

Christianity and Liberalism in *Cry, the Beloved Country*

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Introduction

Virtually all critics who have commented on *Cry, the Beloved Country* since it was first published exactly fifty years ago, have recognised the central position which Alan Paton's Christianity occupies in the novel's overall thematic structure. And yet, despite this critical attention, little effort has been made to provide a precise account of the actual nature of the Christian perspective which underpins *Cry, the Beloved Country*. In the main, critics have tended to refer rather loosely to the 'Christian message' of the novel, without considering what particular interpretation of that message Paton brings to bear upon the text; or they have merely adverted to the 'biblical' flavour of the novel's language, without examining the significance of the original sources of the scriptural quotations and allusions. Similarly, although it has been generally acknowledged that Paton's outlook in *Cry, the Beloved Country* is liberal as well as Christian, there has been no attempt to explore the complex relationship between Christian faith and liberal politics in the novel. In particular, what has not been adequately documented is the extent to which Paton's liberalism informs his religious thinking and gives shape to a Christian perspective which is actively and intimately concerned with matters of social and political justice.

The purpose of this article is to address these issues by examining in some detail the nature and significance of Paton's synthesis of liberalism and Christianity in *Cry, the Beloved Country*. The article will begin by recording how interconnected Paton's religious and political convictions became in the years leading up to the composition of *Cry, the Beloved Country*. It will then consider the pervasive influence of liberal political ideas on the Christian outlook of the novel at the level of plot and characterisation. And it will then proceed to focus closely on a series of key biblical passages which help Paton to formulate his own politico-religious position and which function at a subtextual level to define and determine the novel's linguistic and, indeed, thematic constitution. In more general terms, it is hoped that this discussion of *Cry, the Beloved Country* may serve to clarify some of the important points of consonance between Christianity and liberalism, and to suggest that the liberal-Christian perspective

presented in the novel continues to represent a valid and coherent approach to problems of religious and political philosophy.

Background

As he has recounted in his first autobiographical volume, *Towards the Mountain* (1980), Alan Paton was born into a devout Christadelphian family, but began at an early age to reject the strict, authoritarian attitudes of his father, and to differentiate between what he later termed 'the lesser and the greater moralities' (1980:32). He developed an ecumenical temperament, seeking to establish common ground with those who cherished similar ideals rather than emphasising sectarian differences in dogma, and he was drawn towards a Christian practice based on compassion and tolerance rather than fear and judgement. It seems clear that Paton was a decent, moral young man, concerned about his neighbour and eager to serve his community, but it was only in his thirties that his Christianity began to take on a specifically liberal character as he became increasingly attentive to hitherto unconsidered notions of 'racial justice' (see Paton 1958a:6).

It is too simplistic to reduce the development of Paton's Christianity in a liberal direction to a few incidents only, but it is useful to highlight some of these as crucial stages in that development. By so doing, it will be possible to illustrate how Paton seems to have naturally inclined towards an intimate connection between religion and politics, and especially towards a Christianity involved in matters of social upliftment and political reform. The first and most obvious of these stages was his acceptance—following a life-threatening bout of Enteric fever—of the post of Principal of Diepkloof Reformatory for African Boys. In his thirteen years at Diepkloof, as he notes in his autobiographical essay, 'Case History of a Pinky' (1971; in Paton 1975:328-239), he 'began to understand the kind of world in which Black people had to live and struggle and die' and, consequently, he began to overcome 'all racial hatred and prejudice'. Significantly, he has cast this turning point in his political outlook in religious terms, likening it to that of St Francis of Assisi when he came down from his horse to embrace the leper in the road on the Umbrian plain, and he feels that the saint's famous words could be applied with equal validity to himself (in Paton 1980:169):

The Lord himself led me amongst them, and I showed mercy to them, and when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of body and soul.

Secondly, as Paton has described in *Apartheid and the Archbishop* (1973) and elsewhere, the Anglican synod of 1941 decided to establish a Diocesan Commission under the chairmanship of the then Bishop of Johannesburg, Geoffrey Clayton, with the

task of attempting to define 'what it believed to be the mind of Christ for South Africa' (1973:116). Paton (1973:117) has commented that his involvement in the Commission was for him like coming from the darkness into the light as he began to understand at last that one could not be a Christian in South Africa and claim to love justice and truth without becoming actively concerned about the socio-political problems of the country. As he trenchantly remarks in *Towards the Mountain* (1980:248), 'the bishop's commission ... didn't change the heart of the nation but it changed me'.

