

"One is exiled when one refuses to obey the commandments of Conquest Mission": Religion as Metaphor in Caryl Phillips's Diasporic Philosophy

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Caryl Phillips's later novels, from *Higher Ground* (1989) to *Crossing the River* (1993), have often been read in the context of what Paul Gilroy has called the Black Atlantic, as recreations of slave-trading in Africa, plantation life in the Americas, and exile in European metropolises. Described by one commentator as "a vivid historian of slave experience,"¹ Phillips could even be called one of the major current chroniclers of this often silenced past, since "behind all of [his fiction] looms the dark history of slavery and its consequences."² For all its interest and relevance, however, this historicist approach has its own limitations. In the long run, it could indeed make us forget that Phillips's fiction, far from being exclusively concerned with elaborating a response to the wrongs of colonialism, among them slavery, aspires, like any self-respecting work of art, to express its own way of seeing the world: ie, its philosophy.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, a few reviewers were mystified when in his latest novel, *The Nature of Blood* (1997), Phillips seemed to distance himself from what they regarded as his fictional territory, and dealt with the European roots of exclusion and tribalism, particularly the Jewish Holocaust (which, incidentally, he had already addressed in a collection of travel essays, *The European Tribe* [1987], and in the last section of *Higher Ground*). As if, by leaving the literary ghetto to which the sacred rules of authenticity would have confined him, Phillips had claimed a more direct say on the human condition at large, and had thereby committed literary trespass, an offence taken seriously by some mainstream critics. Such, at least, is the impression given in a review by Hilary Mantel, entitled "Black is not Jewish," where she objects to what she views as Phillips's inadequate tackling of the Jewish Holocaust:

There is only one rule in postwar fiction: don't write about the Holocaust unless you are sure you can do it well. [...] If you can't match [the brilliant desolation of Cynthia Ozick's

¹ Randall Stevenson, *A Reader's Guide to the Twentieth-Century Novel in Britain* (New York: Harvester, 1993): 131.

² J.M. Coetzee, "What We Like to Forget," *New York Review of Books* (6 November 1997): 38.

The Shawl], look elsewhere for a story. [...] Caryl Phillips – born in St Kitts and brought up in Leeds – has dwelled a good deal in his previous novels on the slave trade, which was a kind of prolonged Holocaust in itself. He therefore identifies himself with those wrenched from their homeland, with the dispossessed and the abused; his feelings, surely, do him credit. He has been quoted in an interview in *The Bookseller* as saying he agrees with James Baldwin: 'that when anyone talks about a Jew, that person is talking about me.' This is the devil's sentimentality: it is demented cosiness, that denies the differences between people, denies how easily the interests of human beings become divided. It is indecent to lay claim to other people's suffering: it's a colonial impulse, dressed up as altruism.³

This piece of criticism may demonstrate "the white man's profound desire not to be judged by those who are not white."⁴ Moreover, I find it ironical that, while being painfully ignorant of artistic freedom, such a commentary, by ghettoizing Phillips as it does, should enact one of the main themes of the novel: ie, the fact that throughout history humans have felt the need to define themselves by defining the others.

A similar fate doubtless threatens other writers from the former British Empire who, like Phillips, refuse the role of mere exotic appendages to Western literature, insisting on being viewed as going beyond the purely representational, as exploring the deeper layers of the human psyche. Their writing tends to be read from the narrow angle of a "supposedly homogeneous and unbroken" national tradition,⁵ which is not only oblivious of the plural affiliations of these often displaced artists, but, more importantly, of their contribution to the world of ideas in general. Caryl Phillips, for one, has always opposed what he calls "the missionary approach": ie, "the idea that the black writer should explain black people to white people."⁶ To him, the purpose of literature is rather "to dare to imagine into regions that help to expand not only [the writer's] understanding of the human condition, but help the reader to understand and expand their own notion of what constitutes the human condition,"⁷ one aspect of which is faith or the capacity to believe.

My purpose in this essay is to discuss the place of religion in Caryl Phillips's fiction, a

³ Hilary Mantel, "Black is not Jewish," review of *The Nature of Blood*, by Caryl Phillips, *Literary Review* (1 February 1997): 39.

⁴ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979): 81.

⁵ Salman Rushdie, "'Commonwealth Literature' does not exist," *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta, 1991): 67.

