III EXPLORATIONS IN IRISH CATHOLICISM
11 ‘Our Lady’ versus the Bishops: 
Visions and Pilgrimages in 
Contemporary Irish Catholicism

SINCE I first began anthropological research in 1958 I have had as my primary focus of interest the understanding of the religious dimension of social life, especially the various complex ways in which religion inter-relates with other dimensions, such as the politico-economic, the familial, gender relations, etc. No doubt much of the stimulus for the development of such an interest derives from the fact that I was, for the first 24 years of my life, raised as a middle-class Protestant in the almost wholly working-class and Catholic population of the Republic of Ireland.

Perhaps not surprisingly, when I subsequently turned myself into an anthropologist in Australia some ten years later I began my research career by studying male cults and secret initiations in Melanesia, and followed this up in the 1960s and 1970s by focussing on Buddhist life-cycle rituals amongst the Newars in Kathmandu valley. But throughout I nurtured an ambition to one day attempt to apply anthropological methods and theory to the study of religion in my home community in Ireland.

1 The research on which both this and the succeeding chapter is based was mostly carried out in Ireland for six months in 1988/9, seven months in 1990/1, six months in 1992/3 and six weeks in 1996. I am grateful to the Australian Research Grants Committee for having financed the fieldwork. I would especially like to thank Mary O’Sullivan for the quite exceptional assistance and understanding she has provided throughout.
My decision to focus on religion, though in part flowing fairly obviously from my long-standing interest in that topic, was also much influenced by the fact that despite its undoubted centrality in Irish culture and life, it nevertheless figured in only a marginal and incidental way in most of the extant anthropological literature, especially that based on research carried out in the Republic. The greater part of that research has, in fact, been carried out in a conventional anthropological way by focussing on prolonged and detailed fieldwork in small, mostly rural communities and, though aspects of religion at times figure in such accounts, they have mostly been incidental to a primary focus on secular aspects of community social life. Furthermore, though I felt that much could indeed be learned about religion in Ireland by carrying out an in-depth community-based study I was also convinced that it was equally if not more important to firmly locate my study in a broader context of enquiry that necessitated both detailed historical and state-wide investigations into structures, processes, activities, values and both formal and informal institutions.

Let me begin by summarizing the kind of theoretical understanding of religious phenomena that I have developed in the course of my earlier enquiries in Vanuatu and Nepal. It is to the effect that at the heart of all religious activity is the belief of committed practitioners that such activity has the capacity to bring about desired transformations, whether of persons, social relations, natural phenomena or even supernatural phenomena. Furthermore the relevant transformative power is commonly believed to be of a kind that is accessible only through the performance of a prescribed ritual activity, whether it be by prayer, fasting, penance, pilgrimage, sacrifice, meditation or whatever.

If such a view of religion has any validity it necessarily follows that an essential ingredient in arriving at any worthwhile understanding of a particular religious practice or set of practices is first to determine the nature of the transformative powers subscribed to, and then to determine the consequences of such power beliefs for the actual exercise of coercive power. Such an approach is, of

2 Some seven years after I began my research Lawrence Taylor (1995) did much to remedy this surprising gap in the literature by publishing his important monograph, Occasions of Faith: An Anthropology of Irish Catholicism.
course, widely recognized in anthropological literature, though more often than not analysis has been confined to making the fairly obvious point that claims to the acquisition of religious power or potency provide legitimation for the successful exercise of power in the political arena. There is, however, another and in many ways more interesting connection between claimed religious potency and the structure of secular power relations—and it is this other form that most especially interests me in my recent researches in Ireland. What I have in mind is the way in which claimed religious power is used not so much to legitimate established political hegemony, but rather is claimed as a form of empowerment by those who are otherwise marginalized in the secular social arena. One of the principal points I want to argue in these two chapters focusing on Irish Catholicism is that a seeking for such empowerment has been a major factor in a recent upsurge in Marian visionary cults in many rural areas of the republic—and indeed in a few cases in the north also.

Pilgrimage

Prior to my leaving Australia in July 1988 to begin an initial six month period of research I already knew from a variety of sources that despite some recent weakening of certain aspects of belief and practice—most notably as regards the laity's readiness to accept the authority of priests and bishops, especially in areas of sexual and family morality, a seeming decline in attendance at mass and even more so confession, and the growing influence of alternate and predominantly secular values—other forms of religious behaviour, in particular participation in various forms of pilgrimage, were increasing rather than decreasing in popularity. As an initial working hypothesis it seemed plausible to investigate the possibility that these two phenomena were in some way related to one another.

Accordingly, on my first arrival in Ireland I established myself in Westport in County Mayo and plunged into a busy round of the older and church-supported traditional pilgrimages—most notably Knock in Mayo, Lough Derg in Donegal and its fearful three days of penitential suffering, the watery peregrinations of Our Lady's island in Wexford, and the annual climb of Croagh Patrick, again in Mayo. Though these initial activities constituted a powerful personal initial
immersion in an important aspect of popular contemporary Catholic religious practice, and as such will undoubtedly figure prominently in my future publications, they were soon superseded in importance in my enquiries by the discovery that many of the pilgrims were also enthusiastic participants in new and very different forms of pilgrimage and devotion—forms that were precipitated in every case by visionaries, mostly though not exclusively laity, who claimed that they had seen apparitions of divine persons, usually though again not exclusively Our Lady, in grottoes and other sacred locations scattered throughout the countryside. It is this intriguing phenomenon that I now want to discuss. I will first give a brief historical outline of the development of the cults, then describe their principal features, and conclude with some interpretative suggestions.

**Historical background to the Marian tradition**

In order to understand some of the forces that have led to the immense contemporary importance attached to the worship of the Virgin Mary in contemporary Irish Catholicism it is necessary first to unravel something of the history of the cult in Catholicism generally. Though the Virgin Mary, as the mother of Christ has always been a figure of considerable importance in the historical development of Christianity, it was not until the Church emerged as the dominant power in the newly emergent and feudal social order of Europe in the eleventh and twelfth centuries that her worship began to assume critical and central importance. It did so precisely because the dominance of the church in an hierarchically structured social order ensured that ever-increasing importance was accorded to specifically religious criteria of relative human worth. Just as in a similarly structured social order in India castes are formally ranked by reference to the purely religious criteria of purity and pollution, so too in early medieval Europe were the various social strata ranked primarily by reference to their relative proximity to polarized Christian notions of good and evil. Just as God represented perfect good, so too did Satan assume an increasingly prominent position in

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3 I have found the following works especially useful in constructing my summary account of the complex history of Marian devotion in Catholicism generally: Ashe 1967; Carroll 1986; Hamington 1995; and Warner 1976.
the medieval moral order as the perfect embodiment of evil. An important consequence of the establishment of such an hierarchical social order was the extension of the dualistic frame into virtually every arena of moral evaluation, including the Church’s view of women. As Eileen Power succinctly put it:

In both the ecclesiastic and aristocratic traffic of ideas the position of women was perpetually shunted between pit and throne. In its view of women, the Church ... never knew which face to turn on her. Who was the true paradigm of the feminine gender, the woman *par excellence*: Eve, wife of Adam, or Mary, Mother of Christ. ... The view of woman as the instrument of the Devil, a thing at once inferior and evil, took shape in the earliest period of Church history and was indeed originated by the church. ... As ascetic ideals rose and flourished, and monasticism became the refuge of many of the finest men, in the turmoil of the Dark Ages, there came inevitably into being the concept of woman as supreme temptress, *janua diaboli*, the greatest of all obstacles in the way of salvation. ... On the other hand, both the church and the aristocracy asserted, with no apparent sense of inconsistency, the counter doctrine of the superiority of women. The cult of the Virgin ... spread with great rapidity and soon pervaded every manifestation of popular creed. It was already supreme by the eleventh century and remained supreme until the end of the Middle Ages. (Power 1975:14-19)

The dualistic moral evaluation of medieval women was, for the women themselves, bad news either way. On the one hand, those women who sought to conform to the positive female stereotype of chastity, purity, virginity, obedience, etc., could only do so by subjugating or overcoming their darker or more destructive potentialities, which generally meant conforming to a variety of either self or, more commonly, male-imposed, behavioural restrictions, especially regarding sexual behaviour. In extreme cases such women were put on lofty pedestals and literally worshipped as manifestations of the Blessed Virgin—others simply modelled themselves on Mary by entering into convents that necessitated a total surrender of individual autonomy. On the other hand, those women who, for whatever reason, failed to conform were liable to be viewed as either confirmed or potential disciples of Satan, which in turn meant that they were likely to be suspected of various forms of evil doing, most notably witchcraft. As Condren noted:
Given the conflicting ideals of virginity and motherhood, and given the dualism of Christian theology, women took on a double identity that would find expression throughout the literature and artwork of Europe. Women were symbols of Eve, the primordial Temptress, calling men down from their lofty heights. Alternatively, they were symbols of Mary, the only woman who had achieved the impossible ideal of being both a virgin and a mother.

