

THE POSTFIGURATIVE CHRIST IN MORLEY CALLAGHAN'S *SUCH IS MY BELOVED*

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ABSTRACT

Symbolic Christ figures, i.e. characters whose lives to greatly varying extents mirror those of Jesus of Nazareth without being fully fledged allegories thereof, were frequently employed as fictional devices in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature as means of expressing diverse qualities, lessons, mores, and values in the modern world. One esteemed literary artist who made use of this technique was the Canadian liberal Roman Catholic layman Morley Callaghan (1903-1990). In his novel of 1934, *Such Is My Beloved*, the protagonist, a gifted young priest in a major city, is a latter-day reflection of Christ. In this embodiment, Social Gospel aspects of Christianity come to the fore.

Symbolic Christ figures have long played prominent roles in fiction internationally and perhaps reached the zenith of their popularity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Not until the 1960s, however, was more than infrequent scholarly analysis undertaken of these characters or their significance defined in terms of literary theory. The emergence of "religion and literature" as a scholarly discipline undoubtedly stimulated both literary scholars and theologians to pay them increased attention during the third quarter of the twentieth century. In one seminal article the eminent South African novelist Alan Paton, whose intensely spiritual *Cry, the Beloved Country* had appeared in 1948, and Professor Liston Pope analysed various efforts to model modern characters on Jesus Christ and concluded that for several reasons such endeavours were almost invariably foreordained to failure. Twentieth-century authors who sought to create such a character, they pointed out, could no longer either assume that readers were familiar with the rudimentary lineaments of the story of Jesus or that they were not; consequently, they ran the risk of writing arcane plots with little symbolic meaning or boring readers with pedantic allegories. Moreover, Paton and Pope cited the limitations posed by a pre-existing plot

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whose “end is inevitable from the beginning, whatever form the crucifixion may take” and which could thus yield only tragedy if writers were “faithful” to the Biblical account. Such fidelity, however, did not allow a Resurrection in a modern setting. Consequently,

most often in modern fiction the Christ figure is lost “in the gathering fog” or exiled or executed; we know of no novelist who has undertaken to depict the ultimate triumph.

The central character is thus “reduced to a victim of history, largely without hope other than a vague appeal to the future.” But beyond these literary limitations, these theologically inclined Christians professed,

Christ is too complex and paradoxical for easy treatment in any of the traditional literary forms, whether tragedy, comedy, melodrama, allegory or fable.²

Their caveat notwithstanding, *littérateurs* continued to create symbolic Christ figures, if less frequently than they had done during the first few decades of the twentieth century, and in the early 1970s literary scholar Professor Theodore Ziolkowski published what is arguably the most penetrating and far-reaching analysis of this narrative technique. In his *Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus* he disagreed sharply with the pessimistic conclusions of Paton and Pope. He concurred that in English literature one could point to few successful Christ figures but argued cogently that fiction in German and other languages offered a good many. Acknowledging that he approached “the Gospel story as a cultural possession rather than as an item of faith”, this esteemed Princeton University scholar reasoned that if one did not insist on full parallelism, but rather looked for characters whose lives were prefigured to a greater or lesser extent by that of Jesus (as, to cite one example, that of James Joyce’s Leopold Bloom had been by the Homeric Ulysses in the renowned Irish novel with that title) one could indeed find a cornucopia of laudable examples. Ziolkowski emphasised that his study was not of lives of the historical Jesus two millennia ago or of the various *Jesus redivivus* stories in which the Man of Nazareth miraculously crops up in the modern world, but rather of

2 Alan Paton and Liston Pope, “The Novelist and Christ”, *The Saturday Review*, XXXVII, no. 49 (4 December 1954), pp. 15-16, 56-59.

novels in which the life of Jesus has been wholly secularized: it prefigures the life of a fictional character to such a pronounced extent that it determines the structure of entire episodes (as in *The Magic Mountain*) or, indeed, of entire novels.

He developed a carefully refined typological framework for the categorisation of such types.³ The multilingual Ziolkowski cast a broad net and hauled in an abundant catch of European and North American postfigurative examples, but none were caught in the waters of Canadian literature.