⁶ "Living and Writing in the Caribbean: An Experiment," *Kunapipi* 11.2 (1989): 47.

⁷ "The Other Voice: A Dialogue between Anita Desai, Caryl Phillips, and Ilan Stavans," *Transition* 64 (1994): 88.

theme that metaphorizes not only his own position towards what Wilson Harris has called the "commandments of Conquest Mission"⁸ – the artistic standards imposed on the postcolonial writer, but also the ambivalent interplay between dependence and independence, submission and resistance in postcolonial societies. To do full justice to this multifaceted topic, my reading will have to take into account the social and historical realities underlying Phillips's vision, while being also attuned to his characters' inner states; a reading, in short, that combines both 'secular' and, appropriately here, 'religious' criticism. In *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Edward Said pits these two forms of criticism against each other. Secular criticism, he argues, relies on the fact that texts "are worldly [...], and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted."⁹ Religious criticism, by contrast, does not find favour with him, for, as a religious discourse, it can serve "as an agent of closure, shutting off human investigation, criticism, and effort in deference to the authority of the more-than-human, the supernatural, the other-worldly" (290). While I agree with Said on the need for contextualization on the one hand and, on the other, on the necessary resistance to indoctrination, it seems to me that the dichotomy he sets up is not easy to play out, all the more so because, as T.S. Eliot reminds us, literature affects us as "entire human beings," endowed both with reason and with imagination and emotions.¹⁰

In the case of Phillips's fiction, as we shall see, a separation between the secular and the spiritual, the historical and the existential, the collective and the individual, would be pointless, if not downright misleading. Moreover, as the examples given above can show, secular criticism can occasionally take on a religious garb and lead to closure when it derives, as religious criticism does for Said, from "organized collective passions,"¹¹ be it a blind commitment to orthodox postcolonialism which would see in every novel by Phillips a counter-discursive response to slavery or a form of literary racism that would exclude writers like him from the preoccupations of the so-called centre. Inversely, religious criticism, as a means of investigating what is beyond the strictly historical, social and secular, should not always be associated, as Said suggests, with "systems of authority" or "canons of order."¹² As I will attempt to demonstrate in this paper, it can help to plumb the inner feelings of

⁸ Wilson Harris, *Jonestown* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996): 14.

⁹ Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1984; London: Vintage, 1991): 4.

¹⁰ T.S. Eliot, "Religion and Literature," *Selected Prose*, ed. John Hayward (1953; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963): 38.

¹¹ Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, 290.

¹² Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, 290.

individual characters and their discovery of the sacred which, in Phillips's fiction, never conveys an unconditional deference to a supernatural order, but rather a deep respect for the human as expressed through insecure individual minds who probe self-awareness outside a coercive system of thought.

Phillips's novels have repeatedly dramatized the crucial role of Christianity in the various stages of the colonizing process: "Heartland," the first section of *Higher Ground*, shows how the Bible, combined with the apparently more aggressive sword, was part of the so-called civilizing mission of the early European settlements in Africa, meant to help the native "raise [himself] up above the animal"¹³ and eradicate his pagan customs; the journal of the English slave-trader, Captain Hamilton, in *Crossing the River*, alludes to the ambiguous part played by Christian religion in the enslavement of those who were mere cargo in the eyes of the European believers, a shameful complicity that the Western churches are still refusing to recognize officially today in spite of appeals from African theologians;¹⁴ both *Cambridge* (1991) and *Crossing the River* depict the ambivalence of the converted slaves Cambridge and Nash Williams, who, once "blessed with rational Christian minds,"¹⁵ turn into missionaries for their own "heathen" people. Finally, *The Nature of Blood* denounces the hypocrisy of a religion which contributed to a destructive sense of European superiority and hence to the exclusion from what James Baldwin has called "God's citadel" of those "neither civilized nor Christian,"¹⁶ be they the "infidel Turks"¹⁷ or the Jews.

Imposed from the outside and smacking of paternalism, Christianity is presented in these novels as a major factor of alienation since it makes colonial converts believe that, if they leave paganism behind, they can get access to the "centre," reach a higher level of humanity, or even "renounce [their] devilish likeness":¹⁸ ie, get symbolically whitened. In practice, however, this religion seems to be a powerful means to keep them in their "rightful place" (C 73) and instil in them a sense of dutiful resignation to divine order, in a world regulated by Christian Providence, where man "[is] nothing and can do nothing" (CR 21) without God. This is why Cambridge, after being captured by slave traders for the second time on his way to Africa, is able to believe that "through hard work and faith in the Lord God Almighty, [his] bondage would soon cease" (C 157).