... The Virgin Mary was an impossible ideal for ordinary women. Her virginity made their sexuality highly problematic, casting them in the role of Temptress to men: symbols of Eve. But whereas Eve would appear in the person of the witches, to be burned, tortured and drowned, the part of Mary would be played by generations of holy anorectics, who, far from being tortured, were actually canonized. (Condren 1989:165-6)

By the mid-fourteenth century, when large numbers of women were beginning to threaten the patriarchal social order in a variety of different contexts, most notably by their prominent participation in newly established town markets and fairs, by becoming prostitutes in cities to meet a huge increase in demand both from the crusades and expanding trade (Boissonade 1937:308), by becoming workers in new industrial enterprises (Nelson 1979:343 and Power 1975:59-60), and perhaps most importantly of all through their dominance in the burgeoning world of healing and midwifery, the scene was clearly set for a massive male backlash in the form of witchcraft accusations hurled at this vast army of seemingly stroppy women. And that is, of course, exactly what occurred. Once the dualistic moral view of the universe had become firmly established in medieval Europe, all forms of religious heterodoxy were henceforth categorized as dangerous heresies inspired by the devil and hence not to be tolerated. It was precisely for this reason that from about the eleventh century onwards the church began to increasingly doubt its earlier view of witchcraft as nothing more than an illusion, and instead to seriously consider the possibility that witches were indeed real persons who had been recruited by Satan to undermine Christian morality and authority. Once this view had gained the upper hand within the church the foundations were laid for all of the horrors of the medieval witch crazes that swept most of Europe from
the mid-fourteenth to the late-seventeenth centuries. The estimates of the number of women killed in this terrible three-hundred year long holocaust vary from half a million to as many as nine million. As in the twentieth century Irish conjunction of male-dominated Church and State institutions in the imposition of a highly restrictive moral code that bore down most heavily on women, so too in medieval Europe it was the combined power of church and state that enabled men to exercise such a terrible vengeance on those women whom they felt constituted a threat to their hegemony. In the early phases of the craze it was predominantly women from the lower classes who were most persecuted, though in the final stages accusations were frequently made against both nuns and women of rank. Many of the lower-class women were traditional healers, whilst others earned a precarious livelihood in the brothels, markets, work-shops, etc., of the towns and cities that were then rapidly expanding and multiplying in many areas of continental Europe.

I have focused on the growing importance of the negative Eve/temptress/witch female stereotype in continental Europe during the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries in order to be able to locate the parallel growth in the popularity of the positive Virgin Mary ideal during this same period—for whilst Eve has remained relatively unimportant in Ireland until very recent times, the Virgin Mary has had massive impact. By stating that Eve has remained relatively unimportant I refer in particular to the striking absence of any significant witch hunting in Ireland during those centuries when the crazes raged through continental Europe and including, though in modified form, even England. My understanding of why this was so follows from the proposition that the European frenzy was a direct consequence of a whole series of social transformations that occurred there in full force but which by comparison were of only marginal importance in Ireland. The changes that were occurring in Europe may be summarized as the transformation of the old feudal and hierarchically structured social order into a series of autonomous and class-structured nation states organized around industrial development, colonization and competitive struggle. An

4 For the European witch-crazes see especially Baroja 1961, Bovenschen 1978; Harris 1974; Mandrou 1969; Maecikelberghe 1994; Nelson 1979; Reissner 1974; Sprenger and Kramer 1928; and Trevor-Roper 1969.
integral feature of such changes was a growing politicization of gender relations with women in turn increasingly penalized as the scapegoats deemed responsible for the felt threat to social order and social harmony. In Ireland women were but rarely felt to constitute a significant threat to patriarchy, at least not until a combination of feminism and 'immorality' emerged during the second half of the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, despite Ireland's marginality in relation to the major transformations that were taking place in late-medieval Europe, it was still part of that world and as such did not entirely escape unchanged. Though Irish women in large measure were spared the horrors of the witch crazes, they nevertheless felt the full brunt of the cult of the Virgin Mary from at least the eleventh century onwards. For not only was this century the beginning of the popularity of the Virgin Mary cult throughout Europe, it was also when Celtic Ireland began to seriously disintegrate as a direct consequence of the Norman invasions.

Prior to the eleventh century Mary was worshipped in Irish Christianity primarily as the mother of God, and only secondarily as a virgin woman. Indeed, for many centuries after the introduction of Christianity in Ireland Mary, as the mother of Christ, was in direct competition with Brigid, one of the three patron saints of Ireland who, whilst in part identified with a famous historical nun of the fifth century, was also identified very strongly with a triple goddess of the ancient Celtic religion known as Macha. Though Brigid as patron saint of Ireland was venerated for her virginity, such a condition primarily connoted her autonomous status as a single woman and only secondarily her purity and chastity. Indeed, even in the case of Mary it was not until after the Norman invasion that it was she, rather than Brigid, who was unquestionably recognized as the 'mother of Christ'. In previous centuries Brigid too was frequently referred as 'Mother of Christ' or even sometimes as 'One of the Mothers of Christ' as also 'Queen of the True God' or 'Mary of the Gael' (Condren 1989:160).

But from the eleventh century onwards the...

... image of the Virgin Mary would serve to give support to a new religious consciousness where the freedom and autonomy of someone
like Brigid, the last representative of 'she who created without spouse' would give way to Mary, the mother of God or 'the Virgin who conceived without sin.' (Condren 1989:160)

In other words, prior to the eleventh century Mary pointed back to Brigid, the autonomous woman who founded a famous nunnery, who in turned was linked with the pre-Christian fertility mother-goddess Macha. Furthermore, prior to the eleventh century no churches or monasteries were dedicated to the Virgin Mary in Ireland. But from then on the numbers rapidly increased, 'primarily under the influence of the new religious orders, especially the Augustinians' (Condren 1989:160). Indeed, one can detect a clear correlation between the rise in the popularity of both monasteries and nunneries, that is to say, of ascetic and renunciatory religious orders, and a corresponding increase in the worship of the Blessed Virgin.

By the middle of the twelfth century the popularity of the Virgin Mary was such that, 'the Irish religious poets ... were anxious to assert her equality with Jesus by emphasizing her own Immaculate Conception' (1989:162-3). Nevertheless, though the early Church Fathers certainly promoted the worship of Mary, they rejected a proposition which they saw as directly threatening the pre-eminence of both God the Father and God the Son. It was not, indeed, until some 600 years later, in 1854 to be precise, that the Church finally proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. The proclamation of the Dogma was, however, but one of many manifestations of the immense upsurge in the popularity of her worship that began in the immediately preceding decades and has continued ever since. It was especially during this period that Our Lady, as she is so often affectionately referred to in such contexts, appeared to devotees, usually children and most often girls, and gave them messages urging them to pray, believe, repent, confess, fast, etc., or some disaster may shortly occur to humanity.

In seeking for some explanation as to why the Blessed Virgin should assume such importance throughout much of Catholic Europe in the nineteenth century a number of points are worth making. To begin with, part of the answer must surely be found in the widespread, possibly universal importance accorded to power-imbued mother-symbols as the locus not just of a divine power in
general or abstract terms, but of a divine power that is deemed especially relevant in worldly affairs. The Virgin Mary has been consistently represented as interceding for suffering, doomed or threatened humanity, calming the just wrath of her son and hopefully staying his hand from bringing down awesome punishment.

But it is not sufficient to simply point to historical circumstances, such as war, conquest, famine, the decline of religion or the rise of such secular world views as rationalism, capitalism or communism, all of which were certainly major features of nineteenth-century European social history, and all of which might seem to warrant the intercession of Our Lady in the hope of forestalling God’s wrath or the triumph of the Devil. What is also a highly relevant consideration is the extent to which the cultural construction of motherhood is such as to yet further accentuate the likelihood that mothers are cast in the role of influential intercessors between their powerless children and powerful patriarchal males, especially the children’s own fathers. This was indeed the case for most of Europe since the Reformation, and even more clearly so since the spread of both industrialism and capitalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries led to increased emphasis not only on the nuclear family, but also on the role of men as fathers and husbands as typically remote, authoritarian and potentially punitive, and on the role of mothers and wives as typically compassionate fellow sufferers who nevertheless have the impressive power of being able to intercede with the father/husband to either call forth or stay his wrath. In other words, the cult of the Virgin Mary seemingly flourishes at precisely those historic moments when women as wives and mothers, though rendered economically subservient to men as fathers and husbands within socially isolated nuclear families, are nevertheless in substantial control of the family’s emotional and moral economy.

Though the foundations of some of the major transformations that culminated in the emergence of the new nuclear family pattern were clearly laid in post-famine late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Ireland, and in doing so underpinned the growing importance of the Cult of the Virgin Mary in that period, it was not, however, until as late as the 1980s that the conflict in values between the old form of ‘familism’ and these new values associated
with the emergent nuclear family reached such dimensions that they provided the emotional and imaginative fuel for the remarkable outbreak of Marian worship that began in 1985, and is still very much alive today.

**Moving statues**

The key symbolic feature of the cults, the idea that divine persons can appear to living mortals, is both very old and widely attested in many parts of the world. In Christianity it dates back to the first vision of angels at the tomb of Christ, though it was not until the early middle ages with the rise in popularity of the cult of the Virgin Mary that it assumed a form that has direct historical bearing on the cults that concern us here. There are numerous legends from this early medieval period recounting how statues of the Virgin Mary periodically wept, shed blood, moved head and arms and in so doing were interpreted as signs that the Virgin herself was prepared to assist sufferers and sinners. It was not, however, until just before the Protestant reformation that we have clear historical evidence of a full-scale cult outbreak of moving statues. In 1524, the year in which Italy was over-run by French forces and Rome itself was threatened by floods, famine and plague, thousands of people in Brescia in north Italy were reported as having seen

... a statue of Our Lady open and close its eyes, join and separate its hands with an expression of gravity and sympathy. ... a like occurrence took place at Venice in 1716, after the Turks had declared war on that city. A certain man claimed that the Blessed Virgin had appeared to him and stated that if sufficient prayers were offered for the souls in Purgatory victory would be gained over the infidels. A great crowd of people gathered at a church where a statue of Our Lady stood and saw it open and close its eyelids in approval of what the man had said.

