

SINÉAD O'CONNOR - AN EVENT IN IRISH HISTORY

A review by Peter Brooke of Sinéad O'Connor: *Rememberings*, Sandycove (Penguin Books), 2021, first published in *Church & State*, No 145, July-September, 2021, taken from the website www.peterbrooke.org

I was living in France through the 1990s and not paying any attention to developments in 'pop' music (the term has become quite embarrassing but I don't think anyone's yet come up with an alternative. It isn't all 'rock' music ...), so I missed the impact Sinéad O'Connor made with her first and second albums, *The Lion and the Cobra* and *I do not want what I have not got* and in particular the very successful single, Prince's song, 'Nothing compares 2 U'. The news that an Irish singer had torn up a photo of Pope John Paul II on Irish television may have got through to me and may have raised a flicker of interest but I probably assumed it was a publicity stunt.

I started taking her seriously late in the day, after my return to the UK. Thinking I should try to catch up with what was happening I bought the CD *100th Window* by the English band, Massive Attack. It features three songs sung by her. I was immediately struck by the song 'Prayer for England'. Truth to tell, I think I misunderstood it. When she sang 'Let not another child be slain' I had in mind the children killed by the sanctions imposed on Iraq. 2003, the year in which *100th Window* was released, was the year of the Iraq 'war' (difficult to dignify anything in which the odds are so heavily weighed on the side of the aggressor with the word 'war'). Re-reading the words I think she was talking about killings of children closer to home ('Let not another child be slain/Let not another search be made in vain'). Though I could still be right:

'Jah calls the ones whose
Beliefs kill children to
Feel the love of you and be healed
And may we all cry too
For representing you
So badly so badly'

(She uses the Rastafarian word 'Jah' to refer to God)

But the intensity of the singing (the Massive Attack backing is pretty good too) and the fact that it takes the form of a prayer and is sung with such sadness, raises it to a level of generalisation independent of whatever specific horror she may have had in mind. The song is about the relationship between humanity (I suppose I have to use the non-gender specific term) and God.

THE CRUEL MOTHER

There are many relationships that were important to Sinéad O'Connor. As she says in *Rememberings*, 'I have four children by four different fathers, only one of whom I married, and I married three other men, none of whom are the fathers of my children.' But though many of these relationships are reflected in the songs there are two that stand out very clearly - the relationship with God and the relationship with her mother. The two come together in this story from *Rememberings*:

'I love Jesus because He appeared in my head one night when my mother had me on the kitchen floor. I was naked and had cereal and powdered coffee all over me. My mother was saying all this scary stuff, and I was curled up so she could kick me on my bottom. Suddenly, there Jesus was in my mind, on a little stony hill, on His cross. I never asked Him to come; He just arrived. He had on a long white robe

and blood was flowing from His heart all the way down His robe and down the hill and onto the ground and then onto the kitchen floor and into my heart. He said He would give me back any blood my mother took and that His blood would make my heart strong. So I just focused on Him. When my mother was finished with me, I lay on the floor until I knew she had closed her bedroom door. Then I tidied up all the stuff she'd thrown about and set the table for breakfast.'

It's not difficult to think it's her mother she has in mind when she sings in 'You cause so much sorrow':

'Why must you always be around?
Why can't you just leave it be?
It's done nothing so far but destroy my life.
You cause as much sorrow dead
As you did when you were alive.'

But we learn from *Rememberings* that it's also her mother she has in mind when she sings, in 'Feel so different':

I should have hatred for you
but I do not have any
and I have always loved you
Oh you have taught me plenty

And most surprising she says 'The huge single from the album, my cover of Prince's "Nothing Compares 2 U," was a song I was always—and am always—singing to my mother. Every time I perform it, I feel it's the only time I get to spend with my mother and that I'm talking with her again.' 'Nothing compares 2 U' is a love song if ever there was one.

The album in question is her second, *I do not want what I do not have* and in *Rememberings* she tells the story of how the title song came about. She talks about herself and her sister Éimear (later curator of the Crawford Gallery in Cork) and how they used to spend hours wandering round Dublin begging because they were afraid to go home:

'We did anything to stay out because only battering would happen at home. Some nights we just rode the bus from the first stop to the last and back in the hope that Mother would be asleep when we got home. We were a strange mixture: middle-class kids with filthy clothes that had not been washed for years, begging. We were good at begging; we had to be or we would have starved.'

