

## Ecumenical readings of Bessie Head

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It is well known that Bessie Head had a long-standing interest in religion. Critical studies of her work do not always seem to give this the prominence one might expect. It seems to me an understudied area.

The original inspiration for this paper<sup>1</sup> was the observation that although those who had studied her life and had a detailed biographical knowledge of it were aware of her critical attitude toward Christianity—her own religious identification being with Hinduism and perhaps also to some extent with Buddhism—readers who were not aware of this fact and had read (in particular) *When Rain Clouds Gather* had a rather different impression.<sup>2</sup> In the course of looking at the issues, I came to the view that Bessie Head's religious vision was in many ways a universal one, beyond any simple limitation. It seems to me that religious dialogue, as much as literary criticism, may be an appropriate response to a work on the scale of *A Question of Power*. To try to explain what I mean, let me begin with a quotation from another, quite different, religious novel, C. S. Lewis's imaginative reconstruction of ancient European paganism, *Till We Have Faces*. A Greek philosopher tries to challenge the Priest of Ungit (in front of the King) over apparently inconsistent statements about the gods. The Priest replies:

“[...] They [Greeks] demand to see such things clearly, as if the gods were no more than letters written in a book. I, King, have dealt with the gods for three generations of men, and I know that they dazzle our eyes and flow in and out of one another like eddies on a river, and nothing that is said clearly can be said truly about them. Holy places are dark places. It is life and strength, not knowledge and words, that we get in them [...] Why should the Accursed not be both the best and the worst?”<sup>3</sup>

*A Question of Power* is a story, or a myth, of an encounter with such gods. Why should someone not be both God and the Devil? Elizabeth goes into the dark places, struggles through, and comes out. In such intense meaning, nothing that is said clearly is said truly. In order to approach it, I suggest that we need the resources of more than one religious tradition.

Firstly, though, I will deal with the original issues of this paper.

*When Rain Clouds Gather, etc.*

In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Bessie Head uses images of God drawn to a large degree from Christianity and the Bible. Notably, near the end of the novel, Mma-Millipepe muses on two

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<sup>1</sup> As this paper had developed somewhat since originally being set down for the symposium programme, the title was no longer quite apt by the time it was presented, and I considered changing it for the proceedings, but it seems best at this stage to let it stand as presented.

<sup>2</sup> I have actually met at least two people who thought Bessie Head was a Christian writer because they had only read *When Rain Clouds Gather*.

<sup>3</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces* (Glasgow: Collins, 1987) p. 58.

biblical visions. One is that of Solomon, the great and splendid king of Israel, with his splendid palace: “Gold candlesticks, cherubims, and pomegranates adorned the house, which had forty bathrooms.”<sup>4</sup> The other is that of “a God who was greater than Solomon, but he walked about with no shoes, in rough cloth.”<sup>5</sup> They stand for two futures for Africa, and Bessie Head writes with what now seems frightening foresight: “Who could bathe if all the water went into his [Solomon’s] forty bathrooms? Who would have time to plough if everyone had to join the parade to watch Solomon pass by in his Chevrolet of molten gold?”<sup>6</sup> The God with no shoes “continued to live where he always had - in the small brown birds of the bush, in the dusty footpaths, and in the expressions of thin old men in tattered coats.”<sup>7</sup> All this can be read in a variety of senses, but it is language that Christian readers find highly congenial. It is notable that readers who have only read *When Rain Clouds Gather* sometimes take Bessie Head as here making an explicitly Christian point, and may think of her as a Christian writer.<sup>8</sup> In fact, she undoubtedly did *not* intend this straightforward Christian message, and the specifically Christian reading is clearly untenable if her work is taken as a whole. If Bessie Head had died leaving only this one book, and no other evidence, we would probably conclude that she was a Christian writer, though a few slightly odd comments would suggest to us that she had some unorthodox ideas. (This is, perhaps, a warning about our interpretation of isolated texts.) It suggests, though, the way in which her Christian background did contribute some elements to what went into her writing despite her overall rejection of that tradition.

