is characterized by a hyperbolic fixation on a framework of divine rewards and punishments that acts as an obstacle to ethical interaction.

Pottle's retributive religious perspective encourages a compensatory fantasy of divine revenge among his "flock," as he propagates a point of view in which the saved are few and the majority are damned and can therefore be rejected. In the words of Mrs. Melrose, wife of the locally stationed doctor, his church is mostly comprised of people who are "at the bottom of the barrel right now, right. They come from the low end of the social scale. And the economic scale. They're more or less despised . . . or at least . . . mocked by their neighbours" (107).⁶ This description is consistent with the below-average income levels, educational levels, and "occupational prestige" that has generally characterized adherents of North American evangelical sects until fairly recently (Hewitt 55). Given this demographic tendency and the frequency in Guy's satire with which leaders manipulate public needs, Pottle can be seen to target the exploitation of marginalized people's socially founded vulnerabilities in order to gain power and influence. Providing his parishioners with a viscerally satisfying account of divine retribution, Pottle acts as a catalyst for scapegoating: instead of engaging with the worldly factors that underpin his congregants' earthly sufferings or, on a more pastoral note, facilitating spiritual healing, he perpetuates and even intensifies a destructive pattern of mutual judgment and rejection between the haves and have-nots of Swyers Harbour. Mrs. Melrose recognizes the immediate appeal of Pottle's promise, noting that his congregation know revenge is "coming sure and soon. So they gloat. And that makes them happy. What a comfort religion is, to be sure, in more

ways than one” (107). In *Triffie*, Pottle exploits his parishioners’ shaken sense of self-worth, encouraging divinely entitled religious prejudice as an ego-relieving counterpunch to the social prejudice to which they have been subjected.⁷ The fostering of religious prejudice among his flock increases Pottle’s own power: it is receptive to his particular rhetorical gifts (and apparently sincere predilections) in a way that the nuts and bolts of social action, or the nuanced demands of pastoral care, are not. bell hooks suggests that authorities on saving missions generally desire the existence of marginal people but not their troublesome “marginal specificities,” and certainly not their social agency: “*No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. . . . I am still author, authority*” (343). By focusing his flock’s energy on compensatory gloating and passive prejudice, encouraging them to wait for God to act as the agent of their revenge, Pottle’s gift of divine retribution discourages his congregants from working to improve their worldly lots or to determine their own fates, and keeps them oriented toward his leadership.

Guy’s ridicule of a religious orientation that does not attend to social needs echoes the frustration of those involved in the Christian social gospel movement. This movement attempted to reconcile Christianity to the needs of secular society by emphasizing Jesus’ ostensibly social orientation, and by asserting that true piety requires helping suffering people to improve their earthly lots (cf. Allen; Ramsay Cook).⁸ Yet, in its disregard for spiritual truth, Guy’s satire veers toward the more encompassing Marxist interpretation of religion as an opiate of the masses. In Guy’s work, religious belief is not intrinsically defensible, and can be quite damaging when

it takes primacy over everyday well-being. Further, as Guy's depiction of Pottle (and elsewhere of Smallwood) makes clear, those most immersed in a visionary outlook are, in the world of Guy's satire, in the worst position to evaluate the effects of its propagation. For Guy, religion, in order to be justified at all, must be fully justified in social terms.

In Guy's satirical depictions of clerics, as in clerical portrayals by CODCO's Andy Jones and Greg Malone,⁹ rapture often gives way to hysteria, moral judgment to paranoia, and all of it to fits of (often sexual) indulgence that not only violate the clerics' own moral codes, but are clearly abusive to other people—often to the most vulnerable. As well as physically abusing his daughter Triffie and demonizing village residents, Pottle molests orphans, subscribes to child pornography, tries to kill his son, and, it is suspected, kills and mutilates sheep in a twisted manifestation of his obsession with the blood of the Lamb. Jones' sexually repressed (and confused) Protestant preacher Reverend Percival Freep,¹⁰ and Malone's satirical impressions of Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker,¹¹ offer similar depictions of evangelical enthusiasts who throw all skepticism and reason to the wind in a fervent embrace of what to the apostate often sounds like a wild, mythological fiction. The demands of this mythology are often at odds with the pluralistic tolerance these writers favour, and can seem to demonize earthly desires that Guy, Jones, and Malone clearly regard as understandable and perfectly tolerable. Abusive hypocrisy, usually in a sexual form and typically framed as an outcome of moral repression, is depicted by all three writers as an outcome of an excess of religious enthusiasm.

The success of Pastor Pottle's hypocritical abuses hinges on his religious prestige among his congregants, which in turn relies on the divisive social climate that already characterizes Swyers Harbour. Within this climate, those who became Pottle's flock were already accustomed to being "mocked" and "despised." The majority of the people of Swyers Harbour seem to have rejected them before he came to town, and then, accordingly, abandoned them to his influence, though the boards of the mainline churches did what they could to protect their own congregants from Pottle's influence. Reflecting Guy's interest in politics, the play's satire of the hypocrite Pottle also ridicules the antipathetic denominational climate within which he was able to gain (and is able to sustain) his power. Among independent evangelical churches, particular leaders' prestige is often heavily reliant upon their own charisma, rather than on an institutional affiliation. This may lead to great authority being invested in individual preachers among their congregants, but it also leaves them particularly vulnerable to attack from outside, since mainstream-affiliated Christians as well as the unaffiliated often regard such charismatic leadership as crazy, often hypocritical, and probably fraudulent. Guy dramatizes such prestige and such vulnerability in *Triffie*, while legitimating the latter by depicting Pottle as crazy and hypocritical (though not fraudulent: there is no evidence that Pottle does not believe all that he says).

In much of Guy's satire of the powerful, "Live and let live" is an implicit standard, though it is a standard the characters in his often harshly satirical works rarely live up to. Guy's severest ridicule is usually directed at people who for various reasons neglect to "let live" in their own living, and whose living ought, therefore, to be constrained. Pottle refuses to "let live" in two ways: though he does not fruitfully

involve himself in the moral life of the ostensibly degraded village, he relentlessly harasses and judges its residents; and, in a more shocking turn of moral hypocrisy, as indicated above, he beats his daughter, molests orphaned children, and tries to murder his own son. Several local residents finally (and lamentably tardily) refuse to let Pottle continue to live in a way that so profoundly does not “let live”: after Pottle is witnessed trying to kill his son Billy, they leave the pastor nailed by one hand to a table, waiting for the Ranger to come. The limit these characters finally set upon the principle of “live and let live” recalls the relativity with which Kurtz argues moral principles ought to be applied. A limitation is imposed upon one man’s living, and hence upon the extent to which “live and let live” is embraced as an ethical principle—in order, paradoxically, to better enable it to manifest overall.

Guy’s social-satirical targeting of moral hypocrisy is similarly prominent in his polemical column “Live and Let Die: Thoughts for an Easter Sunday,” in which he expands his “let live” standard to include a moral obligation to “help live.” In the column, he depicts an alleged lack of social responsibility among Western Christians as a kind of hypocrisy, and questions whether the apparently blithe, self-satisfied orientation of many nominal Christians is not actually evil—an assessment that recalls the rejection of Swyers Harbour’s poor by the community’s other Christians, and Pottle’s lack of concern for the earthly state of his flock or even of his children. The focus of “Live and Let Die” is the great gap between the rich and the poor (especially across international divides), and an alleged lack of concern regarding this gap among professed Christians in an historically Christian culture whose exploits, Guy claims, are culpable for starvation in other parts of the world. Guy’s typical ridicule of

Christian ecclesiastical agents' perennial failures to behave ethically, especially given their high moral rhetoric, is rooted in his (like countless other satirists') chronically confounded assumption that it is reasonable to expect individuals or groups to live up to their moral declarations. This strain of clerical ridicule is expanded in "Live and Let Die" to target Western Christian culture more generally: historically, through imperialist exploits; and currently, through a complacent neglect among the privileged, largely Christian inheritors of the West's ill-gotten gains.

Guy chooses the heart of the Christian religious calendar as an apt context for his allegations of idle hypocrisy among Western Christians, whose spiritual celebration at the resurrection of their suffering Lord is transformed in Guy's column into an orgy of consumptive self-congratulation within a culture that is greedy beyond all measure. Guy observes that the churches are generally filled at Easter more than at any other time, but suggests that with people in other parts of the world "dying in such vast numbers while those responsible for their deaths are fully informed of the situation, it is hard to see how churchfuls of burping people being cheerful at Easter is not more devilish than anything else" (*You May Know* 144). Of the West, Guy writes, "This half, so rich that not to be able to eat beefsteaks every other day is considered a 'hardship,' cries out that every little shortage is a crisis, while people in other parts of the world gnaw at the very ground in their last agonies" (144). Then—strikingly, considering his depictions of Rev. Phartley and Pastor Pottle—Guy acknowledges the potential usefulness, if not the cosmic reality, of hell. Noting the decreasing popularity of hell among mainstream Christians, he wonders about this turn of theological events. He notes, "We wish to be left comfortable. We don't want the few rotten and flimsy

bandages we have wrapped around our consciences to be stripped away. We want to hang on to the attitude of ‘every man for himself and God for us all’” (144). And he writes, “The prospects of hell combined with the magnitude of the sin being committed by us daily against our brothers in the other half of the world would, if preached strongly enough from the pulpits, drive congregations away from the church in stark terror” (144). Still, one can only assume that a similarly uneasy relationship with a Pottle-esque Christianity would not receive such a harsh treatment—that it would, in fact, be preferable to devotion. Taking his broader body of religious satire into account, Guy’s real concern in “Live and Let Die” seems to be the maintenance of a humane sense of social obligation, one that the religious orientation of the column’s ostensible Christians does not seem to imbue in them.

Especially given his satirical portraits of the retributively obsessed Pottle and Phartley, one ought not to assume that Guy’s ridicule of a facile Christianity in “Live and Let Die” implies a belief that a Christianity with a proper regard for divine reward and punishment could avoid such profound ethical pitfalls. Mostly, Guy seems to reject the whole model, salvation and damnation alike, while concerning himself with worldly dynamics in which Christians participate, and which are affected by their beliefs. For wealthy Western Christians, the reassuring promise of salvation for believers makes sense of their disproportionate wealth, while the troublesome threat of damnation might make demands on their privilege: hence, hell has to go. In the world of “Live and Let Die,” it is this, and not an actual growth of compassion and love, that accounts for the softening of the Face of God. The column ridicules the failure of the privileged West to acknowledge its own global culpability and responsibility, and uses

the spectacle of Easter feasting to accuse Christianity of failing to act as a booster to public morality in a culture in which it is the dominant religion.

3.3 “A Spirit of Wisdom and Grace”: Guy’s Satire of Newfoundland’s

Denominational Education System

In his attacks on Newfoundland’s denominational school system, Guy continues his rhetorical attacks on the churches’ ostensibly vast moral failures, suggesting they have worked against the common needs of resource-strapped Newfoundlanders by keeping them needlessly divided. Until quite recently, there has been a general reticence in Newfoundland to support non-denominational schools despite complaints from many quarters that such “luxuries” as proper language and science education were sacrificed “when scarce resources [were] put into busing children long distances to attend a specific religious school—or when small communities support[ed] three, even four, schools” (Clyde Wells qtd. in Sweet 56). Depicting a denominational system rooted in sectarian territorialism, Guy rejects religious justifications for educational segregation, depicting them as ethically repugnant. In a 1995 column on the ongoing debate over the future of denominational schools, Guy bluntly states that those who warn against the imminent demise of the denominational system are motivated “by the foolishest philosophy that ever was. ‘We are absolutely right and everyone else is absolutely wrong.’” He calls them “the sort of crackpots and zombies who insist that you’ve got to pay taxes to teach their children that your children are satan’s spawn and will burn in hell for ever more” (“Early Deadline, Please” 3).¹² Though the educational content of denominational schools was mostly controlled by the churches themselves,

denominational schools in Newfoundland were largely funded by the government (Mol 202), a combination repulsive to secular critics such as Guy, given the alleged cost in terms of quality of instruction and the propagation of prejudices. Guy judges the denominational system in terms of its alleged effects on secular education: on these grounds, it and the institutions that have perpetuated it are judged harshly.

In a column entitled “A Spirit of Wisdom and Grace,” Guy accuses supporters of separate denominational schools of having neglected the real logistical challenges of educating children in small, often isolated communities (*That Far* 1-6). Guy’s religious satire is rarely subtle, often teetering on the edge of invective or, in “A Spirit of Wisdom and Grace,” spilling over that edge and dispensing with humour altogether. Guy writes that there were several communities in the area in which he grew up that could have worked together to build a decent school that could have attracted qualified teachers. He argues that the reason they did not is because “these half dozen communities represented three or four different denominations. Christian denominations” (5). In his later column “Early Deadline, Please,” Guy takes a similar line, writing of the defenders of the denominational system, “Jesus and/or the Holy Father, to their way of thinking, are foursquare behind an education system that is in no small way responsible for the highest rate of illiteracy north of the Rio Grande” (3). In Guy’s view, religious denominations have overlooked the substantial improvements in the well-being of their young parishioners that might have arisen from a solid worldly education and the absence of interdenominational animosities, and instead have been willing to do wrong by their children in order to keep them religiously segregated. In Guy’s satire, sectarianism and the dogmatism that supports it are too

easily embraced and too convenient for religious authorities, whereas tolerance and a measure of skepticism are challenging and even counterintuitive, yet necessary for humane relations.

Though “A Spirit of Wisdom and Grace” largely ridicules the virtues of outport teachers themselves, the central problem and underlying object of attack is the churches’ support of a system untenable for populations too small to handle further division while maintaining a decent standard of education. Guy describes the teachers in the often tiny denominational schools of his youth as “mostly . . . eighteen and twenty-year-olds who had barely scraped their heels through grade eleven and a few weeks of summer school and who couldn't teach a chimpanzee to peel a banana” (5). He writes that these unqualified teachers typically “sat day after day growing more frustrated and bitter and twisted, lashing out with the strap and the smash in the face and whatever other tortures they could dream up to get the gas off their stomachs” (5). The column exemplifies Guy’s willingness to sacrifice humour in favour of didactic clarity. His point is made abundantly clear toward the end of the column, when he requests of his readers, “Don't talk to me about the glories of denominational education. Because I may vomit” (5).

A humorous column on school primers called "See Dick and Jane Run. See Lucy Bite the Dust" provides a lighthearted complement to the polemical spirit of “A Spirit of Wisdom and Grace.” In “See Dick and Jane Run,” Guy makes two casual digs at the denominational education system, belittling its importance via the trivialization of educational differences from one denomination to the next. First, he shrugs off denominational education in two sentences: "There used to be separate

schools for Church of Englanders, Wesleyans, Roman Catholics, Salvationists, Pentecostals and Seventh Day Adventists. Except for the Papists and the Pents, the rest have pretty much amalgamated now" (*Ray Guy's Best* 9). The passage contains no critique; aside from the belittling nicknames Guy uses for the two denominations who have not yet amalgamated, it is merely factual. The combined effect of the nicknames and the passage's banality is to downplay the meaningfulness of denominational education: it is a needless system to which only two silly groups still cling. The muted satire of this passage is complemented by a second, wry dismissal of the meaningful content of denominational education. Having described "Dick and Jane" books, Guy notes, "In Catholic schools, Spot was the canine prodigy of David and Anne. David's and Anne's kindergarten had a crucifix above the blackboard and a Bride of Christ to teach them such spiffy conversational gambits as 'Oh, oh, oh. Look, look, look. See Spot run'" (9). Here, Guy implies that various denominations have been overly attached to inconsequential differences in religious instruction.

An implication of the two passages taken together is that schools of all denominations have been more or less the same, and that most denominations have come to recognize this and have therefore amalgamated. Rhetorically, this option is presented as the only sensible choice. Coupled with columns like "A Spirit Of Wisdom and Grace," "See Dick and Jane Run" contributes to a satirical accusation that denominational schools have strained scarce resources and divided communities against themselves in order to maintain insubstantial educational differences. The column's use of trivialization—a rhetorical tactic Neil Postman suggests is usually evidence that the object of attention is not taken seriously—is transformed by its

coexistence with more polemical columns into politicized irreverence, which, Postman argues, indicates the opposite attitude (167). Because of the civil authority Christian churches have wielded in Newfoundland, it seems to have been necessary, in Guy's view, to decry their alleged abuses and shortcomings vigorously, variously, and persistently.

3.4 "A Few Passages From Unholy Writ": The Continuity of Guy's Political and Religious Satire

In his biblically parodic column "A Few Passages From Unholy Writ,"¹³ which remains one of his best-known columns, Guy exploits the cultural and moral authority of scripture to target then-Premier Joseph R. Smallwood and his political associates, and to a lesser extent the Newfoundland public, whom Guy challenges (yet again) to cast off "King Joe"'s leadership. The column's use of biblical language to lampoon Smallwood exemplifies Guy's often mordant attachment to the literary and cultural power of Christian scripture. Guy's satire of Smallwood recalls his religious satire in its critical depiction of leadership that is too autocratic and too visionary, too caught up in its own idea of the good to attend to the particular needs of particular people in a particular time and place. King Joe's sense of divine entitlement echoes ridicule in Guy's religious satire of the misguided presumption that one, or one's group, has exceptional spiritual authority. In Guy's satire, any such presumption is intrinsically misguided and hubristic and is, therefore, a worthy target of satirical ridicule.

During the last half-decade of Joseph Smallwood's twenty-three-year Premiership, Guy made it part of his journalistic mission to persuade

Newfoundlanders that Smallwood's careless, visionary leadership had been harmful to their culture, livelihoods, and sense of self-worth. Among the recurrent topics of Guy's concern were Smallwood's aggressive aversion to dissent—an autocratic impulse that Guy treats in a similar fashion to religious agents' ostensible use of their authority to manipulate people in order to serve their own desires. In "A Few Passages," Guy also ridicules Smallwood's legendary sense of prerogative to act in accordance with his often scattershot vision of Newfoundland and Labrador's industrial future, and mocks Newfoundlanders' willingness, despite extraordinary upheavals, industrial failures, and ongoing political intimidation, to accept Smallwood's word that he held the solutions to their woes. Newfoundlanders' ongoing receptivity to Smallwood's promises seemed particularly to bother Guy, whose curmudgeonly love for the people of Newfoundland was both frustrated and intensified by this apparent mass brainwashing or national lapse of common sense.

Written in chapter-and-verse format, "A Few Passages from Unholy Writ" is classic high burlesque, treating, in language reminiscent of the King James Bible, content that is by turns base and pedestrian. The column is set during a visit to Labrador to christen "Lake Smallwood" (the Smallwood Reservoir), a headpond created by the Churchill River hydroelectric project (*You May Know*).¹⁴ The column ironically depicts industrialists and political lackeys as kings and prophets, and Smallwood as a kind of Messiah. In one passage, Smallwood is referred to as the "bridegroom,"¹⁵ who "cometh like unto an mighty rushing wind," in a travesty of God's biblical appearances that brings to mind Smallwood's notorious knack for ranting (86). King Joe tells those gathered for the christening of the headpond that he

is “the king of all these lands[,] anointed by the Lord to rule over them even unto the end of time” (86-87). In addition to emphasizing King Joe’s sense of entitlement to power, this declaration is a dig at voters who voted the real-life Smallwood into office for over two decades.

As I note above, the political vision reflected in a piecemeal fashion in Guy’s satire significantly recalls Chomsky’s structural understanding of political power. To take a second example, Guy is generally suspicious regarding the political roles of “Great Men.” The presentation of King Joe in “A Few Passages” suggests that the reasons those at the centre of narrow concentrations of power are depicted as saviours of a kind by themselves and their supporters are self-serving, more often than not. Idealism may play a part, but according to Guy’s presentation, this idealism, however genuinely felt, is usually consistent with the interests of power. In *Understanding Power*, Chomsky warns against the disempowering political construction of “Great Men,” which, he argues, has always been a prominent means of assisting the concentration of power. He argues that “Great Men” are products of rhetorical distortions of the facts, and asserts, “That’s part of how you teach people they can’t do anything, they’re helpless, they just have to wait for some Great Man to come along and do it for them” (188-89). In Guy’s satire, Smallwood’s very desire to be a “Great Man” is a trait that hampers his capacity to govern well. King Joe recognizes that his status as the bridegroom relies on the people’s continued ignorance of the true nature of his authority. He explains, “Let stunnedness pass from the Kingdom of Joe and we shall all be undone even like unto a draft of gutted haddocks” (85). King Joe’s contemptuous perspective on the people of Newfoundland and Labrador is a satirical

distortion of Smallwood's own perspective: however hostile Smallwood was to opposition, he seemed genuinely to regard himself as a populist, and to love at least some imagined version of Newfoundlanders as a people. King Joe's utterly cynical remark is a transparent rhetorical challenge on Guy's part: he entreats Newfoundlanders not to be so "stunned" as to allow Smallwood to continue as Premier, given his obviously autocratic behaviour and his arguably destructive policies. This satirical distortion recalls Pastor Pottle's hyperbolic incapacity to value ordinary human sympathy, which serves as a rhetorical caution against grounding ethics in a visionary, otherworldly perspective. In both cases, leaders come to identify themselves and their visions so intimately with the needs of the people that they begin to seem inseparable.

The alleged over-identification of leaders' own "higher" ideals with the well-being of the people is an identification Guy cannot abide. He shares with many writers and public figures in twentieth-century Newfoundland an ongoing concern about the fatalism which has come largely to characterize the Newfoundland public's attitude toward politics, an attitude that has enabled leaders to make policy decisions without due consultation or accountability. Although Guy has, at times, written proudly of Newfoundlanders' endurance, invoking it as a positive national attribute,¹⁶ this endurance has been paired with a collective sense of having been, to some degree, hapless pawns of the British and French empires, the churches, the merchants, "St. John's," and later the Canadian federal and Newfoundland provincial governments. Especially in the early years of his career, Guy was preoccupied with challenging Newfoundlanders to repair a damaged national self-image. This period of his work is

peppered with rhetorical efforts, as in “A Few Passages From Unholy Writ,” to shake Newfoundlanders out of their political fatalism and habitual deference. Discussing the relationship between the unscrupulous businessman Josh Smith and the general population of Mariposa in Stephen Leacock’s *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, Gerald Lynch argues, “[I]f Mariposans did not possess serious shortcomings reflective of Smith’s glaring faults, he would not be able to manipulate and exploit them as he does” (72). In the case of Newfoundlanders’ relationship with Smallwood, one might consider that a sense of awe in the face of power and a naïve hope for a panacea to persistent problems were widespread “faults” among Newfoundlanders during the Smallwood era, characteristics that also describe Smallwood himself with some accuracy. Lynch argues, “It might . . . be said that Smith brings out the worst in the Mariposans, the shadows” (72). For Guy, Smallwood’s (and religious leaders’) capacities to attend effectively to their communities have been stunted by their own ambitions and the primacy of their visionary ideals, which have taken precedence over the messy details of lived experience. The “worst,” in Guy’s view, that such tendencies among leaders brings out in the general population is complicity in a visionary outlook that operates contrary to their own best interests. Guy’s basis for hope, and the root of much of his haranguing of the Newfoundland public, is his apparent belief that they possess a quality akin to Mariposans’ “concern for their community, a concern which is second nature to them” (Lynch 72).

Throughout “A Few Passages,” it is implicit that Smallwood’s autocratic leadership has lost sight of real needs, but also that his charismatic tyranny is fragile, existing only by its persuasive power, under democratic structures in which the people

ultimately have the authority to reject their government. If one is unconcerned about the prospect of rewards and punishments after death, and uninterested in the possibility of transcendent truths or obligations, as Guy seems to be, the power of the churches likewise can and ought to be rejected if it fails to serve the people.

3.5 “My Steady Decline into Sin”: Guy’s Narrative Stance as a Rhetorical Alternative to Authoritarian Relations

In some respects Guy’s sweeping, secular attacks on religious abuses recall Horwood’s novel *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday*. But Horwood’s book presents a comprehensive rejection of its version of outport values, opting for a blend of humanism, libertarianism, and Romanticism as imported to the community by the novel’s secular saviour, Christopher Simms. Herein, a critical departure from Horwood is evident in Guy’s work. This departure is grounded in Guy’s conservative suspicion of any broadly emancipatory systems or outlooks that would cavalierly replace existing ones. While Guy’s own roughly conceived political outlook is, in a limited way, taken to have emancipatory potential, it is at the same time cautious of any totalizing systems or visionary escapes from existing circumstances. Through Guy’s satire, a view of human nature arises, bearing the mark of the Christian tradition from which it emerges, in which human beings are everywhere and always susceptible to sin. But Guy’s vision lacks a redemptive element beyond the same, sinful human beings—this is the source of both moral responsibility and moral failure in Guy’s satire, and it is the reason why visionary solutions like Horwood’s are rejected as fantasy. For Guy, vigorous debate, caution in decision-making, self-consciousness,

and a general skepticism are essential to the correction or constraint of human moral faults in any context. As if to drive the point home, in a good number of his columns, he casts a self-conscious, skeptical eye upon himself.

Guy's humorous uses of, and satirical attacks on, religious institutions and agents reflect an overall voice that is by turns brutal and compassionate, polemical and comical. Though he has sustained an abiding affection for the culture, language, and people of Newfoundland, this affection is not always obvious, given his equal penchant for excoriating critique and cruel caricature. Because of the harshness of most of his religious satire, little of Guy's amicability is apparent in the works discussed for this chapter. His "friendly" voice comes through in columns on the details of outport life, the hyperbolized perils of life in the capital city, and the pitfalls and rewards of Newfoundland gardening, as well as in recurrent caricatures who are likeable if ridiculous, and in anti-heroic first-person narratives that have helped to cement Guy's rhetorical persona outside the self-serious intelligentsia and political classes.¹⁷ Guy's column "My Steady Decline Into Sin" develops his amicable side while offering a humorous (and likely fictional) account of the early development of his satirical predilection. In "My Steady Decline," Guy makes fun of his own tendency toward irreverence, treating it as something akin to a personality defect, emerging early in his life and having no discernible usefulness. The action of the column takes place in Sunday School, though as a religious context it is meaningful mostly for the backdrop of ecclesiastically supported and divinely associated *propriety* that it provides—propriety that Guy's youthful persona can then violate.

Early in “My Steady Decline,” Guy jokes about his own, ever-apparent lack of respect for authority. Describing his catechism lessons, he writes that “the last phrase to be crammed in before the hatches were shut was, funnily enough, ‘To order myself lowly and reverently to all my betters’” (*You May Know* 1). Later, the column’s Sunday School teacher disciplines a boy named Benny who, in all innocence, has proclaimed to the class, “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s arse!” After Benny’s punishment, a near-mutiny takes place in the class (2), but the students ultimately submit to the teacher’s authority. Bemoaning the “wicked little creatures,” the teacher shows them a picture of a donkey in a book of Bible stories. Though he also submits, Guy’s narrator insists upon making the most of his new knowledge by drawing a picture of “Thi Neybours As,” hoping it will afford him some subversive pleasure later. Guy’s child narrator is an anti-hero who declines to stand up for his abused classmate, and whose later attempt at juvenile, anti-authoritarian self-indulgence is quickly rendered fruitless by another authority figure in the person of his father. The boy gets out his picture at the kitchen table and says, “Sigh! I wish I had an ass. Make a nice pet, an ass would. Don’t think he’d eat much oats. We could keep him in the stable with the sheep. Georgie says his father is getting him an ass for Christmas. I dare say an ass would be good for hauling wood, too. If I had an . . .” (4). Predictably, Guy’s narrator is “chopped off in [his] sins” by his father. While Guy’s overall persona is critical and contrary, it is simultaneously self-deprecating; he routinely makes fun of his own alleged incompetence, calls his own motives into question, and suggests his efforts to effect even trivial change have been largely fruitless.

Morreal suggests that laughter at one's own failures demonstrates freedom from "an egocentric, overly precious view of [one's] own endeavors" (106). For a political satirist such as Guy, whose rhetorical effectiveness depends in good measure on a non-elite self-presentation, being openly subject to folly and failure is a useful strategy. Among other things, it may facilitate a sense of kinship by engaging readers' sense of their own limited powers and mixed motives, granting them a kind of permission to laugh at themselves while also legitimating their right to indignation and strong opinions despite their flaws and limitations. As much as Guy is sometimes obviously proud of his irreverence and his willingness to take controversial stands, he is also open about his use of irony as a form of equivocation, and about the ambiguous effects of satire in the public sphere. His complicated self-presentation rejects the autocratism of which he accuses those for whom he reserves his harshest ridicule.

3.6 Conclusion

The perception that a crucial, and cruelly overlooked, tenet of Christian morality is an obligation to social service and a striving after worldly justice is central to the critiques of many religious and secular writers who have engaged critically with the lived values of their Christian cultures. Guy participates in this critical tradition as an apostate satirist: he echoes these writers' predominant social concern, basing his ridicule on a humanistic ethical standard, and making no claims to any transcendent belief. As North American evangelical and fundamentalist Christians frequently rail against what is broadly termed "secular humanism," Guy could easily be regarded as a secular humanist dogmatist railing back. This is true, to an extent, in that Guy is

clearly troubled by the more stringent, dogmatic strains of Christianity at the same time that he is, while in the midst of a rant, equally prone to damning dismissals untroubled by apparent self-consciousness. Undoubtedly, part of the reason Guy is so good at parodying fire and brimstone preaching is because he is so adept at expressions of moral outrage himself, and is quite willing to pull out all the rhetorical stops in his own enthusiasm for judgment. Guy's penchant for a brand of rather damning rhetoric creates rhetorical and ethical complications, considering his profound lack of respect for religious and political dogmatism in others. Guy goes to great lengths to express his own intolerance of the autocrats and visionaries he satirizes. Yet, the other option open to Guy—tolerating them—would render him culpable in *their* intolerance. This paradox illuminates the ethical limitations of the standard of tolerance, while supporting Kurtz's relativistic conception of ethics, in which moral principles have inevitably limited application and often exist in mutual tension.

A pattern of explicit self-deprecation, including a great number of columns devoted to depicting himself as an anti-heroic and curmudgeonly hack, has always mitigated, to some extent, the blunt judgmentalism of Guy's political satire, tending to contextualize it as the product of a writer aware of his own limitations. His critiques of religious (and political) dogmatism attack particular values and their worldly enactment, while his broader self-consciousness presents an alternative to an autocratic rhetoric of right that discourages self-doubt as well as questioning by others. Robert J.S. Manning argues that the act of accusation often appears to produce justice, but that this appearance is misleading. For Manning, the fact that the accuser

represents one party against another skews the accuser's perspective and distorts his representations of the accused (289). As a form of artful accusation, satire is quite openly not involved in the production of formal justice. It never makes any real effort to seem fair or balanced, and invokes as a matter of course all manners of distortion in the service of entertainment and outrage, encouraging a sense of superiority, shame, or resentment depending upon the ridicule expressed and the position of an audience relative to it. It creates obvious rhetorical imbalances deliberately, often to compensate for perceived existent imbalances, and perhaps to criticize the audience itself in a way that is palatable because it is funny. More idealistically, some satirists hope to encourage practical responses to social abuses via the instilling of indignation.¹⁸ A reading public familiar with a satirist's work is apt to recognize these tendencies, and may even be encouraged to do so by the satirist. This is certainly true in Guy's case. In all likelihood, when Guy rants, regular readers feel free to recognize the rant as one mode of a familiar literary persona, to be listened to in a "friendly" way, which includes being freely doubted and disagreed with (Booth qtd. in Ward 28).

Though Guy never attacks religious faith in any sweeping or coherent way, the general anti-authoritarian tenor of his satire, including his ridicule of the actions of Newfoundland churches and his more general satirical depictions of clerical autocratism, does not allow for much legitimacy among most Christian churches in anything like their current form. It is true that Guy's conservative streak occasionally leads to satirical cautions against an utterly unstructured relinquishment of power and discretion to the people.¹⁹ But more frequently and vehemently he rails against an opposite excess: the imposition of visionary, autocratically oriented central authority

upon members of a civil society whose interests only cohere in an ad hoc and partial manner. Dispensing with eternal considerations in all but the most rhetorical sense (as in “Live and Let Die”), Guy judges the churches according to the same rough calculation as he does other institutional bodies: according to the extent of their apparent capacity to see beyond their own vision to the concrete needs of the people, and by the degree of their willingness to acknowledge their own fallibility in their interactions with those whom they govern. In his religious satire, Guy rejects the Christian premise that fallible humanity is redeemed by an infallible God, to whose will Christians have some revealed access. For Guy, there is no infallibility, at least none apparent to human beings. All we have upon which to base policy and practice is some measure of rough agreement regarding what is best in human nature. This is the basis of Guy’s secular humanism, and it is why political skepticism directed at *all* institutional bodies, and a willingness to work from the messy basis of a civil pluralism when determining policy, are such consistent implicit standards in Guy’s satire.

