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After “1984”: Some Contemporary British Versions of Dystopia

“Where Does My Hope Come From?”: P. D. James’s *The Children of Men* (1992) as a Christian Dystopia in the Context of the Late 20th Century Demographic Crisis

« *Where Does My Hope Come From?* » : *The Children of Men* (1992) de P. D. James comme dystopie chrétienne dans le contexte de la crise démographique de la fin du XX^{ème} siècle »

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Abstracts

English Français

While British dystopian works from the 1930s to the mid-1980s were primarily concerned with the fear of totalitarian regimes and/or nuclear war, by the last years of the twentieth century, the end of the Cold War meant that these worries were no longer so prevalent. One result was the appearance of several “demodystopias” or fictions concerned with the demographic crisis which was causing increasing concern in the developed world at the time. Although P. D. James’s *The Children of Men* (1992) has been compared with other demodystopias like *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986) and Zoe Fairburns’ *Benefits* (1979) and described as a feminist work, it is far more of a Christian fable and contains echoes of Christian writers from Dostoevsky to T.S. Eliot. It also takes seriously the concerns of her contemporaries about declining birth-rates, an ageing population and an increasing dependency ratio. James joins in the discussion on these issues, but also asks what can give people hope and a reason to live in this ageing world. Her conclusion is that hope, and a meaningful life, are like happiness, things which are not found by specifically seeking for them, but are by-products of a life based on faith and love.

Les dystopies britanniques des années 1930 jusqu’au milieu des années 1980 se préoccupent principalement des régimes totalitaires et/ou de la crainte d’une guerre nucléaire, mais avec la fin de la guerre froide, pendant les dernières années du vingtième siècle on s’inquiète moins de ces questions. À la place, des « démodystopies » commencent à paraître, des récits dans lesquels importent plus les questions démographiques qui dérangent le monde occidental. Même si on a comparé *The Children of Men* (1992) de P. D. James aux démodystopies telles que *Benefits* (1979) de Zoe Fairbairns ou *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) de Margaret Atwood, en le classant parmi les



romans féministes, le roman ressemble plus à un conte chrétien et évoque de nombreux auteurs chrétiens, de Dostoïevski à T. S. Eliot. James prend au sérieux les inquiétudes de ses contemporains sur la baisse des taux de natalité, la population vieillissante ou le taux de dépendance croissant. Tout en participant au débat sur ces questions, l'auteure se demande aussi ce qui peut donner une espérance ou une raison de vivre à un monde en déclin. Elle arrive à la conclusion que l'espérance et une vie avec du sens, comme le bonheur, ne viennent pas quand on les cherche, mais sont les résultats d'une vie de foi et d'amour.

Index terms

Mots-clés : James (P. D.), dystopie, démographie, fertilité masculine, *The Children of Men*, fable chrétienne, espérance, fiction britannique du XXe siècle

Keywords: James (P. D.), dystopia, demographics, fertility (male), *The Children of Men*, Christian fable, hope, twentieth-century British fiction

Full text

- 1 It is generally agreed that dystopias “take the negative tendencies observed in contemporary society to an extreme” (Domingo 2008, 725) and thus provide awful warnings about possible futures. It is therefore not surprising that the majority of dystopias written in Britain between the end of the First World War and 1984 warn against “the imposition of collective political and social structures upon the individual” (Marks de Marques 2013, 29) and embody the “obvious and useless man-versus-system struggle” (31). Well-known authors like George Orwell and Aldous Huxley wrote as a reaction to Fascism, National Socialism and Stalin’s version of Communism and were equally influenced by the depressing economic problems of the 1930s and 1940s. Questions of fertility and population control were sometimes mentioned, generally in the context of the eugenics debate, as in Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), but they were rarely found centre stage. However, by 1984, it was clear that the Cold War was coming to an end and other concerns started to loom large on the political and social horizons. One of these was what some called demographic change and others, with greater urgency, the population crisis.
- 2 The baby boom years, from approximately 1947 to 1975, had seen the world population reach its highest recorded rate of increase, around 2% per year, leading many academics, including Paul Ehrlich, to claim that overpopulation is “probably the most urgent problem confronting mankind both now and in the future” (1971, 187). However, from then on it started to decline. As Eric Reid explains, “the average completed family size throughout Europe fell from 2.4 [children] for women born in 1940 to 1.8 for women born in 1970 or later” (1998, 11). By the late 1980s, countries such as Germany, Italy and Spain were reporting a fertility rate of 1.5 or less, well below the replacement level of 2.1 required to keep the population stable (Morgan and Taylor 2006). Britain and the United States were not far behind them. As a result, some people, including reputable scholars, began to panic, worrying that a declining birth-rate would affect the “dependency ratio [...] the ratio of the numbers in the population over a designated retirement age compared to the numbers in the population of working age” (Reid 1998, 11). The result of this would inevitably be a decline in the number of people available to care for the dependent elderly and a reduction in the money available for pensions and national social security systems. If Michael S. Teitelbaum and Jay M. Winter’s seminal study, *The Fear of Population Decline* (1985), presents the issues at stake in serious, sober language, the equally well-qualified Ben J. Wattenberg’s *The Birth Dearth* (1987) “hammers the reader with tones of desperate urgency” in a “shrill, over-wrought, semi-hysterical” tone (Blair 1989, 105). At the same time, Evangelical leader Pat Robertson, in an attempt to gain support for his American presidential bid in October 1987 suggested that prohibiting abortion was the best way to “ensure the fiscal stability of the Social Security system” (qtd. in Blair 1989, 108) by halting the decline in the birth-rate, while the same year, well-known anti-feminist