All of this was as nothing, however, compared to the events which occurred when the Papal States were under threat from the French revolutionary armies in 1796-97. All over Rome, and spreading to other parts of the country, statues of the Blessed Virgin were seen by people to again open and close their eyes, give alternate glances of sadness and consolation, and to shed tears. A papal commission was set up, over nine hundred witnesses were examined, and the resultant report was in favour [of the possibility that Divine intervention had occurred]. (Ó hÓgáin 1985:71)
However, these early continental statue-focused apparitions, though great sensations at the time that they occurred, quickly lost their momentum and failed to result in the establishment of enduring centres of worship and pilgrimage. For this to occur it seems that more was required of the religious imagination than the simple interpretation of physical movement in a statue as a sign of divine intervention. A brief examination of the circumstances that led to the establishment of the great contemporary international centres of Marian worship and pilgrimage indicates that, as in Ireland today, the initially simple visual apparitions proved to be but the starting point for the creation of what ultimately became complex imaginative constructions of both a visual and a verbal kind. Furthermore in each instance the cults have occurred in Catholic communities at historic periods when, though for a variety of different reasons, a significant number of individuals have felt their faith in need of convincing reassurance both of god’s existence and his continuing concern for the welfare of humanity.

In the case of Europe, most recorded instances of apparitions of Our Lady occurred since the beginning of the Reformation and by far the most dramatic of these, especially those that have resulted in the establishment of still popular pilgrimage sites, had their origins in the nineteenth century in localities where Catholics felt the most basic tenets of their faith under increasing attack, whether through Protestant proselytization, the increasing influence of secular ideas and values, political persecution, the threat of either Communism or Fascism, or natural disasters, famines, plagues or earthquakes.

Foremost amongst such European Marian apparition sites are the following: La Salette in the French Alps in 1846, the remote grotto of Lourdes in the Pyrénées in 1858, the poverty-struck village of Knock in the west of Ireland in 1879, Fatima in Portugal in 1917, the two small Belgian villages of Beauraing and Banneux in 1932 and 1933, Syracuse in Sicily in 1953, Garabandal in the north-eastern mountains of Spain in 1961, and most recently of all, Medjugorje in Bosnia-Hercegovina beginning in 1980 and still continuing today.

Let me turn now to events in Ireland. To begin with, though the worship of Mary has for long been at least as popular here as elsewhere in Catholic Europe, there is no evidence of which I am
aware of any significant cults based on visions and apocalyptic pronouncements prior to the nineteenth century. Indeed, the more I immerse myself in Irish religious history the more evident it has become to me that it was not until the early decades of that century that the foundations were laid for the extreme dominance of the Catholic church in almost every dimension of Irish social life that so characterized the late nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries. Furthermore, it was not until well into the nineteenth century that the great majority of Catholic churches were built in rural parishes and statues, including those of Our Lady, were very much a rarity until well after the potato famine. Nor were the great majority of Lourdes type grottoes constructed until as late as 1954, a year dedicated by the Pope to Marian worship.

It is therefore not altogether surprising that the idea of moving statues remained dormant in the Irish religious imagination for so long. This is not, however, to suggest that Irish Catholics were either unaware of or uninfluenced by the major sequence of apparitions that occurred in many areas of continental Europe from about 1800 onwards. On the contrary, Irish pilgrims have been visiting many such centres, most notably Lourdes and Fatima, in large numbers for at least fifty years, whilst those who have visited Garabandal in Spain and even more so Medjugorje in Bosnia, have been so numerous that it would be difficult today to find a single village that could not boast of a considerable number of such pilgrims. Medjugorje in particular, which has reputedly drawn some 20 million pilgrims worldwide since visions began there in 1981, has had an enormous impact on the subsequent development of the contemporary Irish cults. The fact that the Irish cults first began in 1985, some four years after the apparitions began in Medjugorje, is alone enough to suggest a strong connection.

It is however one thing to note such influence and quite another to assert that it was the principal stimulus that led to the development of the Irish cults. On the contrary, I am convinced that the cults were first and foremost a response to some fundamental changes that

were taking place in Irish social life. If the miraculous events of Medjugorje in 1981 were relevant, the intensity of public debate that occurred in Ireland throughout the 1970s and 1980s which focussed on issues of changing sexual morality, most notably on contraception, abortion and divorce, but including also homosexuality, child abuse and clerical celibacy, were even more relevant. But before attempting to delineate the nature of such changes I must first describe some of the key features of the cults themselves.

**The Irish visionary cults**

Shortly after I had first settled into Westport in mid-1988 my attention was suddenly and quite dramatically shifted from my initial immersion in orthodox pilgrimages by news of an event due to take place in a few days time in far away Co. Wexford, and only a few miles from Our Lady's Island—an event that subsequently added an entirely new dimension to my focus on pilgrimage. What I heard, in the form of a brief radio report, was that a big crowd was expected to gather on the evening of Sunday 4 September in a country Priory called Grantstown in the hope that they would witness two young women have a vision of the Blessed Virgin and receive a message from her for the people of Ireland. According to the report these two, Sallyanne and Judy Considine, who were sisters and aged 22 and 24 respectively, had been having visions and receiving messages both in their local church in a working-class suburb of Cork city, and at a number of Marian grottoes in different parts of Ireland, at a rate of approximately two or three a month for the past 18 months. Then, early in August they had been contacted by the Augustinian Prior of Grantstown who requested that they come to pray at a newly constructed Marian shrine that he had recently opened in the Priory grounds. They agreed and on 21 August, in front of a crowd of thousands of devotees who had come from far and wide, they again had a vision of Our Lady whilst kneeling and praying in front of the grotto, and received yet another message, which they subsequently shared with the crowd.

When I heard this report I immediately decided that despite the fact that Wexford was a good eight hours driving distance from Westport, this was an event that should not be missed. When I
reached the Priory, which was located in a very isolated spot in the countryside surrounded by fields and over five miles from the nearest village, I joined a crowd of over 3,000 and which was still growing rapidly with cars approaching from every direction. A few minutes before 7.00 p.m. the two visionaries, accompanied by three male escorts, arrived by car from Cork, which was itself about three hours drive away, and they promptly joined the crowd in prayer immediately in front of the flower decorated shrine. After about ten minutes of Hail Mary’s and the Lord’s Prayer, the two girls, whilst still kneeling, suddenly leant backwards whilst gazing with wide-open eyes at the shrubbery immediately behind the statue of Our Lady. They held this difficult pose without blinking whilst alternately smiling, moving their lips in seemingly silent conversation, and holding their rosaries in their hands in an attitude of prayer. They kept this up for about ten minutes and then abruptly swung forward again to a position of normal prayer. They remained for about a further ten minutes like this whilst both they and the crowd continued with prayers. They then got to their feet and accompanied by their escorts joined the elderly Prior in his nearby office. After about five minutes they re-emerged and whilst standing on a bench in front of the shrine read out the message which they claimed they had received from Our Lady. It was as follows:

Dearest children, I want to thank you all for joining with me in prayer. Over these times I have been appearing to show you the way of the Father and bequeath to you all a devotion to my son who is always present in the Church in the Eucharist. I beseech you all to open your hearts to the Lord.

For the next half-hour or so the girls answered questions put by members of the congregation, questions such as—‘what did Our Lady look like?’, ‘why did she choose you two girls to appear to?’, ‘why is she appearing at all?’, ‘do you get private messages?’, ‘what do the messages mean?’, ‘why doesn’t Our Lady give us a sign so that we can believe that she is truly here with us?’—and so on. No sooner had the request for a sign been made than the sun obligingly and dramatically burst forth from behind a dark cloud and shone brightly through a clump of trees with strong and dancing rays illuminating both the visionaries and the statue of Our Lady. Not
altogether surprisingly this event got the crowd very excited and for the next five minutes or so all eyes were focused on the sun. At this point a woman, who had been organizing the question/answer session with the aid of a microphone, addressed the crowd in an agitated manner:

Now, dear people of Grantstown you have got your answer. You can see the sun pulsating, dancing, come out of black cloud. Just accept what the girls are telling you from now on ... oh, my god, it's dancing again. Now, today, this is the sign, we got it through the sun, as happens at all places of apparition and for me this has confirmed Grantstown—this dancing of the sun, today, now.

Clearly, an event like this should be enough to stir the imagination of even the most prosaic of anthropologists, and perhaps not surprisingly I devoted a substantial portion of the five months remaining to me in Ireland in trying to collect as much data as I could on the complex circumstances surrounding the development of this cult. What I found exceptionally fortuitous was that by the merest chance I had stumbled on a cult which though it had been developing for some 18 months prior to my discovering it, was at that precise moment suddenly taking off as a national event with rapidly growing congregations and increased TV, radio and press coverage. It therefore offered the possibility of supplementing my attempts, as previously indicated, to unravel some of the historical circumstances that led to the current popularity of the established church-controlled pilgrimages, with detailed ethnographic data on the contemporary circumstances surrounding the emergence of a new form of pilgrimage that stands substantially outside the church, and indeed as we shall subsequently see, is the cause of considerable anxiety on the part of senior ecclesiastics.

What made the Grantstown event of particular interest is that far from being a somewhat idiosyncratic and isolated occurrence, it was simply the latest example of numerous similar cults that have seemingly gripped the minds and imagination of the greater part of the Catholic population of Ireland in recent years. Indeed, during the spring, summer and autumn of 1985 it would be no exaggeration to say that the whole of the Republic became possessed by a veritable visionary mania with literally hundreds of thousands of people
visiting Marian shrines throughout the country, with many claiming that they saw statues of the Blessed Virgin move or become transformed in some way, whilst others reported lights in the sky, a dancing sun or, very occasionally, visions of a biblical kind. Some of the more famous shrines, most especially Ballinspittle, a tiny village situated some 25 miles south-west of Cork city, became nationally, indeed even internationally, famous, with extensive TV and other coverage of exceptionally ‘big’ days, such as the Feast of the Assumption on 15th August when approximately 20,000 pilgrims visited the shrine. By the end of September almost half-a-million people had visited this tiny grotto, many coming on charter buses from Dublin, Belfast, Galway and other remote cities.

Though I had heard vague reports of these amazing events from far away Sydney, by the time I set forth to begin fieldwork in July 1988 I had assumed that the whole phenomenon had become a thing of the past—indeed, on my arrival in Dublin I had been assured by friends and acquaintances that though there may well be surviving small pockets of devotees and believers, public interest had dropped to near zero. What I was assured was that the various strong criticisms mounted both by the clergy, especially by a number of leading bishops, and by lay experts, had so effectively undermined the credibility of the self-proclaimed visionaries that all such activity had effectively ceased.