After she died:

'I went to see a medium and my mother came through. My mother asked my sister to forgive her for what she had done to all of us. But my sister would not forgive her. And while I understood this, it made me very, very sad for my mother's soul. I was so young and didn't know any better. That night I had a dream in which my mother came to me for the first time since she had died a year and a half earlier. In the dream, I told my mother I was sorry that Éimear couldn't forgive her. My mother said, "I do not want what I haven't got." What my mother meant was that she didn't deserve my sister's forgiveness and that she knew she didn't deserve it so that I shouldn't feel sorry for her.'

What she does with the phrase is interesting:

'I'm walking through the desert
and I'm not frightened though it's hot
I have all that I requested
and I do not want what I have not got.

'I have learned this from my mother
See how happy she has made me

I will take this road much further
though I know not where it takes me'

GOD

God doesn't get much of a look in in *I do not want what I have not got* except perhaps in the song 'Three babes' - 'about three miscarriages that I experienced':

'Each of these
my three babes
I was not willing to leave
though I tried
I blasphemed and denied
I know that they will be returned to me
each of these
my babes
has brought you closer to me.'

The 'you' in question could be the father of the babies but I think it is God. And it makes an interesting contrast to the Gary Numan song, 'Prayer for the unborn', also written in response to a miscarriage - one of several - suffered by his wife:

So, I prayed
But you weren't listening.
Making miracles?

So, I begged
But you were far away.
Saving souls perhaps?

So, I screamed
But she was very small
And you have worlds to mend

So, she died
And you were glorious
But you were somewhere else

But I can't leave *I do not want what I do not have* without referring to the song 'Black boys on mopeds'. It could be seen as an anticipation of 'Prayer for England'. Granted that 'Prayer for England' was prompted not by the Iraq 'war' but by some common or garden case of a child being murdered, 'Black boys on mopeds' also concerns an item that might have got tucked away at the back of a local newspaper. She says: "'Black Boys on Mopeds" is based on a true story involving two young teenagers near where I lived in London. They had taken a cousin's moped without asking permission; the cops were called and gave chase; the boys got frightened, crashed, and died.' She takes it as symbolic of the atmosphere of tension she encountered when she arrived in Margaret Thatcher's England:

'England's not the mythical land of Madame George and roses
It's the home of the police who kill black boys on mopeds.'

But why 'Madame George'? 'Madame George' is the title of a song by Van Morrison which celebrates the courage of a transvestite not afraid to live his conception of himself to the full. But it has nothing to do with England, it specifically references Belfast and Dublin. The explanation comes in *Rememberings*. Soon after first arriving in England from a Dublin she had experienced as extremely repressive, she met up with two cousins living in South London, one of whom was a transvestite: 'My girl-dressing cousin took

me to Kensington Market and there I beheld a smorgasbord of size 12 patent-leather stilettos for men. England was officially the greatest country on earth.'

'Black Boys on mopeds' also features a discreet but definite reference to God:

'remember what I told you
if they hated me they will hate you ...

'remember what I told you
if you were of the world they would love you.'

In case anyone reading this doesn't know these are among the words Jesus spoke to the disciples shortly before the crucifixion.

WHAT DID THE POPE DO WRONG?

We learn from *Rememberings* that O'Connor's feelings about her mother and her sympathetic identification with black people played a role in the famous incident of tearing up the picture of the Pope. It was a very carefully planned gesture - and a very lonely one. She had no accomplices (after it occurred, she says, her manager locked himself in his room for three days and unplugged his phone).

She was singling two songs on a live programme, as the name suggests, *Saturday Night Live*. The second was an a capella version of Bob Marley's song 'War' based on 'a speech given to the United Nations by the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie in New York in 1963 about racism being the cause of all wars.' During the rehearsal she held up 'a photo of a Brazilian street kid who was killed by cops. I ask the cameraman to zoom in on the photo during the actual show. I don't tell him what I have in mind for later on. Everyone's happy. A dead child far away is no one's problem.'

The photograph of John Paul II she used had been taken from her mother's bedroom. She had been carrying it around with her ever since her mother died. When she tore it up she shouted 'Fight the real enemy.' There is a story behind that as well.