Had Ziolkowski examined Morley Callaghan's acclaimed novel of 1934, *Such Is My Beloved*, he would have discovered a protagonist who fits more completely than nearly any other in Canadian imaginative literature his criteria for identifying symbolic Christ figures. To be sure, the character in question points to an inadequacy in Ziolkowski's definition, which fails to cover modern Christ figures who are not "wholly secularized". Father Stephen Dowling is an unambiguously religious person not only in terms of his vocation but also in his beliefs and behaviour. Possibly owing to the fact that its author was Canadian (although it was initially published in New York), *Such Is My Beloved* has never received an appropriate portion of international scholarly attention, a fate shared by most other literary works conceived in Canada, regardless of their artistic merit. Even in his native land the Callaghan's eminence as a writer of fiction was not greatly appreciated until after his death in 1990. A few critics had grasped his importance before then, however, not least with regard to the spiritual dimensions of his craft. Martin Seymour-Smith, for instance, went so far in 1980 as to profess that Callaghan,

perhaps more than any other English-language writer of the century, has a sense of what Christianity means in a post-Christian era.⁴

That religious motifs occupy a central place in Callaghan's novels has been acknowledged since the 1930s. He was unabashedly a writer of first-rate "Catholic novels" shortly before two of his denominational

3 Theodore Ziolkowski, *Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 11.

4 Morley Seymour-Smith, *Novels and Novelists: A Guide to the World of Fiction* (London: WHS Distributors, 1980), p. 110.

brethren in England, Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh, brought that sub-genre into vogue. Indeed, his frequent uses of Biblical intertextuality, not least in the titles of such works as *Such Is My Beloved*, *They Shall Inherit the Earth*, and *More Joy in Heaven*, can hardly be missed by any reader with even a rudimentary grounding in the English text of the New Testament. They indicate Callaghan's reliance on the Bible as a principal source of his creativity and thematic emphases.

It is my intention in the present article to take steps towards a greater appreciation of one dimension of Callaghan's use of Scripture by exploring pivotal aspects of the symbolic Christ figure in *Such Is My Beloved*. So lucidly does this stand out that the consideration of Father Dowling serves as a useful introduction to the use of postfigurative Biblical narrative techniques in modern fiction. Primary attention will be paid to the interplay of the spiritual and the social dimensions which the liberal Catholic Callaghan perceived as the crux of his faith. The Canadian critic Malcolm Ross emphasised the religious thrust of Callaghan's writing and contended that while "no Marxist writer of the period had a stronger sense of the rottenness of his world" than did Callaghan, he refused "to solve the 'social problem' in social terms." This is correct only if one thinks in terms of a strict line of demarcation between Christian faith and social ethics, something which many Christian ethicists would reject out of hand. As we shall observe, *Such Is My Beloved* hinges on the interplay of the two and is *inter alia* a plea that this be acknowledged by the Church. It is distinctly a novel of the Social Gospel, albeit one whose plot occurs within an equally clearly Catholic context.

Remarkably, critics have almost universally overlooked the Christ motif in their published analyses of Morley's gallery of characters in *Such Is My Beloved*, even when dissecting the religious themes of the novel. In her monograph *Morley Callaghan*, for example, Patricia Morley pointed to his use of the Prodigal Son analogue when describing the redemption of prostitutes but apparently did not perceive a Biblical personage incarnated in Father Dowling.⁵ Canadian philosopher John W. Burbidge similarly failed to mention the motif in his study of

5 Patricia Morley, *Morley Callaghan* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1978), p. 27.

"Religion in Morley Callaghan's *Such Is My Beloved*".⁶ In the present article it is my intention to explore the development of the protagonist as a symbolic Christ figure and to comment on the limitations thereof as they undergird the scepticism expressed by *inter alia* Paton and Pope about that literary technique.

1. BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS

Like many of Callaghan's other literary works, *Such Is My Beloved* reflects his religious and social background. He was born in Toronto in 1903 as the second son of an Irish-Welsh father, Thomas Callaghan, who had arrived in Ontario several years earlier and had achieved a moderate degree of economic security but not yet attained middle-class status very early in the twentieth century. As Morley Callaghan's biographer, Gary Boire, has noted, his father was "a keen debater and ardent political worker" on behalf of the Liberal Party in Toronto. These leanings may well have been among the determinants in Morley's life; in any case, as we shall see shortly, by the early 1930s he was clearly an advocate of social and economic reform as well as a critic of the church which he believed impeded them. The family belonged to the Roman Catholic ecclesiastical minority of the city, whose Anglican and other Protestant churches clearly dominated its religious profile. Despite his Catholic identity, Morley attended a largely Protestant public secondary school, and thereafter he studied at the secular University of Toronto, initially taking a general undergraduate arts degree and thereafter becoming qualified in law which, however, he never practised. Instead, he got his professional start in journalism, working on the local *Star Weekly*. In the meantime, Callaghan had begun to cultivate his literary interests, reading especially widely in American and British fiction. He befriended the increasingly prominent American novelist Ernest Hemingway. From further afield, the works of the French neo-Thomist Jacques Maritain found a place on the young Canadian's bookshelves. He took up the pen himself, drafting short stories, the first collection of which was published in 1929 under the title *A Native Argosy*. Never

6 John W. Burbidge, "Religion in Morley Callaghan's *Such Is My Beloved*". *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'études canadiennes*, XXVII, no. 3 (Autumn 1992), pp. 105-113.