Guy’s work may be seen to reflect conservative commentator William Safire’s pluralistic assertion that “[a]uthority is obligated to remain engaged, to be reachable, in order to stay alive . . . [, that] the heated clash of ideas, parties, philosophies, and interests keeps a political system from icing over and stopping cold” (141). For Safire, the accountability of authority is important on a pragmatic level, because it best facilitates a robust pluralism. This account is consistent with David Held’s description, in *Models of Democracy*, of political pluralism as a model in which “the overall direction of public policy emerges as a result of a series of relatively uncoordinated

impacts upon government, directed from all sides by competing forces, without any one force wielding excessive influence” (191). To a great extent, Guy’s satire is accurately read as a “competing force,” perennially engaged in tension against whoever seems at the time to be “wielding excessive influence” in an imperfectly pluralistic society, and working to keep authorities accountable. Chomsky takes his cautions against unaccountable authority further, embracing an outlook which Safire (given his belief in the necessity of hierarchical power and the need for authorities to make decisions that violate people’s desires in order to serve their needs) cannot unabashedly accept, but which puts into plain terms an undercurrent of Guy’s anti-authoritarian, anti-visionary satire. Chomsky’s premise for most of his political arguments is simple: no authority has any “prior justification;” “every form of authority has to prove [to the people] that it’s justified” (201-02). Authority can justly be held only when the body holding it is able to consistently defend its decisions in terms of balancing people’s varied interests, rather than in terms of any overarching ideal regarding what these interests ought to be. Though Guy’s political satire is most often directed at power-holders and power-seekers who market and rely upon political or religious visions, he explicitly if inconsistently acknowledges the power and responsibility of the people, under democratic structures, to refuse to grant authority to visionary leaders. According to Guy’s piecemeal satirical advocacy of a messy, pluralistic political environment, for authority to be legitimate people’s varied interests must be the *source* of decision-making, rather than a product of persuasion by people possessing institutional power and devoted to a vision. To argue against this position from the perspective of a transcendent authority (whether conceived politically as an

overarching ideological vision or religiously as divine rule) is to come to an inevitable stalemate with writers like Guy who consistently reject the existence of politically relevant transcendent truths.

Notes

¹ Russell was the writer and performer of the popular 1950s Fishermen's Broadcast radio series "The Chronicles Of Uncle Mose" for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, episodes of which have been collected into volumes edited by his daughter, Elizabeth Miller.

² The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador's Heritage web site suggests Guy's attacks on Smallwood were politically influential: "Guy's columns made Smallwood a figure of fun rather than someone to be feared, and helped galvanize a new generation of politicians to challenge Smallwood's hegemony over government" (Webb "Provincial").

³ Undoubtedly, Guy creates mad preacher characters partly with his own aptitude for comic vitriol and floridity in mind; such caricatures provide opportunities for him to indulge his facility for hyperbole and grotesquery.

⁴ This outlook is apparent throughout *Understanding Power*, as in other works by Chomsky.

⁵ Both Pottle and Phartley seem inspired by characters such as Father Dinn and Rev. Percival Freep, developed by Andy Jones of CODCO fame. Both blend judgment and repression with hypocritical outbursts of behaviour apparently related to the combination of the first two traits.

⁶ Mrs. Melrose herself is an object of satire, in that she has an enormous general loathing for the people of the village, and deals with her misery through the intensive use of her husband's drug supply. Yet, because of her loathing and her

delicate mental state, she is a good vehicle for satiric attacks directed at others in the play, since she unself-consciously expresses generally taboo observations.

⁷ Psychologist Erving Goffman notes that “the stigmatized individual in our society acquires standards which he applies to himself in spite of failing to conform to them,” and that this makes it “inevitable that he will feel some ambivalence about his own self” (106).

⁸ This late nineteenth-century movement advocating the secular application of gospel principles had a resurgence under the broader rubric of Christian social justice beginning in the 1960s, which responded to a surge of critiques, largely among Christians in colonized countries, of Western churches’ moral failures in the social realm (cf. Williams).

⁹ Andy Jones played Pastor Pottle in the Resource Centre for the Arts’ premiere production of *Young Triffie’s Been Made Away With* in 1985.

¹⁰ Jones’s standby Catholic caricature Father Dinn is similarly depicted, implying that, in Jones’s view, such deluded enthusiasm and attendant repression can be found in any denomination.

¹¹ These impressions recur in Malone’s work, but good examples of both can be found in his one-man show *Pocket Queen*.

¹² This column is available on the internet through a link provided by the Newfoundland Catholic Anti-Defamation League, which has included at least two of Guy’s columns in its “Hall of Shame.”

¹³ “A Few Passages From Unholy Writ” is cited with admiration by Pat Byrne in his article “Tall are the Tales that Fishermen Tell” and by Shane O’Dea in his

oration honouring Guy on the event of his honorary doctorate from Memorial University of Newfoundland.

¹⁴ The one-hundred-year contract signed with the Quebec government for the sale of power from the project has been a notoriously bad deal for Newfoundland and Labrador.

¹⁵ “The bridegroom” is a biblical metaphor for Christ.

¹⁶ In his column “A Fortuitous Distillation,” Guy writes,

A long and determined assortment of harriers and exterminators, both native and imported, have struggled relentlessly through the years to rid the fair face of the world of this unlovely and irksome breed.

But there are some ugly weeds you can’t root out of your pretty garden, misters, and there are some varmits you can’t eradicate”

(*You May Know* 114-16).

¹⁷ Pat Byrne writes of Ray Guy’s anti-hero columns, “Guy turns coping with modern household appliances and conveniences, and the simplest daily tasks into Rabelasian adventures of mythic proportions. A malfunctioning toilet is a menace not to be underestimated” (“Tall” 318).

¹⁸ These are staple discussions among satire theorists. See, for example, Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom’s *Satire’s Persuasive Voice*, or George A. Test’s *Satire: Spirit and Art*.

¹⁹ Cf. “Ah, The Never Fading Charms of Bung Hole Tickle” (*Ray Guy’s Best* 25-28).

4. Play-Wrestling With the Angel: Ed Smith's Ecumenical Religious Humour

4.1 Introduction

Born in 1940, Ed Smith moved with his family from one Newfoundland community to another during his youth, due to his father's career as a United Church minister. As a young man, Smith himself served three years as a student minister, but opted to go into teaching. He taught in several communities in Newfoundland, eventually settling in Springdale where his education career shifted toward administration, from which he retired in 1996. Smith's wife Marion encouraged him to begin writing a column for the local paper in Springdale in 1980. "The View from Here" was quickly picked up by several other papers, and is now published regularly in the province's two dailies, several community papers, and the *Downhomer*.¹ Several collections of Smith's columns have been published through provincial publishing houses, as has a memoir of his childhood entitled *Some Fine Times!*, another humour book called *Fish 'n' Ships: a Brief, Twisted History of Newfoundland . . . Sort of*, and a second memoir entitled *From the Ashes of My Dreams*. Although Smith is extremely well known in Newfoundland, he was almost unknown outside the province until he began writing nationally on disability issues after a 1998 motor vehicle accident, since which he has lived with quadriplegia. Smith won the Best General Columnist Award from the Atlantic Newspaper Association (1994), and has been nominated for the Stephen Leacock Memorial Medal for Humour (1989). In addition, the Canadian Association

of Nurses awarded him their annual prize for excellence in radio broadcasting (2001), and the Catholic Academy of Communication Arts Professionals awarded him the Gabriel Award for broadcasting that "uplift[s] and nourish[es] the human spirit" (2001), for a series of reflections on his rehabilitation after the accident, accounts which eventually developed into his second memoir. Since then, Smith has continued to write "The View From Here," as well as freelance features on disability issues.

Smith has been entertaining and provoking a gradually increasing readership since he began publishing columns in 1980. He has maintained a remarkable consistency of voice, which undoubtedly has helped him to develop a rapport with readers who could not help but become increasingly savvy decoders of his rhetorical play. The generally limited scope of his audience (his work, at least until the publication of his second memoir, has been that of a Newfoundlander writing for Newfoundlanders) aids in the development of such a familiar relationship. As he shifts among a wide range of uses of religious materials and explorations of religious matters, his readers should generally be able to fit his latest tirade, tease, or fit of fun into an overall authorial "personality" they have inferred over years of reading his work, and to interpret new contributions in that light. In his playful treatments of theological questions and religious politics, certain dominant concerns gradually become apparent. In a diversifying cultural environment that Smith readily welcomes despite episodes of half-hearted resistance, he negotiates between paradoxical commitments, to God and Christianity on the one hand, and to epistemological uncertainty and his sense of its apparent social benefits, on the other. The theological perspective that emerges piecemeal through Smith's work recalls a particular

ecumenical outlook advocated by liberal theologians such as Robert McAfee Brown and Hans Küng. Brown describes this brand of contemporary ecumenism as “a desire to reach out in fraternal love to all men” (19), and distinguishes it from the term’s common ecclesiastical usage to describe a movement toward Christian church unity. Smith’s negotiations between a dearly held faith and a comfortable uncertainty fit Brown’s claim that the duty of the ecumenical Christian in the contemporary world is “simply to live the life of ‘Christian presence’ . . . , leaving to God what he will do with this witness, and being willing to live with a certain degree of agnosticism about the coincidence of the lines of the visible church and the lines of the redeemed community” (273). Smith’s comic style tends to reinforce his broadly ecumenical outlook. Making frequent statements of religious opinion, though in a style characterized by self-deprecation, rhetorical shifts, and deliberate paradoxes, Smith encourages readers to participate actively in exploring the challenges of faith and practice in their “detraditionalising” environment (Giddens 45).²

Smith's love of rhetorical play, characterized by almost constant comic destabilizations of meaning, is intimately related to his speculative approach to religious questions and his general concern about the limits of the knowable. These concerns are laid bare in his 2002 rehabilitation memoir *From the Ashes of My Dreams*, whose religious passages further illuminate earlier, humorous treatments of religious matters and materials. *From the Ashes of My Dreams* describes Smith’s, and his family’s, journey to recovery and renewed life after the 1998 accident.³ The memoir follows Smith from the time of the accident through seventeen months of rehabilitation in St. John’s and in Scarborough, Ontario, ending when Smith and

Marion return home to Springdale. In the memoir, Smith grapples with grief, despair, and anger, gains an acute awareness of problems in the medical establishment, experiences the prejudice that people living with disabilities routinely face,⁴ and gains a deepened sense of the warmth and generosity of his friends, family, some total strangers, and many health care providers. There is a vitality in the choice of a phoenix metaphor for the memoir's title, which is particularly powerful considering the tragedy typically overlaid onto disability in the public imagination. The memoir's title frames Smith's injury as a kind of death, though it is not Smith's death, even metaphorically (especially in his more recent work on disability issues, he cringes at such melodrama). An inconsistency between Smith's metaphor and the phoenix myth on which it draws sheds light on the title's meaning: unlike the phoenix, who rises from the ashes of a previous phoenix (or from his own ashes, depending on the account), Smith re-emerges, changed but intact, not from his own ashes or some "previous" Smith's ashes, but from the ashes of dreams—the ashes of abstractions only. In addition to making a statement on his own recovery and on acquired disabilities more generally, the title has ramifications for Smith's humorous treatments of religious questions and materials. It emphasizes the person who keeps on living through the changes. Dreams that previously had made sense for him fail to make sense in his new situation, so he grieves them, but then lets go of them so he can move on. Abstractions serve real life. This is a premise Smith promotes in his religious humour, which tends to unsettle hardened abstractions—including theological abstractions within and outside of the Bible—in favour of a journey-centred approach to faith and religious ethics.

Throughout, the memoir emphasizes the value of personal experiences in struggling toward understanding. This emphasis is reflected in several lengthy passages in which Smith directly reflects on his religious beliefs. The religious passages in *From the Ashes of My Dreams* constitute Smith's most extended, serious published discussion of religious matters. In two chapters, he addresses God directly; and elsewhere, his wife Marion's rejections of friends' well-intended spiritual advice are described. The memoir provides a kind of theological anchor for Smith's otherwise piecemeal, playful forays into religious matters. In the end, the process of collapse and rebirth that forces Smith to scrutinize his own beliefs largely affirms beliefs he had already alluded to in his earlier columns and in *Some Fine Times!*

In *From the Ashes of My Dreams*, Smith comes to several conclusions regarding his belief in, and relationship to, God, and describes the interweaving of reason and faith in the process that leads to them. Although Smith admits doubt about his own notions of God and even, on one occasion, about the existence of God, he also prays, preaches, and talks to God directly, and states that despite his doubts and misgivings, he nonetheless believes.⁵ And he accepts that people have different ways of perceiving God despite his personal, ethically premised rejection of some of these ways. Theologically, Smith is of the "God is love" school. As such, God is also the source of forgiveness, hope, and joy. Godly principles such as power, force, and judgment rank low in the Smithean scheme. Divine intervention is rejected on the premise that God's love is not a demonstration of power or preference, but is universal. In Smith's piecemeal theology, God's love is akin to a wellspring that can be tapped into, but does not act except through those who have tapped into it. Lastly,

despite all that may be believed of God by Smith or anyone else, God is fundamentally beyond understanding.⁶ Hence, the propagation of strife based on accordance with the will of God is, at best, problematic, as are assertions of God's activity in the world. Smith is inclined to attribute only passive virtues to God—largely, it seems, because this is the only way he can practically harmonize a particular belief in God with a pluralistic openness to incompatible beliefs.

Smith's playful rhetorical style supports his pluralistic outlook; their symbiotic relationship becomes increasingly evident as one reads more and more of his work. Through general familiarity with Smith's writing, a reader may easily discern patterns in Smith's playful rhetoric. Hence, such a broad acquaintance is helpful in understanding his voice in any particular instance. For example, Smith's narrator is always closely identified with Smith the writer, but is, nonetheless, often presented as being unreliable. Such conscious employment of an unreliable narrator recalls Guy's use of such personae, though for Guy this practice is sporadic, whereas Smith's playful self-deprecation is a prominent feature of the majority of his work. Smith often treats his opinions as tentative, incomplete, and even mutually contradictory, though at times the concluding statements of his columns or of sections of his books lack this playful touch and veer clearly into didacticism. As Canadian columnist Charles Lynch suggests is true of many writers of newspaper features, Smith is more an entertainer than an informer (Tataryn 36). But he is also a moralist, in his way. Sometimes Smith's willingness to advocate particular religious and social values openly is explicit, as in the conclusion to his column "Ghosts of Christmas Past," in which he asserts, "Perhaps the solution to many [contemporary problems] is as simple . . . as it

was intended to be on that first Christmas in Bethlehem so long ago. Forgiveness and love” (*Take it 70*). Yet Smith’s rhetorical stance is often self-problematizing, and in his religious humour he uses rhetorical flip-flopping and self-deprecation to acknowledge that absolute certainty about the nature of God and the demands of faith is probably beyond human capacity, and certainly beyond his. Though Smith generally depicts himself as shallow, his shallowness is, as Sam G. Riley writes of the simplicity of Langston Hughes’ column character Jesse Simple, “a well-crafted illusion” (76).

To readers generally familiar with his work, Smith’s “shallow” persona is a familiar ruse, and his playful engagement of his readers gives the impression of a writer who is not rhetorically positioned “above” the people but is rather “on their level.” His conclusions are always tentative to some degree; he presents himself as unsure about his own opinions, a stance which creates the impression of kinship with “regular folks.” Yet at times he quite forthrightly embraces the very opinions about which his playful stance suggests a measure of uncertainty. This could have an empowering influence on readers who are reluctant to express their own beliefs and doubts because of uncertainty or embarrassment. Overall, the high level of reader engagement encouraged by Smith’s playful style suggests that the negotiation of important questions of values and beliefs is a task for everyone, and not the province of experts.

4.2 Cultural Bonds and Ethical Axes: Scriptural References in Smith’s Humour

Though Smith writes humour that has obvious religious implications or directly addresses religious institutions or agents, he is also prone to the use of Christian

religious materials to other ends. In many instances, his overtly trivial biblical references are akin to the lighthearted “religion-as-culture” jokes discussed in Chapter One. These uses of scripture are not religious per se, but rely on religious knowledge and the seriousness associated with it to create humour that bonds writer and readers in a common cultural background without making moral or spiritual demands on that shared heritage. Elsewhere, Smith makes similarly playful religious references that also address moral or political concerns, often with secondary religious implications. For instance, Smith approaches the biblical apocalypse from different angles in different columns: in one he laments its frequent utility for people who would use their religion to vilify other people; in another, he explores its cautionary potential for human beings who have been unworthy stewards of the earth. Smith approaches scriptural stories and figures from multiple angles, exploring various ways in which the material can be meaningful and the various ways people interpret it. Smith’s relationship with scripture is abiding but complicated, and his playful, varied uses of it suggest an ongoing exploration of how, rather than whether, it ought to be taken seriously.

In his “religion-as-culture” references to scripture, Smith sometimes subverts its rhetorical power to comic effect, not to truly undermine it but to develop his persona as a shallow hack. Smith’s most intensive use of such frivolous scriptural references is in *Fish ‘n’ Ships: a Brief, Twisted History of Newfoundland . . . Sort of*. For instance, he uses several biblical comparisons to describe William Coaker, who founded the Fishermen’s Protective Union in 1908: “Like John the Baptist, he was a herald of things to come, even if his voice was lost in the political wilderness. Like

Jeremiah, he was a prophet of the future. Like Simon Peter, he was interested in fishermen (harvesters, persons). . . . Like all three, he is dead” (121). Here, Smith makes light of strained, habitual allusions to the Bible, undoubtedly including his own. The first and second comparisons are illuminating, even slightly poetic, if a tad overblown. The third, though, is trivial, neglecting the different meanings of fishing and employing a weak comparison (“interested in”), which suggests the likeness is vague. This effect is amplified by Smith’s second-guessing of the gender-specific term fishermen, which further strains an already weak comparison via a distracting problematization of the language. Last, readers are faced with a simile that is entirely useless. Smith uses scriptural figures to fashion a substantive interpretation of Coaker’s historical role, then slides incongruously into silliness for comic effect. Newfoundlanders have generally been familiar with the main stories and characters of the Bible, and with the depth and importance it is normally granted among the religious. The incongruity between this depth and importance and Smith’s shallow treatments is the source of the comic potency of such frivolous biblical references.

Sometimes the apparent frivolity of Smith’s scriptural invocations is a bit of a ruse, veiling a more serious point. For instance, in his column “Winners and Losers” Smith invokes Armageddon ironically, implicitly criticizing literalist interpretations of biblical apocalypse, and possibly his misgivings about the material itself. In a passage that reflects his general emphasis on forgiveness and inclusion, Smith rhetorically aligns himself with the judged rather than the judges, as a means of questioning this pervasive human tendency and the use of scripture to support it.

That Smith, while a professed Christian, does not advocate a strictly deferential relationship to scripture, is apparent in “Winners and Losers,” as elsewhere. Smith begins “Winners and Losers” by telling readers the Bible states that at the last judgment people will be divided into sheep and goats, “with the goats headed for that last Big Barbecue down under” (*Not a Word* 76-77). He suggests his “goat points” always seem to outweigh his sheep points, and laments, “Somebody’s always dividing people into groups: good and bad; rich and poor; beautiful and ugly; saved and unsaved; and I always end up in the wrong group: bad, poor, ugly, unsaved and a goat to boot. It’s very discouraging” (77). This sort of playful self-deprecation is a common strategy in Smith’s work. By following a list of his own ostensible personal and spiritual defects with the anticlimactic “It’s very discouraging” (77), and leaning on deliberately flimsy metaphors such as his description of hell as a big barbecue, Smith exploits the idea of a literal apocalypse that does not really concern him, as a trope for scrutinizing a social attitude. The tendency to divide “us” against “them,” the column implies, is pervasive and lamentable. The biblical apocalypse is a familiar dramatization of an absolute division, a tool for Smith’s playful exploration of social values. Yet, for Smith, social values have religious implications, and make demands on claims to religious truth. Accordingly, by belittling human invocations of the apocalypse via barbecues and goat points, he rejects the notion that humans have the capacity or the right to make distinctions between the saved and unsaved. Juxtaposing such judgments with a variety of common secular value judgments and social divisions, and aligning himself with the ostensible losers on all counts, Smith

implicitly declares the tendencies to judge, divide, and rank to be purely human impulses, and problematic ones at that.

While Smith uses an ironic reference to biblical Armageddon in “Winners and Losers” to explore human attitudes, in another column he uses both Creation and Armageddon as critical tools for evaluating humanity’s effect on the planet. While the column does not affirm the literal truth of the biblical Creation, it employs a Judeo-Christian understanding of humans as “the Special Creation” with dominion over all others as a satirical standard for ridiculing our actual behaviour. And while Smith does not appear to regard the biblical apocalypse as literally true in a predictive sense, he does deem it to be at least figuratively true, in what might be considered a more broadly prophetic sense.⁷ Here, Smith finds Armageddon to be, at least, a worthy cautionary tale.

Smith begins with a reference to his readers’ alleged impatience with his shallowness. He writes that they have pleaded, “‘Give us something to make us think,’ . . . ‘give us something with meat on it!’” (100). Smith responds, “Okay,” then launches into a partly serious description of human beings’ impact on the earth. He begins by proposing a one-year model of the planet’s entire history. According to Smith’s model, “there would be no sign of man at all until 11:45 on December 31,” and “the entire period of man’s written history would occupy only the final sixty seconds before midnight.” According to Smith, upon our arrival “the neighbourhood went all to hell.” He invites readers to notice “how much we’ve loused up in a minute,” and to speculate on “what things would be like if we had been around for an hour or two!” (*Take It* 100). The remainder of the column bears quotation:

Just to get us off to a good start, we were given dominion over the animals. We can take lessons in forgiveness from dogs, in patience from horses, in work from oxen, in humility from cows, in organization from ants and in procreation from rabbits.

It's a wonder that the Archangel Gabriel doesn't have whoever wrote that bit about man being a little lower than the angels sued for defamation of character. We're told that there's a strong possibility of class action on the Last Day.

To top it all off, no one in his right mind would bet more than a Jackie sculpin that we'll make it through the first minute of the next year.

Now is that serious or what? (100)

Smith's invocation of the Last Judgment is only partly playful. It is a joke surrounded by other jokes; thus, it is not presented as true in any literal sense. But it is juxtaposed with an expression of concern that we may genuinely be doing ourselves in, that some form of apocalypse may indeed loom.

Although Smith often uses playfulness to trouble coherent critique in the service of fun and reader engagement, in columns like this one, playfulness is used to sugar the pill. Smith challenges readers to consider their own behaviour and to ask themselves how, and whether, they are fulfilling their stewardship obligations. His reference to final judgment is paired with a description of humans as the "Special Creation," in order to challenge Christian (and other) readers to consider their own actions in terms of these foundational stories: in terms of humans as the apex of

Creation with attendant responsibilities, and in terms of judgment by an all-seeing God. If these stories are meant to provide a moral compass to followers of the religion, and if they maintain some measure of guiding function for many non-believing members of a Christian culture, then perhaps, the column playfully implies, they ought to be taken seriously.

4.3 Whose God is God?: Smith's Ecumenism

It becomes apparent as one reads Smith's work that the Bible is an abiding anchor for his spirituality and ethics; it is also clear that he does not understand it primarily in terms of rules, or as a literal expression of transcendent truth. Rather, it is a largely *figurative* expression of truth, with all the attendant ambiguities of figurative expression. Thus, its meaning can be worked out only gradually, unevenly, and partially through the course of a life. Smith generally denounces fundamentalism—in part, it seems, because its rigidity is incongruent with his more speculative, process-driven approach to the journey of faith, but more explicitly because he regards it as a threat to humane coexistence. In a column and a memoir excerpt that recall Guy's "See Dick and Jane Run," Smith ridicules an alleged fixation on often trivial religious distinctions among Newfoundland denominations that have perpetrated and perpetuated social strife based on such superficial differences. He repeatedly explores the development of popular images of the divine, implicitly suggesting humans have shaped these images largely according to our own perceived needs. His rejection of the idea that God intervenes, providing assistance to those who have the correct belief or sufficient faith, reflects his sense that it is important to maintain a critical

relationship with images of God, to use one's intellect and moral sense to consider whether these images are God-worthy. Smith's concern for the alleged overvaluation of religious differences, his rejection of selective divine intervention, and his uncertainty about knowledge of God, underpin the ecumenical flavour of much of his religious humour.

Unlike Ray Guy's thoroughly secular opposition to interdenominational animosities, Smith's similarly pluralistic engagement with the problem of social strain across religious divisions reflects an ecumenical religious perspective. Smith strives to find a sustainable religious middle ground between what Küng describes as "blind zeal for truth," which has caused unspeakable cruelty throughout history, and "fatigued forgetfulness of truth," which may lead to disorientation and the inability to "believe in anything at all." The tone as well as the content of Smith's work on religion recalls Küng's third option: "to blunt the edge of the dispute over truth and to arrive at common answers in the ecumenical spirit" (228). As Smith's own work reflects, this path is less tidy than absolutism, and requires the relinquishment of some of its reassuring coherence; but its advocates see religious conflict as irreligious, and consider the softening of one's hold on religious truth to be a virtuous concession if it leads to greater peace and mutual understanding. Patrick Grant writes that in social contexts characterized by religious "scapegoating, . . . stereotyping and binary or mirror opposition, . . . religious commitments, based as they are on elevated principles, can nonetheless be annexed to kinds of behavior that these principles clearly denounce" (ix). Religious satirists have perennially targeted the gap between elevated principles and degraded acts justified in their terms, a gap that routinely concerns

Smith in his humorous treatments of religious divisions. Smith likely would agree with Grant's assertion that interdenominational conflict based on an overattachment to the rightness of one's own group amplifies likeness rather than difference among religious groups: according to Grant, "'patterned opposition' [between groups] produc[es] an often unconscious 'cultural convergence' whereby traditional enemies come to look more and more alike, despite their proclaimed differences" (6-7). It is a likeness without harmony, a mutually condemning likeness that, to one with Smith's ecumenical outlook, serves no one, including God.

In his childhood memoir *Some Fine Times!*, Smith denounces an alleged excess of concern for distinctions between Protestants and Catholics in Newfoundland. He describes a family move to the community of St. George's, to which his minister father has been posted, and which is Smith's first experience of a mixed Catholic and Protestant community. In St. George's, the young Smith faces an unexpected problem: "I couldn't tell Protestants from Catholics at a glance and somehow it seemed important that I should" (105). Thinking there must be some more subtle, yet crucially important difference at work, he asks his parents about it. His father tells him, "Catholics [don't] respect the Sabbath day." The young Smith, however, begins to believe that "if respect for any day meant you couldn't enjoy it, we Protestants had taken one mother of a wrong turn somewhere along the theological road" (105). Smith comes to "understand, even at the age of ten, that religious prejudice has to do with internal rather than external considerations, and that these were so hard to define that they were virtually worthless" (106). As is made clear in *From the Ashes of My Dreams* and, indirectly, through his multi-angled humorous

uses of scripture, working through ultimately ineffable “internal considerations” is, for Smith, important to the religious journey, whatever he may say about such considerations in this moment of indignation. But his work also generally supports this passage’s premise that “internal considerations” ought not to be used as grounds for the propagation of strife. Smith places great value on the worldly effects of religious beliefs and doctrines: for him, the social ramifications and manifestations of a belief are worthy of consideration in the evaluation of the belief itself. Through Smith’s St. George’s experience, the propagation of social enmity based on what he perceives as theological uncertainties (cf. Kantra 187) comes to seem, as Grant might assert, contrary to the “elevated” religious principles that supposedly underpin the various parties’ positions. Smith comes to believe that harbouring suspicions and sustaining oppositions based on disagreements over abstractions is more than problematic: it is “virtually worthless.”

In many of his columns, Smith similarly makes light of interdenominational animosities and of the religious premises that support them. He begins a column entitled “The Little Church Schoolhouse” by parodying justifications for the denominational school system. He declares that church schools were developed in part as a compensation for a “lack of physical education facilities” (*Never* 45), and describes a compensating, denominational-school “phys ed” activity: “For serious competition we fired [rocks] at the crowd from the Salvation Army school a hundred yards up the road who, of course, fired them back with equal vigour” (46). He asks, “At whom would we have pitched rocks if there had been no Salvationist school? How long would students have retained their interest in simply smashing bottles lined off on

a fence? Exactly. Can't get blood out of a bottle" (46).⁸ This description of sectarian violence among children resonates with Smith's denigration in *Some Fine Times!* of animosities based on "internal considerations," especially given most children's vague understanding of the grounds upon which such divisions have been maintained. In the hands of children, the tribalist underpinnings of interdenominational strife are made plain.

Later in the column, Smith addresses a few actual defenses of denominational schools, giving them basically the same treatment as his parodic defense. For instance, he describes the "religious truth" defense, suggesting that *every* religious "persuasion . . . knew that [their] church pretty well had a monopoly on the real truth about things" (46). He notes the paradoxical universality and mutual exclusivity of such claims, and further belittles the "religious truth" defense via an ironic attack on Catholics for being "so far off the straight and narrow, what with their chopping wood and berry-picking on Sundays, that they [don't] even bear mention" (46). Because of the denominations' confidence in their unique possession of religious truth, Smith argues, "they put us in separate schools to keep us apart, and warned us to have nothing to do with each other except to pitch rocks in the other's general direction" (47). Smith is less interested in exploring the theological subtleties of the various denominations than he is in making fun of how such subtleties have been used as a source of animosity. The tendency in his religious humour toward the comic belittlement of antagonism based on religious distinctions is related to the fact that he does not, for the most part, demonstrate much concern with whether one worships the same image of God as he does.

Certain Smith columns playfully explore his theological and moral interest in images of God, an interest later explored more seriously and directly in *From the Ashes of My Dreams*. For instance, in his column “Holy Super Santa,” he implies that popular images of God have human origins, and assesses them according to this premise: they are images, and not God. In the column, Smith describes a childhood version of himself musing on similarities and differences between God and Santa Claus, in the process playfully addressing the development of images of God while expanding a common, rather stern Protestant image of God to include a sense of fun and indiscriminating generosity. A predictable move given Smith’s playful persona and his trepidation about judgment, this shift invites readers to consider their own images of God and the strange existence of Santa Claus, who has become a desirable object of belief for children. The question of why people encourage a childhood belief in Santa Claus is part of the column’s subtext, a subtext that informs Smith’s alleged childhood epiphany, “God and Santa Claus were one and the same!” (*Never* 79): together they seem to present a worthier image of God.

The column begins by explaining the young Smith’s preference for Santa Claus over God:

Santa gave you gifts; God gave you Sunday School. God was stern and strict; Santa was a barrel of fun. God punished you if you were bad; Santa talked a lot about being good and bad. But when the chips were down on Christmas Eve, Santa didn't seem to mind one way or the other.

If God was interested in being popular, I often thought, He could learn a whole lot from Santa Claus. (78)

The column's child protagonist continues to mull over the available evidence and perceives that despite their differences, "they were alike in one intriguing way. Both knew everything there was to know about you" (78), a fact he does not relish. In addition, the young Smith recognizes in both a form of omnipresence (78-79). He wonders if Santa and God could be relatives, then his epiphany strikes. Regarding his revelation, Smith remarks, "God wasn't such a bad fellow after all, when you got to know Him" (79), re-emphasizing the sternness of the youthful Smith's inherited image of God. The passage lightheartedly implies that the stern father God is an impoverished image of God that is improved by this injection of joy and generosity. On a roll, the young Smith considers, since men dress up as Santa, and when children ask why different men dress up as Santa they are told that Santa is busy, and since it is clear that Santa is busy because Santa is God, "why not have someone dressed up as God to take up collection in church?" (79). In a lighthearted subversion of a conventional image of God, Smith suggests God's costume would be easy, since "Everyone knew God was a tall old man with white hair and white beard dressed in long white robes sitting on a golden throne" (80).