¹³ Phillips, *Higher Ground* (London: Viking, 1989): 53. Henceforth in the main text as *HG*.

¹⁴ C. Panu-Mbendele, "Le Silence des Eglises sur la Traite des Noirs," *Le Soir* (16 February 1999).

¹⁵ Phillips, *Crossing the River* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993): 9. Henceforth in the main text as *CR*.

¹⁶ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979): 50.

¹⁷ Phillips, *The Nature of Blood* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997): 49. Henceforth in the main text as *NB*.

¹⁸ Phillips, *Cambridge* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991): 151. Henceforth in the main text as *C*.

Far from being enlightening, then, Christianity proves the efficient handmaiden of oppression, whether slavery, the Holocaust or the daily exploitation of man by man. Cambridge, to take his example again, remains unaware of being lured, and keeps seeing Christianity as a "magical opportunity of improvement" (C 143), a means of escaping his natural African "barbarity" (C 143) and gaining access to "the laws of civilization" (C 149), while being repeatedly victim of the moral bankruptcy of the West, be it greed, lust or sheer dishonesty.

If, at the start, Nash is, like Cambridge, brainwashed by Christian dogma, as he enters deeper into the heart of Liberia, he gradually loses faith in the redemptive powers of his master's creed, even though he believes till the end in an afterlife. While his relationship with his master Edward illustrates how religion intersects with love, his narrative and the failure of his experience as a missionary also highlight an important feature of religion as seen by Phillips: ie, its highly cultural content. Phillips shares this theme with Shūsaku Endō, one of his favourite writers,¹⁹ whose novel *Silence*, set in seventeenth-century Japan, explores the nature of transplanted Christianity and wonders whether as "a religion that developed largely out of European ways of thinking, [it] can ever take root in Japan."²⁰ A similar interrogation crops up in *Crossing the River* when Nash concludes, in the last letter he addresses to his master in America, that

this missionary work, this process of persuasion, is futile amongst these people, for they never truly pray to the Christian God, they merely pray to their own gods in Christian guise, for the American God does not even resemble them in that most fundamental of features. The truth is, our religion, in its purest and least diluted form, can never take root in this country. Its young shoots will wither and die, leaving the sensible man with the conclusive evidence that he must reap what grows naturally. (CR 62)

If such a statement questions the efficiency of missionary work and the notion of a "pure" religious tradition to be handed down, it acknowledges at the same time an (essential) "natural" religious feeling that cannot be imposed from the outside, but exists on its own, regardless of a specific creed. That a cultural barrier remains in spite of a universal need for spirituality is again evoked at the end of Edward's "pilgrimage" (CR 66) to the squalid place where Nash died, when he decides to "sing an hymn, in order that he might calm his

¹⁹ Interview by Louise Yelin, *Culturefront* 7.2 (1998): 80.

²⁰ Shūsaku Endō, *Foreign Studies* (1965; London: Sceptre, 1990): 9.

beleaguered mind" but "as [his] lips formed the words, [...] no sound was heard. Still Edward continued to *sing* his hymn"; but while Edward needs the spiritual sustenance of the hymn, even without lyrics, irrelevant in this African context, the natives fail to understand him and wonder "what evil spirits had populated this poor man's soul" (CR 69).

This being said, it is difficult, if not vain, for individuals to negate the influence of Christianity on their minds, if only because of the extent to which this religion has affected their culture, as Phillips's fiction itself testifies. It contains numerous Biblical references. For instance, the titles *Higher Ground* and *Crossing the River* have clear Judaeo-Christian overtones. Also, the compassion at work in Phillips's writing can be said to be of Christian origin, although the suffering of his characters never has a redemptive quality. It is no use denying this legacy, Phillips seems to suggest, because it is part of who we are, and even as "there is no return" (CR 237) for the children of the African diaspora, it is not possible to go back to pre-Christendom times, as substantiated by the case of Rudi, a black American prisoner in "The Cargo Rap," the second section of *Higher Ground*. While he claims to "have no religion" (HG 95) and radically dismisses Christmas cards as "images of the enemy" (HG 65), he is unaware how deeply his discourse is influenced by Christian rhetoric. Ironically, though he wants to escape white Christianity at all costs, he ends up embracing racial bigotry, which like some other theologies, that of the Nation of Islam, for example, aims at "the sanctification of power."²¹

While focusing on the cultural and existential alienation induced by Christianity, Phillips also challenges other concepts associated with religious doctrines at large, namely those of belonging and novelty, which are to be found in the major myths of humanity, but are also part of the mythology of literary criticism, as we have seen.

