



Religion, literature and identity in South Africa: the case of Alan Paton

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Abstract

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This article draws on recent research into the early unpublished work of Alan Paton to suggest that the interrelationship of (English-language) literature and religion in South Africa is a much under-researched field despite numerous examples of such research elsewhere. One short case study based on Paton's lecture on "God in modern thought" (1934) is offered. The value of a hermeneutic approach to literature that considers human identity in terms of incarnation, for example, is briefly argued and other possibilities suggested.

Opsomming

Godsdiens, letterkunde en identiteit in Suid-Afrika: die geval van Alan Paton

Die artikel gebruik onlangse navorsing met betrekking tot die vroeë ongepubliseerde werk van Alan Paton en stel dat baie min navorsing oor die verhouding tussen (Engelstalige) letterkunde en godsdiens in Suid-Afrika verskyn het, al bestaan daar talle voorbeelde van sulke navorsing elders. Een kort gevallestudie van Paton se lesing "God in modern thought" (1934) word aangebied. Die waarde van 'n hermeneutiese benadering tot die letterkunde wat oor menslike identiteit handel in terme van byvoorbeeld inkarnasie word kortliks bespreek en ander moontlikhede word voorgestel.

1. Introduction

In the past few years I have been engaged on research into the issue of identity in the early unpublished fiction of Alan Paton (±1922-1935). Conspicuous by its almost total absence, with very few exceptions, is any research into Paton or other South African English writers which adopts a specifically religious point of departure, though this is a well-established field elsewhere (cf. Levey, 1999). This article aims to make this approach better known, thus fostering it in South Africa, to survey the few local items of research in this country, to clarify my own hermeneutic methodology, which emphasises incarnation, and to offer a very short case study of a 1934 talk by Paton. I proceed from the perspective that no scholarly approach can be neutral and that even in a secularised country one is entitled to apply one's religion, in my case Christianity, in scientific discourse. Such is a logical consequence of accepting the lordship of Christ over one's entire life. Hence – like Paton – I do not support a privatised Christianity.

Since most of the leading scholars in the field of literature and religion are apparently not well known in this country (though Edwards, Gallagher, Jasper, Walhout and Ward have visited it), I contextualise some of their work. Hence my list of references is deliberately extensive though not by any means complete, since it is intended to act as a resource for researchers.

Though Paton's involvement in politics, his role as a South African writer and his strong Christian convictions have been much studied (e.g., Alexander, 1994; Callan, 1982; Foley, 1999; Ngwenya, 1997; Paasche, 1992) not much is known of his earliest views or writings and only one local study has focused superficially on his religious beliefs (Smith, 1987). I address this further lacuna in my research generally.

2. Incarnation and identity

I consider that Christ's incarnation is not only a matter essential to soteriology but also one of much significance for the critic of literature. For one thing, incarnation speaks of the immanence of God in all positive human activity, and for another it foregrounds the significance of human identity: issues on which many works of literature touch. The incarnation, God become human, is termed by Fiddes *the central moment of the "plot"* of the Christian story (Fiddes, 1991:47; cf. Ward, 2000:45). To my mind the fact that the Bible, as we presently have it, begins with creation and ends with a

new creation is not a mere accident of the process of canonisation, but reflects a particular theological reflection upon history and chronology, setting it in the light of God's creative acts as a whole – which do not cease with creation. In particular, the Bible deals continually with God's intentional presence in human history, whether incarnate in the technical sense or not, and with the resulting significance of human identity, which stems both from relationship with God and with other human beings. Williams (2000) makes a similar point (see below), as does Ward (2005a:106).