While living in New York she had got involved with a group of Rastafarians, a lifelong attachment:

'Jamaicans don't do small talk. At first this is a bit uncomfortable because Irish people are always filling the gaps. I find myself in silence in fish-filled vans making deliveries, just like I did with my grandfather. I thought they didn't like me was why they were silent. But it ain't anything other than they are watchers. They're watching out for God everywhere. They're like God's security detail. That's how they see themselves, and that is exactly how they are. They're like Saint Michael leading God's angels to war against Satan. Like zillions of Saint Michaels all rolled into one huge pyre of prophecy. They're watching for the devil too. That's the enemy of God. The devil is their Lee Harvey Oswald. They only speak when it's about Scripture.'

However just before she left New York, her particular friend, Terry, who ran the juice bar where they all met, took her aside and informed her that he was about to be killed. It turned out that he was a dealer in drugs and guns. He used children as 'mules. They have guns and drugs in their schoolbags, not books.' He had trespassed on someone else's territory and knew they would get him. She realises that her friends - some of them at least - are fake Rastas. When it comes to *Saturday Night Live* she decides she's 'gonna change a few lines to be a declaration of war against child abuse. Because I'm pissed at Terry for what he told me last night. I'm pissed he's been using kids to run drugs. And I'm pissed he's gonna be dead by Monday. It also happens I've been pissed off for a few weeks because I've been reading *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* (a contrarian, blasphemous history of the early church) and also over a brief article, buried in the back of an Irish newspaper, hinting that children have been abused by priests but their stories are not believed by the police nor the bishops their parents report it to. So I've been thinking

even more of destroying my mother's photo of JP2. And I decide tonight is the night ... I yell, "Fight the real enemy!" (I'm talking to those who are gonna kill Terry.)'

That was on Saturday. Terry was killed on Monday.

The time she spent in a reformatory run by nuns (consequence of her becoming a teenage kleptomaniac, following the example set by her mother) also contributed to her feelings. The reformatory was attached to a hospice that looked after women who had worked in the Magdalen laundries. The two institutions were kept strictly separate. One night however, as a punishment for running away, she was sent by herself to sleep in the hospice:

'I never ran away again after my night in the hospice. In the morning when I woke, I knew what Sister Margaret had been trying to tell me. The worst part was, I knew she wasn't being unkind. She was being a nun I'd never seen before. She deliberately hadn't told me why I was to go to a part of the building I'd never known existed, climb a flight of stairs I would never have been allowed to ascend if I'd asked to, knock on a door I would previously not have been permitted to touch, and enter such a scene with no staff present. She let me figure it out for myself - if I didn't stop running away, I would someday be one of those old ladies.'

Still, it may seem unreasonable to blame all that on the Pope. An explanation might be found by turning again to 'Prayer for England':

'See the teachers
Are representing you
So badly
That not many can see you'

She sees the problem as essentially religious.

PRIESTHOOD

The photo-tearing incident occurred in 1992. 'Prayer for England' was issued in 2003. In between the two, in 1994, there was the album *Universal Mother*, which largely concerns her own experience of motherhood, but it also evokes God as a mother; and in 1999, she was ordained as a priest by Bishop Michael Cox of the Irish Orthodox Catholic and Apostolic Church - a church derived from Pierre Martin Ngo Dinh Thuc, elder brother of Ngo Dinh Diem, assassinated President of South Vietnam. Archbishop Thuc had separated from the papacy in protest against Vatican II. Cox, the previous year, had ordained Father Pat Buckley as a Bishop. In his book *A Sexual life - a spiritual life*, Buckley says that, though he himself agrees with the ordination of women, he was unhappy about O'Connor's ordination first because of a suggestion that money had been involved and then, while expressing great respect for her personally, he didn't feel that she had been sufficiently prepared for the role. As a result he separated from Cox and instead received a 'conditional consecration' at the hands of Bishop Peter Paul Brennan of the US Ecumenical Catholic Church. A whole world of independent Catholic churches of which I was quite unaware is opening out before my eyes!