Religion, which etymologically relates to that which binds or brings together, relies traditionally on a rhetoric of love and community since, as Cambridge points out at the end of his testimony, "[the Lord] hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth" (C 167). Yet Phillips's novels repeatedly show that, in its institutionalized form at least, it is a system that separates rather than gathers, that excludes rather than includes human beings. First, it seems to promote gender discrimination, since as Cambridge says "a Christian man possesses a wife, and the dutiful wife must obey her Christian husband" (C 163). Then, it also favours divisiveness over reconciliation insofar as God Himself is "a God of all nations, provided they obey and dutifully serve Him" (CR 26) and his love is "for

²¹ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 48.

all, as long as they be Christian and part of His World" (C 145). Therefore, when Cambridge's first wife and his baby die, the minister initially refuses to bury them together because the child has not been baptized. In *The Nature of Blood*, the Jews' fear of exogamy (which is, according to Eva's mother, "the greatest crime that a person could commit," NB 70) partakes of a similar suspicion of the stranger induced by religion. In this regard, it is interesting to note, with Julius Lester, that "racism is a group's idealisation of itself in society, the world and the universe. It confers religious identity in secular garb."²²

Religion, not only Christianity but Judaism as well, is also replete with the notion of newness: Born-again Christians are given a new name; the Promised Land of the Jewish tradition is a new world. The same could be said of the secular avatars of these two creeds, one example of which is the transportation of the Ethiopian Falashas to Israel, which for all its benevolence fails to take the Ethiopian past into account. Yet, as *The Nature of Blood* powerfully demonstrates, this idea of starting all over again, of "[putting] things behind [oneself]" (NB 178), is a myth because men carry their past within themselves however hard they try to shed it. So, if the Bible does open up new horizons for the colonial converts, these should not forget, as Othello seems to do when he reaches the "heart" (NB 145) of Venetian society, that the Holy Book also contains the story of Ham and his curse, which, James Baldwin reminds us, has sealed the fate of the black man since the beginning of time.²³

If Phillips denounces the hold of institutionalized religion and its secular missions on the individual, he also points out that "there is a terrible paradox with religion. It both enslaves and it liberates."²⁴ As the history of slavery has shown, Christianity proved "a medium of independent black expression and identity."²⁵ In the case of Cambridge and Othello, for example, it means literacy and thus the possibility of making oneself heard in the language of the master, even if the psychological price to be paid for this avenue of expression is very high indeed. The ironically named Christiania, an obeah-wielding slave, embodies what Cambridge, her educated partner, both wins and loses by his Christian education, for if her voice is never heard throughout the novel, she nonetheless remains "spiritually powerful" (C 158) and, unlike Cambridge, survives the violence of the plantation. Though her obeah is dismissed by an English clergyman as "a primitive belief in witchcraft which operates upon the negroes to produce death" (C 98), it empowers her because it puts

²² Julius Lester, "The Outsiders: Blacks and Jews and the Soul of America," *Transition* 68 (1995): 79.

²³ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 38.

²⁴ "See you on the Plantation," interview [with Phillips] by Aaron Ashby and Artress Bethany White, *ARK/angel Review* 9 (1994): 100.

²⁵ James Walvin, *Questioning Slavery* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996): 154.

her beyond the colonizer's rational grasp and symbolizes her refusal to take part in the master's grand schemes, be they the Christian religion or the breeding system supposed to compensate for the end of the slave trade (*C* 67).²⁶