militant Phyllis Schlafly encouraged every American family to have six children to make America great again (qtd. in Blair 1989, 99).

3 Although the subject had been mentioned before without solid proof, in 1992, shortly before the publication of *The Children of Men*, Danish scientist Elisabeth Carlsen and her colleagues published in the *British Medical Journal* a highly specialised article reviewing studies of the sperm count in human males. They concluded that “there has been a genuine decline in semen quality over the last 50 years. As male fertility is to some extent correlated with sperm count, the results may reflect an overall reduction in male fertility” (609). This measured conclusion, confirmed by other articles in the months that followed, led to a consensus “that sperm counts in human males were in decline” (Gannon et al. 2004, 1170) and that human fertility would inevitably decrease as a consequence. The media became aware of this and many articles, as well as radio and television programmes, spread the news to the general public, often in a sensational manner. *The Times*, which is not usually so extreme, even published an article in May 1992 declaring that as “one in twenty men in Britain are thought to be subfertile or infertile,” it was clear that “if men were selected for breeding like animals, most would be slaughtered” (Gill 1992, 5), while later one journalist in *The Independent* declared in 1994: “I believe that the human race will eventually become extinct” (qtd. in Gannon et al. 2004, 1171). Interest in the subject continued for the rest of the decade with many perceiving the situation as a threat to the human race and coming up with a wide variety of theories to explain it, including the possibility that “men were being emasculated by toiletries” (Gannon et al., 1173) or that “organic vegetables, London tap water, ‘gender-bending’ chemicals, tight underpants and membership of the Mafia” (Hunt 2011) were to blame. *The Children of Men*, although fiction, played a part in this debate. After the millennium and for the following decade, there was a slight increase in the birth rate when “women in the UK suddenly started to have significantly larger families: in 2001 the average was 1.64 but by 2008 it was 1.97” (Easton 2011), leading one BBC commentator to remark in 2011: “You may remember all those Doomsday scenarios a decade ago of imploding European populations, with fertility spiralling downwards. Well, it hasn’t happened” (Easton 2011). As a result, interest in the subject also declined.

4 It is in this context that dystopias depicting fertility crises of various sorts need to be studied. Demographer Anton Kuijsten was the first author to examine literary works with demographic themes which he called “demografictions” (1999), using three very different novels from the 1990s, including *The Children of Men*, as case studies. Lionel Shriver, whose novel *Game Control* (1994) was another of Kuijsten’s examples, later attempted a much broader analysis of several works on this theme for a population journal, going as far back as Zola’s *Fécondité* (1899) for her examples and specifically dividing stories of population decline from those about population excess. Using these articles as a starting point, Andreu Domingo was the first to specifically examine dystopias with this theme. Demodystopias, as Domingo calls them, may be defined as dystopias “that are brought about by demographic change or that make population matters a salient concern” (Domingo 2008, 725). Although Domingo also included works more concerned with overpopulation like Anthony Burgess’s *The Wanting Seed* (1962) or Max Ehrlich’s *The Edict* (1971) in this sub-genre, it may be noted that as the fertility crisis got more serious in the last twenty years of the 20th century, it was novels like Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and *The Children of Men* that increasingly struck a chord with the reading public.

***The Children of Men* in Context**

5 When asked about the origins of her demodystopic novel, *The Children of Men* (1992), P. D. James always referred to a book review she had read in *The Sunday Times*:

The book reviewed dealt with the dramatic and so far unexplained fall in the fertility rate of western man. Apparently young men today are only half as fertile as were their fathers. The reviewer pointed out that, of the millions of life forms which have inhabited our planet, nearly all have in time died or were destroyed, as were the dinosaurs. Man's span on earth is as the blinking of an eye. I began to imagine what the world would be like, and more specifically what England would be like, a quarter of a century after a catastrophic year in which the human race was struck by universal infertility (1999, 197).