To my mind, incarnation suggests not so much that the archetypal Christian self, that of Christ himself, is fixed and monolithic, but rather – in common with recent theorists of the self such as Charles Taylor (1989) – that in its human form it is multiple and complex, in process rather than in stasis. Fiddes points to the dialectical contrast in human life: people are both dust of the earth and image of God. They experience both glory and human limitations (Fiddes, 1991:52, 54). One could argue that the incarnation is a profoundly creative act of God, immersing Godhead deeply in the life of humanity. I would add that this is a continuous process, for though the life of Jesus was a single event, it is continued in the body (and bodies) of his followers. In fact, Fiddes observes that “there is indeed no reason why the Creator should not go on being eternally creative” (Fiddes, 1991:62). In my view, the importance of the doctrine of incarnation is also that it links together the concepts of creation and fall and emphasises the relationality, not only of human beings and God, but also, by extension, of human beings and human beings. As Williams (2000:93) puts it: “It is in active relation with [Jesus] that the possibility of human community becomes actual ...”. Mbiti's (1989:106) African reading of such a notion, well expressing the concept of *ubuntu/botho*, similarly holds that the individual does not and cannot exist alone:¹

Just as God made the first man [sic], as God's man, so now man himself makes the individual who becomes the corporate or social man. It is a deeply religious transaction. ... Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual.

Though one might not wish to adopt a dark view of the Fall as predestined and doomed to be repeated in every human life, it is

1 Taylor (1989:35) points out that even in the West “[o]ne is a self only among other selves”.

certainly true that, as Fiddes (1991:63) drily expresses it, “the ‘original fact’ is that all human beings do in practice fall into estrangement”. Fiddes’s suggestion that the best writing imitates the Creator in being incarnational (Fiddes 1991:233), in other words that it reflects the glory and the dust of being human, in my view therefore has much merit. It might be objected that such a reading simply states the obvious, that any good writing will encompass the poles inherent in the human experience. Such an objection, however, too easily passes over the dimension of the transcendent or what might be termed mystery, which need not necessarily be explicit. If a work apparently does not deal with the transcendent at all, then it may be fruitful to ask why.

I therefore define *religion* for the purposes of this article in relatively traditional terms as that which attempts to tie, to link, to bind human activities together, even and especially the contradictory, by an awareness of the transcendent, focused in the person and presence of God. In so doing I explicitly wish to acknowledge that the other sense of *bind*, in terms of limiting, confining, is also all too often operative.² Such a consciousness of the potentially paradoxical nature of religion is central to my own thought and is echoed in Paton’s own sense of the unknowability of God and the enormous challenge of consistently practising his religion. As regards *literature*, I prefer to use the term *writing*, to move away from the notion of the canon and of written texts.

To my mind the study of writing in terms of religion is a fascinating, shadowy, dynamic world calling for a journey along and through the borders of human existence and of academic disciplines. Jasper observes that the task of studying religion and literature is carried out in the context of a journey and of change (Jasper, 1989:138), while Ward (2000:ix) speaks of the thresholds which are academically fashionable, the ambivalence of the boundaries which it is the business of theology to transgress. In Paton’s case, a generous leavening of political and humanitarian activism makes the journey still more interesting.

In undertaking an incarnational reading of Paton I consciously want to acknowledge that I am working within a hermeneutical framework. I do employ postmodernist insights where appropriate, but my

2 In this country and in Africa the close links between Christianity and the colonialist enterprise provide a particularly glaring example of such a sense; see the studies by the Comaroffs (1991; 1997) and Maluleke (1998).

interpretations emphasise theory-as-practice rather than theory divorced from practice. Clearly, a reader schooled within a different tradition and with other purposes might well take another direction.

Probably the strongest critique of hermeneutic thought has emerged from the quarters of those who claim that such a philosophy is foundationalist in nature, in other words that it believes that a deeper reality is determinable. This is quite true and is undoubtedly at the basis of religious thought in general; but one might answer that the definitive claim that reality is not determinable is logically open to the same objection. Hence I freely adopt an approach which is hermeneutic in nature, while acknowledging the existence of competing, even hostile, approaches to narratives and texts.³ Though Derrida's play on difference as both endlessly deferring meaning and being the only way of giving rise to it has been interpreted as an attack on any notion of being able to represent any kind of reality whatsoever (Vande Kopple, 1991:216), I wish to point out with Ward (2000:xiv-xv, 10-17) that the tradition in which Derrida writes, the critical tradition, is only one of the traditions in Western philosophy. (I would add that the linguistic tools which are Derrida's main instrument are not the only ones available.) An equally strong and compelling current is the hermeneutic.