But when Phillips says that religion can liberate too, he may have in mind a religious feeling of an even more marginal and unobtrusive type than obeah: ie, what he calls "faith," which does not necessarily have "a religious gloss," but is "the ability to actually acknowledge the existence of something that you believe in, something that helps you to make sense of your life."²⁷ Such a feeling, which is essentially interior and comes with none of the trappings of official religions, affects all of Phillips's characters, even the most obnoxious ones, like Captain Hamilton or Edward Nash. It also connects them with each other, involving them in a spiritual community, as in *Crossing the River* where the characters relate to an ambivalent father figure, in turn God, master and ancestor. However, this inner belief seems to be more developed in Phillips's female protagonists, who are, on the whole, more critical of the religious establishment (perhaps because they are its first victims) and have more introspective capacities than his male characters. There is Irena in *Higher Ground* who imagines God as a cannibal "shaking a celestial salt-cellar before he ate up his children" (*HG* 176); Martha, in *Crossing the River*, who "could find no solace in religion, and was unable to sympathize with the sufferings of the son of God when set against her own private misery" (*CR* 79); or Joyce, in the same novel, whose wide-ranging iconoclasm is a direct response to her mother's selfish bigotry. Though the distance of these women from religion can be, at first, a source of sadness and isolation, there is nevertheless in all of them a love, whether filial or sexual, that drives them on and helps them to find a purpose in life, if only temporarily. This passion, in Phillips's words, this "annealing force [coming] out of fracture,"²⁸ has much in common with the profane spirituality that characterizes soul music which a critic sees as "a saviour of self-esteem [...] by creating a private world as an escape from the one that is giving you grief."²⁹ It would require another paper to demonstrate how deeply this musical style has shaped Caryl Phillips's writing, but suffice it to say here that it is the "ability to combine passion with social acumen"³⁰ of an artist like Curtis Mayfield that fascinates Phillips. The same could be said of Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder and many others.

²⁶ The girl in "Heartland" (the first section of *Higher Ground*) also possesses a "boldness of spirit" (35), an "inner stillness" (29) which her converted, male counterpart has lost.

²⁷ Interview [with Caryl Phillips] by Graham Swift, *Kunapipi* 13.3 (1991): 103.

²⁸ "Crossing the River: Caryl Phillips Talks to Maya Jaggi," *Wasafiri* 20 (1994): 28.

²⁹ Lloyd Bradley, "Introduction: What is Soul?" in *Soul on CD: The Essential Guide* (London: Kyle Cathie, 1994): 2.

³⁰ Donna Bailey Nurse, "Caryl Phillips' Riffs on Freedom," *Globe & Mail* (21 May 1997).

It is probably through Emily, a nineteenth-century Englishwoman in *Cambridge*, who goes to the Caribbean to supervise her father's plantation, that Phillips's sensitive exploration of the female psyche shows best how an inner sense of the sacred helps people to preserve their dignity and assert their individual self, albeit sometimes modestly. At the beginning of the novel, Emily's faith in a loving, protective but powerful God (C 13, 45) does not really impinge on her view of the island, which she observes from an apparently desacralized, rational perspective, trying to give objective causes to the phenomena she observes, both natural and human. However, as the novel unfolds and her certainties are shaken, she relinquishes her pseudo-scientific discourse, and her voyage into self-awareness goes hand in hand with the realization of the numinous dimensions of the world around her as "her vision had begun to pulsate with a new and magical life, her mind had become a frieze of sharp stabbing colours. Love, love, love" (C 182). This love, or faith, should be understood "as a state of being, or a state of grace" in the "tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth."³¹

The two religious forms, one institutionalized and the other private, which I have attempted to outline may well suggest what has been called the Caribbean "inability to integrate inner and outer space," the fragmentation of Caribbean philosophy between its European and indigenous roots.³² To me, however, the tension and interaction between the two partake of a diasporic philosophy in which displaced individuals are shown as potentially able to tap their own imaginary resources and build their own spiritual frames away from the religious or secular missions which would like to put an end to their wandering by imposing a spiritual order on their marooning imagination. As *The Nature of Blood* obliquely suggests, it is when the Jewish people give up exile for the elusive sense of belonging afforded by the foundation of the nation state of Israel that their religious faith tends to harden into dogma. Exile, and the marginality it entails, carries an awareness and a yearning which, as Phillips's female characters testify, can be a source of anxiety but also constitute the basic "building blocks of open-mindedness and an ability to question given truths."³³

³¹ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 82.

³² Paget Henry, "Rex Nettleford African and Afro-Caribbean Philosophy," *CLR James Journal* 5.1 (1997): 58.

³³ Susan Greenberg, "Jews against Israel," *Prospect* 31 (1998): 12.

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