In *A Question of Power* it is clear that Bessie Head’s religious belief is of Hindu and/or Buddhist type, but evidence of antagonism to Christianity does not appear until the end. Reincarnation and the wheel of existence are assumed, although the vision of existence seems somewhat more progressive and less cyclical than might have been expected.<sup>9</sup> Not only have individual souls developed over many lifetimes—Sello has become what he is because he has “specialized” in holiness—but the human world itself also seems to be developing through stages. Elizabeth is shown visions of some of these previous stages, and the conclusion of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* is quoted to the effect that new life continues to evolve:

There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, an idea of “God” appears, with Elizabeth considering both Dan and Sello for the title at various points, but her thinking moves away from this concept. At the end, she muses that “there is no God like ordinary people [...] you’ll find Medusa and Dan in heaven and hell, but you won’t find ordinary human kindness and decency there. God in heaven is too important to be decent...”<sup>11</sup> This is perhaps reminiscent of the Buddha’s attitude to gods: not exactly disbelief, but

<sup>4</sup> Bessie Head, *When Rain Clouds Gather* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1995) p. 181. The passage seems to refer to I Kings 7, which actually describes both Solomon’s palace and the Temple. The reference to “forty bathrooms” presumably comes from I Kings 7:38 which refers to bronze basins “each of forty baths” (NRSV), a “bath” being a Hebrew measure of volume. The Authorized Version, which was very probably what Bessie Head used, reads “Then made he ten lavers of brass: one laver contained forty baths...” Tom Holzinger recalls (personal communication) that Bessie Head had an excellent verbal memory and could quote from the Bible.

<sup>5</sup> Head, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, p. 181.

<sup>6</sup> Head, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, p. 182.

<sup>7</sup> Head, *When Rain Clouds Gather*, p. 182.

<sup>8</sup> This is accentuated by the fact that the wise character Mma-Millipede evidently holds some sort of Christian belief, though she is cautious in talking about it to the embittered Makaya (p. 127), and by references to “the Good God”.

<sup>9</sup> In Indian thought the wheel of rebirth has classically been regarded as something from which to escape.

<sup>10</sup> Bessie Head, *A Question of Power* (Oxford: Heinemann, Oxford, 1974) p. 35. The quotation is from the final sentence of *On the Origin of Species*.

<sup>11</sup> Head, *A Question of Power*, p. 197.

that they are irrelevant. But in some ways it suggests more the view of the supernatural as noxious.<sup>12</sup>

*Christianity in Bessie Head's other stories:*

Christianity naturally features as an aspect of Botswana society appearing in short stories. The Rev. Dr. Obed Kealotswe, in his useful chapter "Life and Prophecy in the African Independent Churches: Some Background to Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures*" points out that the issue of payment versus free treatment by faith-healers (as in "Jacob: the Story of a Faith-Healing Priest") has been a contentious one in reality, and that names in the story suggest allusions to actual people and events of the time.<sup>13</sup> Bessie Head's attitude to Christianity was critical, and yet there is a certain ambivalence, at two levels. The first presents little problem. Bessie Head recognized goodness in people across the divides of differing ideologies and beliefs, and had no difficulty writing about such figures as Jacob the faith-healing priest, or Galethebege the natural Christian<sup>14</sup> - even if they are contrasted with the money-grubbing false prophet and the intolerant missionary.<sup>15</sup> But the second level is one at which Bessie Head seems, sometimes perhaps despite herself, to see some positive aspects to Christianity. In "The Coming of the Christ-Child"<sup>16</sup> she wrote that the black South Africans "unconsciously chose Christianity to maintain their compactness, their wholeness and their humanity". Her hero, Khama III, was after all the paradigmatic Christian convert ruler of the region.<sup>17</sup> Although Bessie Head had turned away from formal Christianity, she noted it, perhaps grudgingly sometimes, among her formative influences. In 1966 she wrote "[I]n some part of my heart I bow down to the King of the Jews[...]"<sup>18</sup> In a 1982 essay she listed "a bit of Christianity" as an element in her personal mix, and cited especially the appeal of Jesus the story-teller.<sup>19</sup>

In *A Question of Power*, a strangely moving scene is the appearance of Mrs Jones, the old woman whom Elizabeth finds boring, and whom she had physically struck during the height of her troubles. She come in answer to Elizabeth's apology. "You must not be afraid of evil. Jesus overcame evil a long time ago", she says—to which Sello loudly responds "Yes".<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth then muses on this in terms of her evolving human-centred philosophy, but in fact it is a remarkable piece of self-subversion in terms of any simple reading of the novel's religious ideas. This is an example of the sort of complexity which I suggest requires much greater analysis in religious terms.