enthusiastic about his birthplace, which he regarded as a cultural backwater incapable of stimulating creativity, Callaghan escaped Toronto at various times during the 1920s and 1930s, living briefly in *inter alia* Paris and New York. His career as a *littérateur* hit full stride in the mid-1930s with publication of his triptych (which was not a trilogy) of novels with lucidly expressed Biblical themes, *Such Is My Beloved* (1934), *They Shall Inherit the Earth* (1935), and *More Joy in Heaven* (1937).⁷

2. NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE AND PLOT SUMMARY

Such Is My Beloved is, in the main, a conventional work of fiction. Spanning nearly 300 short pages and divided into twenty-five chapters, it is written from an omniscient narrator point of view. Nothing particularly innovative informed Callaghan's narrative technique. It is essentially the recounting of several months of a neophyte Roman Catholic priest's ministry in an unnamed Canadian city during the early 1930s. That cleric, Stephen Dowling, is described in the opening paragraph as "the most eager young priest at the Cathedral" (p. 1) and subsequently as "a big, powerful man" (p. 236). The setting is evidently Toronto, whose neo-Gothic St. Michael's Cathedral, modelled in part after York Minster and dedicated 1848, becomes in fictional dress the "Cathedral of [the] Blessed Sacrament". In a largely Protestant city, the edifice is dwarfed by the commercial buildings which surround it. The congregation is multiethnic, though surnames which can be linked to the Irish immigrant population of the Canadian province of Ontario predominate among the parishioners and other Catholics in the gallery of characters, e.g. Anglin, Foley, Dowling, Jolly, and Robison. The cathedral parish is in a central area of the city which is socially past its prime, if indeed it ever had one. While the number of people on the parish rolls has actually increased, their financial contributions have

7 Accounts of Morley's life and literary career are Morley, *Morley Callaghan*; Brandon Conron, *Morley Callaghan* (New York: Twayne, 1966); Victor Hoar, *Morley Callaghan* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1969); and William Dunn, "Morley Callaghan", in W.H. New (ed.), *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, LXVIII (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1988), pp. 42-54.

decreased, partly because the upward socio-economic mobility of previous parishioners has prompted them to flee to suburban areas, but also because of the economic exigencies caused by the Great Depression of the 1930s. The wealthiest remaining family are the Robisons, whose *pater familias* is a successful lawyer and who are driven to Mass every Sunday in a chauffeured automobile and thus loom socially far above their local co-religionists. The plot unfolds immediately after what Mark McGowan has analysed as a crucial period when Anglophone Roman Catholics had become a permanent and rapidly growing minority on the increasingly pluralistic religious landscape of Canada and through their steadily more visible presence were putting to rest the stereotype that the Catholicism there was an almost exclusively French affair.⁸

In this bleak environment, Father Dowling has begun his ministry, somehow being assigned to a place on the cathedral staff immediately following completion of his theological studies. He has come far from his own humble origins in an undisclosed "country town up around the lakes" where his widowed mother and sole brother still reside. This remnant of Father Dowling's family of origin has sacrificed economically to support him at seminary, and in their pride they dote on him during his frequent visits home. In contrast to Jesus of Nazareth, he is not without honour at those times, when these two relatives parade him before their fellow citizens and his beaming mother "strutted around the main street and in the stores with her chest thrown out looking and talking like a bishop" (p. 44).

At no time, however, does the conscientious Father Dowling assume an attitude of social superiority there or in the urban parish. To be sure, he is not completely free of thoughts which reveal a desire for the congregation to be socially acceptable. He is particularly encouraged by the conspicuous presence of James Robison, accompanied by his wife and daughters, at Mass and experiences a small "glow of pride, knowing that no finer, more aristocratic, more devout people were coming

8 Mark McGowan, "Toronto's English-Speaking Catholics, Immigration, and the Making of a Canadian Catholic Identity, 1900-30", in Terence Murphy and Gerald Stortz (eds.), *Creed and Culture: The Place of English-Speaking Catholics in Canadian Society, 1750-1930* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), pp. 204-245.

out of church doors anywhere in the city” (p. 73). However, he goes about his ministry conscientiously, preaching with vigour, administering the sacraments, and visiting his parishioners.

When one evening he encounters two young prostitutes prowling the streets a stone’s throw from the Standard Hotel near the cathedral, a crucial new episode in his life begins, one which carries virtually the entire plot. One of these ladies of the night is an affable, petite, and attractive French Canadian (who, however, speaks nearly impeccable English) named Catherine (or “Midge”) Bourassa. The oldest girl in a brood of twelve siblings, she grew up in humble circumstances in Montreal. Her older colleague, a native of Detroit with the un-Catholic (and presumably either Danish or Norwegian) surname “Olsen”, is called “Ronnie”, though her official Christian name is Veronica. Somewhat taller and less visually appealing than Midge, this more seasoned prostitute has a more determined personality and spouts decidedly saltier language. Unlike her colleague, she is the progeny of divorced parents, and Callaghan suggests that the instability of her family of origin was one determinant in her moral decline. However, in both cases he also points to the economic dislocation of the times as a contributing factor (pp. 13, 23, 43, 49, 58-59, 226). They are thus both ethically and socially in difficult circumstances, and in both respects Father Dowling attempts determinedly to minister to them.