Quite clearly, the Grantstown event was alone sufficient to query the view that either orthodox theology or secular rationality had effectively won the day in Ireland. Indeed, by the end of my first period of fieldwork I had abundant evidence not only of substantial and growing public interest in the Considine sisters’ claimed visions and messages but that a number of other, and in some ways even more important, visionary cults had developed at grottoes that in 1985/6 had been the scene of moving statues.

It therefore began to look as though what was occurring was, amongst other things, a gradual unfolding of what can, I think with some accuracy, be described as an important component of contemporary Irish religious imagination. Beginning in 1985, though truly spectacular in the huge numbers who seemingly shared in their imaginative capacity, the imaginary itself was of a relatively simple and predominantly visual kind. Indeed, for most of those
who visited the remote country grottoes in those heady 1985/6 days, the imaginary consisted solely of a slight swaying of brightly illuminated statues of Our Lady at dusk or at night-time. Though the devout, or perhaps more accurately, those who sought to be devout in the midst of growing uncertainty, built upon this simple visual image the further and much more imaginative proposition that Our Lady was trying to communicate something of import either to themselves as individuals, the Irish people at large, or perhaps even to all humanity, many others remained puzzled as to the meaning of what they saw or sought for some secular everyday explanation.

Nor were many of the latter to be disappointed. Within weeks of the beginning of the astonishing Ballinspittle phenomenon, a team of psychologists and cognitive scientists from University College Cork released a press statement, followed up a few months later by a small book, in which they asserted that there was a perfectly good scientific explanation for the phenomenon. In brief, they contended that they had incontrovertible evidence that it was in fact very difficult for anyone looking at brightly illuminated objects against a dark background at night time for periods of say ten minutes or more not to see the objects moving backwards and forwards (Ryan and Kirakowski 1985).

No doubt this explanation satisfied a fair number of those who thought that they had indubitably seen the statue move, yet were reluctant to accept the widely preferred alternative explanation that it was a miraculous event due to Our Lady’s sense of urgency in attempting to communicate a message of import to the Irish people. Nor had the supporters of the religious explanation received significant encouragement from the church. Though a small number of priests, and even more so monks and nuns, undoubtedly shared in the belief that the statues were not only moving but that Our Lady was attempting to communicate with the people, they kept a very low profile and refrained from making any public pronouncement of support. By contrast, the great majority of clergy, in particular those who as priests had to contend with cult outbreaks in their own parishes, and even more so most locally relevant bishops, repeatedly warned pilgrims to be most cautious in believing that what they were witnessing were authentic cases of divine intervention. For example, the Bishop of Cork’s widely publicized advice to pilgrims
'Our Lady' versus the Bishops

was as follows:

Direct supernatural intervention is a very rare happening in life, so common sense would demand that we approach the claims made at Ballinspittle with prudent caution. Before any definite pronouncement could be made by the church, all natural explanations would have to be examined and exhausted over a lengthy period of time.

In instances of this kind one has to be extremely careful not to raise expectations unduly. I understand that crowds are gathering there in a great spirit of prayer. This is certainly a praise-worthy thing. It is in keeping with the devotion and respect that is expected at all shrines. (Ryan and Kirakowski 1985:82-3)

I stated earlier that what we are witnessing in the development of these cults may be usefully conceived of as a gradual unfolding of the religious imagination. To develop this theme further I should point out that though what initially led to the cults becoming a phenomenon of national significance and concern was the fact that huge numbers or believers and non-believers alike shared in the basic visual act of seeing the statues move, it was precisely because this vision was for many pilgrims devoid of imaginative elaboration, that the 'scientific' proof of the Cork academics was sufficient to turn them into scoffers and sceptics.

But right from the earliest phases of the phenomenon a considerable number of individuals built culturally meaningful superstructures upon this simple visual base. Indeed, even amongst those who saw no more than the minimal and visually explicable swaying movement, a considerable number chose to interpret such movement as a 'sign' that Our Lady was attempting to communicate with them. Others, whom one might describe as somewhat more imaginative, firmly believed that in addition to simple movement they saw a real, that is to say, ontological, transformation of a stone or plaster statue into a living person whom they mostly saw as the Blessed Virgin, though at times believing that the face became transformed into that of either Christ or the famous Italian stigmatic Padre Pio.

A particularly interesting feature of the first major phase of the cult, a phase that is, that began with the initial occurrence in the small west Kerry village of Asdee in February 1985 and concluded with Melleray grotto in Co. Waterford in mid-August, is that it took
this six-month period, a period during which numerous statues were reported to have been seen moving in just about every county of the Republic, before we get a report of a direct verbal message imparted by Our Lady to a visionary. That is to say, it took this long period, a period marked by intense media coverage, pronouncements by all and sundry as to the possible ‘meaning’ or ‘meanings’ to be attributed to these seemingly remarkable events, and by a great deal of speculative musings as to why Our Lady should be concerned to communicate with Irish people at all, before predominantly visual imagination was at first supplemented and eventually almost wholly replaced by verbal pronouncements. Clearly, once this verbal stage had been reached in the development of the visionaries’ imaginary formulations, new horizons opened up both in the search for meaning and in the defence against ecclesiastical and secular criticism.

I shall shortly return to comment further on the content of these messages. For the moment I wish simply to stress the progressive imaginative development from the initial visual perception of physical movement in a statue to, in the first instance, the statue’s transformation into or replacement by a vision of Our Lady, and then subsequently the increasing elaboration accorded to verbal messages said to emanate from the divine source. What I would now like to suggest is that what we are here witnessing is a complex dialectical process in which culturally significant ideas are periodically generated through a progressive series of imaginative elaborations. At each stage in the process the imaginative product may either meet with derision, disbelief or total indifference, and hence make at best but a marginal and fleeting contribution to the total cultural corpus, or, to go to the opposite extreme, it may succeed in taking a form that so grips the imagination of the great majority of the population that it attains the status of a truly collective representation. When that stage is reached we may say that what began as the imaginary significations of a few relatively marginal individuals in Irish social life, have now been transformed by a complex historical process into recognized components of institutionalized religion (Castoriades 1987:340-73).

As regards the moving-statue phenomenon—whilst the great majority of local grottoes attained no more than a short lived, albeit
dramatic, fame in 1985/6—those few that produced visionaries of sufficient imaginative capability to progress from mere movement to meaningful verbal messages, have become enduring centres of regular worship and pilgrimage. Apart from Inchigeela in west Cork, which still continues to draw a steady though modest flow of pilgrims, especially in the summer months, by far the most popular and enduring of the visionary cults are those that focus on the Considine girls of Grantstown, Christina Gallagher on Achill island, Co. Mayo, Melleray grotto in Co. Waterford, and two north of Ireland sites, Blackwaterstown and Bessborough, both in Co. Armagh.

Melleray grotto, which is located inland in a pretty location in the Knockmealdown mountains, is one of the most interesting of the still operative cults located in the Republic. On 16 August 1985, the same day that huge crowds had gathered at Ballinspittle for the Feast of the Assumption, a local girl, Ursula O’Rourke, then aged 17, had a vision of Our Lady whilst praying at the Melleray grotto. Over the next 24 hours numerous locals, both young and old and male and female, claimed to have seen the statue move. It was not, however, until the following day that Our Lady began to give a series of both visions and verbal messages to two young local boys, Tom Cliffe, then aged twelve, and his cousin Barry Buckley, aged eleven. But, unlike both the Cork and the Inchigeela girls, the boys’ messages were very brief and simple, whilst their visions were complex and elaborate. By far the most frequently repeated verbal message was for the ‘people to behave’, usually linked with a dire prediction of catastrophe should they fail to do so. For example, on 19 August she told the boys the following:

6 See Chapter 12 for a detailed discussion of some of the interesting events that took place at or in connection with Inchigeela.
7 The published sources that I have found useful, much of it consisting of locally produced hagiography, include the following: Brown, M. 1992; Deevy 1986; McGinnity and Gallagher 1996; O’Sullivan 1989; Petrisko 1995; Toibin 1985; Vincent 1992; Vose 1986; and Zimdars-Swartz 1989 and 1991. There are also numerous newspaper reports that have been published in The Cork Examiner, The Irish Times, The Independent, The Sunday Tribune and the magazine Ireland’s Eye.
God is angry with the world. The people will have to improve and pray. My message is for all the people of God’s church. The people have ten years to improve and pray and if not then this is what will happen. (Deevy 1986:21)

Whereupon the boys had a very complex biblical vision in which Noah’s ark and the grotto with all the people in it became fused together and culminated in everyone drowning in a raging torrent of water. In response to queries directed to Our Lady through the boys she is reported to have said that what the boys saw was a punishment for the people of Ireland for their wickedness.

Over the following few days she gave the boys numerous further short messages, of which the following are a selection:

I want the Irish people to spread my message to the world.
God is angry with the world.
The world must improve and the world must believe.
If the world does not improve the Devil will take over the world.
The people must go to Mass more and receive my son more often.
The world has ten years to improve, it must improve ten times.
I want the people to stop saying bad things about me, and not to be mocking me. (Deevy 1986:23-6)

I should point out that throughout the week of apparitions, visions and messages huge crowds, certainly in their thousands, were coming daily to the tiny grotto and, just as at Ballinspittle, a significant proportion were convinced that they not only saw the statue move, but that it was transformed into a truly tangible, living Blessed Virgin.

Since then, though there have been no recorded instances of either the boys or anyone else receiving a message at the Melleray grotto, many hundreds of pilgrims have informed the grotto committee of a variety of unusual experiences—most commonly seeing the statue move, but many others also claiming either a miraculous cure or having seen the sun spin, turn into a pale disc and descend from the sky to hover directly over the grotto.