- 6 James portrays Britain in this world “in which mankind knows itself to be dying” (1999, 197) principally through the eyes of her protagonist, Theo Faron, who is both highly intelligent and, in her own words, “absolutely sterile” (Rose 1993), not only physically, but also emotionally and spiritually. The novel is set in 2021, but James explains the beginning of the crisis in Year Omega (1995), when the last children, called Omegas, were born. She describes what led up to it and how people reacted to the knowledge that they could “no longer do what animals do without thought” (1992, 7). If the basic premise, that human fertility throughout the world could be reduced to zero, “strains our credulity” (Wood 1994, 279), the descriptions of the early 1990s and of government reactions to the crisis are entirely realistic.
- 7 The fictional Faron presents the early 1990s from his perspective as an academic historian and refers to phenomena which were familiar to James's first readers. He evokes “the search for alternative medicine, the perfumed oils, the massage, the stroking and anointing, the crystal-holding, the non-penetrative sex. Pornography and sexual violence on film, on television, in books, in life” (1992, 10), and cites a genuine European Community Report from 1991 (Monnier and De Guibert-Lantoine) showing “a slump in the number of children born in Europe” (10). Faron claims that everyone thought they knew why this was happening—“more liberal attitudes to birth control and abortion, the postponement of pregnancy by professional women pursuing their careers, the wish of families for a higher standard of living” (11)—and claims that many English people saw it as “a welcome development in a world grossly polluted by over-population” (10). If some people were worried, this “was less about a falling population than about the wish of nations to maintain their own people, their own culture, their own race, to breed sufficient young to maintain their economic structures” (11). To make matters worse, the pollution and fertility issues were “complicated by the spread of AIDS” (11), which made the use of contraceptives even more widespread. All this concurs with official reports at the time, even in attitudes which may seem racist or elitist today.
- 8 In James's world, after Omega, people are “outraged and demoralised” (6) by the inability of medical researchers to find the cause of the fertility crisis. Faron sees himself and his fellow men “humiliated at the very heart of [their] faith in [themselves]” (7) and in science. Although to start with, there was much international cooperation and the only debate was about “whether the country which discovered a cure for the universal infertility would share this with the world and on what terms” (7), in fact, by the time the plot starts in 2021, each of the Western nations is conducting its own, secret research projects and, as Ralph Wood puts it, “ethnocentric self-interest triumphs over common need” (1994, 280), a phenomenon not unknown in other global health crises. And as the population of Britain in the novel has decreased from “fifty-eight million in 1996 [...] to thirty-six million [in 2021], 20 per cent of them over seventy” (James 1992, 182), the majority has given up hope and no longer believes any form of salvation is possible.

Dystopian England

- 9 The result of the fertility crisis in James's novel is in some ways a typical dystopia, although a characteristically English one, very unlike, for example, the North-American demodystopia in *The Handmaid's Tale*. There is indeed a totalitarian dictatorship run

by an all-powerful elite supported by a ruthless State Security Police, but no revolution or *coup d'état* has been necessary to bring it about. The cause was simply “almost universal negativism, what the French named *ennui universel*” (12, original emphasis), leading to lassitude, depression and a great unwillingness to get involved in anything, especially politics. James describes “a country sunk in apathy, no one wanting to work, services almost at a stop, crime uncontrollable, all hope and ambition lost” (1992, 219). The dictator, Xan Lyppiatt, Theo Faron’s cousin, calls himself the “Warden of England,” making it clear that “he presides over a country that has become a prison” (Wood 1994, 282). Moreover, it is clear that “there is no real opposition to the Warden of England” and that “there never has been since he took power” (James 1992, 183). Together with his Council of four, Xan offers the population moving towards extinction “freedom from fear, freedom from want, freedom from boredom” (140), and if they are not exactly happy with that, they are at least satisfied and ask for no more. There are no more juries for court cases as it is too difficult to get people to serve, parliamentary sessions only last a month and Parliament is merely an advisory body to Xan and the Council, who do what they like. Elections, are merely to give “the illusion of democracy to people who no longer have the energy to care how and by whom they are governed” (131). Mass euthanasia is organised for those whose lives are no longer considered to be worth living; all criminals, however minor and inoffensive, may end up dead and/or tortured and have no rights. Foreign immigrants are called Sojourners, not in the New Testament sense of pilgrims on their way to heaven, but because, in an older but equally biblical sense of the word, they live in England “like a shadow, and there is no abiding” (1 Chronicles 29:15), as they have no permanent status in the country, only do unpleasant work that native English people do not want to do, and are cruelly thrown out once they reach retirement age. Gangs of criminally inclined Omegas run riot and nobody stops them. Outwardly, England remains the traditional green and pleasant land and retains its historic institutions, although with an increasingly sparse population. In reality, human rights, traditional liberties and ethical standards that were once a matter of consensus no longer exist and, as far as the population can see, nobody is particularly bothered by this as nobody hopes for better.