*"God", and sharing the absolute title*

One of the most distinctive ideas in Bessie Head's most religious vision is the attribution of the name or title "God" to human beings—and not to humanity in general, but to specific or at least individual ordinary people. It is in *A Question of Power* that the concept is discussed most fully, and in fact forms a key theme of the novel. When Sello shows Elizabeth a "vast company" of people who have repeatedly died "for the liberation of mankind", she thinks, "Why, an absolute title has

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Confucius: "...to apply oneself to the duties of man, and, while revering the spirits and gods, to keep away from them - this may be called wisdom." (*Analects*, 6.22). (*The Analects of Confucius (Lun Yu): A Literal Translation with Introduction and Notes by Chichung Huang* (New York: OUP, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> Rev. Dr Obed Kealotswe, "Life and Prophecy in the African Independent Churches: Some Background to Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures*", in Mary S. Lederer & Seatholo M. Tumedi (eds) *Writing Bessie Head in Botswana An Anthology of Remembrance and Criticism* (Gaborone: Pentagon Publishers, 2007) pp. 80-6.

<sup>14</sup> In "Heaven is not closed", *The Collector of Treasures*.

<sup>15</sup> As an indication of Bessie Head's attitudes, it is perhaps telling that even a South African prison guard seems more likely to escape his stereotype than the missionary. ("The Prisoner who wore glasses", *Tales of Tenderness and Power*.)

<sup>16</sup> In *Tales of Tenderness and Power*.

<sup>17</sup> Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa 1450-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996) p. 366: "For the late Victorian and Edwardian world Khama was the model African Christian king, the jewel in the crown of the London Missionary Society, the man who led his country to Christianity and influenced all the kings around him."

<sup>18</sup> Bessie Head, "God and the underdog", *A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990) p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> Head, "Writing out of Southern Africa", *A Woman Alone*, p. 96.

<sup>20</sup> Head, *A Question of Power*, p. 196.

been shared. There are several hundred thousand people who are God.”<sup>21</sup>

Note the *shock*. “God” is an “absolute title”, yet has been shared. Bessie Head here insists on a paradox, and any interpretation of the idea that resolves it into an easily-comprehensible formulation is bound to be inadequate. One may say that any reader who does not find this passage deeply problematic has not taken it seriously. The point is that it is the “absolute title” of the God of monotheism which has been—paradoxically—shared. For the Hindu title of God to be shared would hardly be news. Again, Bessie Head had brought some Abrahamic concepts into her Hinduism. Hinduism is, of course, almost infinitely receptive, and Gandhi brought more Christianity into his Hinduism.

It seems clear overall that Bessie Head did believe in a religious reality, but it is not easy to determine what “God” means within her religious system. It does not seem to have a constant meaning. Sometimes it is used as a metaphor of the sort a non-theistic person might use: “He had said, in so many ways: ‘God is people. There’s nothing up there. It’s all down here.’”<sup>22</sup> Sometimes it is the “absolute title” that shocks Elizabeth. Sometimes the word might be understood as ancient polytheism—“Nearly every nation had that background of mythology—looming, monstrous personalities they called ‘the Gods’”<sup>23</sup>—a sense that would more commonly be spelt “the gods”. Sometimes, as in “She had no illusions left about God or mercy or pity”<sup>24</sup> it seems to refer to a theistic concept of God, introduced in order to dismiss it. But only a few paragraphs before this, we read “Nothing stood in the way of her prestige and self-esteem; she was God”<sup>25</sup>—here apparently referring to Elizabeth’s successfully joining the company of Sello.