Initially, this enthusiastic cleric, who feels a “peculiar exhilaration and joy and life and his work in the parish” (p. 30) especially when he is on the streets of the city, approaches Midge and Ronnie out of pity and in an arguably condescending spirit. He quickly perceives their human dignity, however, and becomes preoccupied with aiding them in the restoration of their moral standards and self-image, especially by convincing them to turn their backs on prostitution.

All of his work since his ordination, as he thought of it, seemed groping and incomplete unless the way he had helped Midge and Ronnie was included, too (p. 30).

Accordingly, the pious Father Dowling emphasises prayer in his conversations with the two. Very soon, however, it becomes evident to him that their plight stems not merely from their almost total lack of spiritual underpinnings, but is also economically determined. Midge serves as the vehicle of revelation. She informs Father Dowling,

You have a good time talking about praying for us, don't you, but prayers won't pay for your room, prayers won't help me get my hair curled.

Her rejoinder to his protest that "millions" of girls have "decent jobs" is terse and blunt: "There are more girls than jobs. What are you going to do with the girls left over?" Midge adds that even though she and Ronnie are nearly starving, their affliction is not transforming them into "tin saints". This conversation, in which the French-Canadian girl speaks "with all the fury of an indignant, respectable woman" while nonetheless evincing "strange humility" is an epiphany for Father Dowling. He realises that his preconceived notions about free will were not well-founded:

Somehow, he himself had always thought of vice as yielding to the delights of the flesh, as warmth and good soft living and laziness, but as he looked around this room and at these angry girls he felt close to a dreadful poverty that was without any dignity (pp. 39-40).

Consequently, the focal point of protagonist's efforts shifts from keeping Ronnie and Midge off the streets to finding them secure legal, gainful employment. Apparently not well-connected in the world outside his parish, he turns to his flock in his search. This quest yields a harvest of conflicts and exposes hypocrisy which dominates much of the remainder of the plot. Juxtaposing the young prostitutes with the wealthy Robisons, Callaghan exposes the insincerity of that church-going couple. Initially Father Dowling approaches James Robison in the hope of exploiting his contacts to secure employment for Midge and Ronnie, an endeavour which proves fruitless. Subsequently, he takes the prostitutes to the Robison mansion, where their presence scandalises the lawyer's wife. She makes little effort to veil her displeasure at their presence in her home, and Midge and Ronnie, feeling entirely uncomfortable about their situation, leave the premises. The ensuing exchange between Mrs. Robison and Father Dowling lays bare both their contrasting perceptions of the matter and the Christian ethical implications thereof. "I must say, Father, I don't thank you for bring street walkers into my house," she informs him icily, adding that she finds his effrontery "too scandalous to be believed". Returning the favour, the young cleric professes, "And I've been more scandalized in this house to-night than I've ever been in my life." Revealing her pre-

judice against practitioners of the world's oldest profession, Mrs. Robison suggests that he is not sufficiently well versed in mundane matters to know that "all prostitutes are feeble-minded," an assertion which prompts Father Dowling to retort, "That's a sociological point of view. It's not a Christian point of view" (pp. 185-186). Callaghan, however, does not shed explicit further light on this dimension of Christian anthropology.

The hierarchy of the diocese fares no better under Callaghan's pen, and the wrestling of the bishop with the case adds another layer of dramatic tension to the economical plot. The involvement of Bishop Foley in the matter stems from the challenge which Midge and Ronnie have posed to Mrs. Robison's "security and poise" rather than to anything remotely spiritual. Reluctantly, her husband heeds her plea that he approach the bishop and demand that disciplinary action be taken to neutralise Father Dowling. James Robison soon overcomes his misgivings about the matter and remembers the young priest's socially critical sermons. "He seemed to be looking for trouble," recalls the defensive lawyer and beneficiary of the *status quo*.

He's always been tainted with dangerous thinking. His sermons against what he calls the bourgeois world. Always putting his head into situations he doesn't understand. A creature of excess. He'll make fools of us all. Lord knows what he's doing with those women and trying to get me to keep them for him (pp. 191, 193).

Having dismissed his qualms about the matter, Robison approaches the bishop's palace, which Callaghan has laden with negative signs. It is "an old, dirty, gray-stone building, not far away from the Cathedral" entirely lacking in visual appeal (p. 194).