Following such lighthearted play with images of God, Smith closes the column with an adult recognition of the Christian spirit of the holiday, paired with a subsequent, perhaps paradoxical affirmation of his ostensible childhood insight:

Today, I know that the way to see God at Christmas is in a Child. But I can't help feeling that my childhood theory of Santa and God being one

and the same can't be too far off the mark. Indeed, I have to be honest about it.

I still like both better that way. (80)

After confirming that the central figure of Christmas is Christ, Smith returns to his youthful epiphany that God and Santa are one being, re-implying his “belief” in Santa Claus as an “image of God.” His assertion that he prefers them both as one is left unexplained. Readers are left to determine how Santa might be improved by being God, and God by being Santa. For instance, if the stern, “father” God is made more kind by being Santa, perhaps Santa (as a spirit of joy and generosity) is improved as one face of an infinitely just God. Underlying such considerations is the column’s implication that both the stern old man God and the jolly old man Santa are images people (largely men) have developed over time. Further beneath the surface, a possible additional implication may be discerned, born of the fact that Santa, while perhaps a desirable object of belief, does not exist in fact. The implications of this are left unpursued by Smith in this column, though he does acknowledge the possibility of God’s non-existence at one point in *From the Ashes of My Dreams* (106). Even in that passage, however, the allowance is made within a narrative that leads back through doubt to an affirmation of belief.

While Smith advocates tolerance of religious difference, this tolerance of people’s faith and respect for its sustaining power does not equate with an uncritical acceptance of any given image. Even the playful “Holy Super Santa,” which implies that both of its “images of God” are human models, still reflects a perception that the truthfulness of different models varies. In fact, Smith’s very insistence on a high

degree of religious tolerance and on a corresponding measure of uncertainty is, by its nature, intolerant of certain images of God. For instance, a God who would favour one group of people over another is unacceptable in Smith's view. This rejection is developed in Smith's satire of Newfoundland's history of interdenominational tensions, in which the various parties' mutually exclusive possession of religious truth, and of God's attendant favour, is ridiculed in principle and in its details. The chapters of *From the Ashes* that either address God directly or mull over theological possibilities further develop Smith's point of view on human conceptions of the divine, including the particular notion that God intervenes in worldly affairs. In the memoir, Smith discusses the well-intended religious assertions of many of his and his wife's friends. He, and more forcefully Marion, openly reject most of their friends' statements about God's potential role in Smith's rehabilitation. While Smith loves and respects the advocates of divine intervention who offer him spiritual counsel in *From the Ashes*, and is open to sharing worship and community with them, he rejects this aspect of the object of their worship because he disagrees with them in regard to the justice of it.

Throughout the memoir's chapters that address the nature of God, Smith grapples with the possibility of an interventionist God, and finds the idea morally unpersuasive. At one point he asks, if God can and does enact miracles,

Where are you when little children are starving to death? When women are raped and killed? When men are executed? . . . Someone has told me they believe in guardian angels who watch over and protect us. Where are these angels when the human monsters of this earth

decide to wipe out whole races of people because it suits their perverted and twisted minds? (105)

Smith subsequently rejects the prospect that God might intervene in the affairs of a select, faithful few, and not on behalf of people suffering genocide and torture. In addition, neither Smith nor Marion can see the justice of divine intervention in Smith's own situation. He writes,

A clergyman friend suggests it's all a matter of faith.

"If you have even the smallest bit of faith, Jesus said you could move mountains," he says pointedly.

This gets Marion very upset.

"That's a cop-out," she says. "It's so easy to say that if Ed doesn't get better it's because he doesn't have enough faith. How much is enough? Who knows how much he has? And if you believe that it's a matter of faith, you probably also believe that this is part of God's plan, which means God must have planned for Ed not to have enough faith. How do you explain that?" (140)

After several more passages of a similar tenor, Smith makes his conclusion about the prospect of God's intervention in his accident and rehabilitation explicit in a direct address to God:

I haven't blamed you for the injury. I don't believe you had anything to do with it. . . . I simply do not believe that my life is so manipulated by you that my choices are limited only to what you allow me to

decide, and that I can avoid the consequences of my actions simply by asking for your help. (312-13)

Despite his stated openness to different images of God, Smith personally rejects an interventionist conception on the grounds that it reduces an infinite God to a partisan god, a prospect to which Smith cannot reconcile his own conception of a universally loving deity. Smith rejects the notion of a God who would hurt him for some mysterious greater purpose, who would base the decision to intervene on the adequacy of Smith's faith (over which, as Marion notes, an interventionist God presumably has control), or who, if Smith were to pray ardently enough, might intervene to aid his healing while neglecting others who may need help more than he does. While Smith's accident and rehabilitation undoubtedly gave him fresh cause to revisit the question of God's plan and the justice of divine intervention, these passages affirm, and develop more extensively, a rejection already humorously articulated before the accident.

In a column appropriately entitled "Divine Intervention," Smith ridicules those who invite God's influence in competition, whether it be sports or warfare. The column adapts the same basic line of reasoning as Smith's rejections of divine intervention in *From the Ashes*. The prospect of a God who would intervene on one side of a competition denies any equivalent claim to intervention by the opposing side in instances where both sides are praying for help in mutual opposition (recalling the "religious truth" claims in "The Little Church Schoolhouse"). Again, the reduction of God to a partisan is an implicit target, as is the invitation of God's favour for trivial, ambiguous, or even objectionable ends.

The column begins with the assertion, "Pity poor God." Smith goes on to describe facetiously the sorts of conundrums God must be faced with on a regular basis, such as which football team to favour. Smith describes a televised football game, and notices that, at a crucial moment, many of the players are seen praying:

You could almost hear the words.

"Dear God, if You'll let that football soar through those goalposts, I promise I will never, repeat never, be bad again. Winning this game means another twenty thousand in bonus money, God, and You know how the new mansion and the three Porsches are bleeding me dry."

(Never 43)

The triviality of the immediate purpose of God's hoped-for assistance (a field goal), and the frivolous materialism of the player's own "deeper" hope, emphasize the absurdity of inviting God's help in attaining it. Smith suggests that "God faces this kind of foolishness all the time," then dramatizes a post-match interview with a victorious boxer in which the boxer begins by saying, "I just want to thank my Lord Jesus Christ" (44). Smith asks, "Thank Him? For what? For pounding another of God's creatures into a bloody pulp? For giving him such a vicious beating that he's still stretched out on the canvas with three doctors working on him? Thank you, Jesus! Amen!" (44). Smith then extends his ridicule to warfare, perhaps the ultimate manifestation of worldly partisanship. He notes the explicit and implicit proclamations of God's favour on both sides during the Persian Gulf War, and idly dismisses the presumption of divine backing that seemed to pervade both sides, finally suggesting, "Being blamed for such actions must be extremely frustrating for the aforesaid Deity"

(45). Smith ultimately cannot bring himself to believe in a partisan God who would overlook the suffering of millions while selectively intervening in the affairs of others. Given Smith's rejection of a biblical literalism that would affirm God's violence, he rejects certain interpretations of God because they just seem cruel, and he cannot accept an image of God that is capable of such cruelty.

While Smith rejects certain images of God and embraces others, he is generally unwilling to authoritatively assert the veracity of any image of God; in fact, the images he rejects tend to be those associated with authoritative assertion in the first place. Hence, he consistently rejects fundamentalism of any stripe. In his column "The Hard Sell," Smith uses the publication of his first collection of columns as an opportunity to put a disingenuous spin on his own motivations for religious ridicule—he writes that he ought to have done it more because he would sell more books. He laments of his forthcoming publication, "Nothing was said to get pulpit thumpers good and mad, although one dear soul did drop a line to point out that the things I say in this column are a stink in the nostrils of the Lord (her words, not mine)" (*Never* 97). Despite his eagerness to make fun of alleged fanatics because he rejects the narrowness of their moral and ontological framework, Smith is open and eager regarding his Christianity, proclaiming and describing the value of an active religious life. An illuminating example of Smith's ecumenical affirmation of the spiritual power of faith is found in *From the Ashes of My Dreams*, as Smith attends a hospital chapel service at the clinic where he and most of the rest of the congregation are rehabilitating after spinal-cord injuries:

The common denominators among us are pain and grief. . . . But somehow in this little gathering pain and grief for the moment are strangers. Drawing on our own strengths, and the strengths of those around us, we manage to rise above our personal and collective demons and are temporarily freed. Here we are understood, and accepted for who we are and not what we are. Here we can share worship with each other in perfect understanding, whatever our unique and varied perceptions of the Creator may be. (172)

The act of shared worship, and a sense of being “understood” and “accepted,” whether by God or each other or both (the excerpt is ambiguous in this regard), are the crucial bonds among the congregants in the above passage. The “perfect understanding” Smith describes is of their common experience of “pain and grief,” and of their shared sense of faith and hope; it is not a common understanding of God. The two axes along which Smith’s musings on belief in God tend to run involve morality, on the one hand, and the sustaining capacity of faith, on the other. When Smith is concerned with moral principles (as in “Divine Intervention”), he cannot shrug at substantial differences in belief that pose real obstacles to mutual understanding and humane coexistence; hence, God becomes a site of some measure of struggle. But when Smith is primarily concerned about God’s sustaining function, he tends not to be very concerned about whether he shares a common conception of God with others. When people of diverse religious beliefs suffer earthly ills together, and require hope and strength, the act of shared worship, despite people’s various conceptions of God, is taken to be of central importance. It is tentatively taken for granted that the community can absorb these

differences because, at such times, the community's primary needs are hope, love, and a sense of unity. Smith's different approaches to these two axes of his religious thought reveal a paradox in his religious thinking. This paradox is accounted for, though not resolved, by his journey-focused understanding of religious life, through which answers to "big questions" only ever reveal themselves partially and tentatively, and within which one finds no reasonable grounds for sustaining absolute divisions or oppositions, regardless of inevitable struggles over specific questions.

For Smith, the development of a maximum amount of harmonious feeling across the bounds of religious difference is both socially and religiously laudable, though it may necessitate a measure of the religious uncertainty about which he is quite frank. In his broadly ecumenical column "Home for the Holidays," Smith describes familial developments that are facetiously presented as a challenge to the limits of his own religious (and racial) tolerance. There is no sincere suggestion in the column that the broadening of horizons encouraged by his children's involvements is much of a struggle for him, especially considering that he begins the column by giving away its self-congratulatory conclusion: "I discovered that I have not a jot or tittle of religious prejudice in my soul" (*Not a Word* 138). This declaration sets the tone for the rest of the column, which is distinctly lighthearted throughout, and which amounts to a humorous affirmation of the social benefits of a far-reaching ecumenism. Smith once again ironically invokes Armageddon, this time as a potential outcome of his children's interfaith attachments. "Home for the Holidays" presents a pluralistic religious, racial, and cultural perspective, relatively unconcerned with the prospect that

differences among religious traditions may be difficult to bridge, let alone crucial to the fates of souls.

Presenting his children's romantic and platonic involvements across a range of religious and ethnic divisions as an apparent scandal, Smith prepares the grounds for his expression of concern that they may bring on the apocalypse. Smith writes that two of his daughters have Catholic boyfriends and that one, "to her Protestant clergyman Grandfather's dismay, has already taken up bingo" (138); he adds, "How far is it from bingo to a full confessional stance?" (138). Their third daughter is involved with a Jewish football player and recently spent a weekend in New York with the family of a Korean Hindu young man with whom she attends Harvard University. Smith invokes biblical apocalypse and final judgment in a typically teasing but pointed fashion, asserting, "Biblical scholars are wrong about where the battle of Armageddon is to be fought. Ten chances to one it will be in our living room" (138). "Other Half"⁹ responds to their children's involvements "coolly and dispassionately:" "If our family was meant to be the combined United Nations and World Council of Churches of Atlantic Canada, so be it. It's more important that the boys are nice. Nice and rich . . . would be even better" (138-39). In a province traditionally fraught with interdenominational conflict, Smith simply and straightforwardly embraces religious differences far beyond those among Newfoundland's still-dominant Christian denominations, extending his always apparent Christian ecumenism to an interfaith embrace.

While, as Smith acknowledges, a broadly conceived ecumenical spirit may encourage peaceful interaction among communities (*From the Ashes* 251), Lakeland

argues there are attendant perils in the pursuit of a far-reaching ecumenism, aside from many religious believers' obvious concern that souls may be at stake. As noted in Chapter One in regard to a possible direction in which Newfoundland's growing religious pluralism may be heading, a pluralistic mindset tends, in Lakeland's view, to promote "a vision that differences don't, in the end, really matter all that much" (57). Addressing concerns regarding the "liberal metanarrative of pluralism which takes over" when the "Christian metanarrative" is abandoned, Lakeland suggests both have the potential to effectively erase Otherness.¹⁰ He acknowledges that pluralism, unlike Christianity, "releases the other to be other" (57). That is, it demonstrates no need to alter the Other. Lakeland values a self-conscious relationship to Others, one which moves beyond straightforward assumptions of one's own rightness; but he suggests that pluralism may do the opposite of what its advocates expect. The pluralist mentality often does not adequately acknowledge that religious difference is deeply substantive in its effects on adherent individuals and communities, he argues, and this lack of acknowledgment prevents a proper understanding of the religious Other. Pursuing his argument, Lakeland argues that religions are "incommensurable," that "each religion is not so much a contributor to the understanding of Being as an account of Being, which must inevitably 'reclassify' other accounts when it encounters them" (68). That is to say, religions have developed as whole systems, and the truth value of elements of a given system is, in some measure, dependent upon their relationship to the whole. Hence, an approach in which one regards religious traditions as collections of spiritual wisdom from which the best parts can be chosen, or the deep histories of which can be taken lightly, fails to understand the traditions,

alters the meaning of their parts due to a reduction of the importance of their broader context, and thereby detracts from the overall, incommensurable “truth” of the different religions.

Locating Smith relative to such an argument is a bit complicated. On the one hand, his doubts about what can be religiously known, and his recurrent expressions of concern for social harmony, lead at times to facile rhetorical diminishments of the meaningfulness of religious difference. On the other hand, his relationship to his Christian tradition is hardly trivial or superficial. By treating the various worldly and devotional materials of his religion as sources of fun, targets of ridicule, political metaphors, satirical standards, objects of love, and fulcrums of theological exploration, Smith seems to take Christianity quite seriously, engaging with it on multiple levels and to multiple ends, not all of which are likely to please any given reader. For instance, a strongly apostate reader may become impatient or bored with Smith’s serious explorations of Christian belief, while a reader with a fundamentalist orientation might find his persistent irreverence and his sometimes facile pluralism a source of irritation.¹¹ Strikingly, in *From the Ashes of My Dreams* Smith begins to consider possible limitations on the positive potential of (or at least an expression of caution regarding) the broad ecumenical spirit he has generally favoured. Addressing the cosmopolitan trend he witnessed in Toronto while living in a rehabilitation centre in Scarborough, Smith observes,

The multicultural and multi-religious groups that make up the Greater Toronto Area seem to have found a way to live together in peace. More power to them. I’m all for peace. Like all peace, this one seems to have

come at a price, that price being that all faiths and cultures are in danger of being reduced to the lowest common denominator. (251)

There is a mild tension between this passage and the overtly pluralistic humour of “Home for the Holidays,” though the two passages are not necessarily contradictory. “Home for the Holidays” is primarily concerned with social harmony, and Smith is amply pleased by what he sees in this regard. His comments in *From the Ashes* simply acknowledge, perhaps for the first time in his writing, that such harmony, which he clearly favours, has a shadow side, that this gain comes with a likely (if not an inevitable) attendant loss, a loss it seems Smith can live with.

4.4 Religious Hypocrisy and Foibles: Integrity and Community in Smith’s

Religious Humour

Smith’s multifaceted interest in his religious heritage, his explorations of matters of belief, and his concern for ethical questions, lead to occasional ridicule of religious hypocrisy—a staple among targets of religious satire, and a particular favourite of Ray Guy. In other passages, Smith depicts religious shortcomings, such as mild foibles in affectionately portrayed religious communities, that cannot properly be attributed to hypocrisy. I use the term foibles to describe shortcomings that are not vicious or deeply harmful, and that seem to arise out of the daily complexity of life and people’s limited insights. By hypocrisy, on the other hand, I indicate willful refusals to acknowledge, or rationalizations with vicious consequences of, glaring inconsistencies between professed moral standards and behaviour. Implicit in Smith’s satirical depictions of hypocrisy is the hypocrite’s lack of proper regard for God as well as for

other people, a combination which recalls the objects of his ridicule in columns such as “Divine Intervention.” In his humorous depictions of foibles, Smith often draws attention to the benefits of shared worship discussed above, and to the presence in the religious community of values bonding and supporting flawed if usually well-intentioned people.

Two prominent objects of ridicule in Smith’s satire of hypocrisy are televangelists and Newfoundland historical figures. The former are ridiculed in a number of columns, and the latter mostly in *Fish ‘n’ Ships*. Though Smith’s main target in his ridicule of televangelists is duplicity, in the process he makes a good deal of fun of their preaching style, which is generally depicted as a bombastic mask for insincerity. His column “Salvation Full and Free” exploits Jimmy Swaggart’s preaching style for satirical purposes; it depicts him as a showman performing for money under a guise of religiosity. In addition to the use of religious enthusiasm as a mask for greed, the column targets drama and aesthetic excitement as a replacement for genuine conviction.

Smith begins the column by admitting, “I’ve just been watching Jimmy Swaggart” (*I Blame* 64). He quickly defends himself for doing so: “Well, I’m on holiday, you know, and at someone else’s house, so there’s not a lot to do and the television was on and the remote control halfway across the room in another chair and it was easier to watch Swaggart than get up and switch to something else” (64). Smith goes on to praise Swaggart as a performer: “Swaggart is another Bo Jangles. The man can sing. The man can act. The man knows how to work an audience better than an auctioneer. The man could bring tears to a glass eye” (65). He describes the “fever-

pitch of ecstasy and praise” that Swaggart has facilitated among members of his congregation, suggesting that “some—the Bo Jangles types—would call it singin' and dancin', but it is obviously ecstasy and praise” (65). He concedes that “the appeal was all to the heart and nothing to the brain, but that's alright. I'd take a great heart to a great brain any day, not having had much choice in the matter for myself” (65). He gets swept up again and, alluding to Swaggart’s motel-room sex scandal, asks, “Motel? What motel? Hooker? What hooker? Hallelujah” (66). Smith uses self-deprecation ironically, in a way that is typical of his satire, in defending Swaggart’s allegedly vacuous preaching on the grounds that it excites and gratifies him, and because it suits his own ostensible incapacity to think critically either about what has been said or about its implications for the preacher’s own behaviour.

The bulk of the column depicts the solicitation from the television audience of money to be directed “towards supporting his television ministry so that he could continue doing what he was doing then” (67). The ambiguity of this phrase recalls Smith’s earlier suggestion that some might call Swaggart’s spiritual leadership “singin’ and dancin’,” and implies, in the context of the column as a whole, that “what he was doing then” was swindling people. The pecuniary plea is framed as a birthday present to Swaggart’s wife Frances, who ostensibly has designed a wonderfully expensive-looking necklace that the Swaggarts are willing to sell for only fifty-three dollars, and the purchase of which will make Frances happy on her birthday. A less expensive cookbook is also available, which, Smith extrapolates, will make Frances less, but still adequately, happy (66). He conjectures that if he does not buy even the twenty-three dollar cookbook, Frances will “spend her birthday in a blue funk” (66).

Smith's identification of himself as a direct influence on Frances' well-being targets the sentimental rhetoric that would present such a financial appeal in personal, emotional terms. Smith's narrator again gets caught up in the show's emotional momentum, ending the column with a nod to Swaggart's persuasive powers, followed by a predictable Smithean about-face:

All I had to do was get my cheque in the mail in a hurry so that
Frances would not be disappointed on her birthday.

And so I shall, Brother Swaggart, so I shall.

When hell freezes over. (67)

It is implicit in "Salvation Full and Free" that some of the pressure to contribute to Frances' birthday bliss comes from a desire among viewers to please God by pleasing these dealers in saved souls. Despite his generally playful approach, Smith is sometimes very didactic. Here, his closing quip makes his own opinion abundantly clear: salvation by these means is neither full nor free. The column satirizes those who, more committed to their own wealth than to God, would sell spiritual shortcuts and encourage a hasty embrace of one's own salvation. Purchasers of Frances' necklace or cook book trade their money for a spiritual solution that is likely to fail because it does not account for the challenges of the long spiritual road ahead, a likelihood obscured by the drama and excitement of instant conversion.

Like Smith's televangelists, the Christian colonial power players whom Smith ridicules in *Fish 'n' Ships* are motivated largely by greed. Describing the notorious exploitation of Newfoundland fishing communities by the merchants, Smith writes, "Merchants were invariably religious. 'The poor you shall have with you always' was

their favourite quote from the Bible, and a good thing for merchants it was, too. Having the poor with them always would mean that they'd always be rich" (59). The same biblical passage is used to similar ends in CODCO's "Upper Class Scene," from their play *Das Capital*. In the CODCO sketch, several wealthy St. John's residents discuss their wish to "get [their] hands on a poor person and pluck him up out of the dirt, . . . and just give him a good scrub up or something . . . And just see, with a little breeding and a little encouragement, see if [they] could make a rich person out of him" (181). However, they decide that it will not work, that the poor person would undoubtedly squander the new-found wealth, and that, "as J.C. himself said, the poor you always have with you" (181), at which point the group chuckle at their cleverness. In both Smith's book and CODCO's sketch, the biblical quotation is used by the wealthy as a means of disengaging themselves from the problem of drastic inequality. For Smith's purposes, it matters little if such a use of the phrase has real historical currency; it is a rhetorical tool for satirizing alleged hypocrisy among people who not only maintain their faith while exploiting the poor, but often find ways to rationalize their positions within the tradition itself.

In the same passage, Smith goes on to describe the accomplishments of Captain Henry Osbourne (an early governor of Newfoundland), as well as British military exploits. In these instances, financial greed is a symptom of a broader hunger for power. After listing several other features of Osbourne's tenure, Smith ironically notes, "Being a good Christian man, Osbourne also built jails and a courthouse" (60). In consideration of the drastic economic inequalities that characterize Newfoundland history—largely due to the machinations of colonial agents and merchants—"jails and

a courthouse” are framed as a convenient, symptom-based response to crime: a response which would largely target the crimes of the poor (often rooted in the effects of poverty), rather than those of the criminally avaricious “Christian” representatives of the crown. Describing the British colonial history in which Osbourne participated, Smith asserts, “The English believed as strongly in war as they did in God, and firmly believed that if they weren't involved in one they weren't pleasing the other. At least, this is what some scholars believe. I, of course, am not one of them” (71). Smith alleges a hypocrisy so deep and abiding that it became a kind of colonialist orthodoxy, no longer recognized as hypocrisy because of the depth to which religious ideals had become adapted to fit imperialist desire. This critique emphasizes the perils of religious control by an elite and of the over-identification of religion with power, in accordance with Smith’s general emphasis on the importance of community and dialogue, and his low valuation of power and might as Godly attributes.

While Smith, like Guy, is eager to satirize religious hypocrisy, especially among figures with substantial power over the public, Smith also gently highlights more benign quirks and flaws, in frequent depictions of the religious lives of ordinary people. Smith explores such foibles in his farcical fictional column “Circa 1951,” and in a more pedestrian fashion in his memoir of childhood *Some Fine Times!*. The column and the memoir, taken together, present a view of religious community life as being characterized by inevitable failure, limitation, and error, but also, when the communities are functioning as they ought, by a shared sense of forgiveness and love among their members.

“Circa 1951” juxtaposes a passage satirizing religious hypocrisy with a slightly absurd though affectionate depiction of the fictional community of Caplin Spawn Gut (a name that recalls Ray Guy’s favourite fictional locale, Bung Hole Tickle). In Smith’s column, the annual report of Caplin Spawn Gut Church is being delivered to the congregation. The report describes church community events such as fundraising suppers, one of these funding an overseas missionary, “Riverent Bellacardy in far-off Africa” (*Never* 123). The speaker reports,

We learned through our church paper that he had been disrobed—right, Riverent, sorry—defrocked for carnal knowledge of a young girl who was also a heathen. Consequently, we put a stop-payment on our cheque for thirteen dollars and seventy-two cents, and we are now looking for a new missionary to adopt.

The treasurer of the League reports they have a balance on hand of thirteen dollars and seventy-two cents. (123)

The pointed reference to the young girl’s heathen condition implies suspicion that it had some mysterious, probably causal relationship to the apparent rape, or that it somehow made the priest less culpable. In light of Smith’s concern over abuses of children, and humanity’s often shameful legacy of cruelty more generally, in several serious passages of *From the Ashes of My Dreams*, his depiction of “Riverent Bellacardy” can be read as a satirical attack on a broader Christianizing, ostensibly civilizing mission that often has had barbaric effects and shrouded base intent.

Although there is an element of light ridicule throughout “Circa 1951” that is strengthened by the satirical reference to Reverend Bellacardy, the remainder of the

column's humour is relatively gentle. Its passages referring to the year's conversions, for instance, are exuberant in a way that is rather cute:

On a spiritual side, it was a year of ups and downs. The bad news is that only five people got saved all year. The good news is that three of them got saved fourteen times, and Joshua Morgan got saved twice in one night. . . . So not counting Billy Price, who was drunk the night he got saved and didn't know what he was doing, that makes sixteen conversions for the year. (123).

Joshua getting saved twice in one night is taken to be an especial achievement, to which the speaker refers repeatedly. The speaker notes that "Church attendance stayed about the same, except for the night Joshua got saved twice" (124), and proclaims at the column's end,

We don't want to forget our wonderful pastor, the Riverent Glentiddy, who gave us such a wonderful sermon the night Joshua got saved twice and knocked over the church stove while the spirit was on him. And last but not least, thanks to all the brave people who fought the fire.

We will now call for volunteers for the new church building committee. (124)

Despite the satirical undercurrent of the missionary passage, "Circa 1951" generally is an example of Smith at his most exuberantly comedic. While the cast of characters is a bit ridiculous, their depiction is, on balance, affectionate. Joshua's multiple conversions are played for laughs, but the community's warm-hearted embrace of Joshua, though comically innocent, is not depicted sneeringly. Similarly, though

Joshua's exuberance inadvertently results in the church burning down, the community's commitment to rebuilding the church is humorously but gently stated, and he is not blamed. Thus, while the passage about "Riverent Bellacardy" is religiously satirical, and while the column may be seen to contain a latent comment on public conversion as a kind of entertainment (especially in light of "Salvation Full and Free"), it also emphasizes the benefits to the community of the church, which acts as a binding agent, through which members (even struggling members like Joshua) are held in a shared, loving embrace.

Churches were socially conservative forces in the outports. The shadow side of this conservatism is depicted in Smith's columns ridiculing the development and perpetuation of interdenominational animosities, and in critiques such as Harold Horwood's excoriations in *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday* of the churches' persecuting or ostracizing attitude toward several arguably innocuous forms of social deviance. But the churches also acted to conserve the bonds of community through the provision of faith, joy, opportunities for socializing, and even the ambiguous gift of social regulation. This overall effect is comically depicted in "Circa 1951" and in several sections of Smith's first memoir, *Some Fine Times!*, about growing up as a minister's son in outport Newfoundland.

Some Fine Times! is filled with lighthearted falling-from-innocence narratives such as the St. George's excerpt discussed above, in which Smith recounts the beginning of his journey toward ecumenism. These narratives recall columns such as "Holy Super Santa" in their tendency to question particular religious conventions without fundamentally questioning the value of religion or belief. More realistic than

“Circa 1951,” a passage from *Some Fine Times!* that describes Smith’s bad boyhood behaviour during his father’s pastoral prayers and sermons is akin to the column in its affectionately humorous depictions of the religious foibles of one of Smith’s own childhood church communities, in its subversion of certain aspects of church propriety, and in its overall affirmation of the value of the church to the community.

The young Smith’s central discovery in the passage is that, despite his own longstanding, finally failed attempts to remain in “the attitude of prayer” when the pastoral or “long” prayer was being spoken, he was not bound to suffer eternal punishment for his failure, unless most of the congregation were similarly fated.

Peeking about for the first time, he sees that

only the near-sainted had their heads bowed and their eyes closed in the proper attitude. There were those with their eyes closed and their heads up; those with their heads down and their eyes open; and those who had neither head down nor eyes closed. The latter group, without doubt, would be in hell even before me. (*Some* 37)

The young Smith’s perennial efforts to make his sister laugh during the sermon receive a similar treatment. When he is finally caught making faces by his mother, she unexpectedly bursts into laughter as well. While being punished for his misdeed, he is preoccupied with a single thought: “Gee, I must be pretty good at making faces!” (39). Smith also describes the range of activities among the rest of the congregation during the sermons, and writes that some particularly bored-looking congregants typically were “the first to compliment my father on his marvelous sermon” (39). Smith is not apparently bothered by these small-scale follies and apparent dishonesties. They are

presented sometimes for laughs and sometimes without comment, as if to suggest that it is simply the way of people not to be generally capable of consistently abiding by strict codes of conduct, to be bored at least some of the time by long speeches of any nature, and to be prone to a measure of small-scale dishonesty, whether for self-protection or diplomacy.

The congregation's distraction during the pastoral prayer and sermon has implications for Smith's interest in community. Whereas the community are not active participants during the long prayer and the sermon, Smith's father's common practice of having a sing-song of hymns after the service, which Smith describes as "the best part of the whole thing," elicits the eager participation of the whole congregation. Neither the long prayer nor the sermon are condemned, but the potential boredom of the congregants is presented as understandable, and "the best part" is participatory. At those times when active participation is less welcome, intensity of engagement goes down. The passage recalls the long-winded-preacher jokes from Chapter One, within which congregant characters vent their boredom or frustration with the preacher's tendency and privilege to talk at great length. Two recurrent elements of Smith's approach to religious matters are evident in this passage. One is his interest in community as a fulcrum for religious life (and vice versa), characterized by a sense of the flexibility and forgiveness community living requires, as well as the tensions it inevitably creates. The other is his concordant interest in the journey of faith, through which everyone moves differently and without perfection.

4.5 Conclusion

Smith's negotiations between areas of moral and religious confidence and his acknowledgment and embrace of a measure of uncertainty manage to hold together in a comprehensible if not entirely coherent whole. In an illuminating discussion of the sometimes tense epistemological negotiations that face satirists who acknowledge a postmodern epistemological environment, M.D. Fletcher argues that postmodern satirists—a label which usefully if only partially describes Smith—are caught between postmodernism's emphases on the play of uncertainties and the often oppressive effects of binary discourses, and satire's emphasis on a form of play that judges, that implies certainties, and that often assumes that binary judgments may have liberatory potential. Fletcher argues that, from within this bind, postmodern satirists have claimed the right to ridicule based on “political limitations . . . imposed by particular arrangements and actions,” but not “political limitations inherent in the problematic nature of human knowledge” (xi). This differentiation is evident in Smith’s distinct treatments of religious hypocrisy, framed as abusive and “imposed,” and religious foibles, generally depicted as benign and “inherent.” Smith discourages “arrangements and actions” that cause hurt or strife through either callous hypocrisy or refusals to admit that human knowledge is problematic and limited, and he encourages a worshipful openness and epistemological humility that he assumes will facilitate harmony and minimize unnecessary conflict. Smith reconciles his Christian faith and his postmodernist doubt through the mystery of God, through which a potentially nihilistic perception that knowledge is ultimately inaccessible is framed within a context that instead invites awe and worship. At the same time, the context of mystery

troubles any over-confident notions about God's nature, so that we humans must be very careful regarding both our assertions about God, and what actions we might presume to undertake in God's name. In this way, Smith's apparently paradoxical embrace of skepticism and also of belief make a certain practical peace with one another.