Naturally hermeneutics, with its origins in the study of Biblical texts, is attractive to Christian scholars in the religion/literature field (see e.g. Lundin *et al.*, 1999:152-182, 230-239 in particular). Jasper (2004:134-136) offers an up-to-date account of hermeneutics from Biblical texts to hyperreality, but its methods are by no means confined to such critics. For instance, the broad category within which I operate could also be defined in social scientific terms as phenomenological or qualitative (in that it is subjective and perceives reality as a function of the human imagination). As Collis and Hussey (2003:60) point out, one of the major qualitative approaches is in fact the hermeneutic. On the other hand the ontological assumption of a positivistic or quantitative approach is that the world is objective and external to the researcher (Collis & Hussey, 2003:48). This would be inappropriate to the present topic and to the field of writing in general. No doubt still other frameworks could be adduced, and, as Collis and Hussey observe, most research projects are to be

3 It is also appropriate for Paton, whose (published) writings, according to the abstract of a thesis by Stuart (1988), could be read specifically in terms of an incarnational hermeneutic.

found on a continuum. My point is simply to demonstrate along with Griffin's volume (2005) that numerous research methodologies are available, asking different questions and yielding different results, but are not thereby inevitably inferior or superior to each other. Quite often they might even complement each other.

3. My explicitly religious approach

My specifically religious, but not dogmatic, method of reading Paton is adopted because I believe it is appropriate for a writer who was, perhaps self-consciously, Christian from early in his life and who was not particularly wedded to dogma (Paton, 1980:274-275). Regarding my approach, one which by definition transcends reason, it is relevant that an agnostic philosopher, Bryan Magee, who read philosophy at Oxford and Yale, gaining a doctorate on Schopenhauer, and has published extensively on philosophy in general, maintains that reason alone is insufficient, adding: "one of the most important achievements of Kant's philosophy is that it demonstrates that permanently beyond the reach of human knowledge lies a realm of possibility such that, provided a statement is not self-contradictory, any assertion about what obtains in that realm is capable of being either true or untrue, and we humans have no way of knowing which" (Magee, 1997:156).⁴ Pointing out that "In so far as I have an involuntary inclination towards one side, it is towards the opposite side from [Kant], against belief in God", Magee (1997:157) nevertheless adds,

I have little intellectual patience with people who think they know that there is no God ... and no reality outside the empirical

4 Like Magee, my interest is more in Kant's trenchant demonstration of the limits of human reason than in his proving or disproving of the existence of God, his success or otherwise in this endeavour being a much debated issue (cf. Grier, 2004). Kant argues that we cannot have knowledge of any realm beyond the empirical (McCormick, s.a.). As he puts it, "[t]here is nothing actually given to us, except a perception and the empirical progression from it to other possible perceptions" (Kant, 1993 [1787]:357 [B:521]). Hence his awareness of the limitations of reason (Kant, 1993 [1787]:xlvi-l). At the same time he makes it clear in the Preface that "I must, therefore, abolish *knowledge*, to make room for *faith*" (emphasis in original; Kant, 1993 [1787]:21 [B:xxix]). Deleuze (1984), discussing the later *Critique of judgment* (1790, par. 87-88; which Tomlinson and Habberjam (1984:xv) consider as the keystone of Kant's "critical arch"), similarly observes that as an object of knowledge, God is determinable only indirectly and analogically; but that as an object of belief he acquires an exclusively practical determination and reality. This and Kant's remark about abolishing knowledge so as to make room for faith represent my point of departure exactly.

world. Some such atheistic humanism has been one of the characteristic outlooks of Western man [sic] since the Enlightenment, ... It is the prevailing outlook, I suppose, in most of the circles in which I have moved for most of my life. It lacks all sense of the mystery that surrounds and presses so hard on our lives; more often than not it denies its existence, and in doing so is factually wrong.