The third seminal event to be noted is Paton's moving encounter at the funeral of Edith Rheinallt-Jones, recalled in his essay, 'A Deep Experience' (1961). Although Paton had been very impressed with Edith's work at the South African Institute of Race Relations and the Wayfarers, his real revelation came at her funeral in 1944 at St George's Presbyterian Church in Johannesburg: scores of people of every colour and creed 'had come to honour her memory—their hates and their fears, their prides and their prejudices, all for the moment forgotten' (1961:24). Paton's experience in that church completely convinced him that Edith's ideal of social justice and racial equality 'was the highest and best kind of thing to strive for in a country like South Africa' (1961:24).

By the mid 1940s, then, Paton had come to accept and expound a brand of Christianity which was neither otherworldly nor divorced from social reality, but directly concerned with the social, economic and political conditions of his country. More particularly, his promotion of individual rights and freedoms meant that his religious outlook was not merely political but specifically liberal in character.

This interweaving of Christian and liberal principles in Paton's thinking is evident in much of his writing from around this period. Most notably, perhaps, it is given concrete expression in his comparative summation of his three mentors, his friend and former Deputy Prime Minister, Jan Hofmeyr, Archbishop Geoffrey Clayton, and the renowned Wits University Professor of Philosophy, Alfred Hoernlé: (Paton 1980:243):

Hofmeyr and Clayton would have regarded themselves as servants, however poor, of the Holy Spirit. Hoernlé regarded himself as a servant of the liberal spirit. And in so doing each of them cherished the same ideals of truth, justice and compassion.

Elsewhere (1958b:278), Paton has further insisted on the crucial affinity between his Christian beliefs and his liberal political principles:

Because I am a Christian I am a passionate believer in human freedom, and therefore, in human rights.

He has also expanded (1958c:11) on what he viewed as the Christian underpinnings of much liberal thought, with specific reference to the South African Liberal Party of which he was a founding member:

Now although the Liberal Party is not a Christian organisation, its policies have a great deal in common with Christian ethics, and its philosophy has been influenced by Christian theology. I shall not apologise for writing something about these things. If one is a Christian, one believes that there is a spiritual order as well as a temporal, but one also believes that the values of the spiritual order—justice, love, mercy, truth—should be the supreme values of the temporal society, and that the good state will uphold and cherish them. Further one believes that the Church, while without temporal power, has the duty of championing these values in the temporal world.

None of this is meant to imply, of course, that liberalism and Christianity are interchangeable or identical, but simply that for Paton certain cardinal values are shared by both. Most pertinently, both are vitally concerned with the needs, aspirations and deprivations of men and women in society, and both promote a vision of social justice founded upon the intrinsic worth and dignity of the human individual.

It ought to have become plain from this discussion that it is not enough merely to refer to Paton's outlook as Christian. After all, Christianity is open to various interpretations on ideological grounds, as a moment's consideration of the ethos of the Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa under apartheid will reveal. Instead, Paton's form of Christianity needs to be distinguished as specifically liberal in orientation, firstly, in its focus on human rights and socio-political amelioration, which differentiates it from other conservative modes of Christian thought. Secondly, its liberal character lies in its rejection of all forms of authoritarian politics that place the interests of the State above those of the individual, a feature which differentiates it not only from the Christianity of Afrikaner nationalism but also from Marxist-based interpretations of the gospel. In order to see how this form of liberal-Christian thought is presented in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, it is necessary to turn to a detailed discussion of the novel itself.

Christianity and Liberalism in *Cry, the Beloved Country*: Plot and Character

Even at the level of basic story line and characterisation, it is apparent that *Cry, the Beloved Country* contains an important religious dimension. The central protagonist, Stephen Kumalo, is a parson, and much of his psychological suffering and anguish as he is faced with the destruction of his family and his tribe is framed in essentially religious terms. Indeed, part of his development in the novel involves his movement from rural

'innocence' (95) to doubt and near despair—'It seems that God has turned from me' (96)—and finally to a mature understanding and acceptance of the world. Forced through his misery to confront the fundamental question of 'the purpose of our lives' and 'the secret of the earthly pilgrimage' (57), he learns through other, affirmative experiences that 'kindness and love can pay for pain and suffering' (193) and that 'there can be comfort in a world of desolation' (56), as the novel's subtitle suggests.

Many of the plot details, to be sure, are designed to show how through religious faith people 'may be succoured and forgiven' (98) and achieve personal redemption. Nevertheless, important though this aspect of the novel undoubtedly is, it must not be allowed to obscure the equally important political dimension of the novel's religious perspective. For the novel is not merely concerned with the alleviation of suffering at a personal level, but also with the elimination of the social and economic causes of much of that suffering, as well as with the reform of the political system which has led to such socio-economic problems.