Smith maintains an overarching concern for social harmony, and accepts a diversity of beliefs in a world he concedes, explicitly in *From the Ashes* and implicitly through his abiding sense of play, is resistant to understanding. In order to accommodate his advocacy of humane interaction in a diversifying social environment, he relinquishes a dominant strain of Christian belief: the belief that salvation through Christ is the only true path to salvation. Smith leaves this prospect aside in his assessments of Christianity and even in his expression of concern for the potential cost of a far-reaching ecumenism. At the same time, his notions of the humane are drawn deeply from his particular Christian affiliation and from a Christian faith he maintains despite his relinquishment of exclusive religious salvation. Neil Postman describes a tension regarding belief in gods that Smith's work often negotiates on some level. Rhetorically framing the term god as a given person's (or group's) most pivotal, stable principle(s), and arguing that atheists as well as religious people have "gods" in this sense, Postman argues that "all gods are imperfect, even dangerous." He emphasizes the benefits of flexibility of mind and a sense of humour in considering gods, and he accepts the potential for multiple loyalties, but he is appalled by the prospect of meaninglessness. He argues that an excess of information inadequately filtered, prioritized, or even excluded, can lead to a kind of moral-

intellectual listlessness that has corrosive effects on the fabric of a society. Hence, despite the dangerous character of gods, Postman asserts that “it is undoubtedly better to have one profound truth, one god, than to have none” (qtd. in Sweet 165). He asserts that individuals and societies cannot thrive without some measure of clarity, some sense that their world is comprehensible and their values stable, and he argues that comprehensibility and stability have psycho-social benefits independent of the accuracy or justice of particular beliefs. Postman cites Christian fundamentalist belief as one uncompromising example of such comprehensibility and stability, writing that the lives of fundamentalists are invested with “meaning, clarity,” and a sense of “moral authority” (79) that have more to do with the fact of belief than with its particularities. But Postman does not condone any kind of fundamentalist orientation; rather, while he values a measure of confidence and coherence, his belief that gods are “imperfect” and even “dangerous” leads him to argue that “a belief too strongly held, one that excludes the possibility of a tolerance for other gods, may result in a psychopathic fanaticism” (qtd. in Sweet 165). Which is to say, while such ardent belief may serve the adherents of a particular religious or ideological sect, fundamentalism is ultimately too dangerous to those outside the circle of belief to warrant support. Smith consciously and determinedly lacks a strong sense of the “moral authority” that Postman ascribes to fundamentalists. For Smith, unswerving moral or religious confidence is inhumane and best avoided. At the same time, sharing with Postman an appreciation of the benefits of belief, Smith strives to maintain and even nourish a sense of meaningfulness and a rich moral life through an epistemology that combines certain Christian social and spiritual principles with a generally

described but undefined blend of secular-humanist tolerance and postmodernist skepticism. Rather than having *no* god, Smith is, in Postman's terms, polytheistic; and his secular gods not only act to temper his attachment to his Christian god, but come to shape the god itself.

Smith's comic negotiations between a religious orientation and a socially critical mindset are explicitly exploratory and experiential, and are not always tidy or satisfying. But they are probably inevitable for a liberal Christian, according to an argument proposed by social critic Anthony Giddens in *Runaway World*. Giddens suggests there are really only two ways that traditional religious observance can sustain itself in a globalizing, "detraditionalising" world. One way is fundamentalism, which he describes as "beleaguered tradition," or "tradition defended in the traditional way" (through "ritual belief") in a cosmopolitan world that demands reasons. Giddens characterizes fundamentalism by its refusal to engage in dialogue with such a world (49). Smith rejects this path, and chooses Giddens' other option, in which religious adherents, increasingly "in contact with others who think differently from them," "are required to justify their beliefs . . . both to themselves and others" (45). It is probably not surprising that Smith, who is a member of a Canadian denomination that has been struggling to balance traditional beliefs and an increasing cosmopolitanism, and who is prone to almost constant comic subversions of authoritative truth claims, is unwilling to forego dialogue and the challenges—even the lack of clarity or solidity of belief—that attend the pluralism he embraces.

In considering Smith's extensive explorations of religious matters and uses of scripture, it is instructive to recall that he declined the ministry in favour of a career as

a teacher and, later, a humorist, and that his most sober published reflections on religious matters arose from a life-altering accident. That is to say, while Smith is an active, sometimes didactic, institutionally affiliated Christian, he is not a cleric or a professional theologian. He is a layperson, very ordinary by his own description, who is privileged to have a regular forum for speaking his mind; and his explorations of religious material and life are experientially grounded and usually funny. For Smith, religious questions interweave with educational, social, and familial questions as the subjects of his playful musings. It is not surprising that Smith, as a humorist, explores his beliefs with a sense of fun and a measure of playful uncertainty. While his affinity for morally and religiously loaded subjects undoubtedly arises, at least in part, from his particular relationship to Christian religion, his brand of humorous play with the Christian materials that preoccupy many Newfoundland writers is consistent with his more general tendency toward rhetorical play characterized by frequent backsliding and self-contradiction. He employs these tools to generate laughs and to engage readers as something like equals in a process of exploring, and making meaning out of, the common materials of their lives, culture, and beliefs. For Smith, humour is at least partly a means of acknowledging and managing disagreement while avoiding conflict, as it often is among circulators of religious jokes such as those discussed in Chapter Two. Like the joke tellers, Smith relies on the fact that humour, on a formal level, acknowledges epistemological limitations and defies the always simplified, coherent assertions that characterize speech in “the serious realm” (Mulkey 214).

All of this is to say that, while it is informative to examine Smith's explorations of Christian beliefs, values, and materials for patterns and themes, one ought not to

seek a final coherence, or even a final incoherence, in the work of such a dedicated humorist, given that humour is largely rooted in surprise and the maintenance of a state of pleasurable unsettlement. Instead, the *process* of Smith's ongoing religious negotiations takes centre stage, as he persistently engages readers as critical participants in a rhetorical exchange. By implication, this relationship with a broad readership questions whether strict orthodoxy or the control of interpretation by an elite can genuinely lead toward moral or spiritual truth.

Notes

¹ *The Downhomer* is a magazine (now on-line as well as in print) that is oriented largely toward Newfoundlanders living outside of Newfoundland.

² Liberal Catholic theologian Hans Küng links detraditionalization to the spread of a far-reaching ecumenism. Küng writes, “If it were up to me, I would prefer calling this emerging epoch of ours “ecumenical” [rather than postmodern] in the sense of a new global understanding of the various denominations, religions, and regions” (3-4).

³ Passages written by Smith’s daughter Jennifer, and others written by Smith according to his wife, Marion’s, memories of the early days after the accident, provide perspectives and responses other than his own. The sections based on Marion’s recollections largely describe times when Smith was in a drug-induced haze.

⁴ In the Author’s Note, Smith writes, “This book is intended to be futuristically productive rather than historically unkind.”

⁵ Recalling Smith’s musings in *From the Ashes*, Hans Küng writes of the limits of applying reason to the question of God’s existence: “Now I cannot and do not wish to prove that religion is actually aimed at a reality. . . . But for their part the atheistic opponents of religion have no proof that religion is simply a venture into nothingness. Like God, this nothingness is nowhere to be found” (230-31).

⁶ Küng writes, “Even in Christian faith, according to Paul, we recognize the truth itself, which is God, only as in a mirror, in puzzling outlines, fragmentarily, in

certain aspects, always dependent upon our quite specific standpoint and place in time” (255).

⁷ cf. Walter Klaassen, *Armageddon and the Peaceable Kingdom*. Klaassen argues that Old Testament biblical prophecy cannot be understood as simultaneously predictive and true, since many of its predictions quite clearly did not come to pass. Rather, he argues that the prophets spoke of a kind of spiritual necessity, in terms that were comprehensible to their audiences and relevant to the politics as well as the linguistic conventions of the time. Hence, reading the Bible’s apocalyptic visions as if they were predictions, rather than expressions of spiritual necessity, is to distort and diminish them.

⁸ Grant describes sectarian behaviour in the Northern Irish context as “representative violence” based on “group morality,” through which “any member of another community can be scapegoated and held responsible for transgressions attributed to that group in general” (188).

⁹ Not until the 2002 publication of *From the Ashes of My Dreams* does Smith refer to any of his family members by name, although he seems to have based many of his columns on his family’s experiences.

¹⁰ “Otherness” is a commonly invoked, usually fairly straightforward object of politicized academic analysis, involving, on a basic level, individuals or groups of people set off from one’s own self or group by differences substantial enough to create blockages to mutual understanding, intergroup conflict, or oppression in instances of substantive power imbalances.

¹¹ Smith's affiliation with the United Church of Canada undoubtedly informs his high level of interest in social harmony and religious tolerance, and his relaxed willingness to acknowledge and even embrace religious doubt.

5. When the Saints Go Marching Out: Emergent Liberal Ethics and the Erosion of Catholic Authority in Ed Kavanagh's *The Confessions of Nipper Mooney*

5.1 Introduction

Over the years, St. John's-based artist Ed Kavanagh has worked as a writer, editor, theatre director, actor, and musician; has won over a dozen awards in the annual Newfoundland and Labrador Arts and Letters Competition; and has served as president of the Writers' Alliance of Newfoundland and Labrador. Throughout this varied career, Kavanagh's work for and about children has remained a staple, one reflected in his first adult novel, *The Confessions of Nipper Mooney*. To a large extent, the novel focuses on the educational and social rites of passage of children and youth in Newfoundland's Roman Catholic school system in the 1960s. In addition to writing *The Confessions* and his popular *Amanda Greenleaf* series of children's books, Kavanagh has edited a collection of children's plays and regularly writes, performs and records songs for children. Maintaining an avid interest in education, Kavanagh himself has earned an Honours Bachelor of Arts degree in English and a Bachelor of Education degree from Memorial University of Newfoundland, a Bachelor of Arts degree in Music from Carleton University, and an Master of Arts degree in Creative Writing from the University of New Brunswick. In addition, he has taught creative writing for the Extensions divisions of Memorial University of Newfoundland and the University of New Brunswick, and has been active in the collection and editing of

adult literacy materials. The latter involvement suggests a concern for those on the margins of the educational mainstream, a concern evident in *The Confessions*, which pays particular attention to stigmatized, marginalized, and alienated students.

One of the striking features of *The Confessions of Nipper Mooney*, which won the 2002 Writers' Alliance of Newfoundland and Labrador Book Award for Best Adult Fiction,¹ is that in some respects it reads very much like a children's book. Even the fanciful name of its protagonist recalls that of Kavanagh's guardian of the waterfall, Amanda Greenleaf. The novel is, in part, a kind of worldly fable: it is peppered with traces of the fantastic and is populated by characters who, while sometimes richly portrayed, are mostly type-based; and its tone is often moralistic. At the very beginning of the novel, Nicholas "Nipper" Mooney "loses time" (is possibly taken by the fairies) for a whole day, on the same day his father dies from cancer. Beginning with this striking juxtaposition, *The Confessions* maintains an undercurrent of wonder and mystery that quietly recalls Kavanagh's Greenleaf stories. This tone serves as a kind of buoy as the novel's central child characters become increasingly immersed in a world characterized by institutionalized cruelty and vexing personal struggles. Throughout *The Confessions*, Roman Catholic institutions are agents of religious training, but also of worldly education and socialization, largely shaping the day-to-day lives and relations of the communities in which the novel's characters live. And throughout, the possession of such comprehensive authority leads to abusive conduct, to the damaging stigmatization and suppression of healthy diversity, and to a culture of self-justifying power. The novel favours a pluralistic, liberal outlook,² dramatized among protagonists who have been failed, and often rejected, by the overriding

authoritarian orientation of the novel's Catholic Church and schools. As the authority of the church wanes among *The Confessions*' younger generation, relativistic, context-dependent ethics come to be favoured over absolutist ones, individual moral discernment is depicted as preferable to centralized moral authority, and mystery is recruited, as it is in Smith's work, as a tool for the reconciliation of religion and relativism.

The Confessions follows its title character closely: though it is often easy to forget about his presence, he is in every scene, often observing and reflecting on interactions in which he is not directly involved. The third-person limited omniscient narrator follows Nipper through his childhood and youth in the small farming community of Kildura and in nearby St. John's, beginning in the first grade and ending shortly after his graduation from high school. During his primary school years at St. Brigid's Academy, a school in Kildura run by nuns, Nipper forges an abiding friendship with Brigid Flynn, an unusually bold, independent local girl. He also develops a fascination for the slightly older Paddy Dunne, son of the local garbage collector, whose strange-seeming life and candid, critical questions help develop Nipper's sympathy for those who live on the social margins. In addition, Nipper befriends Brigid's great-uncle Brendan O'Brien, a local eccentric whose sense of humour and mystical outlook are enchanting and illuminating to Nipper. Later, while attending All Angels Academy in St. John's under the instruction, administration, and discipline of the Christian Brothers, Nipper has to come to terms with unanticipated cruelty among his schoolmates but also among several of the Brothers. Their scapegoating disciplinary tactics draw the ire of Paddy, who becomes a model of

moral courage to the milder, less alienated Nipper. At the same time, Nipper finds he must face the religious ramifications of his increasingly sexual relationship with Brigid, the sinfulness of which seems unconvincing to him in comparison to the cruelty to which he is increasingly witness. As the children move further into the complexities of the “real world,” the mystical Brendan fades gradually into the background, re-emerging at the novel’s end as a symbolically central figure.

Departing from the interdenominational landscape that Guy and Smith routinely depict in their pluralistically oriented columns, Kavanagh’s novel depicts religious and social intolerance within a single denomination, and recalls some of the tensions portrayed between clerics and strays in Newfoundland joke books. In the joke books, the legitimacy, excesses, and social value of both figures are acknowledged, and the jokes tend implicitly to affirm the status quo. *The Confessions*, on the other hand, sustains an obvious critical focus on alleged power abuses within a church depicted as violently authoritarian and seemingly incapable of self-correction. Straying, in the world of *The Confessions*, is sensible and perhaps even noble, because the evils of the church and its agents have been so pronounced.

The novel’s different uses of humour accordingly work to support the perspectives of the story’s strays. This chapter discusses several episodes of lighthearted, humorous dialogue in the novel; these episodes work to foster a sense of sympathy for Nipper and others, who grapple in their day-to-day lives with aspects of Roman Catholic belief and practice. Other humorous scenes discussed in the chapter are very mild examples of Horatian satire, in which the minor vices of sympathetic characters are exposed; in these episodes, humour’s potential as a form of in-group

legitimation and norm reinforcement is evident, and the stigmatization of religious as well as social difference is gently problematized. Other scenes depict joking exchanges that are not presented in a way that is funny for readers. In these scenes, as in the episodes of light satire, the reader's attention is drawn to social uses of humour; but in these non-humorous depictions of joking, the reader is also clearly invited to judge the jokers in identifiable ways. Some of these scenes favourably depict friendly joking exchanges among mutually supportive protagonists as they playfully engage with the incongruities that permeate their lives and beliefs. Other non-humorous episodes portray aggressive joking among antagonists (mostly Christian Brothers and students at All Angels Academy), aimed at characters over whom these antagonists have power. These scenes disapprovingly depict the use of aggressive humour for social control, a more extreme version of the kind of socially regulative joking in which Nipper's more sympathetic family and friends are also shown to participate. The novel's depictions of aggressive joking legitimize the protagonists' sense of alienation and their rejection of the authoritarian relations that are associated in the novel with the Roman Catholic Church. These depictions also suggest an authorial relationship to aggressive humour that differs drastically from that of writers such as Ray Guy, given that aggressive humour in *The Confessions of Nipper Mooney* is consistently depicted as a form of undue abuse.

5.2 Brendan O'Brien: Difference as Defect in the Church and the Village

Brendan O'Brien inhabits the margins of the village of Kildura, literally and figuratively: he is considered to be an eccentric, and is an object of passive fascination

and speculation whom few in the community know more than superficially; and he spends the bulk of his free time in the woods beyond the Old Road on the edge of the village, a landscape with which few in Kildura are very familiar and about which few are more than passingly curious. To those who stay within the normal boundaries of the village, the Old Road is on the edge of their local reality. But the foreign space beyond it is a central part of the worlds of Brendan, Paddy Dunne, and Nipper's father before his death; and it becomes a locus of discovery and growth for Nipper. It is largely on the Old Road and beyond that Nipper gets to know Brendan, who becomes his friend and, in a limited way, a kind of father figure. Brendan's familiarity with generally unfamiliar geographic as well as religious spaces, his frank, friendly attention, and his often self-effacing humour make him an expansive influence on Nipper. Brendan helps to reveal to Nipper the limited nature of the worldview he has inherited, and he gives Nipper greater confidence in his own, individual capacity for moral discernment. Brendan's social marginality is exacerbated, and the romanticism of his portrayal complicated, by his longstanding exclusion from the life of the local church, ever since he angered local priest Monsignor Murphy with persistent questions whose details are never revealed. Brendan's expulsion presages the status-quo-protecting insensitivity of some of the nuns at St. Brigid's Academy and the scapegoating tactics of some of the Brothers at All Angels. But the novel's relatively rounded depiction of Murphy, and the gradual revelation that Brendan's view of him is unbalanced, links the destructive capacity of the church's agents in the novel to their institutionally derived power, which facilitates cruel effects even when the church agents in question are not, on balance, cruel. Along with growing misgivings about the

church's moral doctrine that are supported by Brendan's encouragement of proscribed activities, the consistent link between cruel effects and institutional power is a cause of Nipper's increasing alienation from the Catholic Church. Both undergird Nipper's development of a liberal-pluralist vision of moral and social life that questions patronizing or hostile attitudes toward several of his friends and acquaintances, attitudes premised on the notion that their individual differences are defects.

There are two main playful exchanges in *The Confessions* that focus on Brendan as a "local character," as one who inhabits the edge of the community (cf. Tye, "Local;" "Aspects").³ These exchanges draw attention to the general identification, by many in the novel, of conformity as a virtue and of deviance as a defect. Many characters routinely deny contrary evidence in order to support these identifications, while the novel's protagonists come increasingly to reject them, and even to turn them on their heads. The exchanges that address Brendan as a local character present a paradox in local talk about his religious status: he is spoken of as a saint, but also as an apostate or stray. A remarkable characteristic of this paradox is that *both* versions of Brendan, however contradictory, are framed as defective. The novel consistently implies that certain arrangements of power—specifically, strong, centralized moral authority as manifested by the Catholic Church—tend more than others to facilitate the normal-is-good fallacy, and to stigmatize those, like Brendan, whose peaceable, non-conformist existence embodies a challenge to the recognized bounds of acceptable behaviour.

One of the incidents that emphasize Brendan's strangeness involves Nipper, his mother Sharon, and his aunt Mona as they prepare for the evening rosary. Through

their conversation, they articulate a range of local perspectives on Brendan, whom Sharon and Mona find baffling and amusing. After initial speculation on how he turned out so strangely, during which their familiarity with various local theories suggests that conjecture on possible causes of Brendan's unconventional behavior is a favourite topic, Sharon and Mona describe several apparently bewildering aspects of Brendan's behaviour. He is chronically overdressed (too formally and too warmly), he reads too much, and he is too polite: "There's nothing wrong with being polite," Mona said. "But there's no need to go to hell with it" (94). At the same time that Sharon and Mona stigmatize Brendan, they betray their fascination with him. This comes to the fore after Nipper mentions one of Brendan's favourite books, *Irish Saints and Martyrs*, prompting a discussion of another popular interpretation of Brendan: Brendan as saint. Mona suggests, "He's like a saint himself," though she adds, "But sure half the saints were a bit touched" (94-95). Like Brendan, whose decency Sharon and Mona never deny but who is best kept at a reasonable distance (as they caution Nipper to little effect), the saints exist outside the realm of socially acceptable behaviour. Though they are esteemed as pinnacles of Catholic piety, they are just not normal. Through its playful characterization of clerical and lay responses to Brendan, who draws deeply on the Catholic mystical tradition as nourishment for his own passionate spirituality, *The Confessions* critically depicts a conformist Catholicism that, by bristling against exceptionality and spiritual challenge, reveals its discomfort with important elements of its own spiritual tradition.

As Sharon and Mona's discussion of Brendan takes place in the context of their preparations for the rosary, transitions between the social and the spiritual are

shown to be fluid: gossip is smoothly integrated into preparations for religious ritual, and the two women's saintly descriptions of Brendan demonstrate that Catholic religious themes are integral to their everyday speech and world-view. But their casual social dismissals of several local people bear a tense relationship to the worshipful attitude they embrace during the rosary. And Sharon and Mona, despite their clear fascination with Brendan, turn away from the potential challenge raised by Brendan's differences, back to a reassuring emphasis on the value of likeness as their religious interpretation is informed by socially conformist standards. Saints are deviants, revered in the abstract, but untenable, even ridiculous, in real life.

A second conversation that illuminates popular local responses to Brendan accentuates the common evaluation of his behaviour against a standard of social conformity to which vaguely conceived religious meaning is attributed. In their ridicule of Brendan, several children in this exchange eagerly mimic their adult influences (an imitative aggression later more disturbingly manifested by several of the boys at All Angels Academy). The quip-heavy humour of the episode begins as the children discuss how to properly categorize Nipper, now that his father is dead:

“Well, maybe Nipper's a half-orphan,” Gerard said.

“There's no such of a thing,” Brigid said.

“Why not?” Gerard said “My dad's got a friend who's half-French. And you can be half-dead, or half-drunk.”

“Or half-*cracked*,” Ronnie said. “Like old Brendan is.”

“Brendan is not half-*cracked*,” Brigid said, stepping toward him.

“That's right,” Ronnie said. “He's *all*-*cracked*.” (111-12)

The voices of Kilduran parents echo among Nipper's and Brigid's friends as they shout out a series of rhetorical questions that emphasize the ways in which Brendan is not normal. For instance, Ronnie asks, "How come he's not married? . . . And he *never* goes to church" (112). But Brigid refuses to accept her friends' point of view that her great-uncle's differences constitute defects. She rebuts Ronnie's accusation regarding Brendan's non-attendance at church by pointing out that Ronnie's father spends every Sunday mass outside on the steps, smoking with another local man (112). Brigid's response points out that, to some degree at least, it is the social ritual of church attendance that is valued, rather than religious orientation itself. It is normal to go to church, and that makes it good.

Because Brendan does not seriously threaten the social structure, his defects are described in amused rather than appalled terms. Still, his strangeness is viewed with some apprehension: it disturbs social norms and must somehow be accounted for in a way that minimizes its destabilizing capacity.⁴ A similar anxiety is reflected elsewhere in the novel via several nuns' and Brothers' adverse responses to various forms of non-vicious deviance that trouble an equation of the status quo with the good. In *The Confessions*, this equation, paired with the moral and institutional authority of the church, routinely leads to the damaging stigmatization, punishment, or exclusion of benign or even potentially beneficial diversity.

While it is apparent that even as a child Brendan was not normal, the extent of his current marginal status is linked to his expulsion from the church by Monsignor Murphy. Yet, despite evidence that he was hurt and saddened by the loss, Brendan has made no attempt to reintegrate himself into the local church community (128),

seemingly because it would require submission to Monsignor Murphy. Readers are not informed of the content of the exchanges that led to the final blow-up during which Murphy told Brendan to “get the hell out of his [Murphy’s] church” (128); and Brendan’s account of the episode is vague and brief (128). In the absence of substantive details, readers are left with a power relation involving what Foucault describes as “the general politics of truth.” This consists, among other things, of “the types of discourse which [a society] accepts and makes function as true and the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true” (“Truth and Power” 72-73). In past discussions between Brendan and the Monsignor, Murphy had the religious “truth” on his side in so far as it consisted of Catholic doctrine as mediated by Murphy himself. Brendan’s religious beliefs do not appear to be overly radical, given that the bulk of his belief and practice—excepting his espousal of a traditional north Atlantic belief in fairies, which his family has oddly integrated into a Christian cosmology—can be accounted for within the spacious Catholic tradition; but due to the power imbalance between Murphy and Brendan, once the strain between their truths became too marked for Murphy to bear, Brendan had to lose.

Brendan’s view of the Monsignor emphasizes Murphy’s stubbornness and rashness at the expense of his capacity for compassion and humour. This capacity is evident in Murphy’s patient responses to Nipper in the confessional, as well as in a comical conversation between Sharon and Mona, in which Mona describes a past compulsion to laugh at the Monsignor’s terrible singing during Mass. Though nervous about the prospect of confessing her sin to Murphy, she decides she must. After she confesses, Murphy asks her how much money she put in the collection plate the

previous Sunday. Baffled, she says, ““Twenty-five cents, Monsignor. Just like I always do.”” Murphy responds, ““Well, what did you expect for twenty-five cents? . . . Bing Crosby?””, and prescribes a mild penance (83). The gap between Brendan’s one-sided depiction of Murphy and the novel’s more sympathetic overall depiction of the Monsignor suggests Brendan’s expulsion ought to be seen in institutional terms: the concentration of authority that favours one stubborn but generally well-intentioned character over another with whom he is in disagreement impedes not only an equitable solution to their dispute but the healing of a personal wound.

Despite his wounded attachment to a disapproving picture of Monsignor Murphy and his resultant self-seriousness in this matter, Brendan is generally capable of laughing at himself and his marginal position in the Kilduran community. After Brendan defends the value of divinely-originated variety, citing examples from nature, Nipper asks, ““Is that why you’re different—because of all the variety in the world?”” Brendan agrees that this is likely, but then refers to the rumour that he was dropped on his head as a baby, refusing to rule it out as an alternate explanation (134). Brendan also jokes about some harsh consequences if he is wrong about certain religious matters:

“So I don’t go to church anymore. I make my peace with God in my own way. I don’t think He holds it against me.” Brendan chuckled.

“Although I admit it’s a bit touchy, second guessing God. Just think of the hard time He gave those Philistines. They probably got the surprise of their life when the thunderbolts starting falling on them. The same

thing might happen to me. I might be handed a one-way ticket to hell the minute I passes on. Who knows?" (130-31)

Mulkay argues that it is in the nature of humour to undermine the apparent coherence of serious speech, and to revel in the multiplicity of perspectives and truths that actually characterizes social reality, despite the fact that serious speech persistently (and perhaps necessarily) denies this non-coherence (219-20). For Mulkay, through its very form humour "reminds us that the world in which we live is not exhausted by any one set of meanings; and certainly not by those which happen to be dominant in our own society" (222-23). Mulkay argues that humour contains this reminder even when it is recruited to support dominant understandings and attack marginal perspectives (as is critically depicted in a passage discussed later in the chapter)—since even then it operates by subverting coherence. Brendan's humour about spiritual matters is partly self-effacing: it advocates epistemological skepticism and acknowledges that the possession of a wrong-headed or incomplete perspective is a possibility for anyone in any instance. But Brendan applies to the frequently grave tone of scripture the same humorous skepticism he applies to himself. Recalling Smith's ironic suggestions in "Winners and Losers" and "Home for the Holidays" that his and his family's innocuous foibles are likely to incur the wrath of God, Brendan questions God's well-documented predilection for punishment. And implicitly, in keeping with *The Confessions*' emphases on social relations and institutional power, Brendan's humour calls into question the perceptive capacities of earthly authorities with the power to direct moral speech, judgment, and punishment. In the process he decentres moral authority for a young, impressionable boy already developing doubts about the church.

Brendan's willingness to doubt the veracity of his own religious differences participates in his broader suspicion that all people are subject to error. But Brendan's continued embrace of a peaceable, marginal life—a life of distinct, benign difference—frames not only difference but the possibility of error in a new way for Nipper. Partly through Brendan's influence, Nipper begins to believe that deviation from norms may not be intrinsically bad, and may even have value; further, Nipper comes to suspect that the potential for moral error and the reality of moral uncertainty are not, despite his training, things to be feared. As Nipper negotiates between the religious precepts with which he has been raised and an increasingly complex social reality, he faces several interpretive difficulties. Among Nipper's elders, Brendan is the only one who suggests, through his words and his laughter, that it is all right to be baffled or stumped, and even that it is legitimate to make choices that seem to others to be strange or wrong, as long as they are not oppressive. Complementing the effect of Brendan's humour on Nipper's moral development are Brendan's open-hearted questions about Nipper's point of view on religious matters. Rarely invited to explore his own perspective on religious life, Nipper is usually encouraged only to confess failures to correspond to a received standard. But Brendan's simple questions, such as, "Do you like church?" (128), allow Nipper to consider, without anxiety, his own relationship to his religion and the moral value of his actions. One can read in Nipper's subsequent musings the beginnings of a liberally oriented moral conscience and early, tentative steps away from a belief in the sufficiency of doctrine and the validity of Catholic moral authority.

5.3 Paddy Dunne: Authoritarian Relations and the Path of Dissidence

Paddy Dunne lives in a run-down shack on the edge of Kildura until it burns down in a fire that kills his younger sister Rosarie, after which he and his father move to nearby St. John's. Like Nipper's father, Paddy's mother is dead from cancer. Paddy's father collects garbage and does odd jobs in the community, but his family are still poor. Even as a young boy, Paddy looks after Rosarie and helps to support his family by fishing and by spending hours crouching by the roadside selling worms out of soup cans to passers-by (53-54). Paddy is unusually serious and reflective for a boy his age, reticent to speak but frank and incisive when he does. Despite his clear intelligence (and his surprising gift for calligraphy), he remains largely illiterate throughout his off-and-on educational career. His experiences of hardship and prejudice lead to an unusual willingness to question the word of authority. This willingness, combined with his unruly appearance and mode of expression, make him a target for authority figures who find his disputations threatening. Adverse responses to Paddy's blunt, grating dissent eventually lead to his premature departure from the Catholic school system, but not before he has influenced others closer to the mainstream, such as Nipper. Having developed an admiration for Paddy and an understanding of his character, Nipper is affected by Paddy's social insights and sympathy for scapegoats. By the end of the novel, the Catholic Church appears to have lost Nipper, partly because he has been "radicalized" by Paddy's insights and by the "crackdown" responses that his expressions of discontent elicit from agents of the church (Safire 197).⁵ These agents, who could have opted to weaken the disapproval-spreading effect of Paddy's "censure" through rhetorical "compromises" (Safire 197), instead abet the

erosion of their own power through the very hardline tactics they use to try to strengthen it (cf. Safire 197).

Early in *The Confessions*, having been put back to Nipper and Brigid's grade one class because of poor reading skills, Paddy questions Sister Francesca de Palma, a nun visiting from Peru, about the religious rhetoric associated with the overseas Missions, and is scolded and given detention by Sister Mary Ignatius, a nun who teaches at the school. Paddy demonstrates a striking intuition, which sparks the curiosity of other students, but which goes largely unacknowledged by the nuns. The nuns' invocations of mystery as an account of endemic poverty are depicted as an obstruction to accurate perception, as the complexity of circumstances underpinning the poverty of those benefiting from the Missions' aid is obscured by a view of them primarily as recipients of Christian charity. The nuns' approach affirms the authority and necessity of the church, as meaning is directed away from geographical and political circumstances, toward the divinely-sanctioned healing power of the Church Missions.

Sister Mary Ignatius arranges for the students to ask Sister Francesca de Palma a series of agreed-upon questions. She makes it clear they are expected not to improvise, and are to appear to their guest to be models of decorum. But Paddy is unsatisfied when Sister Francesca responds to a question by telling the students, "Every penny helps. And Our Lord knows what great hardships you good children go through in order to donate to the Missions. He smiles on you for it" (68). Without invitation Paddy asks the class's first spontaneous question: "Then why don't God smile on them people down there and give 'em some food and houses and stuff in the

first place?” As he continues, a shocked Sister Mary Ignatius attempts to quiet him, while Sister Francesca attempts more congenially to respond to his queries. When he implicitly questions the Missions’ marriage of material assistance and evangelism, by observing that ““all of them poor people in them hot countries got nothin’ not because of what they *done* or anything, but just because of where they lives”” (69-70), he is warned by Sister Mary Ignatius not to question the will of God. Paddy nonetheless elaborates on both his hunch that starving Peruvians are probably not in especial need of religious guidance, and his sense of the seeming injustice of God’s apparent will for them, via a story about his Uncle Frank:

“Sure my Uncle Frank got a old huntin’ shack up on the Witless Bay Line that’s ten times better than their houses. And he don’t go to church, he drinks like a fish, he got about seven youngsters even though he was never married—”

“*Enough!*” Sister Mary Ignatius said through clenched teeth. She glanced apologetically at Sister Francesca. (70)

Lacking a coherent critique, Paddy pesters the nuns with questions and doubts, a means of expression which Sister Mary Ignatius interprets as insolence.