I contend, therefore, that it is most unsatisfactory to study human beings and their cultural productions, such as writing, with a consciousness that does not allow for, even impatiently excludes, the non-material. This is a post-Enlightenment Western notion, held also by those scholars from non-Western cultures who have been influenced by Western thought, but not by any means adhered to by many other cultures, and to claim worldwide or absolute validity for it is not only arrogant but contradicts the postmodernist assertion that truth is relative.⁵ It is worth noting that non-Western thinkers, such as Soyinka (1976) and Mbiti (1989) to mention two Africans, are often quite comfortable with the notion of God and/or the transcendent, more so than writers in the West.

4. My theoretical approach

My theoretical foundation, as indicated earlier, may be described as broadly but critically postmodernist in that it considers contrasts, contradictions, stresses and strains and the like in Paton. Rather than discuss such issues from an external point of view, I examine them from a deep involvement with the material. I quite openly own my own limitations and presuppositions: my whiteness, my maleness (and the power associated with both; cf. Ward, 2005b:78), my consciousness that I am not neutral and that I do not want or need to be. Hence, I experience both a tension and a fellow-feeling with postmodernism in the idea that one's presuppositions cannot be divorced from one's thought and practice. As Belsey (2002:29) puts it, "No theoretical position can exist in isolation ... The independent universe of literature and the autonomy of criticism are illusory."

5 Mbembe (2004:4) puts this very sharply, arguing that the "moral power" of both the Jewish (by which he largely refers to Levinas) and the African understandings of bondage, exile and death, and therefore of freedom, "derives from their radical critique of the pagan ethos that has long served as the dark side of Western conceptions of absolute sovereignty as well as Western imperial ideology". See also Ashcroft *et al.* (2006a:517 and 2006b:7) on the increasing importance being accorded to the sacred in postcolonial studies, partly in reaction to Western secularism.

Some of my presuppositions would not be shared by certain (though not all) postmodernists: presuppositions such as my religious outlook on life, which causes me to believe that God, in such as one understands God, is at the centre of human existence or my Anglicanism, espoused by Paton himself.⁶ Others, such as a questioning of critical practice and social systems, might be shared. An important area of contact at any rate is that religion has much to contribute to current debates about identity and something to learn, especially if it is held that the self is constituted through a meeting with what lies beyond it (Walton, 2000:13). In the same way, my own readings of Paton or other writers mirror my interest in how contemporary theories of identity may be useful in understanding these authors' works. Such an interest arises also out of the current post-apartheid South African climate, exhibiting various, often markedly self-conscious, even essentialist, claims to identity such as the formation of the Nativist Club and a large-scale re-evaluation of their identity by white people in particular. This latter phenomenon is discussed at length by Distiller and Steyn (2004:1-11), Steyn (2001: passim), Wasserman and Jacobs (2003:15-17), and Steyn (2003: 235-245). I consciously acknowledge these debates, which offer me both personal and intellectual challenges.

5. Religion and writing elsewhere

The study of religion and writing is presently well-established in a number of countries, such as England, Scotland, European countries (such as Germany, France and Holland), the United States and Australia. Yet almost no studies have been undertaken in terms of South African writing, especially in English, except for the occasional short piece (Kuschke, 1982; Steenberg, 1973; Viljoen, 1992) or thesis (Woeber, 2001)⁷ and very few in terms of African authors in

6 While in the 1920s he was probably not aware of Anglican theology as such (see Nuttall, 2004), Paton's Christian friends' more holistic view of life began a change in him, running from religious belief into action (Alexander, 1994:40-41, 54). He made friends with Neville Nuttall, an Anglican whose deep religious beliefs strongly influenced him, as early as 1921 (Alexander, 1994:42). After September 1925 he was encouraging his wife Dorrie to worship in the Anglican church again (Alexander, 1994:78, 82) and was confirmed as an Anglican on 10 December 1931 (Alexander, 1994:107).