The Melleray grotto has continued to draw substantial numbers of pilgrims. Local farmers and shopkeepers, including a number of the original visionaries, have formed a large and active committee of over 30 members which meets once a month with an average
attendance of 20. The grotto is beautifully maintained and throughout the year at least one committee member is in daily attendance to provide information for pilgrims, to hand out information and prayer leaflets, and to sell tapes, cassettes and a booklet describing the famous events of 1985. On each of the dozen or so occasions that I visited the grotto, most of them on gloomy winter mornings, I found at least a few and frequently a dozen or more devotees praying and gazing at the statue ever hopeful of seeing some movement. There were also more than a dozen fixed dates during 1988 on which all-night vigils were maintained in the grotto and for each of these some 6 to 12 bus loads of pilgrims, generally from remote north-of-Ireland cities, especially Belfast, Armagh and Londonderry, but sometimes also from Dublin or elsewhere in the Republic, visited the grotto.

From even a most superficial examination of Our Lady’s messages both at Melleray and at other visionary sites it is evident that she was first and foremost concerned about the extent to which Catholics in general and Irish Catholics in particular have insufficient belief in the fundamental tenets of Catholic faith and morality. Again and again she urged her devotees to pray, fast, undertake penances and above all to believe. She also repeatedly warned that without such commitment both to God and to herself, the world, in particular Ireland, is heading towards some sort of catastrophe, above all the catastrophe of falling into the hands of Satan. For many, the greatest threatened disaster was undoubtedly that of thermonuclear war, though for most Irish Catholics more localized manifestations of the increasing influence of the Devil are likely to be significant contributors to the rise in the popularity of apocalyptic thought. Recent years have seen a variety of influential attacks on both attitudes and values traditionally held as diacritical of Christian faith and belief, and this has inevitably caused a great deal of anxiety. To the forefront of such worries is the political crisis, repeatedly re-enacted in acts of symbolic parricide perpetrated both on British figures of authority and innocent citizens of both the United Kingdom and Ireland—and with every death there has been the anguish of hearing powerful moral voices, most notably those of leading clerics, declare that the once heroic Irish struggle against imperialism is now tainted and even sinful. Perhaps
the clearest evidence of the influence of the link between, on the one hand, the guilt of political assassinations and other forms of sectarian violence in northern Ireland, and on the other hand, the apocalyptic visions occurring on both sides of the border, is in the presence of very large numbers of north-of-Ireland Catholic pilgrims who travel long distances on overnight buses to seek reassurance of God’s love and concern in the peaceful grottoes located in various parts of the Republic.

The debates concerning the control of female sexuality

Ireland’s political troubles have, however, been around for quite a while and it is my firm opinion that the apparitions and messages of Our Lady are much more directly connected to another and more contemporary area of moral confusion and uncertainty. This concerns what can be best described as the growing assault on traditional mores of sexual conduct by those rapidly increasing numbers of Irish people influenced by alternative and predominantly secular values. If I might return again to Our Lady’s messages, her most frequently repeated injunction to her listeners was the necessity for the Irish people to behave, and by behave she undoubtedly meant a return to that strict code of sexual morality that had so dominated Irish social life from about the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. The three main topics of debate and conflict, those centring on contraception, abortion and divorce, though of concern to a variety of the more liberal and less orthodox segments of the Irish population, shared in common the key issue of who should control female sexuality and reproductivity—above all, whether it should be men through the agency of male-dominated institutions, such as the church, the state, the judiciary and the medical profession, or women themselves. In each instance the controversies precipitated an unprecedented deluge of debate, lobbying, media coverage and political upheaval. Though many men supported reform in all three contexts, just as numerous women, especially those who lived in rural areas, were amongst the conservatives, the primary impetus for reform undoubtedly came from the rapidly growing minority of women who from the early 1960s onwards increasingly questioned their roles and sought a greater degree of choice in the more important areas of their lives,
most notably the choice of whether or not to marry, to bear children, or to terminate unsatisfactory marriages.

**Contraception**

During the 1970s contraception was the key issue. In 1935, as part of the process of incorporating the Catholic moral code into the laws of the State, the Irish Parliament passed a bill banning the sale of contraceptives. It was not until the 1960s that significant demand for reform began to result in the first glimmerings both of public debate and protest action. One of the more imaginative actions in support of the demand for contraceptives was what has since become enshrined in the annals as the 'Contraceptive Train to Belfast' (Beale 1986:106-7). One Saturday in May 1971, forty-seven women took over two carriages on the Dublin to Belfast train. When they arrived in Belfast they headed for chemist shops and bought large quantities of whatever contraceptives they could find. When the train arrived back in Dublin that evening the women brandished condoms and creams at the Customs officials, who wisely decided against confrontation and waved them through, to cheers from the crowd that had turned out in support. However, despite various minor reforms achieved during the 1970s, it was not until 1985, the very year that Our Lady began to indicate her agitation, that the Government finally amended the 1935 legislation to permit the sale of condoms without prescription to those aged 18 and over.

**Abortion**

Meanwhile, beginning about 1980, the two related issues of abortion and divorce had begun to increasingly dominate the public debate concerning sexual mores and the status of women. Needless to say, just as orthodox Catholicism had ensured the banning of contraceptives in independent Ireland, so too were both abortion and divorce contrary to the laws of the State. To cut a long story short,

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as a result of agitation by those in favour of making abortion legal, the conservative forces persuaded the Government to hold a referendum in 1983 which resulted in the Constitution being amended to include an article establishing the right-to-life of the foetus, thereby making abortion not only illegal but also unconstitutional. The anti-abortion campaign received the forceful and highly articulate backing of the Church, with priests openly advocating a ‘yes’ vote from the pulpit. The figures are of some interest—for the country as a whole the ‘yes’ vote was 66 per cent, the ‘no’ 33 per cent, though the turnout was very low at just over 50 per cent of eligible voters (Beale 1986:119). Clearly then, by 1983 a very substantial minority of the Irish population was no longer prepared to accept the Church’s moral stance on such a crucially important matter as abortion, and there can be no doubt that such a shift in morality was the cause of a great deal of anxiety and guilt by many Irish Catholics. Indeed, the campaign by the pro-lifers was not nearly such a resounding victory as they had hoped for. Instead, it developed into an extraordinarily divisive issue. Doctors, lawyers, politicians, journalists, trade unionists, students, women and even farmers were all bitterly divided on the issue—and for a long period all forms of the media were dominated by the cut and thrust of protagonists on both sides.

The outcome of the referendum was the addition of the following highly controversial Article 7 to the Constitution:

> The State acknowledges the right to life of the unborn, and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and, as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right. (McDonagh 1992:1)

The effect of the amendment was to reinforce the power of doctors, politicians and priests over women’s bodies and their capacity for fertility. It also reinforced the degree of public antagonism towards those women who had abortions—for with the increased public knowledge of the large number of abortions and illegitimate births there emerged a portrayal of the women concerned as undermining the moral order that sustains the supposedly ‘traditional’ Irish way of life. From the perspective of the priests and other upholders of the orthodox morality women
were increasingly seen as prone both to unrestrained sexuality and to either infanticide or suicide or both. There can be no doubt that the intensity and bitterness of the debate must have greatly compounded the confusion, guilt and unhappiness of those young single women unfortunate enough to find themselves pregnant. As Beale observed:

It is probably true to say that having an abortion is more traumatic for many Irish women than for their sisters elsewhere. The journey to England is long and tiring and lonely if she goes by herself. The boat trip and operation are expensive. Above all, a woman from Ireland often carried the burden of secrecy. (Beale 1986:119)

It was not, however, until 1992 that the moral conflict between the anti-abortion and pro-life lobbies in Ireland reached its full intensity. During the intervening nine years it became increasingly apparent, mainly through media focus on the issue, that ever-increasing numbers of Irish women were crossing the channel to obtain abortions in the U.K. Whilst official figures for the late 1980s were in excess of 4,000, unofficial estimates ran as high as 7,000 or more. Then, in February 1992 the whole issue leapt back into centre stage in the struggle between the conservative and reform factions. The event that precipitated a debate that culminated six months later in yet another referendum was an injunction issued by the Attorney General restraining a pregnant fourteen-year-old girl who had been raped by an elderly man from seeking an abortion in the U.K:

Briefly, the Attorney General's justification for his action in what became known as the Miss X case was that he had clear evidence that a foetus with guaranteed rights under the Constitution was about to be aborted and that he must therefore act immediately to prevent this...

The evidence had come to the [his] attention from the Irish police. The girl and her parents had gone already to the U.K. so that the pregnancy could be terminated, but before the abortion was carried out they had contacted the Irish police to check whether a DNA test would be admissible as forensic evidence in seeking to prove paternity. Following the interim injunction, the girl and her parents obediently returned to Ireland, no doubt concerned by the possible legal consequences of simply ignoring it....

The High Court injunction provoked a huge outcry both within Ireland and internationally. 7,000 people marched in protest to the Dáil.
radio phone-in programs were inundated with calls, newspapers were deluged with letters expressing both anti-abortion and pro-choice points of view, and many points in between. For several weeks, the Irish national media focused on the case to the near-total exclusion of other news items. Ireland was riveted by its own seeming barbarism. (Smyth 1992:10-12)

The public outcry was such that the government quickly decided to refer the case to the Supreme Court. This august body, comprising five male judges, no doubt strongly influenced both by the public outrage and by governmental pressure, promptly lifted the injunction against the girl travelling to England—which she did a few days later and, accompanied by her parents, duly had her abortion and returned to Ireland. Some weeks later the Supreme Court released its full judgement and to the dismay of the anti-abortion lobby ruled that abortion was lawful in Ireland in the event of there being 'a real and substantial risk to the life of the mother' which in the case before it was deemed to lie in the very real possibility of the girl committing suicide if she were not allowed to have an abortion. Clearly, such a ruling in principle entirely subverted the 1983 anti-abortion constitutional amendment, an amendment which most of the electorate interpreted as a complete ban on abortion in Ireland under any and all circumstances.