In contrast, Sister Francesca de Palma is content to respond to Paddy’s questions. Ultimately, though, she so thoroughly identifies with mystery as a means of accounting for inequity that she fails to really “hear” Paddy’s intuitive, experience-informed doubt of her theological premises. Feminist moral philosopher Rebecca Kukla argues that those with power and privilege in any society typically have trouble understanding the speech of its marginal groups because they do not have to pay

enough consistent attention to gain such understanding. Not only do they not often listen, they often cannot “hear” marginal speech even when they *do* listen (325). Sister Mary Ignatius cannot hear Paddy because she is preoccupied with interpreting his manner: she does not listen. Sister Francesca listens, but she cannot hear him because the content of his religiously skeptical speech is too far removed from the religious account she has internalized. She ultimately echoes Sister Mary Ignatius’ admonition not to question the will of God (a caution which inadvertently encourages Paddy to resign himself to his *own* suffering as an aspect of divine design), and embarks on a lengthy exposition on the Joyful, Sorrowful, and Glorious Mysteries. Paddy quickly loses interest, and Nipper also drifts off, unimpressed by Sister Francesca’s response to Paddy’s inquiries (71). The novel’s contrasting favourable depictions of Brendan, who is in love with mystery, and Paddy, who is a chronic demystifier, amount to a narrative navigation of different potential uses and effects of the invocation of mystery. It is depicted approvingly as a facilitator of wonder and of an epistemological reserve that echoes Smith’s use of mystery to caution believers against a potentially oppressive religious overconfidence. But mystery is also potentially abused, the Missions episode suggests, as a matter of (often unrecognized) convenience, as a means of getting around certain troubling political questions that might unsettle the existing order.

In the introduction to *Canadian Churches & Social Justice*, John R. Williams describes a trend in Canadian Christian mission work that was gaining momentum at the historical moment in which the fictional Paddy questions the nuns at St. Brigid’s. According to Williams, the approach to mission work in the Catholic Church and

other prominent Canadian churches substantially changed beginning in the 1960s. He writes that whereas the churches' engagement with overseas as well as domestic poverty had traditionally been focused on symptom relief, from the 1960s onward—largely led by Christians in colonized parts of the world—they have concentrated increasingly on the social and structural factors underpinning poverty. Williams notes that the churches no longer tend to regard poverty primarily as either the result of the shortcomings of the poor themselves or the mysterious will of God for certain blameless individuals or groups (13). In the light of history, the Missions episode's dramatization of dissident insight and the responses to which it is subjected might be seen to suggest that dissenting voices may express important, emergent insights despite the resistance they routinely encounter. Such “crackdown” responses as Sister Mary Ignatius', while largely successful in the short term as a means of disciplining students, in the longer run come to “radicalize” several students and alienate many others, at a time during which the Catholic Church's authority, and the general effectiveness of the kinds of authoritarian relations upon which it has relied, are waning.

Whereas most of the remarkable episodes involving the nuns at St. Brigid's have to do with religion in some direct way, the frequent abuses carried out by the Christian Brothers at All Angels Academy tend not to be related directly to religious matters, though they arise from the abuse of religious prestige.⁶ Paddy engages in three major confrontations while a student at All Angels, involving attempts to protect scapegoats from abuse (the third of these is himself). In the first episode, the culprits are students whose behaviour mimics the often ruthless scapegoating tactics of the

Christian Brothers, and the scapegoat is Darrell Wiggins, a young man with an intellectual disability, for whose marginal position Paddy demonstrates a feeling of solidarity (224-27). Paddy's words reveal his sense of identification with Darrell—based, it seems, on Paddy's capacity to relate to the experience of being singled out. Before his second major All Angels confrontation—this time with Brother Crane, a predatory former boxer who is the boys' teacher—Paddy furthers his identification with Darrell, who has received unusually terrible strappings partly related to his own panicky movements during his punishments, by helping him with strategies for receiving strappings with a minimum of suffering (231-32). Paddy is the first in the school to assume that with some assistance Darrell might have the capacity to help himself. Darrell surprises everybody by his stoical response to his next strapping, and in the process confounds Brother Crane, who has relied on Darrell's fear and panic as a disciplinary tool. Recalling psychologist Erving Goffman's description of the "ambivalence" that "the stigmatized individual" inevitably feels "about his own self" (106), one can see Paddy's assistance to Darrell as an effort not only to stave off further abuse, but to help Darrell overcome a measure of such ambivalence, given that Darrell is routinely encouraged to feel poorly about himself.⁷ Paddy's acts in defense of other marginal students are also likely to have an ambivalence-mending effect on Paddy himself. As Brendan jokingly suggests that his own difference may be a personal defect rather than a sign of divinely created worldly variety, Paddy indignantly defends his own and other students' differences as legitimate variety, rejecting the prospect that they might be defects. Both Brendan's humour and Paddy's

anger differentiate stigma from defect, and favour a pluralistic outlook in which there are many goods.

At All Angels Academy, the rule of the Brothers constitutes a harsh law that is especially harrowing because it so often seems capricious. The Brothers are protected by their religious prestige from critical assessment by parents, (e.g., 286) and despite their misgivings, the bulk of the students see no alternative to this rule. In the episode that sparks Paddy's first confrontation with Brother Crane, the Brothers cruelly revel in their own authority. The episode begins when Brother Spencer, another teacher, parades into Crane's classroom with Bill Tobin, a "strong and unflappable" farm boy from another class, whose "head was completely swathed in bandages" with no slit for the mouth (238-39). Spencer and Crane make threatening mummy jokes, and Spencer grips Bill by the shoulders, periodically "work[ing] his fingers into a double shoulder-pinch" that causes Bill to "shift in pain" (238). Spencer tells the class, "'This is a boy who doesn't know . . . *how-to-shut-up!*'" (239). After Spencer leaves the class and some time passes, Paddy breaks his silence, saying, "'That's not right, you know'" (240). Paddy has lived his whole life in a kind of "frontier zone" relative to the norms and expectations of the culture whose margins he inhabits socially, economically, and religiously; hence, he sharply perceives the "hypocritical and exploitive" character of "the law" (Grant 10), and he is more than averagely willing to call perpetrators to account because he is ready, if it comes to it, to leave school and go to work on the docks (which he eventually does).

In the exchange that follows, Crane tries to use humour to humiliate Paddy, who refuses to be a passive object of ridicule. In keeping with the novel's anti-

authoritarian tone, when Crane asks, “[S]ince when have you become an expert in these matters?” (240), Paddy rejects the premise that one has to be an “expert” to possess accurate moral intuition. He tells Crane, ““That doesn’t mean I don’t know when something’s not right. Doin’ him up like that and bringin’ him around like he was one of them freaks in a circus”” (241). Crane responds to the long-haired, rough-looking Paddy, ““You’re a fine one to be talking about *freaks*,”” and likens him to a ““bloody streeel”” and a ““hopped-up hippie”” (241).⁸ Throughout their exchange, Paddy refuses to be shamed by Crane’s attempts at aggressive humour. Morreal suggests that those who aspire to superiority frequently encourage those around them to share laughter at “outsiders” (115). This strategy is not different in kind from the satire discussed in earlier chapters, though the targets, the “outsiders,” in the works in this study tend to be authority figures, rather than the relatively powerless as in Kavanagh’s depiction of Crane’s and Spencer’s scapegoating humour. It is in the nature of satire to create imbalanced portraits and to set certain figures off as objects of ridicule, not to be sympathized with by the author or those who laugh along. In his efforts to secure and increase his authority in the classroom, Crane often relies on such aggressive imbalance. If he, as author and authority, can incite laughter—even nervous laughter—from the students, then his power is solidified and his case is made. But in Paddy’s exchange with Crane, the students are struck by Paddy’s resistance, which undermines Crane’s efforts at humiliating him, and also the humiliating humour of the previous episode.

Paddy’s next question, regarding whether Jesus was a hippie because of his long hair, leads Crane to abandon humour and to launch at him with more direct

ferocity. Crane defaults to straightforward aggression in his efforts to re-establish his authority, and insists on an exclusive right to religious interpretation: “‘Mr. Dunne, you don’t pretend to compare yourself with Our Lord, the Saviour of the world—and of *your* miserable soul, do you?’” (241). Brother Crane’s enraged response is an inadvertent invitation to Paddy’s classmates to make just such a comparison, while Crane himself is degraded relative to the righteous young dissident. Crane “pounces” on Paddy, slamming him against the wall so that his head “cracked against the concrete” (241). Crane’s assault on Paddy, and his assertion of a version of Christ that would justify it, recalls feminist theologian Kay Ashe’s discussion in *The Feminization of the Church?* of the effects on earthly power of the attribution of authoritarian characteristics to God. Ashe argues that when God is understood through terms such as “Supreme Ruler” and “Almighty,” and when humans are imagined as “slaves” who must bow in “humble submission” (39), then,

[f]or those who would be as gods, those who long for or who enjoy quasi-absolute political, economic or military power, God's sovereign power can serve as a kind of legitimation of their own. . . . By claiming willing acquiescence to a higher power, God, and by imagining themselves agents of God's will, they demand uncritical acceptance of their decrees. (39)

Having slammed Paddy’s head off the wall, Crane makes his most direct demand for “uncritical acceptance.” He tells Paddy, “‘Now, you listen . . . Nobody here is interested in your opinion—least of all me’” (241), in the process instructing the class, who he knows are *highly* interested in Paddy’s opinion, not to question his position.

Complementing Ashe's description of the political usefulness of authoritarian God language, Vanier argues that history is marked by the perennial demonization of dissidents, often on ostensibly religious grounds, by people who have a "vested interest in the maintenance" of the status quo. He suggests such an interest is often driven simply by a "need to control others" (74). The self-justification and the demonization of difference and dissent that characterize the behaviour of several of the Brothers at All Angels reflect the shadow side—or, depending upon one's point of view, a perversion—of the Catholic Church's understanding of itself as God's instrument on earth. The Brothers apply an apparent sense of divine entitlement to their management of non-religious contact in the schools, invoking an historically prominent, sternly authoritarian image of God to bolster their own authority, and increasingly alienating the novel's freedom-loving protagonists at a time during which such models of authority are increasingly beleaguered by an emergent liberalism that is clearly favoured in the novel.

 Holding Paddy against the wall, Crane asks, "Do I make myself perfectly clear?"; but as the bell rings and more time passes, Paddy forces a stalemate by refusing to answer (241). Though Paddy sabotages an episode of scapegoating, his actions ultimately make *him* a scapegoat—though Crane, who recognizes Paddy's strength, avoids antagonizing him (e.g., 217, 222-23), until it becomes clear that his presence will be more than passively disruptive. Crane eventually weeds Paddy out, to his own surprise and at his own expense, in an encounter during which he taunts and insults Paddy away from most of the other boys. Paddy punches him in the face, knocking him out, then walks out of the school forever (257-61). Though there is little

Paddy can directly achieve through his dissension and rebellion, Nipper and others at All Angels are impressed by Paddy's indignant courage. In *The Confessions*, the destabilizing effect of dissidence, as well as its frequent suppression by those in power and its unpredictable path of influence, is dramatized via the past marginalization of old Brendan, the present marginalization of Paddy, and the influence of both of them on the relatively "normal" Nipper, who sees that their marginalized perspectives contain insights and who respects their mettle.

Though Nipper is influenced more obviously by Paddy's example than by a personal relationship with him, their slowly developing friendship comes to intensify the dissident Paddy's moral influence on Nipper. Before their time together at All Angels, their slowly growing camaraderie is interrupted for several years after Paddy and his father move from Kildura to St. John's. And Paddy's aloofness is an obstacle to intimacy, as is Nipper's shyness around Paddy. Still, Nipper and Paddy slowly develop a personal bond. Relatively early in the novel, as the two encounter one another on the Old Road, Paddy "glanced at the ground, then looked at Nipper furtively. 'I was . . . I was sorry to hear about your old man—I mean, about your father'" (120). Nipper says, "'Yeah,'" then Paddy steps closer, hesitates, and says, "'My Mom died of cancer, too'" (120-21). Through the exchange that follows, the boys acknowledge, through their discomfort and their kind though constrained words, the enormity of what they are grappling with. Later, when they are both in grade eight, Paddy demonstrates his trust in Nipper by recruiting his help in rewriting a paper, and also lets Nipper help him with his reading (235-37). Though the rewrite comes to nothing academically (Brother Crane refuses to even look at his rewrite because the

paper he uses is too long) (244), Nipper's assistance to Paddy constitutes a forward step in their slowly developing bond of trust. Through this trusting relationship, Nipper gains a fuller understanding of Paddy, whose moral courage is made more poignant by his weaknesses and personal struggles. And Paddy gains an apparently new kind of friend—someone whom he can trust with his weakness, who he knows will treat it gently.

Nipper and Paddy's slowly developing intimacy requires that each overcomes his anxiety about the other's foreignness, that each conquer his fear and defensiveness in order to be able to grow through mutual understanding and trust. It is a lovely and worthy idea, but one that relies on the essentially benign character of the diversity they embody. The only strategy the novel ever depicts for coping with people who embody malignant manifestations of diversity—manifestations that inhibit others' freedom to expression *their* diversity—is to avoid or constrain them. In *The Confessions*, even physically violent attempts to free oneself from unjust regulation are understandable and even laudable, while any violence in defense of a status quo presented as *chronically* violent is depicted as abusive.

5.4 Nipper Mooney: The Liberal Conscience and the Waning Authority of the Church

Although several other characters in *The Confessions of Nipper Mooney* are more immediately striking than Nipper, Nipper's moral development remains the heart of the novel. In contrast to the relatively unchanging Paddy and Brendan, the unassuming Nipper is immersed in an obvious process of moral development, and is clearly

susceptible to influence. Though Nipper is not stigmatized by difference as Paddy and Brendan are, his sensitive nature leads him to sympathize with those whose differences are preyed upon. Nipper's attention to marginal characters, and to their treatment at the hands of religious authority figures and those who mimic them, profoundly affects his moral development. In addition, Nipper begins to question the church's sexual regulations, according to which his loving encounters with Brigid are sinful. Nipper gradually begins to consider the whisperings of his own conscience to be an essential tool for evaluating received moral wisdom, the morality and wisdom of which seem to vary widely. As his friends are marginalized by a church which, while still powerful, is waning in moral authority, Nipper opts to follow them into disenchantment, conceding the loss of a coherent, centralized morality because such a concession appears to encourage greater equity and liberty.

The struggle with sin that preoccupies Nipper throughout the novel is developed partly through a series of comical scenes directly involving his confessions. Nipper, who is claustrophobic, finds that being in the confessional is like being "down in a mine," and that the confessional booth reminds him of "a coffin turned on its end" (49-50). With Brigid's help, Nipper begins to plan ways to avoid irritating the priest while minimizing time spent in the oppressive space of the confessional. Brigid and Nipper's rules culminate in an ultimate guideline, "Never, ever, *ever* give a sin you don't understand," the importance of which Nipper learns "the hard way" (58), in a humorous exchange with a surprisingly patient Monsignor Murphy. The priest inquires into the nature of the "bad thoughts" that Nipper has just confessed, until it becomes clear that Nipper has no idea what he is talking about: "Nipper wasn't even

sure what he had confessed. He had overheard the expression ‘bad thoughts’ out on the school playground” (59). The children's preparation for confession at the hands of Sister Mary Ignatius has encouraged an understanding of confession as a process of wrath-avoidance: at one point she pokes Nipper hard in the chest with her pointer as a means of emphasizing the sanctity of confession (58-59). Nipper’s comical confession fiascos reflect a fear of God that is a sublimation of his fear of God’s earthly agents.

Such a strictly punitive framework may miss much of the point of confession, as Monsignor Murphy gently demonstrates in Nipper’s and his Aunt Mona’s confession episodes, in which Murphy displays an understanding of confession according to which “the priest . . . is to sit not as judge but as pastor,” and according to which he is not called to “deal with his fellow sinner as a man or woman or child on trial, but as one who comes to a sacramental encounter with God in his mercy” (Gaskell 148). But despite Murphy’s compassionate example, Nipper’s early understanding of the relationship between sin and confession leads to an approach to moral and spiritual life premised on appeasement. In the years following his first confession episodes, Nipper encounters many minor temptations, and yields to quite a few of them. To compensate for these sins, Nipper develops his spiritual strategies more elaborately. He comes up with another plan: “With so much occasion for sin, Nipper thought it a good idea to make his soul as clean and white as possible and store up this whiteness like a squirrel storing nuts. That way he would have some protection against those times when he would be bad” (179). Having gained a sense that one can gain or lose spiritual points, or “whiteness,” and that storing up “whiteness” may have some “protective” usefulness against sin,⁹ Nipper hopes that by praying very ardently

he can accumulate a kind of sin credit. The comical tone of many of Nipper's confession and conscience-wracking episodes makes light of strategic approaches to sin, and subverts the expiatory seriousness that, according to Nipper's instruction, ought to characterize confession.

Nipper's fearful association of sin with punishment fosters a sense of urgency, and thereby discourages measured reflection on the moral quality of his actions. This fearful association is reinforced by his observations of the nuns and Brothers who are the majority of his schoolteachers. In one instance, Brother Bannister, the principal at All Angels Academy, straps Nipper after he is beaten up by two other students for trying to prevent them from stealing his banana (185). Witnessing Nipper's tears upon his return from Bannister's office, his teacher Brother Devine is obviously troubled by the undeserved punishment. Devine says nothing about it in front of the class, and does not challenge Bannister. Instead, he "crouched down by [Nipper's] desk," and says, "I'm sorry you got strapped, Nipper. Brother Bannister, he . . . he shouldn't have done that." Then "Brother Devine squeezed Nipper's shoulder and went back to his desk" (187). The example of compassion Nipper observes here is fearful and furtive, in apparent violation of a higher authority that seems to be brutal and arbitrary. Such instances encourage fear of punishment and an anxious sense of never being safe.

Eventually the minor tendency to drift from his religious instruction that characterizes Nipper's childhood gives way to a more substantial, sustained departure as his relationship with Brigid turns physical. In facing his own nervous sense, and Brigid's confidence, that there is nothing wrong with their encounters, Nipper must

address the question of his own supposed sin more directly. Catholic feminist theologian Denyse Lardner Carmody argues that the churches, in order to deal morally and humanely with the “sexual misadventures” of youth, “have to take to heart their own doctrinal conviction that sexual sins are less serious than sins of pride and destructive domination” (120). Despite its relative lack of doctrinal gravity, sexual sin has seemed particularly serious to Nipper. This perception is reinforced by its description in the catechism, which tells him that “sins of impurity and immodesty are especially dangerous because our nature is strongly inclined toward them, they are easily committed and soon develop into habits which are very hard to break.” Nipper “grimaces” at the truth of this description (254), though he perceives no real harm in his relationship with Brigid (253, 269-70). Throughout the novel, a relativistic morality in which the moral quality of acts is dependent upon a variety of contextual factors is favoured over an absolutist morality based on the intrinsic qualities of acts: the affection and trust that Nipper and Brigid share affects the moral quality of sexual encounters which, from the vantage point of their religious training, are straightforwardly sinful.

Recalling Guy’s and Smith’s work in different ways, Kavanagh’s novel presents religious language as something humans contrive as a means of approaching the ineffable and lending motivating weight to moral talk. During Nipper’s explorations of the catechism, he turns to a section called “Problems and Exercises,” and reads, “*Godfrey, a lad inclined to be lazy, is bothered with many temptations to sin. May he justly blame all of them on the devil? Explain your answer. Advise him how to overcome his temptations*” (254-55). Nipper closes the book, puts it away, and

thinks, “Sorry, Godfrey, . . . I think you’re on your own” (255). Ultimately, Nipper shrugs off such abstractions, and discovers that his conscience is quiet about his relationship with Brigid but is troubled by his minimal participation in local gang fights and by the physical and psychological violence he has witnessed at school. After examining his religious instruction and his conscience vis-à-vis his encounters with Brigid, Nipper tells her, “I don’t have anything to confess” (270). In the novel’s portrayal of the liberal moral conscience in development, Nipper’s own reason and moral intuition are recruited in his efforts to discern which acts and tendencies are benign manifestations of human diversity and therefore deserving of toleration, and which are malignant and needful of control. In proper liberal fashion, moral authority is shifted away from central institutions and toward the individual (Held 74-75), where moral responsibility lies.

While Nipper grows, relatively unharassed, into an acquaintance with moral complexity and a sense of the insufficiency of doctrine, those in the novel who openly question received religious opinion are berated and punished. Throughout the novel, the domineering church agents responsible for these punishments consistently govern the institutions in which they operate. Gentler, more sympathetic clerics typically try to create safe, supportive spaces in the margins of power, but defer to their more authoritarian superiors when conflicts arise. Authoritarian politics are typical of strong institutions in any sphere, and may actually have positive social functions—clarity of vision and a sense of shared purpose that is not subject to constant second-guessing, for instance,¹⁰ as well as effective regulation of vicious deviations. But institutions also tend to protect themselves at all costs, rigorously excluding perceived threats to

existing authority.¹¹ Nipper observes these power dynamics at work, largely at the expense of people whose worth he recognizes and appreciates; he senses the interplay between these dynamics and the kind of moral instruction he has received; and by growing increasingly resistant to both, he is increasingly alienated from the influence of the Catholic Church that has been their source. In *The Confessions*, church agents' efforts to protect the existing order of power come to impede rather than strengthen their own, and the church's, authority. The church's influence over the novel's younger generation lessens as the novel progresses: whereas Brendan seems to have been very much on his own in his alienation from the church, Nipper finds he has company as well as a predecessor. And old Brendan discovers new bonds with young people, such as Nipper, who increasingly relate to his questions and misgivings as the church's authority erodes.

5.5 Brigid Flynn: An Alternative Model of Power

Though *The Confessions* is focused mostly on male relationships, and Paddy and Brendan's supporting roles are given more exposition than Brigid Flynn's, no one in the novel demonstrates greater strength of character than the independent young Brigid. She is influenced by Brendan's self-governing spirit but is not so stigmatized; she shares Paddy's sense of moral indignation but is not so alienated; and she shares Nipper's sensitivity but is not so impressionable. Brigid's characterization draws on stereotypical depictions of women as natural temptresses, and equally prevalent representations of women as natural nurturers, in the process making much of Brigid's fruitfully complex affiliation with her saintly Irish namesake. The spiritual fertility and

nurturing quality of Brigid's saintly foremother is described very early in the novel, as Nipper recalls his school lessons: "She was . . . the all-provider, the nurturer, symbolized by her cow that always gave milk" (14). But the girl named after St. Brigid is strong, assertive, independent, and sexual, recalling St. Brigid's emblem, fire (14). It is through such fiery traits that she provides for, and nurtures, her young lover. Through her confidence and self-assertion in her interactions with Nipper, and through her bold defenses of others stigmatized by difference, Brigid provides a model of power that supports and defends diversity and individual liberty, a model that contrasts with the authoritarian model embodied by the novel's Catholic Church.

Brigid's confident embrace of her amorous relationship with Nipper demonstrates her strength and moral autonomy. The sexual aspect of Brigid and Nipper's bond grows out of a lengthy friendship, and the tone of their interaction is consistently tender, attentive, and generous. Brigid's secure sense of the goodness of their encounters is reaffirmed for Nipper when Brendan, suspecting what the two youths have been doing, describes it as "church" (252). This is among the novel's many symbolic overturnings of conventional moral associations, as sexual encounters with a trusted partner are likened to a form of worship. Ashe argues that the dominant historical Christian response to human sexuality, which has led to elaborate sexual prohibitions over the centuries, has been phobic and damaging. And like many feminist theologians, she argues this phobia and its attendant prohibitions have hit women's experience of their bodies particularly hard. Ashe argues that the healing of the spirit she believes must take place in the wake of Christianity's repressive history must be accompanied by a healing of people's relationships with their own bodies, so

that people can develop “a sense of ease and pleasure in our own embodiedness” and a sense of the body as “a sacred means of connecting us to God, nature, loved ones and the human community” (26-27). Blessing a doctrinally proscribed encounter that seems to allow or even encourage Brigid and Nipper to thrive, Brendan affirms the spiritual worth of sexual activity that defies Catholic dogma. Though Nipper seems to need this blessing, the autonomous Brigid seems already to be certain that these encounters are worthy and to be cherished, despite doctrine to the contrary.

In her relationship to Nipper, Brigid makes no attempt to shape him despite her considerable force of personality. Instead, she accepts him entirely as he is, empowering him to be, in terms of traditional stereotypes, feminine. Before their first amorous encounter, after joking that his nickname makes him sound like a mosquito, Brigid surprises Nipper by mischievously biting him on the neck, making him blush. Brigid is unfazed, her “eyes crinkl[ing] with laughter.” She brushes off the question of why she did it: “I just felt like it;” and then she compliments Nipper on his pretty eyes, his lashes “like spiders’ legs.” Seeking her approval, he asks, “Is that good?” As she bikes away, she looks back over her shoulder and tells him, “That’s good” (195-96). Throughout the episode, Brigid is characterized by assertiveness and self-confidence, while Nipper is receptive and uncertain, even delicate, needing her reassurance that all is okay—a reversal of common stereotypes that quietly resonates with the story’s general favouring of benign, stigmatized diversity. According to *The Confessions*’ liberally oriented depictions, accepting people’s different predilections (excepting instances where such acceptance enables oppressive behaviour) generally allows them to thrive, and also tends to enrich others around them by unsettling

narrow notions of the proper and the good: the very effect feared by those most invested in the status quo.

Though Brigid's role as the lead character's love interest is typical for a female character in a male-centred narrative, Brigid is also ruggedly independent and a vigorous champion of justice in her immediate surroundings. Her affinity for St. Brigid's emblem, fire, is evident in her quick, indignant defenses of the dignity of her friends and family, and in her inheritance of her great-uncle Brendan's independent spirit. Early in the novel, her defense of a "simple" local boy against schoolmates' taunts (27-28) parallels Paddy Dunne's later acts of solidarity at All Angels Academy. Later, she defends her great uncle Brendan from the slights of her friends (111-13). And at the novel's end, of all the young characters whose development the story follows, only Brigid goes on to attend university, which suggests her assertive spirit is likely to continue to bloom in professional life. Brigid's creative fusion of traditionally female- and male-associated traits not only manifests the benign diversity that the novel celebrates, but, by marrying strength and willfulness to compassion and openness, embodies a kind of power that can actively support diversity in others.

5.6 The Foursome: The Saints Go Marching Out

Through *The Confessions*' modest doses of fantasy, and the association of its central characters with sacred themes and figures, its protagonists are invested with nuance and nobility, and their journeys are imbued with a measure of magic. By contrast, the autocratically oriented, mostly church-affiliated characters against whom they struggle are depicted as psychologically quite flat, and often as abusive, with no such special

qualities. Among the symbolic links between the protagonists and the sacred is the naming of Brendan, Paddy (Patrick), and Brigid after prominent Irish saints.

Excepting Brigid's fairly developed association with St. Brigid, likenesses between the characters and their namesakes are broad and basic. Simple links between Brendan and Paddy and their saintly forebears are easily discerned. Brendan's in particular are underscored by Nipper's mention of Brendan's book *Irish Saints and Martyrs* (94), by Sharon and Mona's discussion of Brendan's "saintly" qualities, and by his talk about, and prayers to, Irish saints (131-36). The gentle Brendan, like his namesake, is a voyager of a kind (St. Augustine's 101), whose knowledge of little-known physical and spiritual terrain is extensive;¹² and it is not hard to see a trace of Paddy in the icon of St. Patrick, trampling snakes or driving them before him (St. Augustine's 433).

Such identifications with Catholic saints symbolically exalt the novel's protagonists, who are neglected, rejected, and even despised by church agents. An association with the sacred is elsewhere invited via Sharon's joking reference to Nipper, Brendan and Paddy as "the Holy Trinity of the Old Road" (119). The recurrent associations of the protagonists with elements of the Catholic tradition, whose institutions and dogma they come increasingly to reject, include quiet gospel echoes. The early community of disciples is echoed by the novel's development of a marginal group characterized by moral vision, compassion, and identification with pariahs. The martyrdom of Jesus is echoed by the portrayal of Paddy as a righteous scapegoat railing against corrupted authorities at his own expense. And the resurrection is echoed by the implication, at the novel's end, that Brendan, having gone missing from the nursing home where he has been sent by his family, has not died but has gone to live with the fairies. These

mostly implicit echoes, tailored to fit a group of protagonists mostly unconcerned with the central Christian question of salvation, symbolically unsettle the legitimacy of a church that is largely depicted as jaded, inertial, and self-serving, whose arbiters frequently exhibit an outlook that is not only self-justifying (as Nipper's, Brendan's, Paddy's and Brigid's perspectives also seem to be), but oppressive.

The novel's final scene, after Brendan has disappeared and Brigid has left Newfoundland to attend university, solidifies the foursome's web of interrelation, and grounds a mostly worldly story in the wonder and mystery that characterizes its beginning. In this final scene, unlikely events cohere in a way that invites a mystical interpretation. While out on a long walk to the shore in May, Nipper steps into the clearing of "Brendan's Lookout" (a new coinage), and accidentally discovers Brendan's silver St. Brigid's medal glinting off a rock, in a turn of events that seems fated. Brendan has told Nipper he wants Brigid to have the medal, but does not actually give it to either Nipper or Brigid before he disappears. And Nipper's discovery of the medal relies on the sun emerging from the clouds and reflecting off it at just the right moment. Now Nipper, whose fondness for Brigid was well-known to Brendan, is responsible for giving her the mysteriously discovered medal. As Nipper walks to the cliff's edge where, accompanied by Brendan, he first saw the ocean years earlier, "a dragonfly [perhaps a fairy, or maybe Brendan] zigzagged past his head, then darted into the woods" (321). Just at that moment, Paddy happens to come down the path, fishing rod in hand. Nipper and Paddy briefly discuss the pendant, then Paddy asks Nipper what he thinks happened to Brendan. Nipper says he thinks Brendan was "stolen by the fairies" (which was Brendan's assessment of Nipper's experience of

“losing time” on the day of his father’s death). But Paddy corrects him: ““No, he went willingly”” (322). Nipper and the generally suspicious Paddy accept the intervention of the fairies as the story that best embodies the mystery of Brendan’s (and the novel’s) end. The final words of the novel ground it in a mystical perspective:

Nipper watched Paddy leave. He looked out over the ocean and listened to the breathing waves, the piercing cries of the gulls. A salt wind stirred the juniper and spruce. Nipper held up the cross by its chain and watched as it caught the light, the bright silver reflecting the sun back to heaven. (322)

Brendan's belief in fairies could easily have been taken as mere foolishness, but instead, Nipper and Paddy affirm and legitimate it—not necessarily via a literal acceptance of the existence of fairies, but at least via an affirmation of the presence of the mysterious within earthly things and within human relations. This affirmation constitutes a stepping back from the territorial knowing of the Cranes and Mary Ignatiuses of the world, toward an increase of wonder and of love—of faith, of a kind—and toward a corresponding, if paradoxical-seeming, *decrease* of transcendent belief. In Kavanagh’s novel as in Smith’s work, an effort to reconcile faith and skepticism through mystery seems evident—in part, it seems, in order to reconcile a religious orientation with a socially grounded, liberal ethics.

5.7 Conclusion

Despite the rich breadth of ideas and perspectives associated with the Catholic faith in *The Confessions of Nipper Mooney*, the influence of its institutions and agents in the novel’s social world slowly wanes because the church and its schools are locked into a

mode of relations that is becoming an anachronism. Dissidents and even fairly mainstream characters in the novel are targeted for punishment or exclusion in order to maintain an authoritarian order. And those church representatives who demonstrate alternative possibilities for engaging with people's differences are relegated to the institutional margins. The fate of the faith is left largely uncertain as dissidents and outcasts develop their own bonds, and as the local church and church schools struggle between a largely subjected compassion and a more prominent tendency toward the aggressive maintenance of order. *The Confessions'* Catholic Church is depicted as largely paralyzed, unable either to change or to revive, in the midst of a process of erosion in the face of an emergent liberal pluralism.

If, as several episodes in *The Confessions* imply, conformity is always likely to be equated with goodness, liberal pluralism may be seen to allow a relatively wide range of people to live and struggle in groups alongside other, similarly "good" people (i.e., those with whom they conform) without unduly oppressing "bad" (but non-oppressive) people or groups. According to such a model, the only acts that need to be constrained are those that get in the way of other people or groups freely doing what they want (to the extent that those things do not prevent others from doing what *they* want, and so on). Such a standard seems to underpin the novel's positive depiction of mutual acceptance among a community of benign outsiders and its dismissive portrayals of some nuns, Brothers, and schoolmates whose actions violate this liberal principle (and for whom no potentially positive role is suggested). Essentially, *The Confessions* implies the same standard that Guy's *Triffie* implies when Pastor Pottle's

hand is nailed to the table: reasonable limits need to be placed on tolerance, for its better overall enactment as a principle.

