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A HARD GOD

BY PETER KENNA

TEACHER'S NOTES

BY SISTER VERONICA BRADY



PETER KENNA'S *A HARD GOD*

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Ireland is a hard land, for all that it is beautiful to look at. The green fields are very small and the rocks, picturesquely breaking the surface, make it very difficult to make a living. In the past it was even more difficult, since the British landlords owned most of it and what little the small farmers made, went to pay the rent. Bitterness, then, made the hard land more harsh. Bowling along on a bus, even today it is not difficult to imagine angry men hiding in the hedges waiting for the agent—the man who worked for the landlord and collected the rents—to set on him and ‘teach him a lesson’, which sometimes even meant killing him. The lesson, of course, which was learned on both sides, was violence and dogmatism, each side convincing itself not only that it was in the right, but that this right was absolute; God’s right, as it were, not something relative to the present social political situation. So Irish and British, Catholics and Protestants not only learned to hate one another but to believe that they had every right to do so. The God they served was often, perhaps generally, a hard God, a tribal God who blessed those who belonged to the ‘proper’ tribe, ours, and brought evils down upon the rest, who were regarded as the enemy.

The people in Peter Kenna’s *A Hard God*, the Cassidy family, come from this kind of background. Even if they live in Australia their parents have handed down to them their memories, the memories of several hundred years of oppression and suffering presented and indeed enlarged and embellished by the fact that, even in Australia, the Irish tended to be somehow different. Partly they tended to be despised—the English thought them feckless and dirty; the Scots, drunken and disorganised—and partly they kept themselves apart, not only to protect one another against the prejudice directed at them but also to ‘keep the faith’. For the Irish, Catholicism was tribal. It defined them and gave

them their sense not only of identity but also of purpose, of being somehow peculiarly blessed. Being ‘a good Catholic’ meant belonging to a group with its own ways of behaving, believing and even taking its pleasures.

For young people like Joe, for instance, it involved going to the Catholic Youth Organisation and enjoying debates with topics like ‘the age of chivalry is not dead’, and boys and girls being much more reserved with one another—though equally it was expected that Catholic boys and girls would marry one another. ‘Mixed marriages’—marriages that is between Catholics and Protestants—were to be avoided at all costs. Once married, it meant strict fidelity to the Church’s rules against contraception and above all, no divorce. When Aggie is exasperated with Paddy’s wife, Sophie (who has taken not only to gambling and neglecting him and the family, but now has another man), she says to Paddy that he could divorce Sophie for what she has done. Paddy replies, scandalised: ‘Aggie, we’re Catholics. I wouldn’t dream of disgracing the family with a divorce.’ This would be a greater disgrace than anything Sophie has done.

To be Catholic meant going to mass unfailingly every Sunday—Dan’s first enquiry of his brother Paddy is, ‘you’re still keeping to the Mass, I hope’. It meant sending children to Catholic schools and paying attention to the brothers and sisters who teach there as well as to the priests. One of Paddy’s worries about Sophie’s behaviour is ‘what the Christian Brothers (will) say when the boys go to school’. To be Catholic meant saying the family rosary together at night. As Paddy remembers it from childhood on the farm, it is also an exercise in family discipline:

Father used to make us kneel as straight as ramrods on the hard stone floor. One sag at the knees and you’d catch it across the shoulders with the buggy-whip he held in the hand that

wasn't dangling the beads. How he could watch us and concentrate on the Hail Marys was always a wonder to me.

All this may sound narrow and constraining, almost a prison, and in some respects it was. But it did give ordinary lives a dignity, a sense of mattering somehow, being part of a larger order of things and having a purpose within it. At times, this made for melodrama, even fantasy. Martin, for example, may not be particularly happy in his marriage—he is married to Monica who is something of a religious fanatic. He may have to work as an ordinary labourer building one of the big dams that were part of the large-scale construction projects of the 1950s, even though he has dreams of being a writer. But he sees the world split into two camps: good, whose champions are the Catholics; and evil, the Communists (whom he believes to be everywhere), seeking to undermine society in general and take control of the trade unions in particular.