Thus, there is no simple answer to the question “what does ‘God’ mean” in *A Question of Power*. This is one of the many profound and difficult questions that arise from the novel. The reader, significantly, is not in my experience aware of such plurality as an inconsistency. It seems to belong naturally to the mythic quality of the story.

### *Man holy to man*

The reason why the absolute title “God” must be shared is linked to her criticism of Christianity, which is summed up toward the end of *A Question of Power*: “[T]he basic error seemed to be the relegation of all things holy to some unseen Being in the sky. Since man was not holy to man, he could be tortured for his complexion, he could be misused, degraded and killed.”<sup>26</sup>

The curious point is that an orthodox Christian would agree with Bessie Head’s argument about the need for “man to be holy to man”. Christianity asserts that human beings are and must be holy to each other, firstly because they are made in the image of God, and secondly because of the Incarnation. The Incarnation is defined in the Athanasian Creed (as Bessie Head, who went to an Anglican school, might have remembered) as “not by the conversion of the Godhead into flesh; but by the taking of the Manhood into God”. The importance of the Incarnation for the social gospel has been repeatedly stressed. Frank Weston, the Anglican Bishop of Zanzibar who protested ferociously against colonial exploitation, famously proclaimed in 1923 that “You cannot claim to worship Jesus in the Tabernacle, if you do not pity Jesus in the slum [...] It is folly—it is madness—to suppose that you can worship Jesus in the Sacraments and Jesus on the throne of glory, when you are sweating him in the bodies of his children [...]”<sup>27</sup> C. S. Lewis, probably the most widely-read Christian

<sup>21</sup> Head, *A Question of Power*, p. 31.

<sup>22</sup> Head, *A Question of Power*, p. 109. Admittedly this is Sello’s use of the term, strictly speaking.

<sup>23</sup> Head, *A Question of Power*, p. 40.

<sup>24</sup> Head, *A Question of Power*, p. 200.

<sup>25</sup> Head, *A Question of Power*, p. 199.

<sup>26</sup> Head, *A Question of Power*, p. 205.

<sup>27</sup> H. Maynard Smith, *Frank Weston, Bishop of Zanzibar: Life of Frank Weston, DD, 1871-1924* (London: SPCK, 1926)

apologist of the English-speaking world in the twentieth century, wrote that “Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses.”<sup>28</sup>

There is, however, a complication. Christianity tries to maintain a concept of God as *both* immanent and transcendent. It is the immanent view that finds all humanity made holy by the Incarnation. The transcendent view, however, is the sense of God as mysterious, wholly other, incomprehensible and beyond all we can imagine. Keeping the two together, although it provides the most all-embracing concept of God, is psychologically difficult, and there has been throughout the history of Christianity a temptation to emphasise one over the other.

Interestingly, Bessie Head herself seems to have sensed that her criticism does not exactly fit Christianity. After setting out the case that man must be holy to man, she concludes that her revelation “was quite the reverse of Mohammed’s dramatic statement [...] She said: There is only one God, and his name is Man.” At this point Bessie Head significantly draws the contrast not with Christianity but with the uncompromisingly transcendent revelation of Islam, which rejects the concept of Incarnation.

### “God” in the Novels and in Bessie Head’s essays

In some of Bessie Head’s essays she discusses her concept of God and her use of the word in her writing. Some individual statements seem clear, and if quoted in isolation can appear to resolve the problem of “what does ‘God’ mean here?”, but when taken together the picture is less clear, even without taking into account the complication of possible changes in her ideas over time. In 1966, the same year that *When Rain Clouds Gather* was published, Bessie Head wrote that “I just accept it that my ‘N\*gra’<sup>29</sup> Goddess is real and alive because I have nowhere else to look for salvation.”<sup>30</sup> This seems clear enough. However in a 1982 essay (*A Question of Power* appeared in 1973) she wrote “I have used the word God, in a practical way, in my books. I cannot find a substitute word for all that is most holy but I have tried to deflect people’s attention into offering to each other what they offer to an Unseen Being in the sky. When people are holy to each other, war will end, human suffering will end.”<sup>31</sup> This seems to imply a quite different sense: that “God” is being used symbolically, though the careful reader will note that this is not in fact exactly what she said. But she then went on: “I believe that the nations of the earth are drawing closer to each other[...] I would propose that mankind will one day be ruled by men who are God and not by power-hungry politicians.”<sup>32</sup> Now we have the concept of people who are God, introduced without explanation in this essay. Taking all these comments together, it is apparent that although they can help illuminate the meaning of “God” in the novels, none of them is sufficient by itself. This is hardly surprising; Bessie Head wrote in 1982 that despite her initial plan to write didactically, the novels seemed to write themselves, and the characters began to rebel against the destiny and definitions she had intended for them.<sup>33</sup>