The highly predictable outcome of the Supreme Court's ruling was a demand from the anti-abortion lobby for a new referendum designed to subvert the Supreme Court's ruling and return to the 1983 constitutional position—and with that battle royal recommenced with all of the various for and against and middle-ground lobbies leaping into the verbal fray—a battle that in fact waged in all of the nations’ media almost non-stop from March until the electorate once again voted on 28 November 1992. The wording of the three inter-related referenda put forward by the government were as follows:

1. the law shall not limit freedom to travel between the State and another State.

2. the law shall not limit freedom to obtain or make available, in the State, subject to such conditions as may be laid down by law, information relating to services lawfully available in another State.

3. (which became known as the 'substantive issue'): It shall be
unlawful to terminate the life of an unborn unless such termination is necessary to save the life, as distinct from the health, of the mother where there is an illness or disorder of the mother giving rise to a real and substantial risk to her life, not being a risk of self-destruction. *(The Irish Times, 16 October 1992, p.1)*

The first two referenda issues, that is to say, the freedom to travel, and the freedom of information, were both expected to be comfortably passed and in fact they were—the travel clause with 62.3 per cent in favour and the information clause with 60.0 per cent. But the real issue at stake was the No. 3 clause. During the lead up to the referenda it was vigorously attacked by the two principal factions, who were themselves the occupants of utterly opposed positions. On the one hand, it entirely failed to satisfy those of the liberal left, most especially the secular feminists, in that though it would legitimize abortion in Ireland, it would be available only for those women whose lives would otherwise be in jeopardy, whilst explicitly excluding all those women whose pregnancies merely constituted a threat to their health, including even threatened suicide. In other words, if the referendum were passed it would effectively negate the liberal Supreme Court ruling. But even so, the pro-life extremists also recommended a no vote, for on their part they could not stomach legalized abortion under any circumstances whatsoever taking place in holy Ireland. Predictably enough, with the two strongest though opposed factions recommending a no vote, that is what transpired with 65.4 per cent giving the thumbs down *(The Irish Times, 30 November 1992, p. 3).* Needless to say, such an outcome satisfied no one, least of all those who were in favour of reform.

**Divorce**

In 1986 divorce, which had been strictly prohibited by the Constitution since the founding of the State, took over as the third gender-focussed issue of public debate. In a referendum held on 26 June, in which the proposal was to amend the Constitution so as to permit divorce under very tightly circumscribed conditions, orthodox morality, again after a full-scale offensive launched by the Church both from the pulpit and through the media, once again won the day with 36.3 per cent voting ‘yes’ and 63.1 per cent ‘no’
(O'Reilly 1988:106-10). For weeks prior to the referendum sermons were given on the family and on the evils of divorce, and extensive literature was delivered to every home in Ireland at enormous cost. But, as in the case of the abortion debate, a major consequence of the media coverage was a heightened public awareness of just how many Irish people were living in sin; in this case the clear evidence that emerged for the rapidly increasing incidence of separated couples who were now living in sinful bigamy with new partners. In 1986 there were 37,245 individuals returned in the census as separated, and though this is, by international standards, a very low 2.5 per cent of those ever-married, it is nevertheless triple the number returned for 1981 (Statistical Abstract 1991:27). Furthermore, it is widely suspected that because both of the illegality of divorce and the immorality of separation, especially if accompanied by a new conjugal arrangement, very significant numbers of separated couples returned themselves on the forms as still married. Brown has estimated that in the early 1980s 'some 70,000 married persons are involved in broken marriages in the Republic, without recourse to divorce legislation' (Brown, T. 1985:349).

By 1995, however, the tide in favour of reform gained sufficient momentum to result in the government holding a referendum in which voters were asked to vote for or against the removal of the constitutional ban on divorce. The proposed amendment, to replace the ban, was as follows:

A Court designated by law may grant a dissolution of marriage where, but only where it is satisfied that:

i. at the date of the institution of the proceedings, the spouses have lived apart from one another for a period of, or periods amounting to, at least four years during the previous five years, ii. there is no reasonable prospect of a reconciliation between the spouses, iii. such provision as the court considers proper having regard to the circumstances, exists, or will be made for the spouses, any children of either or both of them and any other person prescribed by law, and iv. any further conditions prescribed by law are complied with. (Irish Times, 23 November 1995, p. 9)

For some months prior to the referendum polls had consistently indicated a two-thirds majority in favour of the proposed change.
However, on the day itself the yes voters only barely made the required majority with 50.28 per cent in favour and 49.72 per cent against. Nevertheless, by February 1997 divorce had been ratified in parliament and application procedures formulated. For the year ended 31 July 1998, 3,000 people sought divorce in the courts, 1,431 of which were granted (Irish Times, 28 January 1999, p. 3).

To conclude this section, I have, I trust, said enough to indicate that during the 1980s and early 1990s the Irish public were experiencing an unprecedented period of public debate over key issues of sexual morality, above all over issues that focussed on the claimed rights of women to control both their sexuality and fertility. Both the close votes and the endless media reports of many thousands of Irish abortions carried out in English hospitals every year, of the dramatic increase in the numbers of unmarried mothers remaining in the Republic and either ‘immorally’ raising their children alone or on State benefits, of increasing numbers of unmarried couples living together in sin, both with and without children, and of separated couples also living sinfully with their new conjugal partners, together ensured that everyone was all too aware of the extent to which numerous Irish people were no longer living according to the tenets of orthodox Catholic morality. The remarkable outbreak of Marian worship which began in 1985 was clearly triggered off, in part at least, by tensions generated in the debates that we have just looked at—for the burden of Our Lady’s claimed intervention in Irish affairs was to tell the people to stop misbehaving and by this she clearly meant, in the opinion of many of her devotees, to stop using contraceptives, to stop practicing abortion, to stop seeking divorce, and, horror of horrors, to stop resorting, even if only occasionally, to suicide and/or infanticide. Predictably, enough, as in the medieval witch crazes, women were specifically pin-pointed as the primary locus of this mounting tide of disruptive immorality and sinful behaviour. That this was, and still is, the case, is evident in numerous contexts, but none perhaps more poignantly and vividly so than in a number of highly publicized cases of infanticide reputedly perpetrated by young unmarried mothers. Since I am convinced that these tragic cases contributed even more directly to the subsequent upsurge in Marian visionary activity than did the bald facts concerning contraception, abortion
and divorce, I will briefly outline the relevant facts for two of the most widely publicized.

The death of Ann Lovett and her baby

On 31 January 1984, that is, less than a year after the amendment to the Constitution that ensured that all Irish pregnancies would be brought to full term and just over a year prior to the first recorded case of moving statues, Ann Lovett, aged 15 and nine months pregnant, went to the grotto of Our Lady on the outskirts of Granard, a small town in County Longford, and there, shortly after dark, alone and in freezing weather, gave birth to a baby boy. But when she and her baby were discovered lying together on the ground some hours later the two of them were close to death. Her parents, accompanied by both the family doctor and their priest were rushed to the grotto and whilst the doctor did his best for Ann the priest gave her Extreme Unction and baptized the infant. But by the time the ambulance arrived the baby was already dead, whilst Ann died a short while later in a hospital in County Meath.

The case immediately became a national scandal with the press descending on Granard like a cloud of locusts resulting in an avalanche of reports on the circumstances leading up to and surrounding the awful event. For what most especially transfixed and horrified the greater part of the population of Ireland was not just that a young girl and a baby had died in cold, lonely and tragic circumstances, but that she had chosen as the locale for her unwanted and unholy childbirth a holy grotto dedicated to the worship of the Blessed Virgin. Nor were there many who seriously doubted that the girl had chosen this lonely spot not in order to seek succour from the Blessed Virgin, but rather to give birth in a secret place where she could subsequently abandon her baby and perhaps even avoid discovery that she was the mother. And in seeming support of such a view of calculated immorality on the part of the girl was her depiction in numerous press reports as having lived for some years in a manner that caused the morally righteous to strongly disapprove. Her father, who was on the dole and had eight other children, was reported as having been seen frequently pulling her home from the grocery-cum-billiard-hall where she spent much of

As one Grannard resident commented to a reporter:

He'd give her a cuff. Many a father does likewise. You don't call in the ISPCC (Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) in a case like that do you? If anything, you'd say he was doing his best, wouldn't you? (McCafferty 1992:103)

Others observed that Ann was often heard shouting out loudly 'wake up, Granard' as she walked down Main Street after midnight. And then, of course, there was the clear evidence of immorality in her pregnancy itself, which seemingly everyone knew about, though no one, whether family, neighbours, friends, priests nor teachers, felt disposed to enquire about and perhaps offer useful advice or support. Indeed, all bar one friend vehemently denied even knowing that she was pregnant. As Jenny Beale, in her brief account of the incident, asked:

Why had Ann been unable to tell anyone that she was pregnant? Had her parents and teachers really not noticed? What about the father of the child? What kind of personal anguish must she have suffered during the pregnancy? How could such a thing happen in 1984? (Beale 1986:57)

That something was quite tragically amiss in her family is evident in that a mere three months later on 22 April 1984 Ann's sister Patricia, aged 14, died from a drug overdose in circumstances that strongly suggested suicide.

Nor was Ann's tragedy an isolated case. In 1982, 1,642 unmarried teenage women gave birth to babies in the Republic of Ireland (Beale 1986:57), and no doubt many more would have done likewise in the U.K., not to mention yet a further unknown but again almost certainly substantial number of unreported births followed by successful infanticide. That concealed infanticide is indeed a not uncommon occurrence became quite evident during the course of the massive police and newspaper investigations that went on for over a year in County Kerry, again in the 1984/5 period, in the wake of the infamous 'Kerry babies scandal'—which I will now attempt to summarize as briefly as possible. This whole complex and sorry affair is of particular relevance in any attempt to understand that first dramatic phase of Marian visionary activity that became known as the 'moving statues phenomenon,' for the baby scandal took
place in the village of Abbeydorney, a mere 15 miles distant from Asdee, the north Kerry village in which the first reported case of a moving statue of Our Lady occurred in 1985.