As a good Catholic, Martin sees it as his task to oppose the 'Commies' everywhere, especially at work. So he involves himself with the secret movement of Catholics, inspired by B.A. Santamaria, which works not only against the influence of Communism on the worksite but also against the left wing generally, and against any changes in traditional ways of thinking and behaving. This gives him the feeling of being something of a crusader. 'God's with me Dan. It's his fight I am fighting', he tells his brother. But it also makes him quite paranoid. He sees the influence of 'the Comrades' everywhere, though 'it's difficult to prove anything unless you actually catch them at it.' He sees their hand in an attempt to pull his tent down, for example, though there may of course have been other reasons for that event. People who keep as much to themselves, and disapprove so much of the world they live in, do tend to become unpopular, especially when their preoccupation with sex makes them so intolerant. The greatest charge against Russia, for instance, seems to be that 'they have free love' there.

In contrast with his brother Dan, Martin will bear nothing good about his enemies. When he tells Dan about the 'free love' in Russia and Dan asks him what it is, he defines it as

'cohabiting outside marriage'. But even though Dan is shocked, he keeps his sense of proportion, remarking, 'I hear we've got some of that out here as well.' Martin, though, insists on the difference: Russian society is by definition wicked. In Russia, he declares, free love is a 'rule of law. That's the difference.' In the long run then, it is not entirely surprising that he is killed in an accident at work. The family believe that he was pushed over the cliff by the 'Commos' and is thus a kind of martyr; some of his workmates suggest that he has committed suicide, and others that he slipped. Whatever the truth may have been—and we never find out what it is—Dan is an example of someone who lives melodramatically and dies in the same way.

In his case, this belief makes for a kind of fanaticism, no doubt influenced by his wife. (It also probably seems rather silly to many people today, especially when, under Gorbachov, Communism, the kind practised in Russia, is beginning to seem at least as much dedicated to peace, though not perhaps human rights, as our system.) Nevertheless, the Cassidy family's kind of belief does have a heroic, even noble quality about it—and this, of course, is one of the many things which make it so interesting dramatically.

First of all, it does represent an attempt to defend themselves, to preserve some kind of dignity in a society inclined to despise them. Think, for instance, of their memories of the times when they were all together on the farm when they were able to live as they would have liked to have lived in Ireland. Land is nearly as important for Irish people as it is for Aborigines. As Dan remembers it: 'Things were much simpler there. There weren't as many decisions to be made. If you had a crop to sow there was time to do it and that was the only time. It either rained or it didn't and when the crop ripened you harvested it.' They had a way of life which still kept them in touch with forces beyond themselves—the forces evident in the rain or, indeed, in the lack of it, which they were able to associate with the God they worshipped at mass and in saying the rosary and also in keeping the rules they believed to be laid down for them.

This God was not always comfortable either. Marx's famous criticism of religion, that it is merely the 'opium of the people', a figment of the

imagination, a kind of projection of their needs for comfort and consideration, does not really apply to them. The crop was not always harvested, their belief does not make them prosperous and they do not really believe that they have a right to experience success, esteem and influence. What their belief does give them, rather, is a deep sense of belonging together and of being able to trust that what happens will be, if not good, at least bearable. Fanatical as he is in many ways, Martin expresses this sense in his memory of the 'good old days':

When the crop was harvested, do you remember those Saturday night dances ... the word went out and it was understood everybody was to be there. If you played an instrument you brought it with you, and if you didn't, you collected a few gum leaves on the way. When everybody danced the dust rose up off the floor and they had to open the windows and then all the insects of the night swarmed into the light and the girls cried because they'd spent the entire day starching their petticoats and ironing the ruffles on their dresses, and we'd been at it for hours as well, scrubbing our toes and plastering our hair down. But another reel came up and the dust and the insects were forgotten. (p36)

This is in contrast to the fear of nature often expressed in Australian writing, by Catherine Martin, for example, in *The Incredible Journey* (first published in 1926):