The ensuing dialogue in the library between the old acquaintances Bishop Foley and Robison reveals that the former's principles are only marginally more anchored in the spiritual as opposed to the worldly realm than are those of his guest. The bishop, a towering giant of a man who commands general respect but is "inclined to be a bit of a bully", listens patiently to his guest's lament that a young priest is causing a scandal by ministering to the two prostitutes. Initially Bishop Foley defends, at least conditionally, this endeavour and asks Robison whether it is not possible that the priest in question might have actually been helping these women, a question which remains unanswered.

When Robison identifies the alleged offender as Father Dowling, Bishop Foley initially underscores the anomalous situation in which heterosexual priests are placed by their vow of celibacy. Callaghan reveals at the same time, however, that

what he actually was thinking of as he looked at the window so gloomily, was not of the priest but of a charity campaign he was about to launch throughout the city, and he was imagining the result of a scandal that would follow if a priest were implicated with two prostitutes (pp. 198-199).

Accordingly, he follows Robison's lead and adopts a defensive posture in order to obviate the eventuality of a scandal. "Such a state of affairs as you outline can't be allowed to continue, of course," Bishop Foley declares. "Heaven only knows what might happen" (pp. 198-200). Callaghan has thus completed the preparation for the destruction of his protagonist, against whom the power of conservative society as well as that of the religious structure are arrayed in tandem.

Again the head of the diocese is portrayed as a man wrestling with himself. Bishop Foley recalls his years as a neophyte priest, particularly his zeal for ministry and the happiness he had enjoyed at that time. This senior cleric catches himself from drifting too far in what he regards as the direction of subjective sentimentality and decides to act with resolve: "Don't I believe in my own actions?" he asks himself.

I know he was giving scandal. There was nothing else to do. He must be sent away, probably to a monastery. I don't have to go over all that again (p. 269).

In the end there is no monastic episode, however. Neither is there a crucifixion or other death of the protagonist, and Callaghan does not attempt to present anything remotely analogous to a resurrection. Instead, setting a more modest goal for the conclusion of his study of Father Dowling as a Christ-like priest, he places him into a mental hospital. There the doctors can find "nothing wrong with him" (p. 283).

On the last two pages of the narrative, Father Dowling utters words and thinks thoughts unmistakably reminiscent of those spoken by Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and on Calvary.

He understands that not all is well and, kneeling in the grass, he asks God to make him well. The self-sacrificing priest understands that his predicament stems from his love of humanity:

He realized that he was made from worrying about Ronnie and Midge, but his worry and love for them now seemed stronger than ever before. "It must all be to some purpose," he thought. ... It has some meaning, some end.

Kneeling in the twilight, he prays,

O my God, accept my sickness and insanity as a sacrifice and I will endure it, and my God, for this sacrifice I ask only that You spare the souls of those two poor girls. ... Deliver them from all evil (pp. 286-287).

After finishing this prayer of atonement, Father Dowling rises and looks out a window over a lake and tells himself that he has found contentment. This enables him to resume work on a commentary on the Song of Songs. In the final paragraph, Callaghan suggests through vividly metaphoric language which alludes *inter alia* to the Trinity and divine revelation to benighted humanity that the institutionalised priest has become absorbed in eternity:

There was a peace within him as he watched the calm, eternal water swelling darkly against the one faint streak of light, the cold night light on the skyline. High in the sky three stars were out. His love seemed suddenly to be as steadfast as those stars, as wide as the water, and still flowing within him like the cold smooth waves still rolling on the shore (p. 288).

It should be emphasised that generically *Such Is My Beloved* is quite distinct from, but features a certain thematic commonality with, several works in another sub-genre of fiction, one sometimes known as *Jesus redivivus* fiction. In these creations, whose European and North American heyday was in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jesus Christ returns as such in modern, or in any case post-Biblical, social settings, typically as his authors' spokesman for and instrument of social reform. The best known example of this occurs, perhaps, in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which Jesus returns to the world, more specifically to Seville, during the Inquisition and is lectured to by the unwitting Grand Inquisitor on the inadequacies and errors in his teachings. Present-day people, Christ is told, prefer the

security of the authoritarian ecclesiastical establishment to the freedom of choice he had proclaimed many centuries earlier. More immediately relevant to *Such Is My Beloved*, one can point to such works in English as the New England novelist Edward Everett Hale's *If Jesus Came to Boston*, which was published in 1895 and portrays the Messiah being shown houses of prostitution, bars, and charitable institutions in that city. Another example, one which appeared when Callaghan was five years old, was Jerome K. Jerome's play *The Passing of the Third Floor Back*. In this British piece Jesus finds accommodation in a boarding house in London and effects miraculous transformations in the lives of other tenants. Callaghan's novel differs fundamentally from these and other works in the *Jesus redivivus* sub-genre by featuring a man who symbolises Christ without being a reincarnation of him.