10 Several critics have perceived *The Children of Men* as a feminist dystopia, connecting it with such other works as Zoe Fairbairns’ *Benefits* (1979) or Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Domingo 2008, 735). Jessica Aliaga-Lavrijsen thus explicitly categorises it as “part of the sub-genre of ‘open or critical’ feminist dystopia that portrays the end of humanity caused by global human infertility” (2019, 61), considering that it gives “a feminist perspective on the end of humanity” (59). Yet this claim is not really convincing. James does write that she is “a feminist in so far as [she wants] a fairer deal for women, equal opportunity, equal pay, a more just society” (Guppy 1995), but she avoids more radical positions. However, unless it is seen as feminist to discuss fertility, and especially male fertility, at all, feminist issues do not appear to be at the forefront of the author’s concerns in this novel as there is no discrimination against women on account of their reproductive role and women have the same political rights as men.

A Christian Fable?

11 On the other hand, the novel’s themes are clearly religious. P. D. James, who was a practising member of the Church of England, claimed to be “so convinced of [God’s] existence and his love that I don’t doubt them” (Wood 2002, 354), although many details of the faith and of how to interpret world events did puzzle her. In her autobiography, she remarks: “The novel was not intended to be a Christian fable but that, in fact, was what I wrote” (1999, 197). She was clear that “it did not start off as a theological book or a Christian book” (Sharkey, 1) but, as Jan Dalley explains, afterwards she realised “how many accepted ideas were thrown into question by her

premise” (1992) and was obliged to treat relatively complex theological ideas. It was, for the author, “quite a traumatic book to write” (Wood 2002, 353). Although *The Children of Men* sold slightly less well than her other novels, only reaching “number six on the best-seller list” (Guppy 1995), possibly because of its overtly religious content, James was ultimately happy with it, telling one interviewer: “So it did work, it did become a Christian novel strangely enough” (Sharkey 2008, 2). It also became a work suffused with hope.

- 12 Some of the religious elements of the novel are obvious. The resistance group *The Five Fishes* uses the symbol of the fish, ICHTUS in Greek, used by Christians ever since they were persecuted by the Roman authorities in the first centuries of the faith. The novel’s title, *The Children of Men*, sounds biblical as the expression appears over thirty times in the King James version of the Bible, occasionally in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, and very rarely elsewhere. In the novel, it appears in the version of Psalm 90 used in the Anglican burial service Theo reads for a now dead Luke:

Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever the earth and the world were made: Thou art God from everlasting, and world without end. Thou turnest man to destruction: again thou sayest, Come again, ye children of men. For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday: seeing that is past as a watch in the night.
(281)

- 13 This call to repentance in the context of eternity enables the runaway rebels to see their plight from a different perspective, particularly as Luke is the father of the child in Julian’s womb, who may give humanity a hope of survival.

- 14 Christian hope is also clearly indicated in the titles of the two parts of the novel: “Omega” and “Alpha,” the End and the Beginning. The reader therefore knows from the start that there will be a new beginning. The slightly longer first half depicts a grim dystopian world in which all hope is lost. However, although the second half starts with the despair of a crowd of kneeling women, praying in anguish before Michelangelo’s *Pietà* in St Peter’s, Rome (198), it moves inexorably towards the new birth, and ends as Theo makes the sign of the cross on the infant’s forehead with his own tears (351) during an improvised baptism. Theo initially declares that all he believes is: “[t]hat once I was not and that now I am. That one day I shall no longer be” (251). That fact that he is, by the end of the novel, prepared to baptise a child and take on political responsibility shows that he has moved to at least the beginnings of both faith and hope.

- 15 The penultimate element in the novel is a Nativity scene with a mother, the mother’s male protector and a new-born baby in a woodshed, not unlike a stable. Three of the Council, like wise men, have come into the shed to visit the baby. Two are kneeling before him in wonder. The dying Carl, the final member of the Council, stands at the door and, like the biblical Simeon, “speaks his *Nunc Dimittis*” (350) before the child he never hoped for and never thought to see.