Edward Callan (1982:38) has pithily labelled Book Three (chapters 30-36) of *Cry, the Beloved Country* 'the book of restoration' as the focus shifts from an unsettling portrayal of social distress to a vision of restorative possibilities. For example, Stephen Kumalo, on his return to Ndotsheni, embarks on an active campaign of social upliftment for his people. In this, significantly, he has been inspired by experiencing firsthand the work of his fellow priests in Johannesburg, most prominently Msimangu, 'the best man of all my days' (194), but also the English priest, Father Vincent. It is useful to note that this character is based on Trevor Huddleston, the renowned Sophiatown priest whom Paton had met through his work at Diepkloof Reformatory and who had impressed Paton with his commitment to bringing about political change in South Africa (see Alexander 1994:200). It is Father Vincent who counsels Kumalo and brings him back from the brink of despair when his son turns out to be the murderer of a white man in Johannesburg. More pertinently, as part of this counselling, Vincent reminds Kumalo (as Huddleston might well have done) of the task of social 'rebuilding' and of seeking racial 'justice' (98). In addition to Father Vincent, another religious character is based on an actual person: Reverend Michael Scott, the activist priest with whom Paton had served on the Diocesan Commission, emerges as 'that extraordinary Father Beresford' (147; see Alexander 1994:200), whose political views are favourably counterpointed in the novel with white materialistic euphoria about the gold rush in Odendaalsrust. Beresford is portrayed as arguing persuasively in his 'extraordinary' pamphlet, *Cross at the Crossroads*, for the profits from the gold rush to be diverted to rural agricultural projects, social welfare and healthcare improvement, and the raising of miners' wages. Apart from the views of such admirable characters, Kumalo is also influenced, in a different way, by his brother, John. In spite of John's personal corruption, it is clear, as Msimangu concedes, that 'many of the things that he said are true' (37), most pertinently, his criticism of the Church's ineffectual protests against racial injustice (34).

In particular, Stephen Kumalo takes cognisance of at least the partial validity of his brother's dictum that 'what God has not done for South Africa, man must do' (25), and so he begins to take active responsibility for the regeneration of his community:

Kumalo began to pray regularly in his church for the restoration of Ndotsheni. But he knew that was not enough. Somewhere down here upon the earth men must come together, think something, do something (195).

Despite his failure to mobilise the leaders of the community—the chief and the headmaster—into effective action, his enterprise does bear some fruit, particularly in his association with James Jarvis: a telling example of two men, one black, one white, who do indeed come together, and think something, and do something.

James Jarvis is the owner of High Place, the fertile farm above Ndotsheni, and it is his son, Arthur, ironically, who is killed in Johannesburg by Kumalo's son. Like Kumalo, Jarvis's journey to Johannesburg involves him in a personal voyage of discovery as he comprehends through his son's writings the full extent of his country's problems. Jarvis is an ignorant rather than bad man, and, while not overtly racist, is certainly conservative in his political and religious views. As he reads the manuscripts his son has left behind, however, he undergoes 'a deep experience' comparable to Paton's at Edith Rheinallt-Jones's funeral, and begins to understand his son's principles. In particular, he comes to see, as Paton did on the Diocesan Commission, that in a country like South Africa, one cannot be a Christian and not be concerned about political justice, a point made forcefully in each of Arthur's pieces. In the first, fragmentary article, Arthur asserts the culpability of whites in the destruction of black social and economic life, and ends by claiming that

¼ whether we are fearful or no, we shall never, because we are a Christian people, be able to evade the moral issues (127).

The second piece is entitled 'The Truth About Native Crime' (see 119), and its theme echoes some of Paton's own views on black crime published in a series of articles in the journal, *The Forum*, shortly before the writing of *Cry, the Beloved Country* (see, for example, Paton 1945). Arthur's paper acerbically points out the inconsistencies and contradictions involved in a people claiming to be Christian and yet practising racial discrimination:

The truth is that our civilisation is riddled through and through with dilemma. We believe in the brotherhood of man, but we do not want it in South Africa ¼. And we are therefore compelled, in order to preserve our belief that we are Christian, to ascribe to Almighty God, Creator of Heaven and Earth, our own human intentions,

and to say that because He created white and black, He gives the Divine Approval to any human action that is designed to keep black men from advancement ¼. The truth is that our civilisation is not Christian; it is a tragic compound of great ideal and fearful practice, of high assurance and desperate anxiety, of loving charity and fearful clutching of possessions (134).