3. BIBLICAL PRECEDENTS OF THE PROSTITUTE IMAGE

In his creation of prostitutes as central characters in *Such Is My Beloved*, Callaghan alluded to a profession to which repeated if not particularly frequent reference is made in both the Old and New Testaments, where such people of both genders and other individuals whose standards of sexual morality are criticised or otherwise portrayed negatively. Among the passages from the Hebrew Scriptures he may have had in mind is Hosea 1:2 and 2:14-3:5, in which that eighth-century B.C. prophet referred to his spouse Gomer as "a wife of whoredom" and drew an analogy between their relationship and the state of the covenant between Israel and God. More probably, however, Callaghan was alluding to such Gospel texts as Luke 7:36-50, in which a woman identified solely as a "sinner" anoints Jesus's feet while he is a guest in the house of a Pharisee and otherwise treats him more respectfully than does his host and is consequently forgiven of her sins. It is similarly conceivable that Callaghan was thinking of Matthew 21:31, where Jesus informs temple priests who challenge his authority, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you." In these and other Biblical texts, prostitution is nowhere condoned; indeed, in I Corinthians 6:9-10 Paul emphasises that people who are guilty of sexual misconduct will not inherit the kingdom of God, but its practitioners are not placed out-

side the potentiality of salvation, and their detractors are not automatically within its sanctuary.

It is also conceivable, of course, that Callaghan was drawing on the extra-Biblical tradition which has identified Mary Magdalene as a redeemed prostitute, equating her with unnamed characters in the Gospels who, unlike herself, are identified as women with low sexual moral standards. That tradition, which has provided one of the most persistent images in the New Testament, has fired literary imaginations in several genres for centuries. For the period during which Callaghan was gaining a foothold on the literary terrain, one thinks of such works as Father Hugh Francis Blunt's 1928 *The Great Magdalens*, and the American poet Hart Crane's book-length poem of 1930, "The Bridge". Later, in his novel of 1955 *The Last Temptation of Christ*, the eminent Greek author Nikos Kazantzakis followed a growing trend to depict Mary Magdalen as more a symbol of eroticism than of asceticism by portraying her as the instrument of Jesus' final test, offering her sexual love as "the sweetest the world can offer". More recently, Mary Magdalen has been a prominent character in the internationally popular musicals *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell*. One could multiply examples in which the historic figure herself appears. On the other hand, there are probably considerably fewer instances of postfigurative manifestations of Mary Magdalene as modern-day character. However, especially in English-language literature "Magdalen" or "magdalen" became a poetic euphemism for a prostitute. William Wordsworth employed the term in this sense in his "The Excursion", as did George Bernard Shaw in *Man and Superman*.⁹

4. HINTS OF A SOCIAL GOSPEL WITHOUT AN ESCHATOLOGICAL DIMENSION

In places, *Such Is My Beloved* reads like a plea for what in North American Protestantism began in the late nineteenth century to be called the "Social Gospel", i.e. a renewed emphasis on the application of

9 A convenient though superficial synopsis is Margaret Hannay, "Mary Magdalene", in David Lyle Jeffrey (ed.), *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), pp. 486-489.

Christian ethics in a rapidly industrialising society often accompanied by challenges to the severe stratification which characterised the ordering thereof. Callaghan was a Liberal on the landscape of Canadian politics, and he sought early on to use his fiction as a vehicle for conveying his message that Christianity has a duty to raise a prophetic voice against economic exploitation. In *Such Is My Beloved*, Father Dowling serves as his spokesman in this regard, quietly raising a prophetic voice against what he gradually perceives is economic injustice and its debilitating impact on human lives and moral standards.

Callaghan introduces another figure into the narrative to provide a voice which further highlights the seriousness of the social dilemma and, perhaps, to underscore the threat of Marxism playing a greater rôle if the church failed to raise a prophetic voice. Charlie Stewart, a medical student with radical political and economic views but no conventional religious beliefs, is a friend of Father Dowling, who appreciates his opportunities to speak casually with someone quite divorced from the life of the church and shielded from the eyes of his parishioners. Their late-night conversations about Karl Marx, guild-based medieval European society, and “the general progress of the race toward the city of God” provide “many” themes for the priest’s sermons, although how he incorporates them homiletically is not stated. When in monetary need, he gets more help from his atheist friend than from members of his parish (pp. 83-85). Stewart represents an extreme position of social determinism devoid of religious influences. “In the perfectly organized state there would be no street walkers,” he insists in a discussion with Father Dowling.

If the state has a proper control of the means of production and the means of livelihood, it’s never necessary for a woman to go on the streets. No woman of her own accord would ever do such work.