Nature so often terrifies us, in the guise of a power that is no more concerned with the good or ill of human creatures, than she is with the subtle device of a serpent's sting or with the insects that swarm by the millions into existence on a tropical night, tiny flames of light lit in the midst of infinity—only to be quenched in a few brief hours ... In the presence of such ghastly waste, dark questionings arise as to any beautiful end set before the world and its inhabitants.¹

Dan and Aggie may have doubts, and Joe may despair of his own salvation—that is, of his place in the 'Catholic' order of things—but they do not ever see the world so bleakly. God may be 'hard', may be difficult for them to understand, but in the long run they believe that the world has a meaning. 'God', in fact, is for them the word that represents that meaning, and so, while things may be difficult, they are never absurd. So, as the play

ends, even as Aggie knows that Dan has incurable cancer, she is still able to pray, to still put her trust in the power of prayer, as she prays the 'Hail Mary', asking Mary, who gave birth to Jesus, who is God himself, to 'pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.' The last phrase she cannot bring herself to name but, for all that, she accepts it and mouths it as the curtain falls.

So despite everything, being a Catholic means being at home in the universe, having a sense of direction. When drought forces the Cassidys off the land, Aggie wandering through the city streets, suddenly discovers she is lost—'I suppose I got gawking at the people in cabs and the things in shop windows and ... suddenly I didn't have any idea of where I was, it was as if I'd been picked up and dumped down in some other country.' She goes into a Catholic church, into a confessional in fact, and the priest calls one of the boys from the school yard to show her the way home. She has another court of appeal as it were: Catholics belong to one another and to another order of things.

Though they seem very ordinary people who lead rather dull and unsuccessful lives, in fact their lives are bound up with a part of the larger story of Christian faith which involves not only the story of the Scripture but also of heroic Christians throughout the ages, the saints, the martyrs and holy people generally. In this way they have at least something in common with so-called primitive peoples: like the Aborigines, for instance, who take the direction of their individual lives from the Dreaming stories they tell over and over, stories about the great heroes of the beginning of time which lay down the proper pattern of all human behaviour. The Cassidys, too, live under the terms of their myths, the stories which explain why things are as they are, which they celebrate when they go to mass and reflect on when they say the rosary. So the recollection of the Malaysian writer, K.S. Maniam, of his childhood, also shadowed by sacred stories (in his case, the great Indian myths), applies equally to these simple, rather shabby people living in the western suburbs of Sydney in 1946:

How does one describe the land one lived in but never saw? It was more tangible than the concrete one we flitted through each day. Darkness gave it its true dimensions. Then it

vibrated in our hearts... There was a lot of colour in our invisible world. The gigantic flowers that filled our imagination were turned out in bright togas, arms heavily braceleted, necks studded with gold and heads awashed with intricate crowns. Fair, gentle men and women (gods and goddesses, I suppose), fought off the more scheming and brutal characters in battles that clashed over our sleeping heads. The tension between good and evil shimmered therefore like an inevitable consciousness within our heads.²

Even Maniam's conclusion, 'we were a gentle people', is also true of the Cassidys, even if at first it does not seem to be so. The occasional harshness and intolerance is the response of gentle people who have been hurt or feel threatened, especially when the stories which guide and rule them are challenged.

These common dreams, then, made for the strong sense of community evident in *A Hard God*. But this sense was increased also by a feeling of being somehow different because what they believe in seems to others strange, sometimes amusing but at other times dangerously anti-social. They are also drawn together, on the one hand, by a common memory of persecution in the old country and, if not persecution, at least a certain amount of suspicion in the new one; and on the other hand by a common hope which takes in not just this world but the next one. It is not only the fanatical Monica who believes that there is a life after death, and that the living can help the dead with their prayers while the dead also remember them in heaven.

Hell, eternal punishment, is a possibility, one which mission priests, who come into a parish every year to preach repentance and conversion, use to frighten people back to virtue; but somehow Catholics seldom imagine themselves or anyone dear to them in hell—God cannot resist an act of contrition, of repentance and of appeal to God's loving mercy. It is only someone whose faith is as extreme and tortuous as Monica's who would worry after Martin's death that 'he might not have had time for an act of contrition before he went over the edge'. The rest of the family, like most Catholics, have a greater trust in God's forgiveness. Paddy, for instance, is prepared to hope that 'he had time to say one on the way down'.