Finally, in a piece James Jarvis finds most painful, entitled 'Private Essay on the Evolution of a South African', his son records that he was brought up by 'honourable parents' who were 'upright and kind and law-abiding' and 'who taught [him his] prayers and took [him] regularly to church' but who taught him 'nothing at all' about South Africa (150). Acknowledging the truth of his son's words, James Jarvis resolves to take up and pursue, in his limited way, his son's liberal-Christian ideals. Importantly, Arthur's ideals are revealed not just at a theoretical level through his articles, but also through the example of his active efforts in the political arena, calling for 'more Native schools', protesting 'about the conditions at the non-European hospital', and insisting on 'settled labour' on the mines, as well as, in all likelihood, standing as a 'native M.P.' at the next election (121).

On his return to Ndotsheni, then, James Jarvis, like Stephen Kumalo, takes responsibility for beginning the process of restoring the land and the community. Having already donated a large sum of money to the African Boys' Club with which his son was associated in Johannesburg, he now sees to the immediate material needs of the children in Ndotsheni. Far from merely offering some paternalistic gestures, Jarvis also builds a dam and provides the services of an agricultural demonstrator to show the people more successful farming methods in order that they may achieve self-sufficiency. Moreover, in a move weighty with symbolic significance, Jarvis helps to repair the dilapidated local church, for the novel confirms in fictional mode Paton's firm belief, articulated in his *Forum* articles, that at bottom 'moral and spiritual decay can only be stopped by moral and spiritual means' (Paton 1945:7-8). Thus, working in concert with Kumalo, Jarvis demonstrates in exemplary fashion the capacity of ordinary men and women to take responsibility for their lives and to begin the process of rebuilding at least some part of the beloved country.

At the level of central plot and characterisation, then, the Christian perspective of *Cry, the Beloved Country* is deeply and vitally informed by the principles and values of liberalism¹. Far from propounding an apolitical message of earthly endurance and heavenly reward, *Cry, the Beloved Country* offers a Christian approach directly focused on the social, economic and political issues of the day and actively concerned with bringing about a just and equitable society in South Africa.

¹ For a more detailed account of Paton's presentation of the values and principles of liberal political philosophy in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, see Foley 1996.

The question of the relationship between religion and politics is explored not only at the level of plot and character, however, but also at the level of language, at what may be termed the level of text and subtext².

Christianity and Liberalism in *Cry, the Beloved Country*: Text and Subtext

In the body of critical work which has grown around *Cry, the Beloved Country*, perhaps the most frequently misrepresented aspect of the novel is that of its language, particularly those passages which have been termed 'biblical'. Even the most distinguished of Paton scholars, Edward Callan, has failed to provide an adequate explication of the significance of the religious quality of much of the language, merely suggesting that certain sections of the novel employ devices such as repetition and parallelism which are reminiscent of the Hebrew poetry of the bible, especially the Psalms (see Callan 1991:38-44). More recently, Kemp Williams has offered a stylistic analysis of the novel's language, but, beyond noting that some of the syntax of the novel recalls that of scripture, provides little insight into the rationale underlying the narrative style (Williams 1996:10-13). Indeed, the only critic to focus in any depth on the political implications of the religious texture of the language, Sheridan Baker, has done so only to produce a wildly improbable reading of the novel, such as associating James Jarvis with God and Arthur Jarvis with Jesus Christ (Baker 1957:56-61). Most notably, no effort has been made to explain the purpose of the numerous biblical references embedded in the text³.

In the light of this critical velleity, a close examination will be offered of the nature and meaning of Paton's use of a narrative language which frequently seems to be deliberately biblical in character. Such an examination will investigate the specifically political meaning underlying Paton's employment of biblical quotations, references and allusions, but will also consider the significance of the pervasive examples in the text of diction and imagery derived from scripture. In particular, it will be necessary to offer some exegesis of the key biblical passages which Paton has used to underpin his own politico-religious perspective, and which function at a subtextual level to determine the novel's thematic meaning.

² While acknowledging the valuable exploration of intertextuality conducted by structuralist theorists such as Julia Kristeva, for example, this article will attempt to develop the present argument in terms of a specifically liberal understanding of the relationship between political and literary critical practice (see Foley 1992).

³ The concern here is not so much with transparent details such as characters' names but rather with those biblical passages which have actually served to shape the direction of the novel's meaning.

Most evidently, as several commentators have noted, Paton has Msimangu use as the text for his sermon at Ezenzeleni several verses from the Book of Isaiah, namely Isaiah 42:6-7 and 42:16 (81) and Isaiah 40:28,30,31(82). At one level, the choice of these verses is apposite for a sermon designed to console and inspire the blind residents of the place, especially Isaiah 42:16:

And I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not
I will lead them in paths that they have not known
I will make darkness light before them
and crooked things straight
These things I will do unto them
and not forsake them (81).