- 16 While the Christian elements mentioned above are obvious, other aspects of the novel are less flagrant but equally rooted in Christian doctrine and social teaching. In her analysis of English society and its reaction to the fertility crisis, James reveals herself to be part of a long Christian literary tradition. For example, Ralph Wood points out that the English people in *The Children of Men* fulfil the prophecy of Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor: “In the end they will lay their freedom at our feet and say to us, ‘Better that you enslave us, but feed us’” (283). While this is certainly the case, James is even more clearly heir to several English-speaking, mainly Christian, authors writing earlier in the twentieth century: W. B. Yeats, G. K. Chesterton, T. S. Eliot, C. S. Lewis, Dorothy L. Sayers and Walker Percy among others. In Yeats’s “The Second Coming” (1919), in a world faced with crisis, the poet writes: “The falcon cannot hear the falconer; Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold” (65). This is the case in James’s England, so when crisis arrives, with no clear moral compass to guide it, the foundations of the social order start to disintegrate. Moreover, the world is due to end, not in the apocalyptic nuclear conflagration that many had feared during the Cold War, but as in T. S. Eliot’s poem

“The Hollow Men” (1925), “not with a bang but a whimper” (92), as the last human beings prepare to die alone. Alfonso Cuarón also includes clear references to Eliot’s poetry, especially “The Waste Land” (1922), in his film adaptation of the novel (Amago, 217). What James portrays is not only humanity moving towards extinction, but more specifically humanity without faith and without hope, with no belief in eternity, in that tragic situation. The crisis which hits them and shows that their foundations are fragile is demographic, but need not necessarily have been.

17 James frequently admitted her debt to fellow Anglican Dorothy L. Sayers, claiming that she “first came to her in adolescence” and had “remained her devoted admirer” (1993, 19) ever since. Although this influence is clearest in her detective fiction, it may be noted that, in *The Children of Men*, James follows Sayers’ analysis of the reaction of the English people to crisis. In Sayers’ case, the crisis in question was the Second World War. She refers to a population disheartened by “the sense of our individual helplessness in the grip of uncontrollable outside forces” (1940, 25). This leads to a kind of inertia where people are “desperately tempted to try and call a halt to the march of events” (96), crying out to the authorities: “Give us stability! [...] We do not want this perpetual change and disturbance; we want stability” (96). From Sayers’ point of view, this situation came about partly because society was attempting to retain “the great Christian principles without the support of the Christian dogma on which they were founded” (54) and partly because people “had drifted into a lazy tendency to let the specialist take over [their] job and do it for [them]” (17) and refrained from thinking issues through for themselves. Although James’s crisis is in itself very different, she shows the population reacting in a similar way, falling into inertia and abdicating all responsibility. As a result, a totalitarian government easily takes over.

18 Sayers’ final words to the people of England in her 1940 book *Begin Here* also resonate in *The Children of Men*:

If life can be made worthwhile, death will not matter at all; for life can be good, but it is not and cannot be an absolute, anymore than anything else in this world. To make life into an absolute is to exchange it for death-in-life, because, like every other temporal absolute, life takes revenge on those who make it a god. (135)

19 Nearly everyone in James’s dystopic world has made life an absolute. It is only those who have not, who believe that some things are worse than death, the Christian believers Julian and Luke and the midwife Miriam, who find the motivation to act to resist evil and will ultimately be able to bring life back to the dying world. These people still retain St Paul’s trio of virtues: faith, hope and love.

20 G. K. Chesterton’s Father Brown famously claims that “the first effect of not believing in God is that you lose your common sense” (1926, 70–71) and that those who have rejected Christian belief are frequently on the edge of “belief in almost anything” (1926, 94). C. S. Lewis, in two of his Second World War works, *The Abolition of Man* (1943–non-fiction) and *That Hideous Strength* (1945– dystopian fiction) supports this viewpoint and considers that, in a world subject to the Second Law of Thermodynamics, where “nature as a whole [...] is working steadily and irreversibly towards the extinction of life in every part of the universe” (1943, 50), without a solid hope in eternity, people are liable to adopt profoundly unchristian ethics like C. H. Waddington’s in *Science and Ethics* (1942). As Waddington claims, somewhat fatalistically, that “the general direction of evolution is what we must mean by right and good if we are realists” (Laird 1943, 177), previously held ethical systems are no longer to be considered valid. Waddington moves perilously close to a philosophy of might is right, always a dangerous world view. In addition, for Lewis, with no rationally held ethical absolutes, political and social decisions will be based on impulses and chance, “heredity, digestion, the weather and the association of ideas” (1943, 76), not to mention the thirst for power and, once power has been obtained, the desire to keep it. In Lewis’s own dystopian novel, *That Hideous Strength*, the godless leaders actually establish contact with demonic forces. Even if this is less explicit in *The Children of Men*, Ralph Wood is

convinced that James's novel has a similar message: "When God himself disappears, the demonic emerges" (1994, 281).

