

O'Connor, Fergal

by Patrick Maume

O'Connor, Fergal (1926–2005), priest and philosopher, was born Thomas Francis O'Connor on 6 December 1926 in Rathmorrel, Causeway, Co. Kerry, third of seven children of Henry O'Connor, national school teacher, and his wife Nora (née Egan). O'Connor's grandfather had also been a schoolteacher, and his great-grandfather was a hedge schoolmaster. He was educated by his father at Rathmorrel national school, then attended St Brendan's College, Killarney, before joining the Dominican order in 1944; Fergal was his name in religion. After studying at St Mary's Priory, Tallaght, Co. Dublin, he was ordained to the priesthood in July 1951 and studied political philosophy at the Angelicum in Rome (where he took his STL in 1955) and at Oxford, where he studied at the Dominican Blackfriars Hall (1956–9), preparing a doctoral dissertation on Aquinas's understanding of the imagination. He briefly taught at the Dominican House of Studies in Cork before being assigned to St Saviour's Priory, Dominick Street, Dublin, in 1961; he lived there for the rest of his life.

In his early twenties O'Connor developed arthritis, and was advised that he had a short time to live. As he grew older his chronic pain intensified; he was unable to raise his arms above his head, the medication he took for his condition adversely affected his digestive system, and at the end of his life he also suffered from severe leg ulcers.

In 1962 O'Connor was appointed as a lecturer in politics at UCD, where he taught until his retirement in 1991 (he continued to teach a course on Plato until 1997). As early as 1966 the *Irish Times* UCD correspondent noted: 'Perhaps the most inspiring and popular lectures given in the arts faculty are those in politics by Fr Fergal O'Connor, OP. They have raised the standard of political debate enormously, particularly among economics students' (*Irish Times*, 21 December 1966). At a time when the college, and in particular its philosophy and social science courses, were heavily influenced by prescriptive expressions of official catholicism, O'Connor became renowned for the Socratic openness of his teaching, intended to inspire questions rather than answers. Instead of providing a detached analysis of different philosophers' views on set themes, he would spend one term articulating philosophy from a Hobbesian standpoint; then, when many of his students had become enthusiastic Hobbesians, he would switch round and argue as a disciple of Rousseau or some other thinker. Plato and Socrates, however, were his great love.

O'Connor saw Plato not as a proto-totalitarian (as held by liberal commentators such as Karl Popper) nor as an individualistic rationalist, but as living out a social mission in fifth-century BC Athens akin to that which he assigned himself in 1960s and 1970s Ireland: in a society whose traditional assumptions and illusions were breaking down, to resist the blandishments of bourgeois self-contentment and of

sophists who saw everything in terms of power and control (Hobbes for O'Connor was the paradigmatic sophist; hence his fascination) and to encourage the virtuous life both in theory and in practice. A generation of Irish politicians (including a future taoiseach (John Bruton) and a future tánaiste (Michael MacDowell)) and political science academics came under his influence.

It is not clear how far O'Connor believed wholesale social transformation was possible through his Socratic consciousness-raising. In the 1960s he spoke admiringly of the Yugoslav version of democracy as superior in some respects to the Irish variety. On 4 December 1969, after O'Connor described himself as 'a Christian Marxist priest' and suggested St Francis of Assisi was the first hippie, he was denounced by the Fianna Fáil leader in Seanad Éireann, Thomas Mullins (qv), who referred to him as 'one of those dissident priests' who might 'poison the minds of a whole generation of Irish youth' and suggested the government should procure his dismissal by reducing the grant to the university by the amount of his salary. This provoked widespread controversy over academic freedom, in which Senator Mullins was compared to the accusers of Socrates. O'Connor was, however, critical of those who treated Marx as an infallible oracle rather than a subject for interrogation through the same critical techniques which Marx himself deployed (a view which may have been encouraged when he tried to mediate between staff and rebellious students in the UCD 'gentle revolution' protests of 1968; but he was subsequently driven from a staff/student committee by hardline Trotskyist students who characteristically preferred to control and wreck the committee rather than allowing it to develop). In general his students recalled him as the least doctrinaire of men and one whose central commitment was to argument, not for its own sake, but as the pursuit of truth. He was also admired for his personal interest in his students' welfare and work to assist them with their problems.

From 1966 O'Connor 'extended the spirit of his seminars to the living rooms of the nation' (Dunne, 217), when he became one of the most conspicuous regular guests on the *Late late show*, the weekly television chat show hosted by Gay Byrne which made a point of ventilating issues previously not raised in public discussions in Ireland. O'Connor's participation came at a time when it was unusual for priests to appear on television, and the *Irish Times* television critic Ken Gray (qv) noted that Byrne used O'Connor, whose opinions seemed 'several jumps ahead of his colleagues' as a 'magneto' to 'spark the engine of controversy'. O'Connor's appearances on the show were a source of annoyance to the more conservative members of the Irish catholic hierarchy, such as John Charles McQuaid (qv) of Dublin and Michael Browne (qv) of Galway; at least one bishop privately attempted to block O'Connor from appearing on the show. After O'Connor commented that the Fianna Fáil government 'basically make up their policy as they go along', criticised Fine Gael and Labour for conservatism, suggested Ireland needed an Institute of Criticism, and expressed socialist sympathies (*Irish Times*, 1 June 1967), he was criticised by the taoiseach, Jack Lynch (qv), and praised by the veteran trade-unionist John Swift (qv) (*Irish Times*, 17 June 1967) and the left republican Maire