There are two further complications in connecting the ideas of the essays and the novels, especially *A Question of Power*. The first is that *A Question of Power* is a work of fiction. This may be obvious but it bears repeating since the book contains so much autobiographical material and expresses so much a personal viewpoint. A work of fiction is not a disguised autobiography; similarly, it cannot be reduced to a tract for a set of easily defined ideas. It must be treated as having

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p. 302.

<sup>28</sup> C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory” [1941] in *Screwtape Proposes a Toast* (London: Fount, 1998), p. 102.

<sup>29</sup> In full in the original. Bessie Head was referring to a joke about two K.K.K. members at the Pearly Gates.

<sup>30</sup> Head, “God and the underdog”, *A Woman Alone*, p. 44. Interestingly, in this piece she wrote that she preferred a Goddess to a God, though this hardly appears in the novels.

<sup>31</sup> Head, “Writing out of Southern Africa”, *A Woman Alone*, p. 99.

<sup>32</sup> Head, “Writing out of Southern Africa”, *A Woman Alone*, p. 99.

<sup>33</sup> Head, “Notes from a quiet backwater II”, *A Woman Alone*, pp. 77-8.

an internal system in its own right.

The second follows on: the book necessarily exists at two levels. At one level, there are gods and strange events. Anyone might write a story about gods and strange events, whatever their beliefs, as an allegory or myth or whatever, in which case there would be a clear remove between the system of ideas and realities *within* the story and that actually held by, or being expressed by, the author. In *A Question of Power*, the situation is slightly more complex. It is clear that at one level the book uses some of Bessie Head's own ideas and terminology about "God" and religion. *Some* of this terminology and system is described by Bessie Head in her essays as being designed for use in fiction—"I have used the word God, in a practical way, in my books."<sup>34</sup> But some of it seems to belong to Bessie Head the person, and some of it appears in her writing without any neat and tidy definition ever appearing. Thus in *A Question of Power* there is a remove between the two levels but it is unclear and ambiguous; one of the work's fascinating complications.

### *Liberal theology of the 60s*

Another way of looking at what Bessie Head is trying to do with the "absolute title" of God is to consider the new theological writing that was flowering—or spreading like weeds, according to one's viewpoint—at that time. While Bessie Head does not seem to have read a great deal of it, and indeed may not have read any of it in the original sources, the religious ideas of books such as John Robinson's *Honest to God* (a bestseller, incredibly, in 1963<sup>35</sup>) were very much in the air and surely reached her in some form. The liberal theologians were re-interpreting Christianity to make it more "relevant", and usually emphasized the "this-worldly". Robinson emphasised the immanence of God as "Ground of our being" rather than a transcendent "God out there"—the latter concept, he believed, had lost meaning. Like Bessie Head, Robinson was trying to bring God down to earth. "[S]tatements about God are statements about the 'ultimacy' of personal relationships [...]" he wrote.<sup>36</sup> However Robinson was in fact more traditional than he sounded, and carefully noted that "God is love" did *not* mean "love is God",<sup>37</sup> although readers tended to understand his language of "demythologizing" in a strong sense. Later, this theological writing moved on to a "radical" phase, in which some thinkers "demythologized" Christianity in a cruder and more unambiguous way: they tried to interpret statements about God as being merely symbolic, and abandoned the idea of an objectively-existing God.<sup>38</sup>