Stewart immediately acknowledges that such a scenario is not necessarily attainable, however, and qualifies his statement:

But if in the ideal state there were still women who were street walkers out of laziness or a refusal to work steadily then they would be kicked out or interned somewhere for laziness, or as non-producers. Then they’d have to work or starve (pp. 253-254).

Father Dowling rejects this argument but, surprisingly, he confesses that prostitutes may have some “spiritual value”. He juxtaposes them with “respectable women” in his parish who have entered into *mariages de convenance* and whose husbands seek the services of prostitutes to satisfy their desires. Women like Midge and Ronnie, Father Dowling generously wants to believe, perform a service remarkably analogous to the Atonement of Jesus Christ:

These girls were taking on themselves all these mean secret passions and in the daytime, those people who had gone to them at night seemed to be leading respectable and good lives. Those girls never suspect the sacrifice of their souls that they offer every day (pp. 254-255).

Again Callaghan does not develop this line of thinking, but at any rate it indicates a longing on the part of the protagonist to see some purpose in the lives of the depraved young women. Conspicuously absent from the narrative is a well-developed presentation of the author’s views about how the church can serve as an instrument of social change. That it has a certain rôle to play in this regard Callaghan makes evident, but the way in which he believes it should do so remains untold, apart from the central part of the clergy in ministering to the social as well as the spiritual needs of disadvantaged people who are compelled in part by circumstances to lead degraded lives. For all his increased emphasis on social ministry, Father Dowling remains primarily a religious figure who preaches the Gospel and administers sacramental grace.

Furthermore, like many other twentieth-century Catholic literary artists (as well, of course, as Catholic moral theologians) Callaghan focussed on high birth rates as one factor contributing to poverty, human degradation, and criminality. In *Such Is My Beloved*, he does this at two key points. One is directly related to Father Dowling’s ministry to the two prostitutes in question. Soon after meeting Midge and Ronnie, he asks the former how many children there were in her family of origin. She replies unabashedly that there were twelve and begins to name them but, for no apparent purpose other than to underscore the magnitude of Midge’s family, she has difficulty placing her siblings in sequence (p. 43). Callaghan does not pursue this explicitly, preferring instead to allow readers to make the connection between Midge’s status as an economically uprooted and dispossessed young woman on the one hand and her poverty and moral decline on the other.

More explicitly, though in a way which conspicuously deviates from the main thrust of the plot, Callaghan describes how Father Dowling ministers to an Italian-Canadian family which has grown to unmanageable proportions. This is set up in a previous chapter when the priest overhears segments of a conversation that takes place on the street below his residence. An unemployed man relates how he was told to accept a fourth reduction in his salary but chose to leave his job after his employer rejected his protest that he had a wife and three children to support. The words of an unidentified despairing woman then flash through Father Dowling's memory:

Yes, I want to be a Catholic but I don't want to have any more kids and the priest says you can't practice birth control and be a Catholic, so you'll have to leave the church (p. 187).

Not long thereafter, with Ronnie and Midge having followed a magistrate's order to leave the city, Father Dowling visits the Canzano family in "a blind alley, in a row of yellow roughcast cottages under one long sagging roof". Mrs. Canzano has just given birth to her twelfth child, an event which has brought her no joy. "I did not want to see the child when they brought it to me," she confesses to him.

Kids, kids, kids, they just keep coming and I don't know why. It would be different if I knew why. You understand, Father? But nobody knows why.

Her apparently unemployed husband is even more bitter and bluntly rejects the priest's assurance that God had blessed him with another child. "God is not good to do such a thing," declares this impoverished Italian. In response to Father Dowling's admonition not to question divine will, Canzano professes, "I believe in God, but he is not good. You know that. ... There is nothing left but despair" (pp. 245-247). The priest soon shares his pessimism, at least in worldly terms. Observing the ragamuffin boys and girls in the street, he recalls that two of the girls in the Canzano family appeared to be mentally retarded.

Some of the children of that man were not right wise. I could see it in their faces," he thought. "More children while the woman grows more wretched and the man full of despair. God help them. It's inevitable that some of those girls go on the streets and become far worse than Ronnie and Midge.

The question immediately becomes not merely a sociological issue but also a vexing theological riddle for Father Dowling. What chance did they have for spiritual development when they were born with weak minds?" he wonders.

When they died how did God judge their souls? Was it original sin that accounted for their condition? If they were not normal, and there, fore, not to be judged, what was the purpose behind their existence[?] (p. 248).