In the immediate dramatic context of the novel, the verses serve also at a metaphorical level to offer succour to Stephen Kumalo himself, who has been 'blind' to God's mercy and who has indeed felt 'faint' and 'weary'. By the end of the sermon, Kumalo humbly announces that he has 'recovered' (83).

But if Msimangu and Kumalo relate to the verses only at these levels for the moment, it is apparent that Paton is aware of the weightier political import of Isaiah's message and allows this awareness to filter through into the overall perspective of the novel. This political awareness is made manifest later on in the novel when Paton, through Kumalo, grafts the end of Isaiah 42:16 quoted above onto the opening words of Isaiah 40 to produce a vision not so much of personal consolation but of divine assurance at the national level:

Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people; these things will I do unto you, and not forsake you (224).

This is a crucial point to which this article will return in due course. But to appreciate the full significance of the point it is necessary to understand the scriptural antecedents of Isaiah's message and how these earlier passages also inform Paton's religious and political thinking. An examination is therefore required of Exodus 3 and Isaiah 11.

In pursuing this line of argument, it must be pointed out that one would not have had to be a professional biblical scholar to discover the linkages between these various passages. In his quotations, Paton uses the King James Version of the bible (otherwise known as the Authorised Version) and it was standard for editions of the time to have a concordance running parallel with the text (see, for example, the Oxford edition of *The Holy Bible* of 1946⁴). In any event, Paton reveals himself in his Christian

⁴ All biblical quotations and references in this article will be taken from this edition.

non-fiction writing to be a diligent student of the bible who is sensitive to the subtleties and complexities of scriptural interpretation (see, for example, Paton 1958b; 1959).

Beginning with the book of Exodus, it may be seen that Paton derives certain core images from Exodus 3 to evoke the quasi-sacred character of the Natal hills described in the opening chapter of *Cry, the Beloved Country*. In this biblical passage, which relates the epiphany of God in the burning bush, Moses goes up 'the mountain of God' (3:1) where he is told: 'put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground' (3:5). In *Cry, the Beloved Country*, the reader is similarly admonished with regard to the land of 'the rich green hills' above Ixopo: 'Stand unshod upon it, for the ground is holy, being even as it came from the Creator' (1). Moreover, the 'desolate' lower regions and valleys in *Cry, the Beloved Country* would seem to correspond with the 'desert' (3:1) or 'wilderness' (3:18) surrounding the mountain in Exodus. Tony Morphet is therefore wrong to suggest that the passage in *Cry, the Beloved Country* is meant to evoke an Edenic, prelapsarian world (1983:9; see Genesis 2). Such an interpretation, in fact, misses a crucial aspect of Paton's actual biblical reference, for in Exodus the reason why God has called Moses is to deploy him to 'bring forth my people' (3:10) from the 'oppression' (3:9) of Egyptian enslavement; in other words, to effect political liberation. Paton's awareness of this significance is evident in the fact that he utilises several phrases from this passage as leading terms in his own book, particularly the idea of the 'cry' of a country in its desire for 'emancipation' from 'bondage' (see especially the title and final paragraph of the novel):

¼ the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage (2:23; see also 6:1-9).

The argument here is not that Paton expects his readers to recognise in the opening paragraphs of the novel a subtle biblical allusion to the idea of political emancipation. Rather, the point is that an understanding of the political import of the original source suggests that Paton shares with the Exodus author a particular conception of God. For the early Israelites, Yahweh was not distant and unapproachable but was instead actively concerned about the world and at times intervened directly in history to bring political freedom and justice to his people. Similarly, it would seem that Paton's theology revolves around a God not just of heaven but of history; not just of paradise but of politics.

This line of argument may be developed by further considering the concept of 'the holy mountain' as it emerges in scripture and in Paton's interpretation. As is common throughout the bible, later writers often hearken back to the diction, imagery and narrative of earlier texts to substantiate their present assertions. A pertinent example is that of Isaiah 11, where the prophet validates his political message by drawing on the

language and content of the Exodus story (see Isaiah 11:16). The essence of the prophet's vision is conveyed through the image of the mountain of God:

They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea (11:9).