The Confessions' positive portrayal of the development of bonds of trust among a diverse group of mostly stigmatized individuals, as well as its occasional sympathetic depictions of church agents such as Monsignor Murphy, appears to push beyond liberal tolerance, favouring the active pursuit of harmony and understanding across the bounds of difference. Yet the novel's development of a loose-knit alliance of alienated people who show no more sense of moral responsibility to church agents than church agents have generally shown to them suggests a less idealistic option: a kind of pluralism in which a balancing of factional interests is the best that can reasonably be hoped for. Nipper's and Brigid's sympathy with the novel's socially marginal characters might be seen to imply that, through the facilitation of mainstream sympathizers who can advocate on their behalf in a way that will be heard, marginal groups might take up the dialogue with power. Yet even this unsatisfying option is left largely undeveloped in the novel, whose factions—one romanticized, and one demonized—are left without discernible prospects for fruitful exchange. *The Confessions* seems, on the one hand, to hold out a measure of hope for the instillation of some sense of harmony across the bounds of disagreement and difference, while, on the other, conceding to the political pluralism of factions as a contingent response to unaccountable authority.

These two tendencies maintain an uneasy relationship with each other throughout the novel (it is not clear, for instance, how the latter might aid the former), and recall Guy's and Smith's religious humour in different ways. The novel's

mystical, inclusive current reflects an idealistic embrace of “value pluralism” that recalls Smith’s work. Talisse, as we saw earlier, maintains that value pluralism acknowledges that disagreements over the “Big Questions” are not always a product of error, but are to some degree “inevitable, irresolvable, non-contingent, and, in a word, permanent” (2-3). In Smith’s humour, such an acknowledgment can lead to a measure of harmony among groups. *The Confessions*’ emphasis on the importance of a sense of mystery, and its cautions about what can be known with confidence, may be seen as a Smithean corrective to certain potential effects of the factional pluralism whose development the novel traces. A factional pluralism has the potential, for instance, to amplify rather than to mitigate the conformity against which the novel clearly cautions. Factions within a pluralistic society can exist in a condition of mutually aloof tolerance, while continuing to enforce a self-protective conformity within their own bounds. And the struggle for influence, within the group and in the broader society, may reinforce a corresponding pressure to seem “normal.” An acknowledgement of the mysterious, such as that shared between Nipper and Paddy at the novel’s end, may be seen to encourage listening to those whose perspectives might correct or complement one’s own. This seems to be the hope of the liberal ecumenists cited in Chapter Three, and of Ed Smith’s ecumenical humour. *The Confessions*’ hopeful marriage between pluralism and mystery is prominent in Smith’s religious humour, which presents a more consistent case for their combination. Smith’s work routinely advocates for the harmonious, epistemologically self-conscious coexistence of communities, as opposed to the constant jostling for influence that, according to Held, characterizes political pluralism.

Though *The Confessions*' marriage of pluralism and mystery recalls Smith's ecumenical humour in its optimistic tone, it echoes Guy's cantankerous, apostate religious satire in its structure. The novel's depiction of the splintering of a problematic, often oppressive, but stable-seeming unity into a plurality of factions—some of which have not approached self-consciousness—is at odds with Smith's idealistic vision. This unruly factionalism, which characterizes Guy's satirical outlook, is at the heart of political pluralism as Held describes it. Political pluralists argue that factionalism is not only a natural outcome of democratic “free association,” but “a structural source of stability and the central expression of democracy,” through which tyranny is avoided by the mutual competition of many groups formed on the basis of common interests (187-88). Such pluralism does not rely on the insightfulness of its factions. Hence, it can, after a fashion, be seen to acknowledge the presence of the mysterious in human affairs. That is to say, in such a world, “rightness” is nowhere to be found, or at least nowhere to be proven, and in fact is unnecessary as long as political structures foster competitive pluralism rather than authoritarian relations. Guy's apostate skepticism, which abandons any grand, unifying understandings, may in fact reflect the logical extreme of Kavanagh's and Smith's relativistic uses of mystery. His apostate question is: Given that one ought not to build ethics upon what cannot be known, and given that *nothing* transcendent can be known, what is left upon which to build ethics? Kavanagh's novel and Smith's religious humour seem to stop short of such apostasy, yet are left facing Guy's question all the same in their imaginative attempts to reconcile a measure of Christian religious interest with liberal, pluralistic values. The irony of this process in works that exemplify a sustained

interest in religious experience is that while one (authoritarian) set of worldly values that previously had achieved religious ascendancy is criticized as perverse, another (liberal) set is granted religious legitimacy because it is more amenable to the times.

Notes

¹ *The Confessions* was also shortlisted for the Winterset Award for "excellence in Newfoundland writing," and was nominated for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

² According to David Held's *Models of Democracy*, liberalism involves "the attempt to uphold the values of freedom of choice, reason and toleration in the face of tyranny, the absolutist system and religious intolerance." Held explains, "At the centre of [the liberal] project was the goal of freeing the polity from religious control and freeing civil society . . . from political interference. Gradually, liberalism became associated with the doctrine that individuals should be free to pursue their own preferences in religious, economic and political affairs—in fact, in most matters that affected daily life" (74). Pluralism, for its part, modifies the liberal focus on the individual actor by putting "particular weight on the processes creating, and resulting from, individuals combining their efforts in groups in the competition for power," a process which, according to pluralists, facilitates the simultaneous (and, hopefully, relatively balanced) existence of "many power centres" (200).

³ For a detailed study of the social roles and functions of "local characters," see Diane Tye, "Local Character Anecdotes: A Nova Scotia Case Study," and "Aspects of the Local Character Phenomenon in a Nova Scotian Community."

⁴ Tye's work on "local characters" contains illuminating discussions of the social use of deviants for the maintenance of social standards and boundaries.

⁵ Conservative political commentator and wordsmith William Safire's book *The First Dissident: The Book of Job in Today's Politics* is a discussion of the political value of dissent. The book draws upon Job's relationship to God as an anchor for discussion, but is a political and literary study, not a religious essay. In it, Safire argues that it is politically unwise for those in power to attempt to eradicate dissent because this leads to a more intense, widespread inclination toward rebellion. Conversely, allowing and even fostering a measure of dissent has the dual effects of being good for civil society (because political leaders may learn to be better governors by listening to dissenting voices) and good for the self-preservation of the current leadership (because a political climate that invites dissent provides for those who are frustrated with the status quo a sense that their voices are being heard).

⁶ cf. Michael Harris's journalistic essay *Unholy Orders: Tragedy at Mount Cashel*, written in the wake of the Mount Cashel Orphanage sexual abuse scandal. Given the public notoriety of sexual abuse scandals in Newfoundland, it is striking that Kavanagh opts not to depict sexual abuse. This choice seems useful to *The Confessions*' more general depiction of problems arising from the abuse of religious prestige—as if to say, it is not *necessary* for abuses to be sexual to be serious.

⁷ Darrell is dubbed the “class mascot,” and is spoken to “like he was a six-year-old or a puppy” (205). His schoolmates' strategy of ironic bullying relies on his partial comprehension; this bullying creates in him a sense of shame that depends on a measure of understanding, but it also confuses him because it is not straightforward. This kind of emotional abuse is modeled by Brother Crane himself, who routinely

humiliates Darrell, often through the use of sarcasm and other predatory exploitations of Darrell's limited comprehension.

⁸ In the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*, a "streele" is defined as an "untidy, dirty person," or a "dirty, slovenly person, esp a woman."

⁹ Brigid is strikingly dark compared to other Kildurans, and that this darkness affects how she is perceived by others. Brigid's darkness fits the novel's general tendency toward symbolic reversals. For instance, "whiteness"—or purity—loses much of its meaning as Nipper's world gets more complex, while the dark-skinned Brigid—who is also guiltlessly sexual and therefore "bad"—is among the novel's virtuous protagonists.

¹⁰ Neil Postman writes that "any decline in the force of institutions makes people vulnerable to information chaos. To say that life is destabilized by weakened institutions is merely to say that information loses its use and therefore becomes a source of confusion rather than coherence" (73).

¹¹ For a thorough critical discussion of the self-preserving character of institutions, see Chomsky, *Understanding Power*. For a discussion of a similar tenor applied to Newfoundland in particular, see Pottle, *Fun on the Rock*.

¹² At one point during their discussion of Brendan, Sharon and Mona liken Brendan to St. Francis because of his unusual gentleness toward animals (95).

6. The Huntress and the Holy Mother: Symbolic Integration in Berni

Stapleton's *The Pope and Princess Di*

6.1 Introduction

A prolific writer and performer, Berni Stapleton is a fixture on the Newfoundland theatre scene whose original works for the stage demonstrate a combined commitment to artistry, humour, and the exploration of social issues. Stapleton's plays include the renowned *A Tidy Package*, her post-cod moratorium two-hander written and performed with longtime cohort Amy House, which toured Canada several times. Also notable are Stapleton's one-woman satirical fantasy *Woman in a Monkey Cage*, published in the collection *Voices from the Landwash*, and the personally inspired *The Pope and Princess Di*, first produced at the St. John's Arts and Culture Centre for Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland (2004). Along with playwrighting and performing, Stapleton has authored educational video works, poetry, and non-fiction. Her multi-media publication on post-moratorium Newfoundland with Chris Brookes and Jamie Lewis, *They Let Down Baskets*, won the Newfoundland and Labrador Writers' Alliance Non-Fiction Book Award (1999), and her topical works for organizations such as the Provincial Working Group Against Child Sexual Abuse and the Federal Department of Justice (the latter on mending the divide between youth offenders and the general public) are used as educational materials in public schools. Drawing on Stapleton's own experience of breast cancer, *The Pope and Princess Di* continues her

abiding integration of public and political concerns into works with a personal heart and humorous guts.

The Pope and Princess Di sustains a political emphasis characteristic of most Newfoundland literary and dramatic humour about Christian religion, while extending Smith's attention to questions of belief by giving symbols and their interpretation centre stage in her framing of religious power. Blending social realism, satirical fantasy, and affectionate caricature, the play is complex and intricate, but is also polemical, emotionally accessible, and broadly humorous. It challenges prevalent religious and cultural standards while sustaining a wary appreciation of tradition and a far-reaching skepticism about the ultimate adequacy of any epistemological framework. As the protagonists experience a painful process of transformation, symbols—even those most revered—are framed as properly subservient to an experiential standard of wellness that does not require justification through a given set of ideas or beliefs. Religious and cultural symbols are elaborated and subsequently shattered, only to be reintegrated as useful complements in a new symbolic weave messily adequate to the protagonists' emerging needs.

The play centres on Bernadette and Diana, two women recently diagnosed with breast cancer. Both women have been subjected to damaging patriarchal pressures supported by the perception-shaping power of symbols. During regularly scheduled visits to the oncology ward, the two women provide each other with new insights necessary for their emotional and spiritual healing, even as their bodies get sicker. They are helped along their journey by Bernadette's idol, a singing and dancing Pope; Diana's idol, an Amazonian Princess Di; a harried, chemical-addicted nurse referred to

only as Nurse until almost the end of the play; and Bernadette's dead Granny, who captains the fantastical ship upon which all of the play's action takes place. Over time, Bernadette's relationship with the Pope, and Diana's relationship with Princess Di, are elaborated and complicated, and the women, and their very different idols, begin to influence one another in unexpected ways, assisted by Granny's hectoring wisdom and Nurse's self-denying service.

Subject to an historical, patriarchal manipulation of the Christian principle of self-sacrifice that emphasizes its desirability in women especially, Bernadette's understanding of her own needs has been largely stunted. The play's Pope symbolizes a patriarchal emphasis on women's self-sacrifice, until a shift in his character occurs late in the play. The Pope begins his life as a convenient fabrication fulfilling Bernadette's youthful need for a sense of personal importance, which she develops using the materials of her Catholic religion. She cultivates an affinity for her namesake Saint Bernadette, and a fantasy of personal relationship with the Pope catalyzed by the real-life Pope's visit to bless the fleet in her village. Bernadette's fantasy Pope, informed by her fascination with the sacrifices of the holy martyrs, acquires an enduring place in her psychological make-up, and begins to direct and evaluate her behaviour as a kind of warped conscience. Bernadette comes to envision fulfillment arising through a religiously framed self-abnegation, and manifests this in her domestic life as well as in her self-mortifying response to her illness.

For her part, Diana as a young woman becomes fascinated by the story of Princess Diana's fairy-tale marriage to Prince Charles, and develops a kind of pop-culture devotion to Princess Diana, imagining her own life through a princess-fantasy

lens. When her marriage to a breast-fixated man falls apart, Diana tries (somewhat unsuccessfully) to free herself from her princess fantasy and from patriarchal beauty standards, all the while sustaining a fascination for Princess Diana in secret. Once the play is in motion, after Diana is stricken with cancer, Princess Di turns up transformed as an Amazon figure with one breast removed, representing will power and self-assertion, and also (along with Granny) a legitimate future without both breasts—though her insistence on toughness and independence also hampers Diana’s capacity to develop relationships.

The gradual transformations that the women’s idols undergo suggest the plasticity of symbols, as fantasy objects initially conceived in accordance with their proponents’ own wishes are gradually transformed into idols that oppress their adherents by stunting their growth, and which must be further transformed if healing is to occur. Princess Di and the Pope each eventually develop a relationship with the other’s adherent, as well as with one another. Bernadette and Diana are healed through the access they provide to one another’s perceptual frameworks, as symbolized by Princess Di and the Pope; and these frameworks, as a result of the protagonists’ new relatedness, accordingly change their shape. The action of the play culminates in a sort-of-happy ending in which Bernadette and Diana sail away into death with Granny at the wheel, the Pope and Princess Di depart together to “help” others, and Nurse leaves her current job to work in a Florida plastic surgery clinic. Throughout, *The Pope and Princess Di* playfully employs a variety of Christian and Classical Greco-Roman figures and archetypes, culminating in a couple of crucial integrative images:

the shattering and re-gluing of Bernadette's commemorative teacup of the Pope, and Diana's heart leaving her body and hanging in the sky like a moon.

6.2 Hardened Symbols: Bernadette, Diana, and their Idols

Bathed in light and speaking over the humming of a chorus who have just been singing "*Ave Maria*," Bernadette says, "In the beginning, there was me. My name is Bernadette. I'm named after Saint Bernadette of Lourdes. *And I've met the Pope*" (10). Among other things, Bernadette's character introduction suggests an innocence and exuberance that clearly contrasts with Diana's parallel introduction, "In the beginning there was a little embryo of malignancy" (15). Diana is critical, bordering on cynical, and uses barbed wit to protect herself from familiar hurts. The contrast between the two characters' attitudes is the foundation for their often difficult journey toward friendship, and for the fruitful paradox of their strengthened senses of self and their burgeoning interdependence. This journey requires the disruption of their narrow idolatries to the Pope and Princess Di. Initially symbols of sainthood and of romantic salvation respectively, the two figures have hardened into idols that unduly constrain their adherents. As idols, the Pope and Princess Di operate, however inadequately, as absolute principles for their adherents ("Idol"); they become so identified with the principles they imperfectly "point to," that they are mistaken for them (Gross 169), and hence gain the power to distort them. Bernadette's and Diana's growth emerges from the breaking of their idols and their refashioning as softer *symbols*, and from the emergent openness of each woman to the psycho-symbolic world in which the other has been trapped.

There are obvious parallels between Bernadette's and Diana's relationships with their respective idols. Both begin with sustained fascination for the *people* who are transformed into their idols, and both have had brief encounters with these people—encounters that are culminations of long anticipation and that become important elements of their personal mythologies. In addition, both have come away from these encounters with items that become relics, acting as loci of reflection and adoration: Bernadette's is a commemorative teacup of the Pope; Diana's is a scrap of lace that was torn off the train of Princess Di's wedding gown. In addition to their roles as idols, The Pope and Princess Di also function as archetypes in that they represent ultimately unattainable states of being that are perceived as ideal, toward which each woman strives through the use of her relic as well as through an attendant ritual (Moon). Bernadette's ritual is "tea with the Pope," which she describes as being "like having a hold of God by the ear" (42). Bernadette's tea ritual, presented as safe and reassuring, is quietly parodic of the Eucharist as a kind of archetypal striving through ingestion. This parodic quality is emphasized by Bernadette's assertion at one point that the Pope "*is this cup*" (27)—a point reinforced when the Pope, in first giving her the teacup,¹ enacts a comically self-aggrandizing parody of Jesus, saying, "Take this in remembrance of me" (14). However comforting the ritual, the self-sacrificial ideal that accompanies it has become self-absorbing and self-destructive for Bernadette. Diana's archetypal counterpart to Bernadette's tea ritual is drinking martinis: she describes "having a martini [as] like having the world by the balls" (42). It is archetypal in its striving toward an ideal of willpower (in this case, willpower over the always surprisingly bad taste of martinis) as a means of overcoming the

disappointments that largely characterize her life. The will, which is the one means Diana can accept for bearing the weight of her disappointments (62), is embodied in the archetypal figure of the Amazon. Princess Di's description of the martini as "a triumph of elegance over pleasure" (62), however, hints at the ambiguity of Diana's ritual. Princess Di's words can be read as reflective of Diana's longstanding sacrifice of her own pleasure for the sake of a sense of her beauty as it can be objectified by others. Diana's sacrifice of her pleasure on the altar of other people's expectations bears some obvious effective resemblance to Bernadette's propensity for self-sacrifice, despite the characters' apparent opposition. It is the shadow side of Diana's attachment to her will, to her capacity to endure trials and disappointments.

Following her introduction of herself, Bernadette points out that she is from Lourdes, Newfoundland (a name that may refer to the island village of Lourdes off the west coast of Newfoundland, and also to the grotto in the eastern Newfoundland village of Flatrock that is modeled after the grotto dedicated to Saint Bernadette at Lourdes, France), and gives a comical account of the life of her namesake (10). Bernadette suggests that as a girl, Saint Bernadette "was really sweet and shy and cute and starved for attention" (10). "So," according to Bernadette, "the Holy Virgin Mary Mother of God" appears to Saint Bernadette, and the saint subsequently discovers a holy spring. Then she "lived out the rest of her life being extremely popular and very well known and a very successful Saint" (10). Bernadette's interpretation of her namesake's life reflects her own early, approval-seeking motives for aspiring toward sainthood, motives that shape the Pope's devotion-hungry character. Like a stereotypical celebrity (he first emerges as a clericalized Elvis, singing, dancing, and

fretting over his blue suede shoes), he is petulant and prideful, his ego easily wounded. He threatens to eternally condemn Granny for refusing to indulge Bernadette, (12) and even threatens to cancel Purgatory altogether, citing the previous Catholic retraction of limbo for children: “Remember limbo? All the little dead babies? Null and Void!” (12). As she ages, Bernadette comes more fully to embrace the sacrificial aspect of her saintly aspiration, relinquishing much of her hope for recognition by her peers. And the Pope continues to encourage martyr fantasies even once Bernadette has begun to struggle against them. He encourages Bernadette when she says such things as, “Saints do have to suffer for a while of course. They have to be tortured, mutilated, sometimes boiled in oil” (13). Bernadette’s eventual, gradual discovery of the strength of her will, and her nascent appreciation of herself, are facilitated, to the Pope’s surprise and chagrin, by a model of toughness and pride embodied by the ghost of Princess Di.

Bernadette has viewed holiness as inextricably linked to suffering. She describes to the Pope her revelation on the way into the operating room:

When they were wheeling me into the operating room to do the mutilation, it struck me. I had finally achieved my dream of Sainthood. The pain would elevate me to a greater spiritual level. The scars will distinguish me as a martyr. I even begged them to let me stay awake, to have it done without anaesthetic. I wanted to suffer as much as possible, so I could offer it up. (30)

Bernadette’s fixation on sacrifice satirically reflects a pan-historical, cross-cultural idealization of “women who disable themselves for the sake of marriage, religion, and social approval” (Anderson). Broadly speaking, “men who sacrifice others and women

who sacrifice themselves” have perennially been objects of celebration and admiration (Anderson). Kaye Ashe argues that women, “already prone to an unhealthy self-abnegation, have an obligation to themselves to weigh others’ needs against their own,” and that women's self-effacement is a sin against the self but also against the community, hindering “the creation of a humane culture in every area of life” (37). Ashe’s perspective is reflected in Bernadette’s improved relationships with her family once she stops being such a “saint” and learns to admit her own need.

Throughout her process of self re-valuation, Bernadette has to grapple with the Pope’s continued, intimate influence. When Princess Di asks, “Are you trying to seduce me?”, the Pope articulates his own understanding of his appeal and his power, responding, “Yes. Yes I am. Women love me. I'm the perfect man. Strong. Seductive. Yet I make no real demands of the flesh. Only of the spirit. Women love that” (34). While the Pope seems unaware that women like Diana consider him a retrograde threat to their liberation, he recognizes that he is the perfect man for women persuaded that their best attribute is their capacity for self-sacrifice. He lavishly praises Bernadette for her aptitude in this regard, and addresses her with diminutive endearments, continually affirming her self-sacrificial mode. He responds enthusiastically when she says, in response to her ongoing refusal of painkillers, “The Chemo hurts sometimes. It can burn. I offer it up. Like a gift. To God” (14). At one point he suggests that Diana’s amputated breast “can sit at the right hand of the Lord” (46), a theme he further explores, in a travesty of Christ taking the sins of others onto himself, when he speaks of the sacrificed breast purifying other, sinful breasts (25). In the Pope's “allegory,” Bernadette's breasts are analogous to Christ, and mastectomy is

the cross. The Pope also discourages Bernadette from developing a candid relationship with her newly altered body, by discouraging her from looking at herself (13). When Bernadette eventually looks, with her husband, at her post-mastectomy chest—after which they have great sex (72)—her view of surgery as a sacred mortification is disrupted.

When the Pope realizes he is losing his hold on Bernadette, his first response is a narcissistic projection of his ideal, most powerful self. Applying Freud's work on narcissism to relations within and among nation states, in a manner that resonates with Bernadette's Pope, Jacqueline Rose notes that "a belligerent state not only breaks the law in relation to the enemy; it also violates the principles that should hold between itself and its citizens" (18). According to Rose, when states (by which term Rose consistently seems to indicate governments) are recognized, by the citizenry but also by themselves, as being capable of the nastiness they attribute to others and purport to abhor, they become defensively narcissistic: they become "frantic and demanding because of the extent of the internal damage they are battling to repair" (17). Along these lines, the Pope can be seen as a wounded narcissist violating the faith of his adherent when he responds to Bernadette's nascent sense of self-worth and suspicion of his moral governance by threatening, in a fit of absurdly hubristic pique, to cancel Easter as proof of his own power (Stapleton 55). Viewed as Bernadette's own projected struggle, The Pope's nasty lashings-out are a final, failed internal battle as her old self-image struggles against an emergent one.

As the play progresses, Bernadette begins to make irreverent but fairly innocuous jokes, deriving a seemingly inordinate amount of pleasure from them.

During a conversation in which she and Diana list things (mostly body parts) they would rather give up than their breasts, Bernadette blurts out, "I'd rather give up [my husband] George!" (50), unable to suppress her enjoyment of a sense of freedom she only feels when with Diana. Morreal argues, "Any prohibition can cause a person to build up an increased desire to do what has been forbidden, and this frustrated desire may manifest itself in pent-up nervous energy" that can be released in laughter when the forbidden desire is mentioned in speech (21). Bernadette's breakthrough is that she allows herself to think in ways she has largely forbidden herself until this point. After she says this, she pauses, then says, "I'm only joking! My Lord. The things I say to you" (50). Morreal argues, "When we look at our own culture with a sense of humor, we see our customs, which we often take for granted as the natural way to do things, as just one possible way of doing things" (102-103). Bernadette's own comment comes as a surprise to her, and gives her an opportunity to consider the removal of her breasts in terms other than sacrifice.

Bernadette gradually claims a measure of autonomy, and discovers the healing power of the expression and relief, rather than the suppression or sublimation, of grievances. She learns to argue with Diana, decides she is sick of tea (77), complains about being stuck with all the housework despite her sickness (77), accepts painkillers for pain she no longer frames in sacral terms, and on her way into drug-induced relief, quietly says, "Fuck the Pope," inadvertently smashing her Pope teacup in the process (79). When her immune system crashes, Princess Di, having witnessed a change in her character, declares her to be a "[m]artyr. And Amazon" (80).

Earlier in the play, in response to Bernadette's initial enthusiasm for the Pope, Diana tells her, "I'm an atheist. I hate the Pope. . . . Misogynistic old fart. Traipsing around the world, sticking his nose in everybody's business. Trying to keep us all barefoot and pregnant and prostrate on the altar of his paternalistic bullshit" (28). This rant accurately reflects Diana's public persona and its clear contrast to Bernadette's. However, Diana is unable to free herself sufficiently from her fear of rejection to consistently discard the patriarchal expectations she associates with the Pope. Diana also cannot, despite her own assertion, simply dispense with faith. Diana's expressions of belief assert an affected cool—"I believe in 40 proof imported Finlandia Vodka. And in science, facts, stats, and odds" (28)—but Diana secretly still worships Princess Di, though she is increasingly embarrassed by the particular hope this implies. The Amazonian ghost of Princess Di who appears part-way through the play acts as a corrective to Diana's fantasies of posh romantic fulfillment. But her hard-nosed strategies limit Diana's potential to connect emotionally with others, which she needs to do, especially once she is stricken with cancer. Diana also has to discover in herself a new kind of vulnerability, through which the toughness she has cultivated is transformed by a deepened sense of trust. This vulnerability is that of open-heartedness, exemplified by Diana's moral support for Nurse and more profoundly for Bernadette, and by her surprising, sympathetic words to the wounded Pope.

Diana's marriage entrenched in her an anxiety about what constitutes her "assets," an anxiety that has come to work with her residual hope for romantic rescue to compromise her capacity for autonomy, even as they intensify her conscious need for it. Diana describes her ex-husband:

The love of my life did not love me. He loved my breasts. He always told me how beautiful my breasts were. . . . I wanted long conversations about life and feelings and philosophies. What I got was “You have amazing breasts.” “Thanks,” I’d say. “I grew them myself.” He saved his important conversations for other people. People with less impressive breasts. (32)

Diana emerges from her broken marriage having tacitly submitted to a body-based appraisal of her value, while having consciously determined to revolt against it through the development of a tough, independent persona and a devotion to her career. Despite her aspiration to freedom from patriarchal fetishism, Diana perceives that her success as an upscale real estate agent, and in the marriage market, relies largely on her appearance: specifically, her breasts. This perception instills in her a high degree of anxiety at the prospect of a mastectomy.

Once she learns to trust that Bernadette will not use her vulnerability against her, Diana breaks with her typical reserve and tells her about the princess fantasy that still underpins much of her current anxiety. As a young woman, Diana saved up for a trip to England to attend Princess Di's wedding. Diana tells Bernadette, “She was so demure and sweet and fucking young. And weren't we all so fucking sweet and young just from looking at her? And hopeful I saved up for a year. . . . And I made it happen. I was there” (68). When Princess Diana passes by, her train tears a bit on the metal barrier, leaving Diana with her relic. Then there is a moment of direct identification, at least for Diana: “And then she turned, she looked at me. . . . I was

standing there, feeling like it was me going to walk in that church. She was me. I was her. In that moment” (69).

Diana also tells Bernadette about the crumbling of her fantasy:

I designed my own wedding gown. I based it on hers. And when I was going through my divorce, I'd think, well, this can't be happening to me! I'm the Princess. It's all supposed to be Prince Charming and happy for fucking ever after, right? . . . I promised myself I'd never give another soul my heart again, as long as I lived. (70)

When Princess Di shows up in Amazonian form, she provides a symbolic replacement for the living Princess Di, in accordance with Diana's resolution. Carol Christ argues, “Symbol systems cannot simply be rejected, they must be replaced . . . [because] where there is not any replacement, the mind will revert to familiar structures at times of crisis, bafflement, or defeat” (275). Embracing the notion that the divine is ultimately mysterious, feminist philosophers such as Christ assert that symbols for the divine are fluid in nature, and can and sometimes should be replaced. They regard a conception of the Goddess as a crucial devotional symbol for women, partly because, as Christ argues, “in a Goddess-centered context, . . . [a] woman is encouraged to know her will, to believe that her will is valid, and to believe that her will can be achieved in the world” (284). For Carol Christ, an embrace of the will is a crucial corrective in women's spirituality to the self-effacement she sees as endemic for women in patriarchal systems. Catholic feminist Denyse Lardner Carmody argues that the Goddess has *symbolic* value even for women with more mainstream religious beliefs, because of its “linking [of] women to a female sacral power,” which helps

women to perceive “that what makes God God is as much in her as in men (27). Diana needs to learn to trust her own will, and to see something of her new, powerful ideal self reflected in the object of her devotion.

Bernadette intuits Diana’s need for belief when she asks, “[I]f you don't believe in God, then why are you always cursing and swearing on him? Why do these words give you so much satisfaction if they're meaningless?” (76). Neil Postman argues that blasphemy and irreverence are “among the highest tributes that can be paid to the power of a symbol. The blasphemer takes the symbol as seriously as the idolater” (165). Diana's seriousness about the Pope is the inverse of Bernadette's, and equally acknowledges his power: he is as dangerous in Diana’s view as he is salvific in Bernadette's initial view. As Bernadette intuits, Diana believes in the God against whom she rails; she just hates him. And her other object of belief is an embarrassment to her. Upon returning from the dead as a figure who interacts directly with Diana as the Pope does with Bernadette, Princess Di ridicules Diana for so ardently denying her discipleship: “Why do you deny me? You say you're not religious. Yet you're no better. Did not Peter deny Jesus three times? You've denied me now twice and if there's a third time I'm coming down there and punching you right where the Botox keeps you numb” (30). Diana’s denial is premised not on this new Princess Di, but on the old Cinderella version, whom she still partly worships, as is evinced by the Princess Diana books she carries around. The new, resurrected Princess Di is the “woman [Princess Diana] would have become,” (60) a tough huntress who symbolizes an absolute ideal of female independence. Already a testament to the fluidity of symbols through her decidedly non-Cinderella divorce from Prince Charles, Princess

Di returns from the dead in a new, crucially one-breasted form in order to help Diana shape a new self-image as she journeys through breast cancer.

Yet, while the new Princess Di seems to be a definite improvement upon the earlier version, she is still ultimately an inadequate aid on the road to Diana's healing, because this new Princess Di's personality is too caustic to truly reflect the full range of principles which her Amazonian rebirth symbolically suggests. These principles rightly include not only the strength, autonomy, and ferocity that the new Princess Di clearly manifests, but community with other women as well. Rather than showing Diana a way out of her current fixations, Princess Di merely turns Diana's princess fantasies and physical insecurities—and any demonstrations of weakness for that matter—into sources of shame and objects of ridicule. While Princess Di's ridicule of Diana may usefully point out errors in Diana's current priorities, since she speaks in a language Diana easily understands, this language also helps to keep Diana locked into an alternately self-defensive and self-loathing pattern from which she ultimately needs to escape.

The process of cancer treatment and the anticipation of a mastectomy undermine Diana's confidence in herself as an object of male attraction and as an appealing catalyst for attraction to upscale property: "What kind of a Real Estate agent will I be? Nobody wants to buy a house from a one-breasted wonder" (17); "Who will love me now? Fuck. Now I'll have to rely on my winning charm and sparkling personality. Fuck" (49). As long as Diana can maintain an image very close to a rigidly normalized high-class aesthetic, she continues to feel relatively self-assured about her desirability or at least her professional prospects. But the process of careful

correspondence to an aesthetic ideal to which Diana subjects herself creates its own anxieties, especially once her image begins to suffer unforeseen alterations due to her cancer treatments and surgery. Diana's gradual liberation from a fetishistically framed self-image is poignantly dramatized in two "seduction" scenes. In the first, which takes place before Diana's mastectomy, she attempts to seduce a bartender she has dubbed (Prince?) Charles. She asks the bartender, "Are you a leg man? Or a breast man?" Her anxiety about the predicted anti-seductive effects of a mastectomy creeps into her words: "Either way, I've got it all. Legs and breasts. Two of each. It takes two" (24). She runs her Martini glass over her breast, invites the bartender to come home with her, and dances as the lights fade, unbuttoning a few buttons on her dress, subjecting herself to the physical appraisal of her male watcher.² In the second sequence, after she has lost her breast, the attempt at seduction is aborted. Previously, she has heard about George's acceptance of Bernadette's new body and the reportedly great sex they have after they both look at her new, breastless chest. Diana has been envious of Bernadette's marriage, and has tried to interpret George's anxiety about Bernadette's cancer and treatment as a symptom of rejection. Yet Diana comes to appreciate George's acceptance of Bernadette, with all her weirdness and now with her changed body. Diana's words before her second dance are a marked contrast to those preceding her first: "Fuck Charles. I'm going to hold out for someone like George" (74). Her dance is different too: it is an exploration of her own sensuality; and as she begins to unbutton her shirt, she looks down at herself, replacing the evaluating male gaze with her own loving gaze.³

Diana's decision to wait for someone like George constitutes a rejection of fetishistic assessments of her virtues, but does not suggest simple independence. As a heterosexual female, her continued longing for a male partner is understandable; yet, she is now willing to risk being alone rather than settling for exploitative relationships. As she dances, by herself, she affirms her continued sensuality through her own eyes; she is ready to forego willing subjection to a fetishistic gaze. She relinquishes an aspiration that has led to unhealthy obsessions, deciding she will have an accepting man—a man like George—or no man (74). Bernadette's protection of George from the physical details of her ordeal, which Diana has interpreted as due to the prospect that he will be disappointed or disgusted, turns out largely to be the result of concern that he will worry about her too much. His is a passive virtue, far from the heroism of a fantasy prince, but Diana decides it is better than salvation through a male partner. This route has already failed her; nonetheless, early in the play she still automatically recommends it when Nurse laments the demands of her job. Diana suggests, “Marry a doctor.” Nurse responds flatly, “Tried that” (16-17).