7 Woeber has also published articles related to her thesis (e.g., Woeber, 1995; Woeber, 1997) where a respectful but interrogatory discussion of the effects of religion on autobiographies by black South African writers is central; work by Hofmeyr (2004a; 2004b) carefully researches the effects of religion on reading in South Africa, but without a specifically religious ethos; Van Vuuren, likewise a

general, except where Islam and Muslim writers are sometimes discussed (Bangura, 2000; Harrow, 1991; Newell, 2006) or where postcolonial studies are brought into play (Scott, 1996). Occasionally studies on African writers and religion appear in contemporary topics of discussion such as gender (Le Roux, 2005).

Generally speaking the validity of reading writing from a religious perspective is not much in debate these days, though in the past such critics as Jonathan Culler (1984) have spoken their minds rather freely. As arguments on both sides have become more reasoned, the acceptance of the field has become more widespread, even if there is sometimes uneasiness about overt expressions of faith (or of doubt, for that matter). Though one might have expected religion and writing to constitute a well-defined, coherent and harmonious sphere of interest, the field might perhaps be best described in Kort's (1990:577) wry words as a "forum of disputation constituted by processes of many kinds". The truth is, of course, that there are probably as many approaches as there are, not just religions, but individual practices of religion.

South African scholar, has published an article on Golding which is theologically sensitive and is very much in the *Religion and Literature* tradition (Van Vuuren, 2004), but its subject-matter is not South African. Marais (1997) has undertaken a study of J.M. Coetzee in Levinasian terms but focuses on aesthetics, respect for the other, the relation of ethics and politics and the autonomous subject in Levinas and Coetzee (Marais, 1997:1, 17, 51, 59, 66), proceeding philosophically rather than religiously (cf., also Marais' references to infinity, Marais, 1997:62 and 64). In contrast, very thought-provoking is Ledbetter's study of desire in Coetzee's *Age of iron*, which explores issues such as silence and pain in this novel from an explicitly religious perspective (Ledbetter, 1996:104-119, especially 108-109 and 117-118). Hamilton's article (2005) on suffering in *Dusklands* in my view studiously avoids any religious readings of a positive nature, while Du Plooy and Ryan (2005:47) speak about compassion, forgiveness and the transcendence of pain and suffering in Morrison without admitting any metaphysical dimension. As far as I am aware one of the few local studies discussing religious aspects of South African literature is by a theologian, Du Toit, who after a summary of various works by overseas writers depicting Jesus adduces an African example in Ngugi's *A grain of wheat* (Du Toit, 1997:819-830) and very briefly considers poems by two Afrikaans writers, Sheila Cussons and Breyten Breytenbach (Du Toit, 1997:832-834). Another is a chapter by Opland (1997:300, 315), which covers some of the same ground, making the valid point that English and Afrikaans writers were free to accept or reject Christianity while for black (African) writers this religion was only part of a "cultural complex imposed from without" (Opland, 1997:315). Ridge has published a number of articles in this vein, e.g. on allusions to religion in Pauline Smith (Ridge, 1992:128-132). Stuart's doctoral dissertation (1988) seems to be the only specifically theological study of Paton; it appeared in the United States.

For many years various Judeo-Christian approaches have dominated the scene, reflecting a wide range of theological and philosophical trends. More recently, the contributions of other religions have begun to surface, such as Buddhism or Islam or Aboriginal religion, but these are still in the minority.