It is a familiar passage, and one of special importance to Paton who used it for the title and epigraph of his autobiography, *Towards the Mountain* (1980). It is also, however, a passage which has been frequently misinterpreted. Rather than speaking of a far distant future moment, even after death, when a condition of perfect peace is attained, Isaiah is prophesying the imminent arrival of the messiah, conceived of in the Judaic tradition as an earthly king of the Davidic line who will bring about the liberation and unification of the people of Israel (see Isaiah 9:2-7; 11:1-9; and Psalm 2:6). The specific political context of the prophecy arises from Isaiah's denunciation of the king of Judah, Ahaz, whom Isaiah regarded as having betrayed the people by surrendering their sovereignty in a coalition against the Assyrians rather than trusting in Yahweh's promises (see Bright 1980:290-291). The holy mountain, then, refers to the ushering in of an ideal political state governed by a king of peace and justice (see Isaiah 9:7; 11:2-5). Again, the lexical echoes of *Cry, the Beloved Country* are noticeable, for here the people will acknowledge that God 'comfortedst' (12:1) them as they 'cry' out (12:6) in celebration.

Part of the reason for the common misunderstanding of the passage derives from its appropriation over the years by Christian commentators to signify the Second Coming instead of the Judaic messiah, a fact of which Paton was very much aware (see Paton 1988:1). As such, several critics have mistakenly assumed that Paton's fondness for the passage means that his focus is essentially directed towards a world outside time and history (Morphet 1983:10; Williams 1996:14), or, as Thengani H. Ngwenya (1997:54) has recently contended, that his religious beliefs played 'the primary role' in his writing:

By anchoring his political philosophy in religious principles Paton positions himself above conflicting political ideologies and presents his vision of the future in essentially utopian and transcendental terms.

For Paton, however, while part of his faith is certainly based on the Christian eschatological hope, another equally important part remains firmly rooted in the political realities of this world. As he pointed out in a 1974 paper entitled 'The Nature and Ground of Christian Hope Today' (in Paton 1975:288):

The fact is that although we shall never reach the holy mountain, the whole journey of the Christian life is directed towards it. It is the vision of the

unattainable that determines what we shall attain. There is no holy mountain. It exists only in the vision of the prophets. Yet the vision of it can move men and women to unparalleled deeds, and to lives devoted to what is just and holy. Therefore our hope is concerned with the Future and the Now.

Later on in the same essay, he explicitly describes Isaiah's vision of the holy mountain as 'the vision of the triumph of righteousness in one's own country' (in Paton 1975:289). His interpretation of the concept of the holy mountain, therefore, is, if anything, anti-utopian (see also Paton 1980:122) and based on the belief that Christian justice and holiness are to be sought in the present world. It is an interpretation, moreover, fully consonant with the meliorist principles of liberalism, which affirm 'the corrigibility and improvability of all social institutions and political arrangements' (Gray 1986) rather than positing a rigid utopian ideal. Towards the end of the article, I return to Paton's use of the concept of the holy mountain. For the moment, however, the focus reverts to Isaiah 40 and 42 with which this discussion began.

As biblical scholars have demonstrated (see Westermann 1969), chapters 40 to 55 of the book of Isaiah belong not to the original prophet but to an anonymous later writer, conventionally called Second Isaiah or Deutero-Isaiah (just as the even later writer of chapters 56-66 is called Trito-Isaiah). The political context of chapters 40-55 has shifted from the time of the Assyrian empire in the eighth century BC to the imminent conquest of the Babylonians by the Persian, Cyrus, in 539 BC (Bright 1980:360). Characteristically, though, Deutero-Isaiah draws on the language and concepts of both the Exodus narrative and Proto-Isaiah to authenticate his prophecy in which he foretells the coming liberation of the people from Babylonian captivity and their return to their own land (as was Cyrus' policy). The prophet interprets these events as God appointing Cyrus as his unwitting tool in restoring Zion (see Isaiah 44:24-45:7), and so God is to be exalted as the Lord of the universe, including, importantly, political history (see Isaiah 45:11-18; 48:12-16).

Once more, the opening chapters of Deutero-Isaiah have been the subject of much confusion as they have been taken over by the Christian tradition (together with Micah 3:10) as a herald of the coming of Christ (see Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:2-3; Luke 3:4-6; John 1:23). As noted earlier, however, Paton is clearly aware of the original significance of these chapters as conveying a message of God's active concern with history and particularly his confirmation of the imminent emancipation of his people. And thus Paton, though not quoting at length, allows the diction and imagery of these chapters to permeate his own narrative as a subtextual consolidation of his politically-oriented religious outlook. A brief consideration of the opening of Deutero-Isaiah (40:1-11) will illustrate the point:

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.

Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned; for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God

The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field:

The grass withereth, the flower fadeth, because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass.

The grass withereth, the flower fadeth, but the word of our God shall stand forever.

O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God!

Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him.

He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather his lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.