It's one of the disappointments of *Rememberings* that she says nothing about her ordination though it does include a photograph of her in her priest's outfit. She does say, however:

'I'm certain part of the reason I became a singer was that I couldn't become a priest, given that I had a vagina and a pair of breasts (however insignificant). I always had an interest in working with dying people, because I was always a person who believed very much in an afterlife and in the lack of need to fear death, which I discerned from having had the Gospels drilled into me. I figured that was Jesus's reason for coming to Earth. That seemed to sink in to such a degree that only now, as I'm writing about

my songs, have I become aware that an awful lot of them are about death or talking to dying people or where the narrator is a dead person.'

And again: 'I should have been a missionary, in fact, but the next best thing was music.'

The year after she was ordained as a priest she produced an album with the promising title *Faith and courage*. It contains sentiments, though, that are surprising - maybe absolutely without precedent - coming from a newly ordained priest, for example in a song addressed to her father, *Daddy I'm fine*, expressing her feelings when she first arrived in England:

Sorry to be disappointing
Wasn't born for no marrying
Wanna make my own living singing
Strong independent Pagan woman singing
And I feel real cool and I feel real good
Got my hair shaved off and my black thigh boots
I stand up tall with my pride upright
And I feel real hot when the makeup's nice
I get sexy underneath them lights
Like I wanna fuck every man in sight

She also addresses God as a goddess, for example in another song addressed to her mother, 'What doesn't belong to me':

I'm Irish, I'm English, I'm Moslem, I'm Jewish,
I'm a girl, I'm a boy
And the goddess meant me for only joy.'

Youtube features a video of her singing 'What doesn't belong to me' from 2012, dressed in her priest's outfit. Although it's one of the ugliest pieces of clothing ever devised she, of course, looks very good in it. By this time she's over forty years old but with her shaven head she looks like a ten-year old boy. That she did, or does, in fact see herself seriously as a priest, or a missionary, or a preacher, comes over clearly in the song 'The Lamb's book of life':

Out of history we have come
With great hatred and little room
It aims to break our hearts
Wreck us up and tear us all apart
But if we listen to the preacher man
He can show us how it can be done
To live in peace and live as one
Get our names back in the book of life of the lamb

Out of hopelessness we can come
If people just believe it can be done
'Cause every prayer ever prayed is heard
Take power in the power of the word

Out of history we have come
With great hatred and little room
It aims to break our hearts
Wreck us up and tear us all apart ...

But if we listen to the Rasta woman
She can show us how it can be done

To live in peace and live as one
Get our names back in the book of life of the lamb

It is a constant theme with her that God, however understood, is a reality and that a lot of the problems in the world come from the fact that people don't feel that reality, and that a major reason for this is the way God is presented, not as a reality but as an idea, or as a bundle of clichéd sentiments, in religion. But she does see the need for preaching. And she does see the need for Scripture.

THEOLOGY

Which brings us to what I see as her masterpiece - the double album called *Theology* (2007). But first we should take account of *Throw down your arms* (2005). This is made up of very straightforward versions of quite well-known Jamaican Reggae songs. As such it could be said to follow on from *Sean-Nós Nua* (2002), made up of very straightforward versions of quite well-known Irish songs. She says in *Rememberings* that *Sean-Nós Nua* 'contains the very best singing that I ever did in my life' but this article is concerned not with the quality of her singing (always beautiful or powerful in all the phases she went through) but her adventures in religion, and thus primarily with the words she wrote herself. In this respect *Sean-Nós Nua* is mainly notable for the absence of anything to do with religion. Nor does it include any rebel songs, though a powerful version of 'The foggy dew' appears on Youtube and *Universal Mother* features the song 'Famine'. She says of this: "'Famine," of course, is a song about Ireland and how everyone believes there was a nineteenth-century famine, but in fact, there was lots and lots of food in the country, it was just being shipped out of the country. It was just that you were shot dead if you were Irish and you went near anything but a potato.'

But *Throw down your arms* is both religious and rebellious, despite its very charming cover which shows her own first communion photograph with a decoration of Celtic scrollwork on either side. They're all Rastafarian songs. lamenting exile from their homeland and calling on Jah to free them from their bondage to Babylon. She says of it:

'In 2005, I was lucky enough to go to Kingston, Jamaica, and record *Throw Down Your Arms* with Sly and Robbie (Sly Dunbar and Robbie Shakespeare) and the most incredible band on earth. I got to perform some of my favourite and most inspirational songs, which are all very male Rastafari numbers. I had the time of my life in Kingston with a friend of mine, who was very gay, for three weeks; at the time in Jamaica, you got ten years' hard labor for being gay. So I had to keep poking my friend's chin to make his mouth close every time he was staring at the lovely-looking men ...