21 Carl Inglebach, a member of the Council of England in *The Children of Men*, himself completely without faith or hope, surprisingly agrees with this viewpoint. Declaring that "only fools and fanatics" (142) can continue to hope, he also believes that "without hope of a future, [Man] becomes a beast" (142) and that with no religious or ethical principles to hold them back, people will inevitably revert to "old myths, old superstitions and even to human sacrifice, sometimes on a massive scale" (143). Although Carl does not seem to realise it, he and his colleagues are in fact practising a form of human sacrifice themselves in their organisation of Quietus ceremonies (semi-enforced mass suicides) and the elimination of all subversive elements. Other signs of this may be found in the disaffected churches used for "occult rites, animal sacrifices and Black Masses" (Wood 2003, 584) and in the scene where Luke is murdered by a group of frenzied Omegas in a pagan ritual "ceremony of death" (James 1992, 259-67).

22 One of P. D. James's personal concerns clearly present in *The Children of Men* is her concern about the lack of respect for human life in a faithless society where civilisation has broken down. In an interview, she describes Xan Lyppiatt's England as one where the "country has given way solely to pleasure and the old will become a nuisance who are expected to kill themselves" (Sharkey 2008, 2-3), and says she worries about "the attitude towards the old" (3) in her own time which may be moving in this direction.

23 Writing in 1990, shortly before James wrote her dystopian novel, American Christian author Walker Percy drew attention to a 1920 book, *Allowing the Destruction of Life Unworthy of Life (Die Freigabe der Vernichtung Lebensunwerten Lebens)*, which was written by two German professors during the Weimar Republic, jurist Karl Binding and psychiatrist Alfred Hoche. Walker Percy considered they had, perhaps unconsciously, influenced many people in the 20th century, leading them to believe that some lives were valueless. From Percy's point of view, "if one can dispense with the scandalous Christian proposition that each human being is created by God and accordingly sacred" (Short 1990, 238), it is quite reasonable to say: "If the quality of life is not good, why not get rid of it?" (Short 1990, 238). For Percy, this leads to a slippery slope which ends in the Nazi gas chambers (Scott 1989, 231). P. D. James also follows this logic in *The Children of Men* with Hilda Palmer Smith, who is forced to take part in a ceremony of mass suicide and murdered when she tries to escape (1992, 109-10). She is not alone. Theo describes the whole practice to the Council as "culling our old people [...] like unwanted animals" (136), emphasising that they are deprived of their basic humanity in a society that no longer considers human life to be in any way sacred and so justifies the ill-treatment or elimination of migrants, criminals and the dependent elderly.

24 Although Xan Lyppiatt's England is largely without faith and hope, it is not without religion. *The Children of Men* also shows what James perceived as the weaknesses of many tendencies in the Christian culture of her day. Alan Jacobs considers that the novel is a demonstration of "the uselessness of liberal theology in a time of profound crisis" (1993), but this depends on one's definition of liberal theology. James herself was in some ways doctrinally liberal—she did not believe that the New Testament is completely historically accurate (Sharkey, 2008, 16), nor that "Christianity is the only way; that no one comes to God except through Jesus Christ" (Guppy 1995), although she herself did. She did however believe strongly in "redemption through love" (Guppy 1995) and in Christ as the perfect example of this, but strict Catholics or Evangelicals would hardly be happy that the character who proclaims the victory of love, sitting in a chapel at the end of James's final Dalglish novel, is one half of a lesbian couple (2008, 395).

25 *The Children of Men* is critical of "the recognised churches, particularly the Church of England" (James 1992, 73) who are described as having, in the 1990s, "moved from the theology of sin and redemption to a less uncompromising doctrine: corporate social responsibility coupled with a sentimental humanism" (73), and thus, in James's opinion, ignoring the reality of evil and the need for redemption. Two religious superstars, one male and one female, embodying two extreme forms of Christian