Can we see Bessie Head as demythologizing God? That is, did Bessie Head mean, by saying that God is Man, that statements about God would become simply a way of talking about humanity, human destiny, and so forth. This is a possible reading,<sup>39</sup> and some of Bessie Head's writings, which seem to indicate a preference for a rational, logical world-view, may support it. However I think that it is an inadequate way of understanding Bessie Head, as it implies a "means only" reductionism, and that Bessie Head was in reality a non-religious writer using religious symbols. This does not match the evidence of Bessie Head as a person with real (if not clearly defined) religious beliefs. In terms of the new theology mentioned before, Bessie Head seems to have more affinity with the earlier, liberal writers, such as John Robinson (who were in fact more her contemporaries) than with the later, "radical" writers such as Don Cupitt (the comparison being complicated by the fact that as we have seen her beliefs were not Christian). The liberal writers did

<sup>34</sup> Head, "Writing out of Southern Africa", *A Woman Alone*, p. 99.

<sup>35</sup> Adrian Hastings, *A History of English Christianity 1920-1985* (London: Collins, 1986) p. 537; "Religionless Christianity", *Time*, Friday, Apr. 12, 1963, archived online at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,828100,00.html?promoid=googlep> accessed 29 June 2007

<sup>36</sup> John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* [1963] (London: SCM Press, 1987) p. 50.

<sup>37</sup> Robinson, *Honest to God*, p. 52.

<sup>38</sup> In fairness, it should be said that this was often part of an attempt to apply a sort of extreme postmodern scepticism more universally, and disbelieve in *anything* "out there".

<sup>39</sup> Recall Sello's "God is people. There's nothing up there. It's all down here." (*A Question of Power*, p. 109)

not, initially, see what they were doing as actually writing an objectively-existing God out of the story, but as providing a new, more “relevant” way of understanding a God they continued to believe in. The development of the “radical” strain of the new theology was by no means welcomed or accepted by many of the earlier liberals, who did not agree that the reduction of God to a symbol was the inevitable result of their reinterpretation.

*About Bessie Head's Hinduism, and other possible views*

Bessie Head's work provides a religious vision of extraordinary fertility. There is, of course, no such thing as a standard Hinduism, but Bessie Head's beliefs do not seem to have fitted clearly into any of the main traditions (hardly a surprise). In a 1969 essay she seemed to identify herself with the “Untouchables” (now more often known as Dalits).<sup>40</sup> I have not been able to discover what influences were important in the development of her Hindu/Buddhist thinking. At the least, by investigating the religious and intellectual history of Durban in the relevant period some possibilities could be suggested. I suggest this as an area for future research. That is, rather than simply label her beliefs as “Hindu”, I suggest that it would be fruitful to try to explore which *parts* of that enormously rich and diverse tradition she was reading and learning about when she imbibing it. (She was in touch with a particular community, and it is possible that a particular library could be identified as the source of her reading.)

In some ways, the world-view (inasmuch as it can be deduced from the fiction) seems more like that of Mahayana Buddhism. Apparently superhuman beings like Dan and Sello are ultimately within the same universe of rebirth as the rebirth as us. In *A Question of Power*, the people who have died repeatedly “for the liberation of mankind”<sup>41</sup> are reminiscent of *bodhisattvas*, those who turn back from nirvana to remain in the world of rebirth in order to help others.

The extraordinary, archetypical dreamscape of *A Question of Power* has I believe a universal resonance. Its original religious background was, of course, Hindu and perhaps Buddhist in terms of Bessie Head's own thought; and I have just been discussing some ways in which the Christian aspects of her environment may also be relevant. Also, however, I would suggest that it would be interesting to hear the results of analyses from *other* religious and philosophical perspectives. For example, to illustrate what I believe is the wide potential of Bessie Head's work, let me take a tradition completely removed from Botswana, one which might at first glance seem rather unpromising, and suggest a Confucian reading of Bessie Head. The central Confucian value of *ren* (human-heartedness) would be an obvious first point of contact. Next, I think a Confucian would be interested in her ideas about the holy really relating to humanity. The Confucian tradition has tended to value an emphasis on the natural and this life.<sup>42</sup> (Note, however, that although Confucian thought has sometimes been described as secular, and a fully secular interpretation can be supported from some classical sources,<sup>43</sup> the Chinese Confucian tradition has in fact been somewhat more complex.) Also, it might be interesting to set Bessie Head's insistence on “ordinariness” against the Confucian belief in the normal: “The Master said ‘The path is not far from man. When men try to pursue a course, which is far from the common indications of consciousness, this course cannot be considered THE PATH.’”<sup>44</sup> Confucianism does of course traditionally express human relationships in

<sup>40</sup> Head, “African religions”, *A Woman Alone*, pp. 50-1.