From the time of the Reformation onwards, Protestants have tended to see this as somehow lax, lacking a proper sense of human sinfulness on the one hand and of the power of God's grace on the other. Whether that is so or not, people like the Cassidys do have a strong sense of hope that however much they may suffer in this world, things will be better in the next life. Nevertheless, this does not mean despising their existence here and now. People like Dan and Aggie are the kind of people who never manage to make money, being too honest and, in the long run, too little interested in money. They like fun, the family are genuinely fond of one another and look after one another. There is always a meal, advice and support for Dan, and Aggie's loyalty to him means that she will look after them too, however undeserving they may seem to be. Monica's is a different case and so to a certain extent is Martin's. No doubt influenced by her, he is obsessed with his 'sinfulness'.

It is this sense of community of course which makes Joe's position so painful. His threat to 'leave the Church' might seem exaggerated, even funny, but it is a gesture not just of defiance but of a kind of spiritual suicide. It also involves a kind of blackmail, threatening Jack with the responsibility for his damnation, his exclusion from eternal life, the community of the blessed echoed by his exclusion from the Catholic community.

When you're at Mass this Sunday just remember I won't be there. Let your conscience live with that and I won't go to confession either and I'll leave the Catholic Youth Organisation. (p.71)

Jack's response, 'it's your soul, Joe', even when Joe goes one better and threatens to 'go with other men', may seem quite sensible to most of the audience, but the Cassidys' kind of Catholicism believes otherwise. For them, we are, in effect, responsible for one another as we are in the view of Scripture, of course.

Joe is the most painful figure in the play. Belonging to the next generation, he has to bear the burden of being suspended between two worlds and two cultures: the old closed tribal world of his parents' Catholicism and the world of his own desires, especially of his increasingly urgent sexual feelings. It would have been easy for the playwright to make a great deal of this awakening and confused sexuality

on the one hand or of the pressures of the society around him. Even in 1946 Australia was growing increasingly Americanised, influenced by Hollywood, popular music and advertising, and increasingly obsessed with sex. Indeed, there is a kind of sub-genre which has grown up in Australian literature and film which deals with the problems of 'growing up Catholic' in this environment. But Peter Kenna is much more subtle. As his symbolic use of space—Joe and Jack have their own space throughout and changes of place and situation are indicated by lighting—suggests, his intention is not to document the actual physical and social situation but to point to what lies underneath: the deepest concerns of heart and conscience.

Joe's real problem, then, is not just the usual problem of growing up, of learning how to balance the claims of the body with the claims of the spirit, but something more complicated, his own more urgent version of the problem his father and mother have also to deal with: how to adjust the tradition of belief and of living, inherited from the past on the other side of the world and from a very different kind of society, to the actual world in which they live. As Dan works side-by-side with Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus loading and unloading ships, he comes to realise that there are other ways of worshipping God and living decently than the ways in which he has been brought up. He can no longer believe that only Catholics are saved and that everyone else is in error. Nor can he say with any confidence any more what he once said to Martin, that God will look after those who believe in him and live 'good Catholic lives'. What happens to Martin and Paddy and their wives makes that only too clear.

As for Aggie, she comes to realise that, in a sense, Dan has been her religion. As she tells him: 'I've loved you above everything else in my whole life'. According to the way she has been brought up, this means that perhaps she has not been 'a very good Catholic after all'. Perhaps even more troubling to traditional belief, she claims the right to deny Dan's fate when she tells him fiercely, protectively, not long after his illness has been diagnosed as cancer: 'Nothing's going to happen to you, Dan. I wouldn't allow it'. The fact that, of course, she's helpless and that he is going to die, a fact that she has come to accept as the play

closes, does not affect this defiance. But—and this is the point the play makes—it does not make her any less Christian because it is the expression of love. True, an old-time narrow kind of Catholicism, Monica's kind, might be shocked, but it is the central teaching of Christianity that the measure of our love of God is our love for our fellow human beings.