'I also felt so strongly about making *Throw Down Your Arms*, I paid four hundred thousand dollars of my own money for the record's production. I was heading toward my next record, *Theology*, which is an album, believe it or not, that I had wanted to make since I was seven years old. *Throw Down Your Arms* was very much the precursor to *Theology*, which I also paid for personally. (I can't remember how much that one cost me.)'

She says of *Theology*:

'Around the year 2000, I went to college for a brief period to study theology. The books of the prophets were where my passion lay. We had the most beautiful teacher, a priest, who was able to bring God off the page when he was discussing the prophets. Particularly Jeremiah; he'd be going, "My poor people, my poor people," and his eyes would be streaming tears ... I wanted to do the same thing musically that he was doing when he was teaching, bringing God off the page. Let everyone see the humanity of God, the vulnerability, the moodiness, the emotionality ... There's a very fine line between corny and cool when it comes to writing religious songs, and I grew up in the 1970s with all these terrible charismatic Christian songs on the airwaves. So I didn't want to risk making that mistake.'

On the actual CD cover she says:

'I would like to thank Father Wilfred Harrington, to whom this record is dedicated, for his inspired classes on the prophet Jeremiah and for his suggestion that I should set some scriptures to music. Also, as usual, thanks to all Rastafari for having been doing exactly that for fifty years; and for having me as a daughter.'

Theology is a double CD, one recorded in London, the other in Dublin. The London sessions have a full band backing, the Dublin sessions a very simple acoustic accompaniment - herself and another guitarist. There are the same songs on each of the different sessions, except that the London sessions include the Tim Rice song 'I don't know how to love Him' which, she admits in *Rememberings* - rightly - was a mistake. She also says the Curtis Mayfield song 'We people who are darker than blue' was a mistake. Insofar as it isn't Scripture-based, she might be right but it's still a very impressive version of a song which - like the songs on *Throw down your arms* - one might think only a black person could sing, protesting as it does against black on black (or indeed, as it expands to include brown and yellow, non-white on non-white) violence. It may be that she feels it is her Irish identity that gives her the right to sing such songs. As she says in *Rememberings*: 'I'm Irish. We're different. We don't give a shit who you are. We've been colonised by the very worst of the spiritual worst and we survived intact.'

The rest of *Theology* is scripture based. Although there is no hint of reggae the Rastafarian influence is still present. God is referred to as Jah and all the scriptures used are from the Old Testament - from Jeremiah ('Something beautiful', which starts as a song in her own voice but turns into an anthology of God's complaints against Israel taken from different parts of Jeremiah), the Psalms ('Out of the depths', '33', 'The Glory of Jah', 'Whomsoever dwells' and 'Rivers of Babylon'), Song of Solomon ('Dark I am yet lovely'), Job ('Watcher of men') and Isaiah ('If you had a vineyard'). If she never did anything else, her life on earth would have been justified by her version of 'If you had a vineyard':

Jerusalem and Judah
U be the judges I pray
Between me and my vineyard.
This is what God says
What more could I have done in it
That I did not do in it?
Why when I ask it for sweetness
It brings only bitterness

For the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts
Is the house of Israel
And the men of Judah
His pleasant planting
And he looks for justice but beholds oppression
And he hopes for equality but hears a cry

'Out of the depths' contains, interspersed into words from Psalm 130, what almost amounts to a personal creed as well as a statement of intent:

And I've heard religion say you're to be feared
But I don't buy into everything I hear
And it seems to me you're hostage to those rules
That were made by religion and not by U

And I'm wondering will U ever get yourself free
Is it bad to think U might like help from me?
Is there anything my little heart can do
To help religion share us with U?