5. A TYPE OF COMMUNION

The high-water mark of the Christ symbolism is reached in Chapter XVI when Father Dowling again visits Ronnie and Midge at their hotel and interacts with them in a richly symbolic episode which bears many hallmarks of both the Last Supper in Jerusalem and the celebration of the Eucharist in the Roman Catholic Mass. The timing of this incident is crucial; it occurs on an undisclosed date shortly before Easter. The young priest overcomes the prostitutes' reluctance to receive him and, having again gained their confidence, announces that he has a dollar and suggests that they use that modest sum to purchase coffee and sandwiches at a lunch counter nearby and consume them in their digs on what Callaghan has earlier established is upstairs in the Standard Hotel. Before Midge returns with these elements to what is implied to be a type of "upper room" but while Father Dowling prepares the scene by opening the windows to admit fresh air, Ronnie fetches from a drawer a bottle of what is bluntly described as "cheap red wine". At that point the young priest obviously takes the lead in the proceedings. He does not explicitly consecrate the elements, and there is no direct mention of transubstantiation, but the symbolic meaning of the occasion will not be lost on any reader with even a modicum of liturgical sophistication. In an apparent play on the denotation of communion as a sacramental meal, Father Dowling, whose invitation to the prostitutes to attend Mass at the cathedral has gone unheeded, reminds them that this occasion in decidedly less ornate circumstances is "the first time we ever ate together." He insists on serving them; in an act which unmistakably mirrors the administration of the eucharistic elements he places the sandwiches, which have been "wrapped in a white napkin", on saucers, and he pours coffee for

them. The wine follows the sandwiches; it, too, represents sacramental grace. Callaghan could hardly have been much less subtle: Father Dowling “poured the wine for them with a special graciousness, as if he were the host at a banquet.” He does not preach as such to Ronnie and Midge or quote Bible verses, but he nevertheless uses this occasion to talk to them about

savory dishes he had tasted, about recipes he knew by heart, about cheese and wines that had “a mysticism all their own”.

Father Dowling’s strategy of bringing the church to these fallen young women who were not coming to the church has some effect. They want him to continue to communicate his message to them (pp. 215-216).

It must again be pointed out that *Such Is My Beloved* is not an allegorical narration of the ministry of Jesus Christ. For all the obviously constructed similarities between this episode at the hotel and the Last Supper and the Eucharist, there are crucial differences. One is the absence of the High Priestly Prayer. Another is the absence of any reference to the betrayal. Thirdly, there is no mandate to wash one another’s feet. This is, after all, a novel about the application of Christianity in twentieth-century Toronto, not an account of its origins in first-century Jerusalem.

6. CONCLUSION

That Callaghan constructed Father Dowling as at least a partial Christ figure seems beyond dispute. Such elements in the plot as the outcome for the protagonist and the meal he shares with Midge and Ronnie offer indisputable evidence of this. Moreover, when one reads *Such Is My Beloved* against the backdrop of the author’s liberal religious and political views, it is apparent that he created his heroic priest partly in his own reformist image. Father Dowling is to a noteworthy extent interested in the flaws he observes in the urban social fabric, although his preoccupation with his immediate clerical duties prevents him from pursuing a broader reform agenda. Doctrinally, this priest, like Callaghan, is not entirely on the same wavelength as Catholic orthodoxy, and he clearly has nascent misgivings about its leadership on the diocesan level, but he unswervingly remains within the Church of

Rome. In his magisterial study of how the figure of Jesus Christ has been employed by artists, including *littérateurs* through the centuries, the eminent theologian and church historian Jaroslav Pelikan observed how malleably they have treated their subject, usually shaping him to fit their own times and often harnessing him to draw the chariots of their particular campaigns.¹⁰ Callaghan was no exception to these generalisations.

What is equally evident is that the Christ figure *Such Is My Beloved* is woefully incomplete and lucidly exemplifies several of the problems which Paton and Pope highlighted in their essay about the difficulty of such fictional transfigurations. Most obviously, although Father Dowling is at least temporarily defeated by an alliance of religious and secular forces and finds salvific significance in the sacrifice of his mental health, there is no triumph corresponding to the Resurrection. Instead, one reads in the final two paragraphs that “his love seemed suddenly to be as steadfast as those stars ...” and he vows to continue to write a commentary on the Song of Songs, an action which will presumably allow his Christian love to continue indefinitely. (The title of the novel is taken from this book, where 5:16 in the then current Douai translation reads: “His throat most sweet, and he is all lovely: such is my beloved, and he is my friend, O ye daughters of Jerusalem.”) Father Dowling is thus “reduced to a victim”, in the words of Pope and Paton, and also according to their critique his hope is essentially “a vague appeal to the future”. But throughout the narrative, this priest falls short of being an incarnation of the omniscient and omnipotent God. At times he evinces considerable insight into the minds and behaviour of people with whom he interacts, but he can also seem decidedly naïve and vacillating. The previously cited lament by Paton and Pope that “Christ is too complex and paradoxical for easy treatment in any of the traditional literary forms, whether tragedy, comedy, melodrama, allegory or fable” seems particularly apt with regard to *Such Is My Beloved*.

10 Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

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