Another sign of Diana's emergent sense of self-worth is presented when she tells Bernadette, “I'm opening my own agency. No more Condos. From now on, I'm handling fixer-uppers. Homes that need to start over” (81). Princess Di has ridiculed Diana for her haughty professional pretension—a thinly-veiled striving toward a sense of self-worth still dependent upon appearances—calling her “Little Miss Perfect. Little Miss I only sell Condos. I only handle the big estates. Little Miss Snot! . . . Little Miss Lakefront Property” (30). Diana's decision to deal in older, flawed/experienced/broken properties acknowledges an acceptance of the critique

underlying Princess Di's harsh rebukes. Diana's career reinvention also resonates with the play's themes of brokenness and renewal, as she directs her professional attention along the lines of her personal decision to give her heart to Bernadette (a survivor of a double mastectomy), and to herself. This healing heart-giving is facilitated by Diana's developing camaraderie with Nurse, as well as her surprising development of empathetic feelings for the Pope. Diana, who has been wounded and who is therefore fearful of letting herself be vulnerable or of giving of her deeper self, finds succour in her own capacity to help a newly humbled Pope. She swallows her distaste, and manages some kind words:

POPE: I'm shattered.

DIANA: She'll get another one [another teacup].

POPE: It was a one of a kind cup.

DIANA: It was a fine cup. (80)

As a humbled, needy person, someone who, like Diana, has maintained a carefully honed image based on adoration by others and whose self-image has ultimately failed him, the Pope is able to be of assistance on Diana's journey toward a healing empathy. Sacrifice (seen now, at its best, as a product of empathy) and its attendant principle, self-transcendence (Carr 102), are necessary for Diana's healing, since it requires escape from a narcissism that bears a partial resemblance to the Pope's, into a kind of relationship of which she has had little apparent experience. Diana's new sacrifice is to stop protecting herself so ardently from the hurt she risks by emotionally connecting with, and supporting, others, especially when these others are in some sense "the enemy." While *The Pope and Princess Di* is critical of exploitative or dehumanizing

relationships, its depicted path of escape from these relationships proposes nothing like straightforward self-reliance. The inevitable partialness of any liberation is intrinsic to the play's presentation of autonomy within interdependence.

6.3 Granny and Nurse: Complex Experiences, Simplistic Salvations

In an essay about her experience of breast cancer, Audre Lorde emphasizes the importance of sharing personal experiences, writing, "If I am to put this all down in a way that is useful, I should start at the beginning" (149). In a sense, this is Granny's role in the play: she is able to draw on more and earlier experiences than either Bernadette or Diana, providing perspectives that otherwise might be lost to them. And her experience-based stories cast doubt upon the simplistic salvations to which both Bernadette and Diana have aspired. Drawing on the multiple interpretations of "wake" that fuel the play, Granny has been "awakened" in order to help Diana and Bernadette grapple with the messy "flotsam and jetsam" that lies in their wake, by which they come to a new awakening partially through her influence. Complementing Granny's role in grounding the play's symbolic movements in the complicated world of experience is Nurse, who is the most disconcerting character in *The Pope and Princess Di*. Nurse is beleaguered, overworked, and addicted to Demerol, and imagines that a job in a Florida plastic surgery clinic will provide her salvation. Nurse negotiates her way through others' painful experiences with little time to consider her own well-being, and receives little institutional or patient recognition for the emotional toll her work takes on her. Whereas Bernadette is fixated on an ideal of self-sacrifice, Nurse is sacrifice flatly embodied, and is far from happy about it. And whereas Diana seeks

meaning by seeking ways to be in demand, Nurse is *constantly* in demand and wishes for nothing but respite. She comes to associate “truth” with pain and suffering, desperately longs for a life of superficiality, and imagines it realized in a cosmetic heaven in which she invests all her hopes for well-being. Like Bernadette and Diana early in the play, she devotes herself to a patriarchally shaped symbol of salvation that seems destined to fail her. According to the play’s depictions of Granny and Nurse, ideals and symbols ought to be sources of help but not sources of authority: they may reflect truth in limited ways, but they *are* not truth, and hence do not merit devotion.

Introduced as the captain of the ship aboard which Diana's and Bernadette's “journey” takes place, Granny steers the vessel armed not with a coherent set of principles or a clear mythology but with the piecemeal wisdom of her experience. Granny offers often unwelcome, eccentric-seeming advice as well as anecdotes containing wisdom in the midst of their comic foolishness. Granny is, roughly speaking, a crone in the sense attributed to the term by feminists who emphasize the experiential wisdom that accompanies age rather than the physical withering emphasized in common definitions of “crone.”⁴ Granny tries repeatedly to discourage Bernadette from overly mystifying her experience. For instance, when the young Bernadette tells Granny that the Pope will arrange it so she will “have to say a million Hail Mary's just to get into Purgatory!”, Granny responds, “You, my dear, *are* Purgatory!” (11). Bernadette is frequently irritated by Granny, as is Diana, who asks a few times whether it is possible to get rid of “the dead Granny” (9). Many of Granny's insights are not easy to hear; she is necessary, but this does not make her popular.

Granny's descriptions of past and present attitudes toward spiritual matters help to frame the play's seeds of doubt regarding individuals' capacity to adequately understand their own needs, and thereby regarding the veracity of worldviews tailored to suit one's particular purposes. One of Granny's contributions, coming from her long and often difficult journey through a hardscrabble outport life, is to doubt the benefits of personalized religion. Granny recalls, "Now in my day, there was no such thing as spirituality. That's a new thing that came out in the eighties. In my day you went to church and you got down on your knees and you thanked God and all creation for what little you had" (44). With tongue slightly in cheek, Granny affirms thanksgiving prayer, but later in the same speech, describes the failure of her *pleading* prayer to have only sons so as to avoid passing breast cancer along to daughters. Granny's seasoned reports of her life and disappointments suggest there are no panaceas, no escape routes from suffering.

At the same time, the vexing world of experience that Granny describes also provides surprising moments of pleasure and dignity. This second contribution to the play's undermining of worldviews based on tidy premises and clear, authoritative reference points comes to the fore when she relates another past experience. She describes hiding her head—newly bald from chemotherapy—under a bandanna because she missed the long hair which had been a central aspect of her own conception of her beauty. Coming home in the rain one day, and thinking herself alone upon her arrival, she is seen by her daughters while changing her bandanna. Granny describes the episode:

I wanted to croak right then and there. All of them looking at me as bald as a baby. Or, in my case, like an old bald eagle. Till my oldest jumped up and grabbed a hold of me and says mom! I never knew how beautiful you are! I couldn't see your face for all the hair! Next thing I know, they're jumping up and down and screaming cause I'm so freaking gorgeous without all my hair. Go on, I told them. You great Obegons! Don't be so stunned. But I got a bit vain after that. I started sneaking on a dab of rouge and putting on perfume when no one was looking. Now that was living it up. (74).

As a means of liberating Diana and Bernadette from fixations that stifle their capacity to adapt to a new chapter of their experience, Captain Granny troubles over-attachments to particular symbols, whether inherited or tailored to suit one's own apparent needs. Granny's stories of her complicated experience serve to suggest that the world will inevitably—and often favourably—out-complicate all available accounts.

Whereas Granny positively emphasizes the complexities of experience, Nurse is mired in them, and understandably longs to escape into a simple, sunny world of superficiality. At the end of the play she seems overattached to an understandable but limited symbol of her desire. Nurse's attachment to her cosmetic heaven is akin to Bernadette's initial devotion to the Pope or Diana's worship of Princess Di: all three women attempt to transform the materials of their patriarchally mediated suffering into the fabric of their salvation.

Nurse's basic good nature is abused by the hospital management, and the stresses of her job go largely unacknowledged by demanding patients and staff. Her coping strategies include sarcasm, Demerol, and fantasy. Another of Nurse's meagre defense strategies is the smoke break, a habit for which she and the other nurses are criticized in a demonstration of cold disregard for their obvious need to unwind. The nurses receive a memo from the hospital administration, "saying it doesn't look so hot, to see the nurses, standing outside the hospital smoking." Indignant, Nurse sends a memo back, saying, "Well, give me a raise, and I'll go smoke in my Porsche like all the doctors do" (16). A distillation of an historical lack of respect for the crucial nature, and the difficulties, of "traditional" women's occupations, Nurse's plight is indicative of a profound failure of community and compassion. At one point, it occurs to Nurse that she could take the Demerol that Bernadette routinely refuses: "Just this once. Just to take the edge off. I'm only human" (45). Later in the play, it becomes apparent that she has become addicted. The unrelenting demands on Nurse's time and energy, and the emotionally taxing context in which they take place, lead to a fantasy of a heaven of surgeries that are purely cosmetic, ostensibly freed from the context of suffering.

Until Diana begins to notice Nurse's suffering, it goes entirely unrecognized as she slips slowly through the cracks while putting her own well-being on the line. An episode in which this process is revealed also urges Diana out of her self-protective shell, as she is forced to address her concern for Bernadette, and to recognize the desperation of her new acquaintance. Nurse tells Diana, "I'm going to go in and give [Bernadette] a steroid shot. Take the pressure off the joints, you know." Diana

responds, “Stop! You just went in and did that. I watched you. You did that already. Jesus. How many fucking needles did you give her today!”, and shakes Nurse, as if to snap her out of her daze. Nurse responds, “I was having phantom pains. I just wanted a little peace and quiet. Let me go” (65). This poignant conclusion to an important episode reaffirms Nurse's sense of sympathy with her patients as well as her drug-addled state, both of which are reasonable interpretations of her “phantom pains.”

Once Nurse realizes how badly off she has become, she quits her job, sobers up, and is off to Florida. When she makes her decision, she expresses her desire to finally be known by her name (Florence, as in Florence Nightingale), rather than simply as Nurse. This seems to be a sign of progress toward autonomy, as does the recognition of her need for relief from the weight of her current circumstances. But in the course of relinquishing her suffering, she also relinquishes depth and growth: she states flatly, “The truth is not my business anymore” (83). What has passed for “truth” has radically failed Nurse. As the play ends, Diana’s and Bernadette’s worlds are expanded, a process that has required them to become vulnerable to unsettling truths, to an open engagement with meaning and the potential for *different attributions* of meaning to the same experiences. But Nurse, whose vulnerability has been exploited, whose openness has been abused, and who has been left exhausted and emotionally raw, refuses meaning altogether, settling for a narrow heaven that reverses the pattern of her current occupation, creating breasts instead of removing them. “Florence”’s dawning recognition of her own need for relief is accompanied by signs that her self-image is damaged and in need of repair. Her plan for repairing it, though, glosses over the image-based anxiety that underlies cosmetic surgery, and suggests that her

awareness, like Bernadette's and Diana's, is not sufficient to her needs: she predicts that when she dies, "I'll have had so much collagen and Prozac, I'll be the damndest finest looking corpse ever laid out for a wake" (83). Nurse's ardent desire to escape from "truth," from meaning, from any obligation to seriousness, is understandable, and provides a striking foil to Bernadette's and Diana's initial, rather severe orientations: when, on her way to Florida, Nurse is asked by Princess Di whether she is a martyr or an Amazon, Nurse responds plainly, "Neither" (81). Yet Nurse's deliberately meaningless salvation is equally narrow; and, given the treatment that simple salvations generally receive in the play, it is implicit that Nurse's plastic heaven will at some point become her prison.

6.4 The Heart Beneath the Breast: A Symbolic Reconfiguration

Granny repeatedly expresses frustration with her own doctor's refusal to follow her intuition about a growth in her second breast. Recalling the Amazon courage that runs through the play, Granny says, "If your frigging doctor won't listen to you, chop your own frigging tit off and shove it down his throat" (17). Elsewhere, she rails, "Two tits! Two tits for the price of one! But would he listen to me? . . . Told me the lump was nothing to worry about" (13). The implication of these expressions is that the oversight killed her. Granny also believes the same hesitation resulted in the premature death of Bernadette's mother (13). As the cultural complex of symbolism surrounding breasts is ironically elaborated, Granny's impatience becomes poignant. She does not identify with breasts as cultural currency. To Granny, they are valued but ultimately survivable parts of the self. Such a perception, expressed by the play's crone, enriches

the play's explorations of relationships toward breasts ranging from loathing to integration to fetishistic attachment. The twin poles of loathing and fetishism are linked in the play to the notion of the breasts as a source of sexual temptation, linked in turn to a more general historical tendency for men to locate the source of male sexual sin in women. The connection between the breast and the heart in the play is obvious and invites attention: mediated through Granny and Princess Di, a shift in emphasis from the breast to the heart takes place, and the heart, the play's site of courage and of empathy, becomes the new framework for perceiving the breast.

The fetishistic end of the breast-perception spectrum is reflected in the play's word lists and word play surrounding the breast as a cultural symbol. Breasts are integral to how many women are perceived, and to how they perceive themselves. Yet, having been fetishized, breasts are also set off from the self, evaluated, presented, hidden, altered—objects in their own right with the power to shape perceptions of women as subjects. Estella Lauter and Carol Schreier Rupprecht write of the Boston Women's Health Collective's decision to name a self-help book *Our Bodies, Ourselves* that they were not expressing an essentialist relationship but were rather “reclaiming their bodies on their own terms,” bodies which “had been described in research informed only by male fantasy for so long that even [women's] own sense of their bodies had been affected” (227). This is evinced by Diana's perception that her breasts are her primary sexual lure, and by Bernadette's belief that it would be ideal for saints not to have breasts, in keeping with the Pope's interpretation of the story of St. Agatha, “the patron Saint of breast cancer” (25). At one point early in the play, the Pope offers Bernadette “a teaching Parable:”

This is a story about poor Saint Agatha. Lovely girl. Came from a good Sicilian family. What a little sweetheart. Happy as a lark. But my dears! Wait til I tell you this! She was being courted by a lecherous Judge who wanted to have his wicked way with her. Nudge nudge, wink wink.

When she told him 'no', he chopped off her breasts. Martyred her. (13).

In the Pope's telling of the tale, Saint Agatha is essentially blamed for her own martyrdom because she has, in the Pope's version, tempting breasts. The spiritual privilege of sainthood is transformed into a punishment for built-in sin, as is evident in the moral the Pope derives from the story: "It's better not to have any breasts at all in the first place" (13). The judge is implicitly free from culpability because, as a man, he cannot (or should not have to) control his impulses.

In *The Pope and Princess Di*, word lists associated with breasts constitute an exposure and exorcism of fetishistic patriarchal fantasies, including the association of breasts with sexual temptation, so that what can emerge is a sense of breasts as *parts of the body* that can be related to, grieved, but also put to rest. The meaningfulness of the lists is gradually transferred from their specific features, lost in a sea of plurality and contradiction, to their sheer length and detail, which imply a cultural obsession. One such list, provided by Granny, is composed of various colloquial names for breasts: "Tits. Titties. Tough titty said the kitty, made the milk taste shitty. Bite my titty. Bosoms. Bazoombas. Honkers, hooters, hootchies. Knockers. Jugs. Udders. Melons. Puppies. Over your shoulder boulder holders" (39). Linda Hutcheon argues that irony can be "a useful mode by which to acknowledge the force of [a] culture and yet to contest it, in perhaps covert but not ineffective ways" (*Splitting* 99). This list,

recalling the list of words for “vagina” in the introductory section of Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*, (5-6) illuminates a cultural preoccupation with breasts and breast imagery.

Another list, courtesy of Princess Di, is a testament to the commercial, cosmetic, and therapeutic attention paid to breasts, suggesting an underbelly of fantasy while telling the audience almost nothing of breasts themselves:

Welcome to our Brassiere Museum. Bustier. Corset. Full support. Light support. Sports. Strapless. Criss-cross. Push-up. Cotton. Silk. Lace. Padded. With water balloons. With blow-up air-inserts. Nursing bras. Starter bras. Gel bras. Cross your heart bras. Training bras. Wonder bras. Merry Widows. All used to encase and hold a little mound of flesh. The hidden garment. The last barrier to the great frontier. (51)

Through its excess, this list rhetorically subverts fetishistic attention to “a little mound of flesh.” Princess Di elaborates on the fantasy underlying her list, as the chorus hums the *Star Trek* theme: “To boldly go where no one has gone before! To the breasts! Our heaving breasts, our quivering breasts, our pillowy bosoms of comfort. The bra unhooks and bliss is unleashed on the world like a madness. The door opens to love, to sex, to mother's milk, to the center of the universe” (52). Stapleton's wordplay echoes Betsy Warland's “theorogram” “The Breasts Refuse,”⁵ in which Warland describes patriarchal diction as a function of power, and asserts her own right and power to rename. But whereas Warland's word play is explicitly analytical, grounded in the creative use of etymology, in Stapleton's play the word play stops short of overt, analytical overturnings. Instead, it relies on intuitive connections made by the

audience, and gains its power to trouble via a fetishistic-seeming aggregation of varieties of brassieres, an absurd superfluity of nicknames and general expressions of enthusiasm for “a little mound of flesh,” the relationship between this obsessive attention and the sin and danger associated with breasts elsewhere in the play, and the play’s symbolic reconfigurations that facilitate an atmosphere of questioning.

The breast is linked in the play to the heart, which is framed as the site of both empathy and courage. Bringing to light an identification of the heart as a site of empathy, Bernadette responds to a favourite saying of Granny’s—“You’re giving me a Royal Pain where my left tit used to be” (11, 13)—by making the link explicit: “Granny . . . often had a Royal pain right where her left tit used to be. Which meant, a pain in her heart. Ever since they cut her breast off, her heart was too close to the surface, and hurt more easily” (13). According to Bernadette’s interpretation, Granny’s breast has a quite different, more genuinely intimate role to play than that which we see in any of the word lists. Here, the breast protects and insulates the heart. It is integral, and its absence hurts, but its loss can be survived, and may even have its uses. The heart connection is deepened by the emergence of Princess Di as a warrior who, according to the stage directions, floats onstage “dressed as a Greek Amazon” with “[h]er right breast . . . strapped flat by sparkling thick cords” (29), carrying a bow, the use of which is eased by the removal of the breast. In this regard, the loss of the breast comes to represent the transformation and strengthening of spirit that Bernadette and Diana experience through their ordeals, reflecting the dedication of the Amazons to “warfare and the hunt” (Reinhard). As the play goes on, the audience’s attention is gradually shifted from the breast to the heart; and these women’s journey

through breast cancer, through the loss of a body part that is also the object of a massively conflicted patriarchal obsession, becomes a journey of healing and growth through which Bernadette's and Diana's hearts are exposed (Diana's to empathy, Bernadette's to her own will, and each to the other) and ultimately shared.

In the opening scene of the play, Diana hears a heart monitor somewhere and notes, "There are two of us, but I only hear one heartbeat" (5). Diana interprets this in the most obvious way: one of them is dead (7). This turns out to be true, as it becomes apparent at the play's end that Bernadette, now deceased, has come back with Granny to see Diana across the threshold of her own death. But the meaningfulness of the one heartbeat extends beyond its use as a plot point. Through the course of the play, the discreet locations of different characters' hearts in their own bodies increasingly give way to rich sharings dramatized by literal, physical dislocations.⁶ Several times, Princess Di mentions that her heart has fallen out. This literal fact—the impact of the crash tore her heart out of place—reflects Diana's feeling that her own heart is falling out. In the end, it *does* come out when the self-protecting Diana offers it to Bernadette. Diana muses, "If a bird shits on it, I'll frigging kill somebody," then wonders, "Now that I've given her my heart, what will I have left for myself" (80). Other hearts must come into play to support Diana now that she has given her own heart away: Princess Di's lost heart, perhaps, which she may have given to Diana in the first place, and Bernadette's, repeatedly described as a strong heart, which joins Diana's in the sky at the play's end.

Earlier in the play, Bernadette speculates on a couple of benefits that might come of having a removable heart:

It might be nice to have a heart that you can pop out of place when it's convenient. When you don't want to feel too much. Or when you want to show someone that you love them deeply. You can let them hold your heart. The Virgin Mary's heart is always floating around outside of her body, in all the pictures you see of her. Proof of all the love she feels. (56)

When Diana responds with habitual skepticism—"The Virgin Mary never looks very happy, if you ask me"—Bernadette displays the wisdom underpinning her sacrificial orientation, despite its lack of measure, remarking, "Love and happy are not the same thing" (57). The culminating image of Diana's heart is striking. The play develops a polytheistic "cosmology" of sorts, inhabited by multiple spirits creatively interacting, leading to surprising new symbolic integrations. Though Diana combats patriarchal pressures via the emulation of an Amazonian archetype, she offers her heart like the Virgin Mary. This heart now oversees Bernadette's no-longer sacrificial sufferings as a moon, infusing the Virgin Mary's love with the self-assertion of the Huntress.⁷

6.5 Humbled Idols: Symbolic Integration as a Product of Relationship

In *The Pope and Princess Di*'s opening scene, which sets the tone for the play's use of the fantastic, the audience is introduced to Bernadette, Diana, and Granny on a ship. Throughout the scene, Bernadette is working on a crossword puzzle, struggling with clues for the words "Vessel" and "Wake," both of which are linked to the "flotsam and jetsam" that lie in the characters' wake (in the play, flotsam and jetsam are still-perceivable residue of the past). Defined as "to become active or alert after being

dormant,” “wake” foreshadows Bernadette's developing sense of self worth, Diana's newfound sense of creative purpose, and their awakening to interdependence. A wake is also defined as a “watch over the body of a dead person through the night, before burial” (5), presaging the revelation that Granny is dead, and further that Diana and/or Bernadette may also be. The double entendre in Bernadette's utterance, “You are supposed to Wake the dead,” acknowledges the wake tradition while suggesting another form of waking the dead: inviting their wisdom back into the world of the living. And all these meanings of “wake” are reflected materially in Diana's relic, a scrap of lace from Princess Di's extraordinarily long wedding train, a kind of wake in its own right. “Vessel,” for its part, is defined as a “hollow container for holding something” and as a “tube or canal that transports a body of liquid” (4). It is the boat that carries Bernadette and Diana, and it foreshadows their different brands of emptiness, their self-valuation based on the burdens they can carry or what they can be filled with: it is the protagonists themselves, the ones creating the wake. “Vessel” is materially represented by Bernadette's relic, the commemorative teacup of the Pope. Granny notes, “When two wakes converge all kinds of things get regurgitated” (20). Bernadette and Diana are in the same boat now, sharing one vessel and one, new wake they are creating together, the flotsam and jetsam rising up out of the turmoil, demanding to be acknowledged and accounted for. Of the “cosmology and structure” of Adele Wiseman's novel *Crackpot* (1974), William Closson James writes that “everything can be redeemed, gathered up, and incorporated” (57). In *The Pope and Princess Di*, as in *Crackpot*, this redemption and incorporation is neither facile nor final, but emerges through the often painful core of human experience, and is in a state

of constant incorporation, as well as constant shattering. It is a deeply plural universe, within which attempts to impose conformity are both futile and destructive; but it is also a universe whose inhabitants cannot remain in a state of static coexistence with those who are different from themselves. It is, rather, a universe of hybrids.

In *The Pope and Princess Di*, the developing relationship between the title characters is used to reflect the growth and relationships of the protagonists, who themselves develop new relationships with their habituated symbols and with foreign or resisted symbols. As the play progresses, the Pope and Princess Di engage in a series of agonistic, bragging exchanges in which they outline their supposed virtues. The Pope argues he is “the power of prayer” and “the physical manifestation of the power of . . . belief”; associates himself with “the relief there is, in looking outward, to God” and the “force of faith”; and asserts about the nature of life and the cancer-stricken state of the protagonists, “It’s purpose, . . . It’s faith, . . . , It’s how you play the cards, . . . It’s knowing when to fold ‘em, and knowing when to hold ‘em, . . . It’s divine intervention, . . . It’s life after death, . . . it’s me!” Princess Di calls herself “the power of life” and “the fecking ghost of Christmas Past”; aligns herself with “the power there is in looking inward, to the self” and with “force of will”; and argues about life and the protagonists’ cancer, “It’s random, . . . It’s genetic, . . . It’s how the hand is dealt, . . . It’s keeping an ace up your sleeve, . . . It’s self-motivation, . . . It’s life *now!* . . . It’s me!” (35, 43-44, 61). Satire theorist George A. Test writes that participants in a satirical *agon* “may both be condemned by their own words,” (129) as the Pope and Princess Di are, in that their pretensions become increasingly ridiculous and they both ultimately resort to egotistical defenses. But the effect of their bragging

exchanges is not wholly satiric: the two characters also make substantive claims to symbolic merit, reflecting in simple terms the struggles lived out by Bernadette and Diana.

While the two women are amply complex, “human” characters, the two spirits are tied directly to particular principles, so when their principles collide the spirit characters themselves collide in quite a direct and uncomplicated way. And once they harmonize, they straightforwardly align themselves with each other. In a comically simplistic way, the eventual, eager alliance of the two spirits reflects the successes of the relationship between the two human protagonists, despite false starts and half-achieved understandings:

POPE: I think she loves that cup more than she loves me. I could just go cancel something. Something like Easter. And I can do it pardner. Just, poof! Issue a Papal Bull and voila! No more Easter. I'm all riled up.

PRINCESS DI: I feel the same way about Elton John. Totally infuriating. That beastly song wasn't even written for me!⁸

POPE: I hardly think that compares.

PRINCESS DI: Chew on an olive, old man. (55)

As their animosity wanes, the Pope and Princess Di find a way to cooperate, and ultimately to help their adherents. Late in the play, the Pope moves beyond narcissistic displays of power and acknowledges he is losing his hold on Bernadette, who is drawn increasingly to Princess Di. He laments, “I miss the days of infallibility. She [Bernadette] heard you.” Strikingly, considering their relationship to this point,

Princess Di's response is productive rather than petty. Recognizing that she cannot save Diana on her own, that she needs the Pope's help, she says, "So now *you* get through to the other one [Diana]. Are you up to it?" (62). In *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience*, Anne E. Carr argues, "An adequate feminist [religious] interpretation . . . is suspicious as it unmask[s] the illusory or ideological aspects of symbols that denigrate the humanity of women, and it is restorative as it attempt[s] to retrieve the genuinely transcendent meaning of symbols as affirming the authentic selfhood and self-transcendence of women" (102). According to the play's cosmology, the "illusory or ideological" aspects of the Pope's symbolism include his encouragement of sacrifice as deference to an unconsultative authority within a gendered power context, while Princess Di embodies an unrealistic solution to socially mediated suffering, based on an excessive reliance on the strength of the individual will. But faith and will, sacrifice and autonomy, empathy and courage, are nonetheless presented as "genuinely transcendent" in their capacity to lead to a healthful combination of "authentic selfhood and self-transcendence," a pairing that captures the essential dynamic within and between Bernadette and Diana:

POPE: Think of the courage of the martyred ones.

PRINCESS DI: Think like an Amazon.

POPE: Face the music like a Saint among Saints.

PRINCESS DI: Be an Amazon, a fierce warrior woman. They lopped off their own breasts.

POPE: Offer up your breasts.

PRINCESS DI: The right one, so it would not hinder the use of the bow. Like so.

She demonstrates proper bow technique. After a moment the POPE holds the bow with her. (65-66)

In the end, the principles that Princess Di and the Pope promote collectively help to save the human protagonists, as the spirits begin to work together.

By the play's end, the Pope is redeemed by becoming vulnerable. The thinness of his self-assurance, its very nearly desperate character, has in some sense been obvious all along; but only once he is rejected and “powerless” can the power of his principles—sacrifice, selflessness, faith—take hold and do their work in a positive way. Immediately after Diana's encounter with the broken-down, drug-addled Nurse, she first hears the Pope's voice (65), having been forced by circumstance to forget herself and to reach out to another in need. Conversely, Bernadette shakes loose her monomaniacal focus on the Pope and embraces a bit of Princess Di's independence. This development in Bernadette's character is evident when she first hears Princess Di's voice:

POPE: All this puking makes me ill.

PRINCESS DI: Sook.⁹

BERNADETTE: Sook. Just like George. (57)

Bernadette echoes Princess Di's evaluation of the Pope, then applies this evaluation to her husband, revealing her emerging impatience with her own quiet deference to those she serves spiritually and domestically, and with their excessive, self-indulgent

lamentations of minor hardships (an impatience that reflects her decreasing satisfaction with her own martyrlly identity as well).

In their blessing of Granny's ship at the end of the play, the Pope's and Princess Di's new complementarity is succinctly framed:

POPE: We wish you well. We wish you peace.

PRINCESS DI: We wish you a good strong arm. (85)

The Pope and Princess Di are transformed from idols to helpers, from objects of direct worship to symbols of principles that are deeper, more elusive yet more enduring than the images that have represented (and obscured) them. This accords with Rita Gross's description of idolatry. For Gross, idolatry arises from a lack of recognition that the language of religion is inescapably metaphorical in character, because the objects of religious worship are not encapsulable in speech or reducible to human perception. She writes, "Every [religious] statement contains a bracketed 'as if' or 'as it were'" (169). If the recognition of religious language as a set of "linguistic conventions" is lost sight of, Gross writes, "if what is focused on is the metaphor, instead of what it points to, religion becomes idolatry" (169). This is not to assert that Stapleton's play presents a clearly religious perspective; it does not. Rather, it draws on the culture and history of Christianity as well as aspects of Christian and Classical mythology to facilitate a dramatic exploration of, among other things, the personal and political power of symbolism. This symbolism, largely but not exclusively religious, intersects with experiences that operate in creative tensions with it. These intersections stop short of an utter chaos of colliding principles, while calling into question the value of symbolic orthodoxies through problematic depictions of "idolatrous" worship.

In her book *Pure Lust*, which legitimates women's desire as a positive, creative force, Mary Daly defines her coinage "Be-Friending" as a kind of ontological befriending that is subversive of patriarchal, patronizing, and controlling "befriendings" of those perceived as needy by those with power. For Daly as for Stapleton, Be-Friending does not operate on the premise "that every woman, or even every feminist, can 'be a friend to' or 'be friends with' every other woman." Daly argues, however, that all women can share "the work of Be-Friending," which implies the creation of an atmosphere in which women are enabled to be autonomous friends. Every woman who contributes to the creation of this atmosphere functions as a catalyst for the evolution of other women's creative potential and for the forming and unfolding of genuine friendships. (373-74)

Among the echoes of Daly's hope for Be-Friending in the relationship between Bernadette and Diana is the importance of not being naïve about potential for individual friendships. Very nearly until the end of the play, Diana insists to Bernadette and to Princess Di that her relationships with them are "temporary alliances;" and Diana and Bernadette struggle to see eye to eye even after Diana gives her heart to Bernadette. Still, Bernadette's and Diana's abiding mutual influence is clear, and is affirmed in their exchange of relics near the play's end: Diana gives Bernadette the piece of lace from Princess Di's dress that functions as her relic, and Bernadette gives Diana the Pope teacup, which she has glued back together. Links are forged and walls come down, as the two struggle through a new set of challenges together.