For oh you're like a ghost in your own home
Nobody hears U crying all alone
Oh U are the one true really voiceless one
They have their backs turned to you for worship of Gold and stone

And to see U prisoner oh makes me weep
Nobody hears U screaming in the streets
And it's sad but true how the old saying goes
If God lived on earth people would break his windows

I long for U as watchmen long for the end of night

The statement 'U are the one true really voiceless one' evokes a passage in *Rememberings* in which she is reflecting on the loss of her father as a child when her parents separated and custody was given (as it always would have been at the time to the woman) to her mother:

'I don't go looking for any father because I have God. And God sends me stuff because I talk to Him. Naturally He's the number-one father. But I'm a kid. I need a father's voice, and poor God don't have a voice. I like voices for some reason. I dunno why.'

KEEPING A DIARY

In *Rememberings* she says:

'Please be aware that every album represents a diary and each song is a chapter in that diary. And my collection of albums represents my healing journey. When I was younger, I wrote from a place of pain, because I needed to get things off my chest. Once I came to the *Theology* album, which is all Scripture, I worked from a place of healing. And the first album I wrote totally from that platform is *I'm Not Bossy, I'm the Boss*. And it is from that platform I continue to write. After all, there is no point setting out on a healing journey if you're not going to find yourself healed.'

So I think there is a logic in stopping here. She did as it happens have to go through a whole new bout of pain when, in 2015, she had a hysterectomy: 'I'd had to have the surgery because I had chronic endometriosis. I didn't actually need my ovaries taken out too. The doctor just decided he "might as well" whip them out.' The result was a 'total breakdown', a period of a couple of years when she disappeared from public view and was obsessed with suicidal thoughts. She says that this explains the imbalance in *Rememberings*. She had already, prior to 2015, written about the events leading up to *Saturday Night Live* - her childhood, the relationship with her parents, her discovery of the Rastafari. After 2015 her memory was shot to pieces, hence the more perfunctory account of events from 1992 to 2015.

It was in 2018 that she converted - she would say 'reverted' - to Islam. I do not think for a moment that this can be 'explained' by the consequences of her hysterectomy but they do provide the context in which it occurred. As she says towards the end of *Rememberings* 'trouble is only God in disguise.'

For what it's worth I think I can see two things that might have drawn her to Islam. The first is the theological simplicity of it. Sunni Islam at its most basic posits a very simple two way relationship between God and Man (which in this context should be recognised as a non-gender specific term, better than 'humanity' or 'the individual person' because it refers to the universal humanity of the individual). And that is the theme of all her religiously orientated songs. The second thing that might have attracted her is the hijab. In a television interview which can be seen on Youtube she says she isn't a very devout Muslim, she doesn't say her five daily prayers, but she does always wear the hijab. Describing her time in hospital following her breakdown she talks about an old Vietnam veteran who is 'utterly bewildered but still waits every day for me because he never saw a heterosexual woman with no hair before. He

doesn't realise I'm actually asexual.' The hijab would be a better protection than a shaven head against the sexual tension which obviously surrounded her all her life.

So I don't think the 'reversion' to Islam, or even the hysterectomy, alters the fact that she'd reached her 'place of healing' with *Theology*.

I've written this article because I consider Sinéad O'Connor's career to be an important event in Irish religious history. It is the story of a woman with a strong religious sensibility living through the period when the credibility of the Irish church collapsed. It's important to stress that the incident of tearing up the photograph of John Paul II occurred before it became easy (all too easy) to attack the church or to call out clerical child abuse. She was right at the beginning of that particular process and at the time the general assumption was that she had wrecked her career. What is remarkable about her (apart from the wonderful voice and stage presence) is the extent to which her career has been pushed by deeply felt necessity rather than calculation. She isn't, thank God, a clever person (unlike, for example, Bob Geldorf or Bono). And she obviously loved the church as much as she hated it - you only have to hear her singing 'Regina Caeli' (on the compilation album *She who dwells in the shelter of the most high*) or, on a radio programme available on Youtube, 'Veni Emmanuel' to be sure of that. Similarly with her mother and similarly with Ireland (she rarely has a kind word to say about Ireland but she couldn't have recorded *Sean-Nós Nua* if she didn't love it).

In this conflict with the church I'm not declaring her to be right and the church to be wrong. I'm not taking sides. But I would suggest that if religion is to survive in Ireland - and so far as I'm concerned that means if a worthwhile Irish culture is to survive in Ireland - some sort of accommodation between the two sides will have to be found.