This becomes increasingly clear to Dan as he grows more and more aware that the word 'God' is not as easily understood and accounted for as he once thought. Watching people of other religions at their worship, he is impressed by the thought of a God whose love embraces everyone and who is more and more mysterious yet also very powerful. Watching them, 'I can't believe they're praying to an empty space', he tells Aggie. But whoever it is, whatever it is outside ourselves, it's not telling anybody. So it is 'our total ignorance of what he's about ... (which) finally drives us to distraction', making us see him as 'a hard god'. Nevertheless Dan hangs on to the centre of belief: 'It would be unbearable if I wasn't sure he loved me and I am sure of that.'

In this way, coming to a belief which puts emphasis on love rather than mere duty, on faith rather than dogmatic pronouncements and above all, insists that they must live as fully, lovingly and bravely as they can here and now (rather than fixing their eyes on the next world), they in fact become better, more orthodox Christians—and the word 'Catholic' is, or ought to be a synonym of the word 'Christian'. But where Aggie and Dan succeed in combining faith and experience, their son Joe fails. This is partly because of his lack of experience. He is fighting battles that are largely still theoretical; he is rejecting a God still concerned almost entirely with rules and regulations (not the true Christian God of love and understanding, Aggie and Dan discover). But the main reason for Joe's failure is his homosexuality.

Sexuality in general is, for a whole variety of reasons, something which the Catholic Church still finds difficult to deal with—hence the preoccupation with the rights and wrongs of contraception, abortion, clerical celibacy, pre-marital sex and so on. This is not to say that the opposition to promiscuity, and to the mindless cult of sex and bodily pleasure generally, is not important for the defence of dignity, women's

especially, and freedom (which is I believe properly defined not as doing what you like but what you ought). But it is also the case that the body is good and sexuality something not only sacred but essential for a proper human life, though 'sexuality' here means not just the physical act but accepting and loving oneself as a sexual being. It is clear, too, that the kind of Catholicism Joe Cassidy inherited had not given much thought to this. His parents, it seems, married, made love and had children in a relatively uncomplicated way. But once Jack has made Joe realise that he is attracted to Jack sexually and they have made love to one another, there is nothing to help Joe cope with his feelings. By and large, the Catholic Church sees homosexual love as wrong, wicked even, especially when making love is seen as justified only in order to have children. Homosexual love, of course, can find no such justification.

Jack, who at first seems much more of a 'free thinker' than Joe, is conscience-stricken after they have actually made love. He sees the sudden storm which blows up as a kind of warning, a threat of punishment to come, and resolves to give up his friendship with Joe. It seems that he was just experimenting. But having discovered that he is homosexual, attracted to men and not to women, Joe is faced with a choice, between that attraction which has become so important to him, and between continuing to be a 'good Catholic'. His Catholic conscience tells him that what he has done is seriously sinful. Therefore he must go to confession to ask God's forgiveness. But to be forgiven he must resolve never again to do what he has done, and he cannot—indeed, will not—in honesty promise that. The play leaves him there. But it is important that he is neither given the last word nor allowed to strike any very dramatic pose. The fact that in the play's last moments, miserable as he is, Aggie appeals to him for help in coping with Dan's illness suggests, I think, that he still has a long way to go in finding out who he is and that some kind of accommodation may be possible between the two sides of himself.

The important thing about *A Hard God* is perhaps just this: the refusal to paint characters clearly black or white, good or evil, or to resolve the struggle between good and evil in any clear

or simple way. The absence of melodramatic resolutions is Kenna's great achievement. He sees the Catholicism he dramatises as something narrow and constraining and in some respects even superstitious, but also as a 'great inheritance'—something which gives the Cassidys a place in the world, and a power and a dignity all their own.

Notes

1. Catherine Martin, *The Incredible Journey*, Sydney, Pandora, 1988, p. 26.
2. K.S. Maniam, *The Return*, London, Writing in Asia Series, 1981, p. 37.