**The Kerry babies scandal**

The event that triggered off the 14 month-long saga was the discovery of a dead baby boy wedged in the rocks on the White Strand beach, located some 3 miles from Cahirciveen, a small and picturesque town on the western seaboard of County Kerry. A local farmer found him whilst jogging along the beach—a tiny naked body with the umbilical cord cut neatly flush with his belly, he was washed, his neck was broken and he was stabbed twenty-eight times in the neck and chest. After the state's pathologist pronounced the baby dead, the local gardaí began the search for its parents, initially concentrating on the town of Cahirciveen, though before long extending enquiries to the whole of the Iveragh peninsula—for those who know Kerry as tourists the area covered was approximately that known in the tourist brochures as ‘The Ring of Kerry’.

During those first two weeks of fruitless enquiry the police nevertheless unearthed information not normally given public recognition in Irish rural communities. As Nell McCafferty noted:

Families were named where incest was suspected; a married man was having an affair with a young woman; the female partners in broken romances were checked out; women who had to get married because of pregnancy were reported; a woman was nominated whose husband had been barred from her home on foot of a court order.

The search spread beyond the town. Hippies were reported and investigated. Travelling families got visits from police. A man with a criminal record and a common-law wife was checked out. The police visited a man who merely had a ‘female living with him’, and was in a different category entirely, as was the married woman who had ‘a man’ living with her. Information was given on a pregnant woman known to have paid a visit to England. A ten-year-old girl said her next door neighbour was ‘after having a baby’. (McCafferty 1985:11-12)

Others visited by the police included a man who had been imprisoned during the IRA campaign of the 1950s and a woman who had given secret birth in her family home some four months earlier. In short, though the police came up with no likely suspect during the first two weeks of their enquiries, they nevertheless
unearthed a grim trail of evidence of the darker and normally concealed side of Irish rural social life in the very same year that Our Lady began to proclaim the apocalypse if sinners did not hastily repent and reform.

But then, some fifteen days after the discovery of the Cahirciveen baby, the police were given confidential information concerning a young unmarried woman named Joanne Hayes that led to intensive enquiries followed by a formal charge of murder against Joanne and of concealment of the baby’s birth against members of her family. The evidence that led to the police making these charges may be summarized as follows. Joanne, who was then aged 25, lived on a 60-acre farm near Abbeydorney, a small village about 5 miles north of Tralee. The farm effectively supported two families. In the older of the two buildings there was the farm owner, an elderly bachelor called Maurice Fuller who was Joanne’s mother’s only brother, together with his spinster sister Bridie Fuller, an unemployed nurse. A hundred yards away there was a small county council cottage which contained Joanne, her parents Mary and Paddy Hayes, her two brothers Ned and Mike and her sister Kathleen, all of them adult. Joanne, who was the youngest member of the family, had been working for a few years as a receptionist in a sports complex in Tralee. ‘She’d work the shift until six or ten in the evening, and then go for a drink with her new-found friends. Saturday nights always found her back in town, at the discos or in the pubs’ (McCafferty 1985:18). Amongst those friends was another employee at the Sports Complex, a married man called Jeremiah Locke, with whom Joanne had begun an affair as far back 1981. Jeremiah would frequently give Joanne a lift home in his car after work and by early 1982 she found herself pregnant, but had a miscarriage at an early stage. However, within months she was again pregnant and this time successfully gave birth to a baby girl in hospital. Though in the months leading up to the birth of the baby there was a great deal of tension within Joanne’s extended family, after the birth the infant soon became their collective delight. It had been twenty-two years since a baby’s cry had been heard on the farm, and the sound was a joy for all of them to hear.

Meanwhile Joanne’s affair with Jeremiah continued with the result that she became pregnant for yet a third time late in 1983. But
when she heard that Jeremiah's wife had also again become pregnant she decided to end her relationship with him. As McCafferty put it:

In their twenty-two month relationship she had become pregnant by him three times. Joanne Hayes faced into 1984, severely burdened in mind and body. Her heart was broken, she was expecting a baby, and, in February of the new year, she learned that her job was about to end. (1985:23)

The local police were already well aware of much of this background to Joanne, especially that she had a lover, that he was Jeremiah Locke, that she had an illegitimate daughter who was the darling of the whole Hayes family, and that she had recently become pregnant for the third time. However, direct suspicion that she might possibly be the mother, and therefore presumably also the murderer, of the Cahirciveen baby did not surface until Mary Shanahan, a cousin and neighbour to the Hayes, telephoned the local garda Liam Moloney to inform him that Joanna had lost her baby through miscarriage in a Tralee hospital. But it soon transpired that though Joanne had indeed gone to the hospital at the recommendation of her doctor because of a threatened miscarriage, a scan showed that despite substantial internal haemorrhaging there was nothing whatsoever in the womb. The inference was quite clear that the haemorrhaging was due indeed to a miscarriage, but it must have occurred some time prior to admittance to hospital. When the police in charge of the Cahirciveen investigations heard this they were left in no doubt that they had now found the murdering mother. What especially clinched things in their minds were two considerations—Joanne was clearly a 'bad' and immoral woman, and she had had a secret miscarriage exactly one day prior to the discovery of the murdered Cahirciveen baby.

But it was from now on that the whole case became ever-increasingly bizarre. When the police took Joanne into custody for questioning they simultaneously descended in large numbers on the Hayes' farmstead. Initially every single member of the family, Joanne included, denied that she had been pregnant. However, within half an hour of intense cross-questioning Joanne stopped her denials and told Garda Maloney that she had given birth in a field and concealed the baby's body. Her statement was greeted with
incredulity and a bunch of Dublin detectives were brought in for further interrogation. She now told them that she had miscarried at home and had flushed the results down the toilet. When a garda told her that if that were so then the foetus would still be in the septic tank, she then went back to her first story, even specifying exactly where she had concealed the body on the farm. Two garda were promptly sent to search for it but returned saying that they had found nothing.

Meanwhile, when family members were informed that Joanne had admitted to having a miscarriage, they were subjected to yet further intensive police interviewing. The result was a series of signed statements from Joanne, her mother Mary, her sister Kathleen, and her brothers Ned and Mick Hayes. Though these statements were full of inconsistencies and even contradictory assertions, they nevertheless all agreed on the broad outlines of a supposedly terrible sequence of events in which Joanne, with the help and connivance of her family, after giving birth to her baby is portrayed as proceeding to suffocate it, to hit it on the head with a bath brush, and to stab it several times in the chest. Her two brothers then put the now dead body in a plastic bag, and drove off with it in the boot of a car to throw it in the sea. If such an account were true then not only was Joanne beyond all reasonable doubt the murderer of the Cahirciveen baby, for it neatly gelled both with the stab wounds in the chest and the plastic bag container—not to mention exactly the required timing—but it also vividly portrayed the murderer as a truly demonic character totally devoid of either compassion or morality.

But then an awkward development occurred on the very night of the initial court hearing. Just before Joanne was led away to her cell she spoke to her sister Kathleen and told her that her baby was indeed hidden on the farm and also told her exactly where to find it. The following afternoon Kathleen and her brothers went searching on the farm and Mike soon found the bag in a water hole. Ned immediately drove in to Tralee and informed Garda Liam Maloney of their discovery. A posse of gardaí returned to the farm, and on opening the bag not only found a baby boy’s body inside, but apart from some slight discolouration around its neck—could see no evidence at all of either blows to the head or chest wounds.
One might be inclined to think that the obvious inference to be made from this discovery was that whatever else Joanne and her family might have been up to on that fatal night when she gave birth to her baby, she could not possibly also be guilty of the death of the Cahirciveen baby. And furthermore if one came to that conclusion one might also wonder just what set of circumstances had led the Hayes family to make statements to the gardaí that seemingly not only precluded burial on the farm, but also supported the proposition that Joanne’s baby and the Cahirciveen baby were one and the same. Might not one obvious explanation be that the gardaí had somehow managed to coerce the Hayes family into making statements that would lead to a conviction of Joanne as the murderer of the Cahirciveen baby?

The reaction of the gardaí to the discovery on the Hayes’ farm was nothing short of astounding. That same night all of the gardaí involved in the investigation held a meeting in Tralee the outcome of which was a unanimous agreement amongst them that Joanne had given birth not to just one baby, but rather to twins, one of which was buried on the farm without any evidence of violence whilst the other, with multiple stab wounds and a broken neck, was put in a plastic bag and thrown in the sea. That same night they produced a lengthy written report outlining the case that they intended to bring against Joanne in court. The report admitted to one possible flaw in their case which was based on the evidence of blood groups. Joanne Hayes, Jeremiah Locke, and their dead son all belonged to blood group O, whereas the Cahirciveen baby was blood group A—hence one of the parents would also have to be blood group A. In order to meet this little difficulty the gardaí now proposed that Joanne Hayes, that totally immoral young woman, had had twins by different men, one of whom was Jeremiah and the other was an unknown man of blood group A. Both men, so the argument went, had had sexual intercourse with her within a forty-eight hour period, and she had become pregnant by both. Nell McCafferty comments scathingly:

This phenomenon, known as super-fecundation, is so rare that it is a footnote in rarefied medical journals. The police report wished it to be taken into factual consideration. It was possible, wrote (Superintendent) P. J. Browne, that Joanne Hayes was the mother of the Cahirciveen
baby. He added a note of caution: ‘The converse probability that she is not is more likely’.

Given the probability that she was not the mother of the Cahirciveen baby, the police put forward another theory. The baby which she had stabbed, and which her brother had thrown into the sea, had simply never been found. By a strange twist of fate, the police argued, two stabbed baby boys had been thrown off Sea Head on the same night, one of which had been found, identity of mother unknown, the other of which was still missing, its mother identified as Joanne Hayes ...