Some Christian views have been fundamentalist, attempting for instance to derive explicit norms for reading and writing literature, such as morals, unity, depiction of characters or plot from Scripture (Meeter, 1972). Many such perspectives have reacted sharply against contemporary literary theory because of its non-foundationalist premises and Derrida, as one might imagine, at one stage came in for particular opprobrium, though also for spirited defences (cf., Walhout, 1985 and Underwood, 1986). The furore is dying down at present, with a number of books having demonstrated Derrida's and other leading postmodernist thinkers' actual interest in religion (cf. Anidjar, 2002; Derrida & Vattimo, 1998; Ward, 1997), even if they often exclude metaphysics as such. Conversely, it would be a mistake to suppose that Christianity and criticism are necessarily at loggerheads; mainstream critics of a Christian persuasion, apart from Eliot, Gardner and Lewis, include not only previous mainstays such as Frye (1982) and Kermode (1979),⁸ but also Cunningham (2002), Professor of Poetry at Oxford. Many leading British scholars in the field of religion and literature hold chairs at major universities, such as Glasgow (Jasper) and Manchester (Ward). However, it is true that several books are available which, uneasy about theory, undertake to provide guidance for the conservative Christian reader (cf. Barratt *et al.*, 1995; Ryken, 1979; 2002; Walhout & Ryken, 1991).

Also, it should be noted that a number of earlier influential readings of literature, overtly Christian, have employed broadly humanist, formalist or new critical methods (Eliot, 1935; Gardner, 1983; Lewis, 1961), sometimes with little self-reflexivity as to political or other pre-suppositions. In the same general vein are readings which have attempted to measure literary works by Christian theological standards, e.g. Battenhouse (1969) on Shakespeare, or readings which have read the Bible or theology as literature (cf. Alter, 1982), or conversely works of literature as susceptible to Christian readings. Sometimes these are sensible, as with readings of the uses of

8 Still, at the age of ninety, regarded by one writer as the last of the great critics (Sutherland, 2006).

Biblical imagery in Ngugi or Faulkner. Often they are appropriate, as is the case with theological readings of Teodor Dostoyevsky, Denise Levertov, Themba Msimang, D.B.Z. Ntuli, Flannery O'Connor, John Updike or Patrick White: all confessed Christian writers. But unfortunately it is not uncommon for the critic to exhaust him-/herself in an irritable reaching after images of Christ (or conversely the anti-Christ) in all of modern literature (cf. Meeter, 1972).

More sophisticated and sympathetic are treatments of twentieth-century literature such as that by Etchells (1969) which examine its philosophical foundations and parallel these with Christian reflections on human existence, attempting to show how each can complement a reading of the literature concerned. Etchells' work, taking existentialism as its point of departure, offers a clear example of how, generally speaking, Christian treatments of literature, far from transcending the concerns of their day, are embedded in the dominant contemporary philosophy.

An obvious area of debate arises in discussion over the nature of "Christian literature" and whether there is such a thing. Very often the issue is trivialised into assertions that Christian literature *must* embody the idea of hope in Christ (Werkman, 1996), that it *must* be moral (Walhout, 1998). Generally speaking, however, sense prevails, with many recent "Christian" novels simply not being worth reading (Terrell, 2006; Terrell, 2002 tartly points out that a narrow "piety is not enough", arguing his case in convincing detail, especially on p. 249-257; see also Kilby, 2002:277-278).

Considerations of the nature of language and of the creative process have often produced very fruitful debate and represent a major portion of recent output (Edwards, 1984; 1988; 1990; Jasper, 1995; Mills, 1996; Ward, 1995; Wright, 1988). A number of these rely on various forms of pneumatology or Trinitarian theology for their basic argument, as did one of the earlier major contemporary exponents of literature and religion studies, Dorothy L. Sayers (1941). Especially interesting are the views of professional linguists such as Vande Kopple (1991) or Yallop, who holds that linguistic meaning is but one form of meaning (Yallop, 1994:194-195), thereby setting both logocentricity and the attacks on it in perspective.