Bernadette and Diana become friends in the sense described by Daly: they help each other to “Be” in a more complete and fulfilling way. But while Diana and Bernadette might Be-Friend each other, whether they can be regarded as friends in the pedestrian (and valuable) sense of pleasant companionship is doubtful. A funny exchange elucidates their struggle to relate to one another:

BERNADETTE: It's not like we're best friends or anything.

DIANA: It's not like we're bosom buddies, or anything. I don't even really like you a whole lot.

BERNADETTE: I don't even really like you a whole lot too! We have so much in common! (50)

Though they do not pretend to be compatible when they are not, they are willing to provide needed support, a kind of solidarity in keeping with, though not reducible to, Diana's uses of the term “alliance.” The characteristics that make Bernadette and Diana difficult for each other are the same traits that make them valuable to one another. Diana’s irritation with Bernadette's attachment to self-mortification is transformed but does not dissipate once Diana begins to have empathy for her. When Bernadette suggests that her refusal of drugs to ease her pain is “just a little bit of penance,” an irritated Diana responds,

What wrong are you doing penance for? For having cancer? . . . Do you think I should atone for having cancer too? Do you think we should all crawl around on our hands and knees and say Fucking sorry for being such snotty little unworthy cretins that we have to be stricken with cancer? (42)

These irritated responses to Bernadette's behaviour draw from Bernadette a measure of self-assertion and a willingness to be critical (initially through defending herself to Diana), ultimately encouraging her to question her perceptual framework and drawing her out of a morbid stability into a surprising relationship with someone whose priorities are far removed from her own. While at times shocking to Bernadette, Diana's irreverent nastiness liberates her to express her misgivings and her desires, ultimately improving her self-esteem and her relationships. Conversely, Bernadette's enduring if flawed relationships raise questions for the self-protecting, lonely Diana, and Bernadette's general incapacity to see herself as valuable outside of a self-sacrificial framework gives Diana's strength somewhere to go, gives her someone else to serve, in a more profound sense than that to which she has been accustomed. Bernadette undermines Diana's insistence on independence while strengthening her capacity for it.

Diana guesses that, precious as it has been, their friendship might be too difficult to sustain in an active way, for reasons in addition to basic incompatibility:

BERNADETTE: We've been true shipmates, haven't we? We'll look back and see the wake behind us and remember everything.

DIANA: No. We won't. We'll lose touch. We'll run into each other at the mall, or the grocery store one day. And we'll be afraid to ask, you know, how are you doing. Because we'll be afraid the news is bad. Or worse, afraid the news is good. Afraid the statistics won't be working in our favor. We'll smile at each other, and maybe not even stop to talk at all. We'll just wave, and look busy. Years will pass. (83)

It is one of Diana's ambivalent gifts to be able to be candid about such possibilities, to admit the ambiguities of people's motives and the less-than-altruistic impulses that often shape behaviour. But Diana also admits, though not to Bernadette, "I can't be her friend. Friends leave, they go, they die, they break your heart. I am not going to be her friend. It's just a temporary alliance. Just to get her through, for now" (65). Here she expresses an additional fear, which adds a touch of the bittersweet to her declarations of temporary alliances, a suggestion that her rationalizations for their future separation may, in part, be a fearful dodge of anticipated grief, a symptom of her lingering attachment to a ruggedly independent persona.

In one striking scene, Bernadette demonstrates her understanding of Diana's need to feel strong and important, her own willingness to help fulfill this need, and at the same time her own receptivity to Diana's influence. Earlier, Diana laments, "I'm supposed to be the center of the universe" (60). When Bernadette returns from the intensive care unit, she recognizes that Diana is suffering, and tells her, "You *are* the center of the universe" (67). In context, this is not an invitation for Diana to return to narcissism. Rather, it is a badly needed affirmation of Diana's value as a person, in language she understands. In the next moment, Bernadette shocks Diana by unselfconsciously lying on the linoleum floor. When reminded about the rules, Bernadette shows a new willingness to enjoy herself on her own terms, responding, "They are not the boss of me. C'mon down. Relax" (67). This rich scene depicts a softening of the lines between the two characters. In turn, Diana contributes to their developing mutual influence by allowing herself to become vulnerable through admitting her weakness, in her own cantankerous fashion. Having told Bernadette

about her ring, an imitation of the ring worn by Princess Diana during her fatal car crash, Diana says, “All right. I’m a fucking fool. All right? If you tell a soul I will personally haul what’s left of your hair out through your ears” (55-56). As Bernadette says about herself, Diana tells Bernadette things that she does not tell anyone else.

Among the gestures that symbolize Bernadette’s and Diana’s newfound closeness as the play comes to a close, Bernadette’s agreement to share a martini with Diana “just this once” (87) reflects her new willingness to temper her idealism with an acknowledgment of the often surprising awfulness of experience and the utility of the will. And Diana’s confession in the same scene that she is “scared . . . shitbaked” (87) can be seen as an acknowledgment of her need for “tea;” that is, for a sense of safety, for trust, for a kind of faith. In *The Pope and Princess Di*, total healing is neither achieved nor expected, and moral imperfection is inevitable; Stapleton’s clear rejection of the notion of human perfectibility that haunts much of Western thought is consistent with her use of Christian themes. Self-sacrifice and the principle of empathy, dramatized as moral necessities in a world characterized by persistent and inevitable error, are symbolized through Bernadette’s description of the Virgin Mary’s external heart. And their implied complementarity and compatibility with autonomy and strength of will are symbolized by Diana’s (and later, Bernadette’s) heart floating like a moon in the sky.

6.6 Conclusion

The humbling of the Pope relative to the play’s female characters (and the legitimacy of his symbolic role in this humbled capacity) combines with the richness of the play’s

female archetypes to acknowledge “the legitimacy of female power as a beneficent and independent power.” This is how Carol Christ describes the “simplest and most basic meaning of the symbol of Goddess” (277). A central image for the play’s negotiation between its rejection of male-originated or male-defined salvation and its embrace of sacrifice as a necessary principle, however exploited it has been, is the shattering and subsequent re-gluing of Bernadette’s commemorative teacup of the Pope. The Pope is vulnerable now, stripped of deferential privilege, his symbolism of sacrifice falling into its proper place as a child of empathy. And, once the Pope is broken, they are *all* broken, since Princess Di has been missing her heart since the accident, and Bernadette and Diana lose breasts but have also lost the brittle comfort of their habitual modes of perceiving themselves and their relationships to the world around them. The process of new symbolic integrations itself symbolizes transformative growth and a kind of necessarily limited, morally weighted liberation from oppressive relationships to symbols and power.

Despite its affirmation of women’s need and right to creatively subvert oppressive symbolism, *The Pope and Princess Di* ultimately problematizes the idea that one can adequately make or choose one’s own symbols or objects of worship. It does this by depicting the Pope as the representative of a crucial element of Diana’s healing, which she cannot foresee and in fact actively resists, and via Princess Di’s equally unforeseen influence on Bernadette. The characters do not have a thorough understanding of their own needs, and their habits and predilections resist principles essential to their well-being. Due to the limits of its characters’ self-awareness, transformative growth occurs in the play through a process of piecemeal intersections

between symbols and experiences, rather than in clear epiphanic moments. This interplay is crucial to the play's implicit suggestion that ethics cannot remain too pure and also be genuinely helpful for people living in a rather vexing and messy world. The kind of ethics the play resultantly embraces is characterized by paradoxes. The play's presentation of a range of paradoxes—sacrifice and autonomy, faith and will, death and life, brokenness and wholeness—suggests creative tensions that do not need to be (or perhaps cannot be) resolved into singular principles, that do not need to be “solved.” In *The Pope and Princess Di*, symbols are fluid, and the paradox of vulnerable interdependence and cagey self-preservation leads to both personal growth and community building. Accordingly, the play questions, in accord with the work of radical and Christian feminist theologians, the appropriateness for women of a model of service heavily oriented toward self-sacrifice. Conversely, it cautions against an excessive emphasis on the individual self, which is depicted as a frequent source and symptom of narcissistic insecurities, and hence as a roadblock to autonomy within community.

Within this context of crucial moral tensions, the play's undermining of the privileged status of dominant symbols, without an utter relinquishment of their importance, recalls Alfred North Whitehead's vision of historical change at its best. Whitehead argues that it is necessary and good, whenever any “principle” (embodied by social, political or religious organizations) becomes dominant, for a new “principle of refreshment” to emerge. According to Whitehead, it is an historical truism that “[t]he moment of dominance, prayed for, worked for, sacrificed for, by generations of the noblest spirits, marks the turning point where the blessing passes into the curse”

(339). It is the illuminating struggle that is good; hence, a new struggle must emerge to prevent the falling into decadence of the previously sought-after, now-dominant principle. In Stapleton's play, the troubling of old orthodoxies is portrayed as necessary for the shaking loose of symbols that, shaped by "the old dominance" (Whitehead 339), have come to act more as shackles than supports, and for the provision of access to new possibilities. Ideally, for Whitehead, the dominant order will recognize the need for an infusion of newness. He argues, "It belongs to the goodness of the world, that its settled order should deal tenderly with the faint discordant light of the dawn of another age" (339). In a healthy transformation, access to the new does not undermine the value of the waning order, but builds on the "firm foundations" of what is best in it, in a striving toward "the faint discordant light" that is inevitable in any case, and in the movement toward which the "requirements" of the old order ought to be handled "tenderly," as it gradually "sinks into the background before new conditions." In Whitehead's view, this gentle transition is far from an inevitable process. He acknowledges the prevalence of two errors that disrupt such "tender" transformations, and writes, "In either alternative of excess, whether the past be lost, or be dominant, the present is enfeebled" (339). In *The Pope and Princess Di*, the past has been dominant, and has enfeebled Bernadette's and Diana's capacities to deal with new chapters in their experience. But the Pope (and to a lesser extent Princess Di), while at first resistant to the giving way of the entrenched to the new, ultimately comes to see the insufficiency, for the creation of a healthy new arrangement, of his own habitual ways. And Diana's and Bernadette's new Huntress/Holy Mother hearts, the emergent alliance of the Pope and Princess Di, who

leave together to help “the faint of heart” (86), and the anecdotal presence of Granny throughout the play, depict a world in which the old has not been sacrificed at the altar of the new, but instead has nourished it organically.

In *The Pope and Princess Di*, the new symbolic order is tentative, and rooted (despite its fantastical elements) in the perplexities of lived experience. Granny repeatedly undermines the adequacy of any singular approach by emphasizing life’s messiness and by embodying an eclectic wisdom. And no one saves Nurse from her ambivalent fate. Nurse relinquishes “the truth” and embraces a future in plastic surgery because she is exhausted from being an overworked, underappreciated witness to suffering, which is the only meaningfulness “the truth” currently has for her. Perhaps Nurse is the “faint of heart” whom the Pope and Princess Di are off to help, but her future is uncertain. The transformations that have brought Bernadette and Diana through a crucial epoch do not help Nurse. Her refusal to be labeled as either a martyr or an Amazon (81) suggests that she has her *own* needs. And like the others, her own vision of salvation is not sufficient to these needs. The world of cosmetic “improvements” toward which she aspires, while understandable given her experience in oncology, is, like Bernadette’s and Diana’s initial fantasies of fulfillment, embedded in damaging, patriarchal expectations, and shows all the signs of being receptive to idolatry. Ultimately, the play presents symbols—*any* symbols, no matter how privileged—as servants to experience. If the Pope and Princess Di are to help Nurse, they will have to reconfigure once again, because it is *her* need that must be served, not theirs.

In some respects, Stapleton's play reflects the institutional preoccupation of most politicized literary responses to Christian religion in Newfoundland: it sustains a strong emphasis on institutional sources of repression, for instance, as well as on attempts by regular people to liberate themselves from a "repressive milieu" (Murphy 3-4).¹⁰ And it tends to question religious orthodoxies without rejecting the possibility of the renewal or reintegration of Christian values and ideas within new complexes of social and political values. But while *The Pope and Princess Di* sustains this institutional interest, it also goes further, through a detailed, feminist engagement with the perception-shaping power of symbols, which extends Smith's engagement with images of God within the Christian tradition, and develops his latent embrace of postmodernism's understanding of values as partial and contingent.

The Pope and Princess Di also reflects the prevalent use of the fantastic among women writers with satirical or otherwise socially critical intentions. Within Newfoundland, Stapleton's own work, as well as plays such as Liz Pickard's *The ALIENation of Lizzie Dyke*, and novels such as JoAnne Soper-Cook's *Waking the Messiah*, attest to the potential of fantasy for women writers' explorations of political, moral, and in these cases religious themes. Further afield, writers such as Margaret Atwood and Ursula K. Leguin regularly exploit the critical potential of story environments unconstricted by current social (and sometimes physical) limitations. Like *The Pope and Princess Di*, much feminist fantasy writing is religiously subversive while tending at the same time to demonstrate a fascination for mythic structures and grand moral struggles. While much of this work is fully embedded in its imagined worlds (though with critical implications for this world), Stapleton blends

the two worlds throughout the course of her play, so that the audience is rarely able to forget the “real-world” role of the play’s fantastical elements. Real and mythic realms intertwine, and the real is infused with a sense of the mythic as the mythic is perceived as a means of exploring the real. In combination with sustained, intricate symbolic play, this grounding in a “real” world that is never more than partially receptive to symbolic movements reflects *The Pope and Princess Di*’s (and Stapleton’s general) tendency toward balancing the didactic and the doubtful, as well as the accessible and the esoteric. The presence of comic demystifiers like Granny and Nurse ground the play in the familiar world of quippy folk comedy and blunt social satire, and the symbolic obviousness of Princess Di and the Pope render the play didactic in a way that recalls the work of the other authors in this study. Yet the intricate interplay of relics, images, and symbolic figures, with their various and shifting relationships to each other and to other characters, invites a good measure of focused, critical attention in its own right.

The Pope and Princess Di embraces a far-reaching epistemological skepticism, though it also dramatizes a necessary negotiation of ethics and political relations within this uncertain context, as per the feminist and postcolonial writers Linda Hutcheon describes. According to Hutcheon, such writers embrace postmodernism’s deconstructive potential without committing themselves to the politically useless nihilism that lurks at its extreme (*Canadian* 70). Concordantly, Stapleton’s creative realignments and integrations of existent symbolism declare a kind of creative agnosticism, or something akin to the symbolic fluidity of Goddess feminists for

whom symbols are crucial to a healthy spirituality, but are also inextricable from (and typically subservient to) questions of political relations.

Notes

¹ This is an aspect of Bernadette's fantasy; her Pope is not the real-life Pope, and the real-life Pope did not give her the teacup. The cup was actually given to her by Granny.

² Diana's association of her sensuality with particular physical attributes and with a desiring male gaze also characterizes the monologist in Stapleton's earlier play *Woman in a Monkey Cage*, in which a former beautician, now locked in a cage and relentlessly observed by a creature only referred to as her Watcher, begins to despise the natural processes now interfering with her carefully controlled image, and begins desperately to miss the reassurances of physical contact with an observing male (and more broadly, physical contact in general). She states,

I'd like to shave all the hair off my body so there'll be nothing . . .
animal about me. God, I've got hair comin' in on my legs like weeds
and bushes growin' under my armpits and my eyebrows are takin' over
my face. I'd like to scrape myself bald from head to toe, everywhere,
just to feel . . . human . . . just to feel soft again and smooth and clean.

(353)

She pleads with her strange, leathery Watcher, "Just open the door and let me touch you, just a touch, I need someone to touch me" (357).

³ In the *Artistic Fraud* production, Diana's second dance is hardly a dance at all, and was not seductive as indicated in the script; it was a quiet, almost sad moment, which has significant interpretive ramifications.

⁴ The politicized adoption of the term “crone” is particularly common among pagan feminists. The term is a staple, along with “hag,” in Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology* and *Pure Lust*; and websites and books published by feminist pagan groups and oriented around the crone abound.

⁵ It is a poetic essay, or a discursive poem.

⁶ In the December 2004 Artistic Fraud production, much of this is muted, apparently due to technical choices that omit visual cues Stapleton scripted.

⁷ Although Diana is also frequently a symbol of chastity, this does not appear to be meaningful in Stapleton’s play.

⁸ Elton John’s song “Candle in the Wind,” originally written about Marilyn Monroe, was modified in dedication to Princess Diana after her death.

⁹ “Sook” is a regional term for one who laments one’s circumstances exceedingly, or is given to whining or pouting.

¹⁰ While Murphy writes about Ireland, many of her observations of Irish literature and religious politics are usefully applied to Newfoundland.

7. Conclusion

Like much of contemporary Newfoundland culture, the island's humour about Christian churches and religion has been influenced by a range of broadly influential schools of philosophical, political, and religious thought that have tended to conspire against traditional religious (and political) authority. The availability and apparent desirability of ideas and beliefs drawn from a variety of movements including liberalism, secular humanism, religious ecumenism, and, in recent years, feminism and even postmodernism, have fostered a culture increasingly critical of Newfoundland's established ways of viewing and doing Christian religion. The character of religious ridicule in Newfoundland has shifted accordingly, from conventional ridicule of one religious group by another (still observable to varying degrees in the joke books), toward ridicule of Christian religious figures, institutions, and beliefs in a general sense, or else of particular denominations by their own apostate "strays." Alleged narrow-mindedness, and abuses of too-little-questioned authority, have been typical objects of religious ridicule in Newfoundland professional humour in recent decades; and some form of pluralistic outlook, drawing on various combinations of the broad movements listed above, has routinely been presented as a favourable alternative. The writers in my study have created worlds in which one set of long-dominant, presently waning beliefs and modes of relation is ridiculed or otherwise humorously problematized, in favour of an emergent set that not only appears to provide alternatives to these beliefs and modes, but whose own roughly conceived, liberal-

pluralist ideology is premised on the very availability of multiple alternatives.

While it is tempting to suggest that Newfoundland religious humour has been a causal factor in the secularization and pluralization of Newfoundland culture, such an argument, generally proposed, would distort the role of such humour on the island (despite exceptional examples such as CODCO's satirical depictions of priestly abuses of children well before such activity entered public debate). Humour tends not to be a prominent characteristic of vanguards. As Mulkay discusses at length, socially critical humour tends most often to enter the picture within movements once they have gained some footing in the culture (177). In *Fun on the Rock*, Herbert L. Pottle supports Mulkay's basic argument in a Newfoundland context. Pottle writes that the susceptibility to humour, and especially to satire, of traditionally dominant institutions such as the churches *followed* the loss of a degree of their power. A Newfoundland amenable to a robust tradition of humour about the churches was a Newfoundland in which their authority had already been disturbed sufficiently for serious questions to be asked of them and their role in the society.

As is true of Ray Guy's earlier religious satire, socially critical humour may ridicule mainstream actions and tendencies (though these generally have already been unsettled to some extent), and may favourably present somewhat marginal (though familiar) alternatives. Just as often, however, humour's predilection for unsettlement is turned upon marginal positions, in order to reaffirm a status quo or to strengthen a new ascendancy (cf. Mulkay). By the time Kavanagh's *The Confessions of Nipper Mooney* was published, for example, pluralistic values and open criticism of ecclesiastical authority had become mainstream in Newfoundland's creative and policy circles and

in the popular media, and “traditional” ways of conceiving Christian religion were on shaky grounds. *The Confessions*’ attacks on institutional Catholicism are hardly surprising; they amount to a retroactive reprimand (and perhaps a caution against authoritarian relations more generally), composed in the context of a culture that largely has become comfortable with the author’s point of view. A decade previous to the publication of Kavanagh’s novel, the predominance of “lapsed Catholicism” in a 1990 issue of *Canadian Fiction Magazine* dedicated to current Newfoundland fiction was roundly criticized by Harold Horwood in a review for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, on the grounds that its grappling with Catholicism had become needless and uninteresting (“New Writing” 2). While Horwood’s criticism suggests that decisive political and cultural shifts on the island had stripped such literary responses of much of their political and religious urgency, he seems to have underestimated writers’—and readers’—need to sort through the legacy of institutions central to their history, culture, and belief traditions.

The obvious injection of opinion into imaginative writing—even at the expense of a measure of craft—ought not to be regarded simply as a deficiency, though it often is regarded as such. One might instead consider didactic literature as literature that expresses a cultural moment, and might regard the prevalence of politically opinionated works in a culture as an indicator that its artists are self-consciously engaged by public life, rather than by the standards of a relatively narrow artistic/scholarly class. One might even argue that the prominence of sophistication as a literary standard is suggestive of elite control over the production, reception, and interpretation of literature, in a way that is not so much engaged in the edification of a

broader public as indifferent or even hostile to it. John Ralston Saul makes this argument in his 1993 book *Voltaire's Bastards*, in which he describes the evolution of the novel as a socially engaged form of literature that was for a long time disrespected by the literati. He argues that the public relevance of "serious" novels waned as they gained respect within an increasingly professionalized literary-critical establishment. According to Saul, the seeking of elite approval led novelists who wished to be taken seriously to reflect elite values both ethically and aesthetically (536-76). I do not assert that the prominence of "sophisticated" literature within a culture is a sign of decadence or blithe self-satisfaction, but I do think it is inaccurate to suggest that the prevalence of literature that favours clarity of ethical expression over psychological or aesthetic sophistication signifies an immature literary culture, as critic Lawrence Mathews sometimes does in his well-intended praise of the sophistication of a current crop of Newfoundland writers (cf. "New Writing;" "Report").

Like the prominence of didacticism, the general prevalence of humour within a culture's professional arts may be a sign that the public matters to artists. Smith's folksy humour, Guy's love of satirical shock, Kavanagh's conversational wit, and Stapleton's caricatures might be taken as signs that the tastes of the huge numbers of Newfoundlanders who have bought joke books since their production took off in the early 1970s are not only of interest but of appeal to these authors. These writers' blend of humour and political opinion, in works that by turns are also sophisticated and artful, is suggestive of an artistic class balancing multiple loyalties, drawn to the lives, struggles, and tastes of a broad Newfoundland public; to pluralistic values, which have gained prominence in many social classes, but which reject the ethical and religious

perspectives of a substantial portion of the public; and to the artful experimentation and psychological focus that characterize “serious” contemporary literature.

Artists in contemporary Newfoundland frequently reflect, and often openly grapple with, a broad struggle on the island, between attachments to tradition and modernization, local culture and cosmopolitanism, simplicity and sophistication. This is evident in this study, and has generally been evident in the island’s literary and dramatic arts for decades. To some degree, Newfoundlanders, including its artists and policymakers, have determinedly fostered a sense of themselves as a “peripheral people, . . . who hold fast to the particular, the familiar, the traditional in a world based on individualism, hedonism, materialism, [and] progress” (Davies, *Ethnic* 47). As there is among Québécois, there is among Newfoundlanders a powerful sense that their culture is unique and important; this sense has been invoked countless times in contemporary writing on the island. Yet, paired with this often nostalgic attachment to a regional heritage is a perception that one relinquishes at one’s peril a critical relationship to the cultural legacy one has inherited, and that this legacy in Newfoundland has in many important respects been fraught with error and abuse. As Newfoundland has absorbed and adapted contemporary “Western” values that tend to radically refashion the priorities of traditional, village-based cultures, such values have largely come to shape contemporary criticisms of alleged failings in Newfoundland’s cultural and institutional legacy.¹ Shifts in social and educational policy on the island make it evident that the values which have gained ascendancy in contemporary Newfoundland accord with an understanding, reflected in the works in my study, of Christianity’s claim to transcendent authority as being problematic at best.

Accordingly, all of the works are imbued to varying extents with a religious skepticism that is amply reflected in the increasingly secular culture in which they have been produced. Among them, Smith's and Stapleton's explore the question of religious belief most extensively (while some of the jokes take belief most for granted). Their work presents religious symbolism as something highly plastic: it can by its nature be adapted to many ends and outlooks. The plasticity of religious symbols and concepts is a sufficiently striking feature of Newfoundland literary responses to Christianity to merit study in its own right, far beyond what I was able to achieve in Chapter Five's explorations of religious symbolism in *The Pope and Princess Di*. To take one example that is typical of CODCO and several of its alumni, in his one-man comedy special *Pocket Queen*, comedian and social activist Greg Malone observes that people's notions of God tend strikingly to reflect their own character, then launches into impressions of Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart in self-reflective, self-gratifying conversations with "God."² Pushing such plasticity to its extreme, eminent Newfoundland playwright and poet Al Pittman denies human beings a solid, meaningful reality beneath our constructions. Pittman presents readers with a world in which fantasy is the fabric of human reality: one cannot hope to avoid it. This theme in his work has repeatedly been implied by critics, but has not received the sustained attention it merits. At the same time, Pittman's work suggests that our myths are not all equal: some are preferable to others, depending upon their capacity to help people thrive and maintain a sense of dignity. Pittman's existentialist vision does not unproblematically support the humanism that generally underpins the works in this study, since *The Pope and Princess Di*'s implication that people might *require* their

“illusions,” and perhaps cannot be stripped of them without harmful effects, is at the heart of much of his work. Yet Pittman’s implicit standard of thriving shares with the works I have discussed, and with other contemporary Newfoundland writing that addresses the island’s religious legacy, a reliance on standards resembling the “common moral decencies” described by secular-humanist ethicist Paul Kurtz.

As I discuss in Chapter Two, certain moral principles recur, according to Kurtz, with remarkable consistency as behavioural standards across time and cultures. He argues that such principles do not require a coherent worldview, and have not been proven by history to require—or even particularly to benefit by—the dominance of a religious outlook (63-96). *To The Wall*, a 2003 one-man show by renowned comedian and CODCO alumnus Andy Jones, is an outstanding example of a contemporary work of Newfoundland humour that embraces a Kurtzian outlook. While *To The Wall*’s moral explorations are not inconsistent with the politically loaded humour of the works in my study, it is a more philosophical work, and appears to depend less on the ascendancy of a particular framework for the values it favourably presents. Sensitive, sophisticated, and wise despite its heavy employment of slapstick, silliness, and physical comedy, *To The Wall* merits a separate study for its complex use of often coarse comedy to nuanced philosophical and moral ends. Ostensibly premised on Jones’ own prayerful response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, after an adult lifetime of atheism, *To The Wall* comically explores two premises—the existence of God, and the capacity of science to save humanity—both of which are described as crucial to the “theoretical underpinnings of the evening” (10). As the show proceeds, God’s existence, not to mention benevolence, comes increasingly into

question, as does the saving power of science.³ Twice in the show, Jones declares that science is “the answer and the hope for the future . . . ‘science!!’ and ‘love’ of course . . . and . . . and hope and freedom and openmindedness, generosity of spirit, understanding, originality and boldness. . . . You know, *science*” (7). Following the second instance of this highly compromised claim—just after he has been struck down and paralyzed (by God?)—Jones’ character ardently quotes the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. Amen” (27). While this prayer seems largely to be an effort at spiritual compensation, based on fear of divine punishment, it is nonetheless striking that the moment at which Jones quotes the Lord’s Prayer is a moment in which “science” once again fails to respond to crucial human needs, and further, that the passage echoes Kurtz’s “common moral decencies.” Its ethics are paralleled in a variety of religious and secular traditions, and are consistent with Jones’ character’s twice-stated list of values compensating for science’s shortcomings: values, the show ultimately suggests, that do not require science *or* religion.

Jones portrays human existence as fragile, beautiful, and perilous, in need of great care and attention in each moment, rather than in need of a saving system. This may be its major departure from the more ideological tendencies of the works in my study. In its particular comic vision, which marries absurdity and flights of comic imagination to a broad sense of pathos, *To The Wall* recalls the comic novels of Wayne Johnston, who has become an exemplar of the new, “sophisticated” Newfoundland literature (cf. Mathews, “Report”). The humorous ribbing in *The Story of Bobby O’Malley* and *The Divine Ryans*, Johnston’s two comic novels with a

substantial religious focus, is largely indiscriminating—more like the Tulks’ freewheeling joke books in this sense than like any of the other works in my study. All Johnston’s characters are subject to the comic gaze, the religious characters not substantially more than others. In their freewheeling use of humour and wild imagination, and in their psychological penetration, Johnston’s comic novels achieve a Robertson Davies-esque sense of wonder and wisdom. Both novels hint at some of the issues grappled with more explicitly in the works upon which I have chosen to focus. But Johnston’s religious humour is not politically didactic in the way that most of the works in my study are. Rather, it participates in a comic vision within which humour arises through often tragic circumstances, in narratives that foster sympathy for characters who live an often bleak and unsatisfying existence. Within this framework, Christian religious belief is often presented as a means of protecting a sense of coherence and structure from an imagined chaos which looms and threatens from the margins, waiting for cracks in the religious armour.

While this presentation is not obviously political in Johnston’s work, its brand of vision of the psychology of zealous religiosity seems partly to underpin the abuses of religious authority that are so prevalent in the works in my study. In these works, defensive religious postures foster a skewed sense of the good, oriented around the protection of a beleaguered religious order, and abuse arises from the marriage of power to such a skewed moral sense. Through this marriage, all manners of difference and dissent are regarded as evil (cf. Vanier 74), and the status quo is mistaken for the sacred. If Neil Postman is correct in asserting that irreverence is an “answer to idolatry,” (167) and if one accepts that the irreverent attacks directed by Guy, Smith,

and Kavanagh at the churches' power over education in Newfoundland (to take one example of religious power abuse in the works studied) are genuine idol-smashing, one might also ask whether this smashing merely paves the way for a new set of unasked questions and a corresponding new set of exclusions. Concordant with Postman's liberatory understanding of irreverence, Northrop Frye has argued that satire "break[s] up the lumber of stereotypes, fossilized beliefs, superstitious terrors, crank theories, pedantic dogmatisms, oppressive fashions, and all other things that impede the free movement of society" (233). The power to facilitate "free movement" that Frye ascribes to satire is a power too freed from particular interests to accurately describe the genre. Satire overwhelmingly implies specific standards, if only via ridicule of their opposites. Rather than simply "freeing up" the discursive landscape, these standards typically reflect reasonably prominent trends in the culture, which constrain certain actions and tendencies even as they facilitate others. In the case of the works in my study, one prominent trend reflected with considerable consistency is the increasingly liberal, pluralistic character of Newfoundland's contemporary political culture.

For ways of living and perceiving grounded in a deep commitment to a religious tradition, the ramifications of the pluralistic, generally liberal outlook typically reflected in these works may be profound. To take a prominent contemporary Canadian example, some critics of Canadian multiculturalism argue that it fosters a trivial, showy plurality, while demanding substantive conformity to a basically liberal standard. Beneath its outward embrace of diversity, one may question whether multiculturalist pluralism, or the pluralism that has come to dominate social thought in

Newfoundland's circles of influence, genuinely fosters diversity at deeper levels of conviction and practice (or, to take the argument further, whether this is practically possible). It is probable that the ascendancy of a pluralistic outlook works to constrain belief and practice within a new set of fairly narrow parameters, imposing one set of standards upon many people who do not necessarily share its values but are nonetheless bound by its rules.

At the same time, in consideration of Newfoundland's increasingly plural demography, the pluralistic standards underpinning the works in my study may be seen to foster a culture that protects the rights of individuals and minority groups—including religious groups—in substantive if limited ways. One may consider a competing criticism of Canadian multiculturalism: that the guise of harmonious multiculturalism protects those who harbour hostility toward the state and toward “Canadian” values (however one conceives these). To concede to a pluralistic outlook is, to some extent, to accept the legitimacy of a measure of opposition to ascendant values (if not of the seditious activity that some envision is likely to arise from such opposition), as an acceptable risk of a robust pluralism in which individuals and groups are given space to sustain and adapt their own beliefs and traditions.

Notes

¹ One would be remiss not to acknowledge, in addition to the continued popularity of the major denominations in Newfoundland, the spread and enduring popularity of evangelical Christianity within Newfoundland's contemporary religious landscape, especially in some of the outports, and to recognize it, at least in part, as a village-based reaction to an objectionable contemporary milieu, rejecting the secular in favour of the transcendent, reason in favour of revelation, and individualism in favour of obedience in their moral and spiritual life. But, despite the presence of this ardent strain of Christianity and the continued, if diminished, influence of the mainline churches, the island's political culture has continued to secularize.

² Malone's *Pocket Queen* won the Gold Award for Comedy at the 1999 Houston International Film and Television Festival.

³ Throughout the show, Jones elaborates on a far-fetched mathematical equation that will, he assures the audience, explain not only the nature of the universe but the nature of God. Variables in this equation include "the [number] of beef buckets of sand you'd have to toss to accidentally get . . . two perfect maps of Newfoundland and Labrador," (7) and "[e]verything ever there was or is or ever will be" (or "the teddy bears picnic") (23).

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