There was another difficulty. Irish tidal waters flow clockwise round the island, and the baby found at Cahirciveen would have had to float eleven miles in an anti-clockwise direction, in twenty-four hours, if it had been thrown off Slea Head. (1985:70-1)

Those who knew the local coast and its currents regarded this as quite impossible. In short—the report was bizarre beyond belief and could only have been the outcome of a last ditch attempt on the part of the investigating gardaí to defend themselves against the obvious suspicion that they must have somehow extracted fallacious and presumably strongly coerced statements from a badly frightened Hayes family. In other words, they felt that they simply had to come up with some explanation, no matter how improbable, that might make comprehensible why the Hayes family confessed to a series of complex and terrible actions that it was now patently obvious they in fact had not carried out.

However, the report was never submitted to court for prior to doing so the Superintendent in charge first took it to the Kerry state solicitor for his advice. The solicitor promptly perceived how inept it was and advised the Superintendent to scrub the report and drop the charges against Joanne and her family. But even then the Superintendent speculated about the possibility of charging Joanne with the murder of the baby found on the farm. But again the solicitor advised against this course of action on the grounds that it would prove very difficult to prove that the baby had been born alive, never mind prove that it had been killed. Finally, some four months after the discovery of the body on the Hayes farm, the Hayes family were informed in court that the charges against them had been dropped.

Not surprisingly, on advice from their solicitor the Hayes family now alleged extortion of confessions by force and psychological
terror. Since already that year there had been a fair amount of publicity in Ireland concerning other instances of police brutality, the Kerry babies case almost immediately became a national media sensation. Under the glare of intense publicity the police held an immediate internal enquiry into the affair to which the members of the Hayes household submitted written statements detailing the various ways in which they had been terrified and coerced. Yet, predictably enough, the police exonerated themselves on all counts.

But by now the public outcry had reached fever pitch with a demand for an independent enquiry into the affair. On 28 December the Minister for Justice set up a tribunal of enquiry—its specific task being to investigate how the police had conducted themselves during their investigations. However, right from the beginning events moved in a quite different direction. Instead, the Judge, taking advantage of the third term of reference, which was to investigate 'any relevant matters', turned it into a quasi-trial of Joanne Hayes, the very trial that had earlier been denied the police. Over the next five and a half months the proceedings of the tribunal dragged on and on and throughout the main thrust of investigation was into the actions of Joanne and her family with scarcely any attention paid to the conduct of the gardaí. Joanne in particular was subjected day after day to constant grilling and cross-questioning— much of the time having to cope with a portrayal of her actions as those of someone devoid of morality, mentally deficient and a bare-faced liar. So terrible did her inquisition become that on two occasions she broke down in court and had to be sent home under heavy sedation. And, most incredibly of all the main thrust of the tribunal’s questioning of Joanne and her family was directed towards seeking corroboration of the gardaí’s bizarre superfecundation theory. In order to determine what level of probability should be accorded this theory an English expert witness was summoned, but it seems he was a busy man, for it was his prolonged failure to turn up that led to the inordinate length of the proceedings. And, predictably enough, when he finally did find a moment to spare his pronouncement on the theory was that super-fecundation was such an exceedingly rare phenomenon that it could be entirely ruled out of consideration. The prosecuting solicitor’s reputed reaction was to observe, 'the bastard shot us down'. 

Ritual, Politics and Gender
But meanwhile, at an earlier stage back in Tralee some rather remarkable and happier events took place. At the height of Joanne’s inquisitorial questioning by both prosecuting council and judge, a rising tide of public support for the persecuted young woman began to emerge—for few in Ireland, not even the most morally conservative, take kindly to the sight of ordinary folk suffering at the hands of the ‘authorities’—whether these be the law, the police, the judiciary or whatever—and the mass media coverage of the events in the Tralee council house made it quite evident that Joanne was indeed suffering greatly. The first major gesture of support began in January 1985 when at first a trickle and eventually an avalanche of yellow flowers, especially roses, flooded into Abbeydorney and Tralee from all over Ireland, all of them addressed to Joanne. The second major gesture of support occurred shortly after a graphic news coverage of Joanne breaking down under interrogation in the court. Again at first a trickle and eventually a veritable torrent of both letters and mass-cards of support flooded into the Hayes’ letter box, again from all over Ireland. Then, at much the same time, the 300 or so people of her home community, Abbeydorney, with the world’s media ready to televise them after first assembling and parading silently outside the council building in Tralee for two hours, went inside the building and stood around the walls of the packed court. They powerfully and silently made clear their disgust at and condemnation of the way in which the tribunal was conducting its enquiries.

The following day an even more remarkable demonstration of support for Joanne and her family occurred when many hundreds of women, most though by no means all, members of women’s liberation groups, gathered by car and coach from many areas of Ireland to demonstrate against her pillorying in Tralee at the hands of the tribunal.

Many months later, to be precise, on 4 October 1985, the tribunal’s presiding Judge Kevin Lynch released the report of the tribunal’s findings. I quote here from Nell McCafferty’s summary account:

He (that is, the Judge) rained blow upon blow on the heads of the surviving members of the family. Joanne Hayes, he found, was not the mother of the Cahirciveen baby. But he exonerated the police from any
major blame in charging her with its murder. She and her mother and her sister and her brothers were ‘barefaced liars’ who had misled the police and perjured themselves before him in an attempt to cover up the death of Joanne’s baby. He did not answer clearly the central question and reason for the setting up of the tribunal—how did a family come to confess to a crime they could not have committed, and supply corroborative details known only to the police, and add imaginative details of their own? (1985:170)

He did, however, devote considerable attention to the secondary issue that nevertheless so absorbed him; what exactly had happened on the farm that fatal night? His account was as follows:

Joanne Hayes’ mother, Mrs Mary Hayes, was very annoyed with Joanne Hayes and expressed her annoyance at the prospect of having to rear another child for Jeremiah Locke, especially when the child did not appear to be strong. Bridie Fuller (Joanne’s spinster Aunt) and Kathleen Hayes (Joanne’s older sister) also showed their displeasure to Joanne Hayes at her having another baby by Jeremiah Locke. ...

Joanne Hayes got into a panic, and as the baby cried again she put her hands around its neck and stopped it crying by choking it and the baby did not breathe again. At some stage during the course of these events, Joanne Hayes used the bath brush from the bathroom to hit the baby on the head to make sure that it was dead. None of the family tried to stop Joanne from either choking or hitting the baby. (1985:172)

Though nowhere in this carefully phrased document did the judge find that a criminal act had been committed either by Joanne or her family, and hence no further charges were laid, the language he used was nevertheless such that the media immediately interpreted him as saying that Joanne Hayes had indeed killed her baby. In short, in this passage, as also in numerous other passages in the very long and detailed report, the judge consistently depicted Joanne Hayes as a sexually immoral and evil woman. The Catholic Church, which maintained a deafening silence throughout the whole affair, unambiguously endorsed the judge’s moral assessment when the priests of Joanne’s local parish refused, after a request made by the Hayes family shortly after the tribunal finished its enquiries, to say mass at the home of that very unhappy family. One can only conclude that the treatment meted out to Joanne shared much in common with that meted out to those women in late medieval Europe who were accused of witchcraft.
Conclusion

As a final reflection of a rather more theoretical and also speculative kind I would like to suggest that what we are here witnessing in the events surrounding the visionaries imaginative experiences may be described as a complex process of cultural invention, elaboration and reformulation. As I have argued in the main body of the paper, in the years immediately preceding the initial phase of moving statues Irish society had been undergoing a truly massive transformation from a predominantly agricultural to an industrial and urban base—as is evident alone in the percentage decline of workers employed in agriculture from 53 per cent in 1926 (Boylan, Curtin and O'Dowd 1988) to 33 per cent in 1975 and most recently to a mere 18 per cent in 1987 (Statistical Abstract 1991:91, Table 2.32). As integral components of this transformation there also emerged a series of confrontations between the proponents of competing definitions of reality and their respective legitimating moral orders—most notably the religious versus the secular, but also those associated with the various strata of the ever-increasingly complex and heterogeneous social order.

What I am now suggesting is that the visionary cults may be best understood as attempts on the part of their proponents and ideologues to promulgate a reformed religious world view that might hopefully bring a halt not only to what they felt was the moral disintegration of Irish society through the growing popularity of secular values, but at the same time provide more attractive and meaningful forms of worship than those provided in the churches by the male custodians of authoritarian orthodoxy—most notably in the persons of bishops and priests. In other words, the cults began to compete, both with the church and with the various institutionalized contexts in which predominantly secular world views were being promulgated, as significant arbiters as to what constitutes an ideal Irish way of life. What I see as especially interesting in carrying out a study of such phenomena is the fortuitous opportunity it provides

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11 The same trend can be seen in the rapid increase in urbanization. In 1926, 67.7 per cent of the population lived in communities of less than 1,500 persons. By 1951 the figure had dropped to 58.6 per cent and by 1971 it had fallen below the halfway mark at 47.75 per cent (Brown, T. 1981:257-8).
to gain some insight into the precise processes that might lead from what usually begins as a wholly or predominantly idiosyncratic imaginative act, in this case believing that a statue can not only move, but in so doing may constitute a sign of divine intervention in human affairs, may then progress through a series of confrontations with the supporters of contrary and well-entrenched definitions of reality and rectitude, to perhaps evolve into a more sophisticated series of meaningful propositions that may ultimately prove attractive to a significant number of others. I would suggest that by studying such phenomena over time we may begin to gain some glimmerings of understanding as to the kinds of processes that result in the transformation of images to ideas and perhaps from thence to truly collective representations; in other words, we may begin to understand some of the complex processes that underlie the creation, maintenance and transformation of culture.

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