In this and later chapters there is a recurrent reference to 'comfort' being brought to the people (see also 49:13; 50:3; 51:3; 51:12; 51:19; 52:9); of 'cries' of sorrow being turned into 'cries' of national rejoicing by the prophetic 'cry' of liberation (see also 42:14; 43:14; 54:1); and of such comfort obtaining even in the midst of 'wilderness' and 'desert', or, more pertinently, 'desolation' (see 47:11; 49:8; 49:19-21; 51:19; 54:1-3). Furthermore, Deutero-Isaiah spreads the message, as Paton does in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, that the people should not be 'afraid', but should overcome their 'fear' (see 43:1; 44:2,8), and begin to 'rebuild' and 'restore' (42:22; 44:26; 49:6), for 'a new thing' (43:19) is about to be created. And the prophet makes extensive use of the imagery of 'valley' and 'mountain' (including the phrase 'high places': 42:18; 49:9), particularly 'the high mountain' (40:9) of Zion, reminiscent of the mountain of God in Exodus 3:1 and 'the holy mountain' of Isaiah 11:9.

The point to be made, therefore, is that Paton is not simply employing this vocabulary for the sake of lending his narrative style a biblical flavour. Instead, it is evident that in the composition of *Cry, the Beloved Country* Paton has had in mind a series of linked scriptural passages which deal with the theme of God's concern with political history. It is these passages which have influenced the development of Paton's conception of God, and which underlie his understanding of the relationship between religion and politics. Put in theological terms, God for Paton (and for other liberal-Christian thinkers) is coterminously transcendent and immanent. That is, as lord and

creator of the universe he is above and beyond this world while at the same time being present in the world and vitally concerned about the world. Hence, while *Cry, the Beloved Country* certainly confirms the Christian belief in posthumous salvation (witness, for example, the desperate efforts to get Absalom to avail himself of absolution), it is simultaneously focused on specifically social and political issues.

However, rather than present these ideas bluntly in the form of statement and assertion, Paton has utilised an altogether more subtle and original technique. He has taken these key biblical passages and, recognising their politico-religious significance, has allowed their very language to pervade his own writing: not only in the form of direct quotation and allusion, but in terms of diction, tone, syntax and imagery. And as this subtextual language has become part of the actual fabric of his own text, so have the concepts and vision within this language come to inform and even determine the thematic structure and meaning of his novel. Thus, far from functioning merely as quaint stylistic embellishment, the recurrent biblical phrases and images in *Cry, the Beloved Country* form an integral part of the novel's meaning, and help convey a sense of God as actively and immediately involved in human society and politics.

Conclusion

This article has argued that in *Cry, the Beloved Country* Alan Paton offers a profound exploration of the relationship between religion and politics, not only at the level of plot and character, but also at the level of what may be termed text and subtext. The pursuit of this argument has, however, raised a number of related issues, some of which it is necessary in conclusion to address. In the first place, it must be emphasised that when Paton conceives of God intervening in political history, he does not see this—as some charismatic Christian groups have—in terms of a physical incarnation of God in the world, or in terms of the *parusia*, and certainly not in terms of the establishment of a theocratic state. In more moderate and more plausible manner, Paton conceptualises such intervention in terms of individual people being so inspired and motivated by the ideals of the liberal-Christian outlook that they seek to implement such ideals in their own societies. It was his conviction, as noted earlier, that the vision of Isaiah's holy mountain could compel men and women to the pursuit of political justice and sustain them in that pursuit: he contends after all that he himself had been moved 'to the depth of [his] being' by this vision⁵ to strive for 'a more just, a more humane, a more Christian country' (in Paton 1975:289,291). And, indeed, much of the thematic thrust of *Cry, the Beloved Country* concerns individual characters like Msimangu and Stephen Kumalo,

⁵ In this regard, Paton also records the effect on him of John of Patmos's vision in the New Testament of the new heaven and the new earth (Revelation 21:1-22:5), a vision which he similarly interprets in political terms (in Paton 1975:287-289).

or like Arthur Jarvis and James Jarvis, being so moved by just such a vision that they take it upon themselves to help effect real and meaningful change in their society. God intervenes in history, therefore, through the agency of human beings who have been touched, as it were, by the kinds of ideals articulated, for example, in the Beatitudes of Christ: righteousness and justice, mercy and compassion, tolerance and peacemaking (Matthew 5:1-10). Put in more poetic terms, Paton's unwavering faith in the ability of God to influence political conduct is reflected in his final published words at the end of his last volume of autobiography, *Journey Continued* (1988:301):

God bless Africa
Guard her children
Guide her rulers
and give her peace.