culture that James did not appreciate, dominate the post-Omega years. Roaring Roger is a typical hellfire preacher, “moulding himself on the popular idea of an Old Testament prophet” (70) and denouncing just about everything as “text after damning Old Testament text” (71) falls from his lips. He resembles in some ways certain American TV evangelists of the period like Jimmy Swaggart or Jerry Falwell and gets rich by insinuating that “repentance is best demonstrated by a contribution to [his] campaign expenses” (70). However, as he dares not denounce the Omegas’ excesses and inertia takes hold of society, his messages no longer seem relevant by 2021. The other superstar, Rosie McClure from Alabama, preaches a form of “religious hedonism” (71) based on the Beatles’ song “All You Need is Love,” with a message of universal salvation. From James’s point of view, Rosie’s religion is an illusion as she denies the reality of evil (70) and depicts a God with no moral values except the desire “that all his children shall be happy” (72). Both Roger and Rosie have abandoned the religion of the New Testament and its message of sacrifice and redemption. Rosie has even “virtually abolished the Second Person of the Trinity together with His cross, substituting a golden orb of the sun in glory, like a garish Victorian pub sign” (73), calling people to a Christianity without Christ and without judgement. The cross was important to James partly because, as she wrote elsewhere, “it had been carried with its message of love and forgiveness into the darkest hells of human imagining” (2008, 66-67). Without it, for her, the message of the Church has no power.

26 Together with these caricatures of evangelical Christianity, the Church of England in James’s 2021 is run by an Archbishop of Canterbury who is a woman, a Rationalist, and a Republican and who would not have agreed to crown the King, even if Xan had asked her (132). The few churches and chapels which continue to have services often do so for the music. Many, like Theo, attend occasionally “to listen to the singing not to take part in an archaic act of worship” (48). The Church no longer has “a common doctrine or common liturgy” (99) and is fragmented into splinter groups, many with strange beliefs and practices and none with any influence. It has become an irrelevance to dying humanity.

Unlikely Bringers of Hope

27 The religious and philosophical aspects in P. D. James’s novels are mainly revealed through her characters. Using what Ralph Wood calls “an incarnational aesthetic” (2003, 586), the spiritual and ideological content comes “as part of describing the character” (Sharkey 2008, 4). James explains that in nearly all her books “there is someone who actually lives a Christian life or tends to live a Christian life” (Sharkey 2008, 4) and that a book “which didn’t have that religious dimension would seem to [her] curiously thin and empty of a vital part of human experience” (Sharkey 2008, 27). She is, at the same time, aware that the majority of her readers are not Christian believers (Sharkey 2008, 17), and is eager for them to understand those who are and “what they are striving for” (Sharkey 2008, 17). In *The Children of Men*, the message is embodied by Julian and Luke, the Christian parents of the first child born in twenty-five years, and, to a lesser extent, their agnostic friend, the midwife Miriam.

28 In spite of the despair in the world around them, Julian, named by James although not by her fictional parents, after the fourteenth century English mystic and anchoress Mother Julian of Norwich, and Luke, an Anglican priest, have retained a strong, traditional Anglican faith. Like James herself, who was Vice-President of the Prayer Book Society (James 1999, 140) and refers to the 1662 Book of Common Prayer as “central to my life and to my craft as a novelist” (1999, 89), Julian and Luke still use the prayer book rather than one of the more modern liturgical texts. They try to celebrate a daily Eucharist (James 1992, 250). Ironically, their strength and power to change things comes partly from their imperfections. Physically, their fertility has not been noticed as they are not considered worthy to breed by the authorities. Julian has a deformed left

hand (57) and so is not “on the list of women from whom the new race would be bred if ever a fertile male was discovered” (57). Likewise, Luke, the one fertile male in the novel, is “a reject” (272). He suffered from a mild form of epilepsy as a child and is therefore “exempt from testing” (272). Morally, they are also imperfect, as their relationship is illicit, Julian being married to the violent, power-seeking Rolf. Julian is completely aware of her moral failings and doesn’t excuse her adultery, calling it “an act of self-indulgence” (275), and is conscious of being not a saint but a forgiven sinner. Yet, because of their hope of eternity and commitment to something beyond this world, they are able to rise above the general despair. Their physical fertility symbolises their ability to bring life and hope into the world. With everyone around them desperately seeking to produce a baby but not succeeding, Luke and Julian, the rejects who are not even trying and are focussed on compassion and justice, manage to do the impossible.