Comerford (qv) (*Irish Times*, 7 June 1967). Conservative laity also disapproved of some of his views, such as his November 1975 statement that he could see no reason why the catholic church should not tolerate civil divorce in Ireland. Byrne in his 1972 book, *To whom it concerns*, reprints several letters from indignant viewers who complained, denouncing O'Connor's criticism of the British anti-pornography campaigner Mary Whitehouse when she appeared on the show ('as a priest, Fr O'Connor should back up a Christian position'). Byrne commented that O'Connor had expressed sympathy for some of Whitehouse's views but criticised her muddled thinking.

O'Connor tended to take the view that since catholic viewpoints were no longer endorsed by Irish society as a whole, they should no longer influence the civil law, and that sexual permissiveness was primarily the result of deeper flaws in Irish society and education which had led to widespread failure to form true relationships – a view denounced as naive by conservatives. At the same time O'Connor's view, that while contraceptives should be legally available they should not become 'a consumer item', was denounced by liberals as 'orthodox, Roman catholic and conservative' (*Irish Times*, correspondence, 4, 14 April 1977). In his later life, as liberal views became social orthodoxy, he became more critical of them.

O'Connor's views on the contrast between the traditional self-image of Irish catholic virtue and the flaws of Irish catholic society rested on personal experience, which derived from his view that virtue must be lived as well as preached and theorised ('principles are too thin to live by'). In 1968 the Homeless Girls' Society under O'Connor's leadership founded Sherrard House Hostel, a ten-bed residence for homeless girls at 19 Upper Sherrard Street in the north Dublin inner city, run by female volunteers and operated under a relaxed discipline. At weekends O'Connor supervised repair work in the hostel, hoping to save money. (He sometimes commented that if he had not been a philosopher he would have liked to be an engineer.) Many of his students were enlisted to help in the hostel and regarded their fireside conversations with him as among the most profound experiences of their lives. In 1971 O'Connor founded Ally, a group which assisted single mothers (run from St Saviour's Dominican Priory in Dominick Street); it closed down some years before his death, stating that its functions had now been taken over by the state. O'Connor has been subjected to some retrospective criticism, however, for holding the view – at least in the group's early years – that it was better for single mothers to give up their children for adoption than to raise them themselves. He also helped many needy individuals throughout his life on a one-to-one basis.

O'Connor's last years were overshadowed by a side-effect of his social work. In 2004 a former resident of Sherrard House made accusations against him, first of having maintained brutal forms of discipline in the hostel in the early 1970s, then of having connived at the rape of inmates by others, and finally of having raped her himself. This was reported to the Dublin diocesan authorities who passed it on to the civil authorities, leading to a lengthy Garda and Eastern Health Board

investigation during which O'Connor was barred from having contact with Sherrard House or anyone connected with it. He engaged a lawyer and defended himself vigorously; statements were taken from numerous former Sherrard House residents who supported his version of events. In August 2005 the Health Board concluded that the abuse alleged 'is unfounded on the basis of the information available to us at this time' and the director of public prosecutions decided that a prosecution could not be considered. O'Connor's friends later spoke of the mental anguish these accusations had caused him and of the relief he expressed just before he died at the knowledge that he had been cleared. They claimed that O'Connor was clearly physically as well as morally incapable of the actions alleged against him, that the accusations should have been dismissed at a much earlier date, and that O'Connor fell victim to the desire of both the civil authorities and the Dublin diocese to distance themselves from the long and sordid record of negligence which had marked the handling of clerical abuse cases in previous decades and which was to be exposed by the 2010 Murphy Report. O'Connor's accuser was the author of a best-selling memoir *Don't ever tell* in which she alleged extreme physical abuse by her father and claimed that she had been confined in a Magdalen laundry. Her claims were widely disputed by acquaintances, including most of her siblings.

Fergal O'Connor died in the Mater Hospital, Dublin, on 29 September 2005. Among the tributes paid to him was one by Fr Cyprian, a fellow Dominican: 'I do not know what the word saint means if Fergal is not one. He was not a crow thumper, anyone who heard him on the *Late late show* could tell you that. But he was a saint' (Kelly, 125).

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*Ir. Times*, *passim*, esp. 28 July 1971; 30 Sept., 4, 8 Oct. 2005; Gay Byrne, *To whom it concerns: ten years of the Late late show* (Dublin, 1972); Emer O'Kelly, *The permissive society in Ireland?* (1974); Gay Byrne (with Deirdre Purcell), *The time of my life: an autobiography* (1989); John Cooney, *John Charles McQuaid: ruler of catholic Ireland* (1999); J. Dunne, A. Ingram and F. Litton (ed.), *Questioning Ireland: debates in public and political philosophy* (2000); *Sunday Independent*, 9 Oct. 2005; *Irish Catholic*, 13 Oct. 2005; Joseph Dunne, 'Teaching in the spirit of Socrates: remembering Fergal O'Connor OP', *New Blackfriars*, lxxxvii, no.1009 (May 2006), 210–28; Hermann Kelly, *Kathy's real story: a culture of false allegations exposed* (2007)