Regularly being published are subtle readings of literature in terms of current theologies, philosophies and cultural thinkers (e.g., Detweiler, 1989; Ferretter, 2003; Fiddes, 1991; Gearon, 1999; Griffith & Tulip, 1998; Jasper, 1989; 1995 & 2004; Kort, 1990; Ledbetter, 1996; Ong *et al.*, 1995; Ruf, 1997; Tsuchiya, 1997; Vanhoozer,

1998; 2003; Ward, 1995; 1997; 2000; 2005a; 2005b; et cetera). In a recent article Wright (2005) traces trends in the arena of religion and literature from modernism to postmodernism. Although many such readings are intellectually radical, not all of them evidence much political engagement with society. One honourable exception is Gallagher (1994), while the recent work of Ward (2005a and 2005b), is moving in this direction. Generally this lack of engagement is also true of Paton's early writing, though his religion itself is not privatised.

Scott (1996b:303-305) describes three main overlapping emphases in this field, of which the first is most prevalent in my work, though I acknowledge the importance of the others. Firstly, Scott identifies a focus on literature as possessing theological or religious significance, which protests against a narrow literary criticism. Secondly, there is a critical stance towards Christianity's historical role in the colonialist enterprise. Finally and most recently, the recognition of religious pluralism has widened the debate to encompass other religions.

In line with Scott's first category and my own thinking, Fiddes argues that creative writing, because it is concerned with human experience, is occupied with themes that also occupy theology (Fiddes, 1991:33). Hence theologians could be influenced by the themes and techniques of imaginative writing, while Christian concepts could provide the reader with a perspective for interpretation of literary texts (Fiddes, 1991:33-34). Fiddes is careful to add that while this does not verify the Christian understanding of the world, it does mean that the reader is employing the skills of a literary critic consistent with her/his view of a general revelation of God in human art, yet treating both revelation and art equally.

This is the general method I follow, though I fully concur with Fiddes that one should beware of treating the arts as a happy hunting ground for Christian truths (Fiddes, 1991:32). Hence my own reading, where possible, arises from motifs already present and central in Paton. With Jasper (1995:145; 2004:20-22; cf. Gadamer, 1989: 291-292 especially), I admit that a hermeneutic circle is inevitable and that what is important is how one enters the circle: with violence, or with humour? More important still, I would maintain, is a sense of humility, not always found in Christian literary critics or in Paton himself.

6. Alan Paton's *God in modern thought*

Whilst studying Paton I keep in mind that he was a strongly self-conscious figure who deliberately cultivated particular perceptions of himself, creating a distinctive identity and clearing a well-defined space for his activities in the images of the pilgrim and the prophet.⁹ Particularly in later years these were his favourite self-portraits, as signalled by the titles of the two volumes of his autobiography, *Towards the mountain* and *Journey continued* (Levey, 2001a and 2001b; Paton, 1980 and 1988). These titles also suggest the strong sense of purpose which Paton experienced throughout his life. His sense of identity as a Christian writer, deeply involved in South Africa, in politics, with other people, naturally leads to the questions of how he perceived the identity of himself and of other human beings in general and to what extent it was manifested in his earlier work. I would suggest his view was largely incarnational in essence.

An incident I discussed in an earlier paper (Levey, 2001b; a reading which I correct below) demonstrates Paton's familiarity with the current thought of his time, his vigorous application of it, but, interestingly, not his engagement with the politics of the period.