29 While Rolf and Gascoigne have joined “The Five Fishes” for personal or selfish reasons, Julian, Luke and Miriam have done so out of concern for “the dignity of others” (158) and for justice. Although the absence of babies has affected them, they have not become depressed or lost their essential humanity. For Julian and Luke, this is because of their faith, while Miriam has kept a healthy veneration for life. When Julian’s baby is referred to as a miracle, Miriam replies: “I’ve delivered two hundred and eighty babies. They all seemed like miracles” (223). For her, all life is a gift for which to be thankful and thus to be treated with wonder and respect. On the other hand, Julian campaigns for justice because, in her opinion, “God wants [her] to” (161), but also because she is not ready to become less than human. In many ways, for her the fertility crisis is irrelevant. Julian does not believe anyone can die with dignity if they “care so little for the dignity of others” and pleads: “If we’re dying, we can die as human beings and not as devils” (160). Like Luke, she believes it is still possible to give people hope (84) and to “help them to care” (85). She has no sense of her own dignity and does not care about preserving her own life or being careful. She tells Theo that “the world is changed not by the self-regarding, but by men and women prepared to make fools of themselves” (161) and is quite willing to be one of the fools, trusting “in the terrible mercy and justice of her God” (326) to take care of her. As a result, the words of the manifesto she and Luke write are notable for “their simplicity, their reasonableness, their essential humanity” (163) as they try to persuade others to share their own passion for justice and care for others, like the Sojourners, exploited shamelessly by the Fishes’ compatriots.

30 In the end, Luke will become a Christ-like figure as he gives his life to save Julian and the others (270). He offers himself as a victim to the raving Omegas and enables the others to escape. Myriam too dies as she leaves their refuge to seek for milk for the baby. Theo, who has come to love Julian, is also ready, if needed, to “die for her life” (327), but survives to protect the new mother in the trials ahead. In the same way as, in the Gospel of Matthew (2: 16-18), the infant Jesus’s survival is obtained at the price of the massacre of many innocent children, Julian’s baby is born after the painful slaughter of all but one of his mother’s closest associates and some innocent people who just got in the way. But he survives to bring hope to the world and will be brought up by a mother who has kept alive the desire for justice and compassion in a world where they were almost lost. As Alan Jacobs declares, *The Children of Men* “convincingly demonstrates that in such a world people will hold to a fully supernatural faith in which hope is quite specifically a theological virtue or they will abandon hope altogether” (1993). The people who do keep hoping turn out to be justified in that hope.

31 In addition, if, as Ralph Wood believes, “childlessness in the age to come seems to be James’s analogue for godlessness in the present age” (1994, 288), the novel could be understood as a challenge to those who do still believe, similar to T. S. Eliot’s challenge in his 1931 essay “Thoughts after Lambeth”:

The World is trying the experiment of attempting to form a civilized but non-Christian mentality. The experiment will fail; but we must be very patient in awaiting its collapse; meanwhile redeeming the time: so that the Faith may be

preserved alive through the dark ages before us; to renew and rebuild civilization, and save the World from suicide. (387)

- 32 In the same way, it is not from destruction that James's dystopian world needs saving, but from suicide, the result of lack of hope. Even in one of the greatest crises possible for the human race, *The Children of Men* calls for perseverance, the maintenance of humane values, of justice and compassion and, above all, hope. And the novel demonstrates that hope is inseparable from faith and love. James appears to agree with what St Paul wrote many centuries before, that when all else is gone, these three remain (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Conclusion

- 33 In 1995, when Shusha Guppy interviewed P. D. James for *The Paris Review*, she confidently asserted that "the greatest problem of the world is overpopulation, not the drop in the sperm count of Western man." However, after the increase in the number of babies born in the first years of this century, 2012 saw the curve unexpectedly turn down again and, today in 2022, it continues to decline, notably in the UK. As Polly Toynebee writes, the birth-rate "had already fallen to 1.6 last year in England and Wales—but now it's predicted it could collapse to 1.45 by 2023" (2021). The unexpected Covid-19 crisis has also "temporarily exacerbated the longer-term decline in fertility rates" (Spinney 2021), making the perceived problem worse. Some people have started to panic again, with authors like the epidemiologist Dr Shanna Swan, co-author of *Count Down: How Our Modern World Is Threatening Sperm Counts, Altering Male and Female Reproductive Development, and Imperilling the Future of the Human Race* (2021), claiming that falling sperm counts together with problems of sexual development are "threatening human survival" (Bryant 2021) to the extent that "following current projections, sperm counts are set to reach zero in 2045" (Bryant 2021), which means that she considers that the improbable scenario of *The Children of Men* could become a reality. In addition, climate crisis panic and even the titles of such militant movements as Extinction Rebellion mean that, for some, "the idea that we're out of time is what makes *Children of Men* both a mirror and augur of this world, and the world to come" (Jacobson 2020). For some commentators, "while James' story is fiction, in the real 2021, life may be imitating art" (Stonestreet and Rivera 2021).
- 34 In this situation, it remains to be seen if the message of James's Christian fable will also be considered relevant and efforts made to keep hope and humane values alive in the crises facing humanity. The novel, although certainly a dystopia and a warning, is also "a book of surprising, indeed apocalyptic, hope" (Wood 1994, 285), where the existence of any and all life is a reason for gratitude and rejoicing.

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