In the second place, it is important to note that Paton did not view the idea of God's intervention in history in terms of what later came to be called 'liberation theology'. The term denotes a radical intellectual movement with a Marxist rather than liberal orientation which tended to condone the use of political violence as a necessary means of liberation from oppression, using selectively interpreted biblical passages as justification. Paton's view is articulated in *Towards the Mountain* (1980:32):

Although attempts are made today—and particularly in Africa—to prove that Jesus believed in 'sanctified violence', and although he drove the money changers out of the temple, it seemed to me that the whole meaning of the gospel was that creative love had a greater power—and a truer and sweeter power—than force.

Paton's rejection of violence as an agent of political change has been condemned by certain critics who have regarded his advocacy of 'love' as naïve and irrelevant (Watson 1982; Rich 1985). It is important to realise, however, that the word, love, as it is used in a political context in *Cry, the Beloved Country*, means far more than some vague notion of interpersonal goodwill, and may more properly be glossed as the desire and effort to create a just and equitable social order in South Africa. This is certainly the sense in which Msimangu, for example, uses the word: negatively, he fears that when the whites finally 'turn to loving' they will find that the blacks 'are turned to hating' (38; 235); but more positively Msimangu offers a lucid explication of the political meaning of love as effective action for the achievement of racial equality and justice:

But there is only one thing that has power completely, and that is love.
Because when a man loves he seeks no power, and therefore he has power. I

see only one hope for this country, and that is when white men and black men, desiring neither power nor money, but desiring only the good of their country, come together to work for it (37).

The impression must not be given, however, that Paton created *Cry, the Beloved Country* as a watertight theological treatise or that there are not some inconsistencies in the presentation of the novel's religious standpoint. Most notably, there is the problem of Msimangu's strange decision to retire into a religious community where he 'would forswear the world and all its possessions' (183), since this seems precisely to remove him from the sphere of practical action and influence which Paton has been highlighting in the novel. It would appear, moreover, to substantiate the views of Msimangu's unnamed critics in the novel who, following Marx's axiom that religion is the opium of the people, despise Msimangu for preaching 'of a world not made by hands, making the hungry patient, the suffering content, the dying at peace', and for sending the people 'marching to heaven instead of to Pretoria' (82-83). Although Paton evidently based this episode on the actual case of Father Leo Rakale, the first black Anglican to become a monk in South Africa (see Alexander 1994:200), there is no doubt that its inclusion weakens rather than strengthens Paton's portrayal of Msimangu as a Christian committed to social change.

Despite such inconsistencies in detail, the liberal-Christian perspective which the novel presents remains generally coherent, and the novel's ending succeeds in bringing the examination of this perspective to a meaningful and appropriate conclusion. On the eve of his son's execution, Stephen Kumalo goes up into the mountain above Carisbrooke to hold a vigil, and on the way he coincidentally meets James Jarvis. Despite the gathering darkness, the two men find words to thank each other for their kindness and to console each other for their loss, thus revealing how far the two men have come in their relationship and confirming the potential for true human interaction that they have established. But the setting for this final meeting also operates at a symbolic level to recall the holy mountain of Isaiah as an ideal of political reconciliation and peace:

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.

And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox (Isaiah 11:6f).

Paton is careful to avoid rendering the scene implausible, and so the white man remains mounted while the black man stands on foot and there is no physical contact for 'such a thing is not lightly done' (232). Nevertheless, through the subtextual biblical imagery,

Paton is able to suggest in the figures of these two old men the potential for the real and meaningful reconciliation of the races in South Africa and for the attainment of genuine racial justice.

The biblical subtext of the novel continues into the final pages as Kumalo contemplates in solitude the meaning of all he has experienced. By now, significantly, the notion of the interconnection of religion and politics, and of God's involvement in history, seems completely natural as the concept of 'salvation' (235) is applied at the national level, and the anthemic prayer of South Africa is mentioned for the fourth time:

And now for all the people of Africa, the beloved country. *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*, God save Africa (235; see 53, 191, 229).

Even though Kumalo is sufficiently prescient to perceive that such salvation 'lay afar off' (235), the novel does end with some sense of hope. Kumalo's view of the sun rising in the east betokens not just the actual dawn, but also, through the serious pun, the assurance of both personal resurrection and, potentially at least, national redemption. The famous final sentence of the novel, appropriately echoing the language of the books of Exodus and Isaiah, adroitly encapsulates this complex blend of pragmatic restraint and expectant faith:

But when that dawn will come, of our emancipation, from the fear of bondage and the bondage of fear, why, that is a secret (236).

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