<sup>41</sup> Head, *A Question of Power*, p. 31.

<sup>42</sup> Thus Confucius, in response to the question “What is death?”: “The Master said: You do not understand life yet; how can you understand death?” (*Analects* 11.12).

<sup>43</sup> Xunzi [Hsün Tzu in Wade-Giles romanization] held that rituals for the dead are understood by the common people as being about spirits, but by the superior man (*junzi*) as being a form of social solidarity (ch. 13). This source should perhaps give us pause, firstly because of Xunzi's elitism, which not would have gone down well with Bessie Head, and secondly because of his role as the teacher of Li Si and Han Feizi, two Legalists who helped establish the ruthless and anti-traditional state of the First Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi.

<sup>44</sup> *The Doctrine of the Mean [Zhongyong]*, XIII.1, in *The Chinese Classics* trans. James Legge (Hong Kong & London, 1861) vol. 1 p. 257 (Google scanned text accessed from <http://books.google.com>).

terms of a society of seniors and juniors rather than equals; but then so does Botswana, and Bessie Head was able to find great good in it nonetheless; furthermore Bessie Head's engagement with good-hearted humble people—"she had fallen from the very beginning into the warm embrace of the brotherhood of man"<sup>45</sup>—could be compared with Mencius's belief in human equality based in the precepts that everyone has "sprouts" of good in them and is capable of being a sage.<sup>46</sup>

The basis of a possible Taoist critique is not as obvious, but then my knowledge of Taoism is limited. (Possibly one might note that religious Taoism<sup>47</sup> is one of those traditions which deals explicitly with those aspects of the supernatural which might be called demonological—what Taoist masters call "the Tao of the Left".) There is something about *A Question of Power*, with its unexplained strangeness followed by sudden enlightenment, which may connect with the related Zen Buddhist tradition. Perhaps both a Confucian and a Taoist would agree in finding, in the three main novels, a sense of the Way and its loss (most of all, perhaps, in *Maru*, despite its apparent resolution).<sup>48</sup> A Muslim response might seek to answer Bessie Head's critique of the idea of transcendence. These are only suggestions, and this list of traditions is not intended to be exhaustive or to indicate which I suppose to be more important, merely some cases where I have some illustrative ideas to offer.<sup>49</sup>

And then of course there is the view of the traditionalist. Fashions change as to whether we should talk about an "African Traditional Religion" or not, but it would nonetheless be interesting to hear the insider's voice. There is of course a problem in that there is a great reluctance to discuss some of the relevant topics openly (notably witchcraft)—partly for obvious reasons and for reasons of traditional secrecy, but also because of westerners' unsympathetic attitudes. A secular and sceptical west needs to treat the beliefs of Africa, both old and new, with more respect, if it wishes to learn anything about how Africans think.

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<sup>45</sup> Head, *A Question of Power*, p. 206.

<sup>46</sup> Mencius [Mengzi] 6.A.8, 6.B.2.

<sup>47</sup> Western scholars have generally followed Chinese tradition in distinguishing philosophical Taoism (*dao jia*) and religious Taoism (*dao jiao*). Taoist masters are, among other things, ritual specialists for the general population, though it should be noted that "Taoism" and "Chinese popular religion" are not the same thing.

<sup>48</sup> See *Analects*, e.g. 4.6, 3.24, 14.38; *Daodejing* [*Tao-te-ching*] ch. 38.

<sup>49</sup> In her essays Bessie Head expressed admiration for Jewish thought, but this does not seem to appear overtly in the novels.