In 1934 (or very early in 1935) he apparently gave a public lecture entitled "God in modern thought". Its lucidity bears a slight resemblance to William Temple's Gifford Lectures, delivered in Glasgow in 1932-1933 and 1933-1934 and published in 1935, though a direct influence is not demonstrable. As with Temple, Paton argues for the immanence of God in the world (Paton, 1934a:3; cf. Paton, 1934b), discussing contemporary psychology (p. 1), decrying extreme behaviourism and determinism, particularly because these schools of thought have proclaimed themselves as a new gospel (p. 2-3). He points out that if human artistic and intellectual achievement are merely responses to stimuli, the same can be said of behaviourism itself (p. 4). He maintains that character and moral struggle are real things and insists upon the existence and importance of human freewill and choice (p. 5-9), asserting that "[r]eligion and human choice stand or fall together" (Paton, 1934a:6). Following McDougall (*Introduction to social psychology*) Paton champions purposivism (p. 4-6), contending that of *our own purposes* (emphasis in original)

9 Le Roux (2003:1), former rector of Edgewood College of Education and hence an official of the Natal Education Department, who had frequent contact with Paton in this capacity, indicates that he "rather agree[s]" with this assessment, adducing one or two further examples.

human beings might join their purposes to those of God (p. 6), claiming that human beings possess a freedom in this self-determination (p. 7): the *feeling* that we are free, and not the *thinking* that we are bound, as he puts it (p. 8; emphasis on Paton's). He concludes, in terms which would probably be termed "foundationalist" today:

We gain freedom, not by any intellectual distrust of our emotional endowment, but by recognition of their complementary [sic] function, by the seeking of the truth, by the holding of the beautiful, by the striving for the good, by the worshipping of That which is beyond knowledge, which men call God. (Paton, 1934a:9.)

I interpret Paton's explicitly Christian, non-privatised, thinking here as specifically incarnational: it views the person as a holistic entity but not as one solipsistically autonomous from God or other humans: he/she consists, inter alia, of emotions, intellect and will, and is therefore able to make significant moral and other choices; he/she is consequently able robustly to participate in the work of God here and now, yet is accorded a wider purpose and calling that both affects and transcends human existence.

Intriguingly, Bram Fischer may have been a member of Paton's audience and certainly borrowed the typescript. On returning it, in a friendly covering letter dated 20 February 1935 apologising for keeping the document so long (Fischer, 1935) he acknowledges that Paton had dealt with the topic "carefully & reasonably", but regards the finish as "not quite satisfactory", finding the reference to God insufficiently reflecting the "realness & the essential reasonableness & yet the altogether beyond reason of the Father disclosed in the very humanness of the words of Jesus". He avers that applied (dialectical) materialism is at the base of things and, ironically, given Paton's aversion to Watson, declares that the latter is a strong exponent of this philosophy and is exactly what it needed to make its position at all thinkable. Paton would undoubtedly have considered Fischer's views to be somewhat limited, and limiting of human identity, since they foreground Jesus' and other people's humanity but allow little room for human freedom or relationship with other human beings or divinity – in short, little room for incarnation. One could say that Fischer emphasises dust over glory, since there is no meeting of the human self with anything beyond it.

It is important to note that the talk, at least in typed form, embodies a number of Paton's characteristic weaknesses: a sureness, a certain

self-consciousness, a complete lack of awareness of gender. A religious reading of Paton, I hold, should bring out not only Paton's strengths and his attempt to live out a *holistic* vision of life, but also his weaknesses, deploying a hermeneutics both of faith and of suspicion (cf. Jasper, 2004:8-10).

As I have attempted to suggest, to my mind an entire field of research lies virtually open for students of South African literature. For me hermeneutics, identity and incarnation have proved greatly fruitful, but the journey could follow many different paths. If the doctrine of common grace is in any sense true, then the activity of God is there to be discerned in numerous roads not yet taken.

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10 I argue that this is the same as the supposedly lost *Religion and my generation* (Alexander, 1994:115) since it appears to be half-finished and chapter titles include "My generation" and "Religion and my generation". In places the argument repeats that in Paton (1934a).

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Key concepts:

hermeneutics
identity: incarnation
religion and literature
South Africa: English literature

Kernbegrippe:

godsdienst en letterkunde
hermeneutiek
identiteit: inkarnasie
Suid-Afrika: Engelstalige letterkunde