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## Christian, Norse and Celtic: Metaphysical Belief Structures in Nancy Farmer's The Saxon Saga

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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### Abstract

Introduces a young adult historical-fantasy trilogy, *The Saxon Saga* by Nancy Farmer, and elucidates the value of its multicultural approach in our distrustful and fragmented age. The respectful representation of three conflicting cultures in the novels—Christian, Norse, and Celtic—demonstrates to young readers that people may hold vastly different metaphysical views and yet may have many core values in common, enough to forge a relationship of mutual trust.

### Additional Keywords

Norse mythology; Religious tolerance in children's literature; Celtic mythology; Christianity and myth; Farmer, Nancy. *The Saxon Saga*; Multiculturalism in children's literature



CHRISTIAN, NORSE AND CELTIC:  
METAPHYSICAL BELIEF STRUCTURES IN  
NANCY FARMER'S *THE SAXON SAGA*

DAREK OZIEWICZ

"Of 'pagan' belief we have little or nothing left in English. But the spirit survived." J.R.R. Tolkien, "*Beowulf: The Monsters & the Critics*" 36

THE RECREATION OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE in quasi-historical circumstances is one of the many uses of the modern medievalism which undergirds much of post-Tolkienian fantasy. Although they may only be partially true to historical facts, medieval worlds employed in fantasy are often based on detailed research and can immerse the reader in the structure of belief which informed historically identifiable pre-modern societies. In confronting the modern with the historical, fantasy not only helps contemporary readers learn about mythological and historical legacies of specific cultures from the past. It also creates a detached contextual frame to view and perhaps better understand a number of issues relevant to the globalized reality of post-9/11 world.

One of those issues is the friction between different belief structures held by individuals and societies alike. Metaphysical beliefs have been one of the most recurrent causes of human conflicts, and disagreements over beliefs have been among the most difficult to resolve. At the same time, in many cases the belief structures of the parties in conflict—although conceived by each side as radically different—shared a considerable overlap when seen by an outside observer.<sup>1</sup> In this article I will examine the interplay of three metaphysical belief structures in Nancy Farmer's *The Saxon Saga: The Sea of Trolls* (2004), *The Land of the Silver Apples* (2007), and *The Island of the Blessed* (2009). I argue that the three

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Vigen Guroian's theorizing about values vs. virtues in his "Awakening the Moral Imagination: Teaching Virtues Through Fairy Tales." In Guroian's perspective, values are components of moral living chosen by an individual and are subordinate and relative to the individual's own autonomy. Virtues, by contrast, such as for instance mercy, courage, honesty and others, are not subjective; they are substantial and universal in character, and this substantial morality lies beneath ever-changing values in human life (10). In the Saxon Saga each metaphysical belief structure embraces different values—for example pillaging is important to Viking and fasting is for Christians—but virtues such as courage, honesty, truthfulness and others are the same regardless of culture and religion.

belief structures—medieval Christian, Norse, and Celtic—are represented by Farmer as alternative and equally consistent narratizations of human spiritual reality. I demonstrate that by adopting this pluralist perspective, one that does not exclude or privilege any single belief structure, Farmer suggests that a difference of beliefs does not have to be a source of conflicts. On the contrary, diversity of beliefs can be used to enrich every individual with insights and understanding that are not possible within one's own belief structure.

Nancy Farmer's *The Saxon Saga* is one of the best recent examples of mythopoeic fantasy as I defined the genre in *One Earth, One People*. Addressed primarily to teenage and young adult audience, the books of the series affirm a holistic worldview that sees life as a continuous whole—a web of planes of existence represented by the tree of life Ygdrasil, all planes sustained by the same life force. They tell a story in which the fantastic and the real blend to create "an imaginative experience of a world in which metaphysical concepts are objective realities and the protagonists' responses to those realities reflect on their lives" (84). The story is constructed "from a variety of artistically re-imagined and reconfigured mythic elements"—all of them presented as believable by realist criteria (84). It recounts the protagonists' attempts to meet specific moral imperatives, thus suggesting why similar imperatives in the primary world demand certain kinds of behavior. The saga's mythopoeic dimension is best seen in the novels' secondary world: offering a panorama of 8<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-Saxon England, Pictish Scotland, and Norse Scandinavia, *The Saxon Saga* introduces the reader to the mythical realms that were recognized as real by those cultures: Jotunheim, the land of trolls in Northern Scandinavia, Elfland, the realm of fallen angels hidden deep under the English soil, Notland, the realm of the Finfolk to be found north of Orkneys, and the Islands of the Blessed—the Celtic paradise located somewhere northwest of Ireland. *The Saxon Saga* also features mythical beings such as dragons, trolls, elves, hobgoblins and Finfolk; old and new gods of various cultures—Norns, Yarthkins, Odin, the Forest Lord, and the devil—and, of course, magic. There are magical beings, magical items, magical lore, magical healings, magical transformations, and magical learning.

For all of its otherworldly and fantastic qualities, *The Saxon Saga* reflects the extremely violent realities of the late 8<sup>th</sup> century clash of three cultures: Anglo-Saxon Christians, Viking Norsemen, and Celtic as well as Pictish polytheists. The series opens with the sacking of Lindisfarne in 793—historically, the first major Viking raid on England—and then things get worse. In *The Sea of Trolls* eleven-year-old bard-apprentice Jack and his six-year-old sister Lucy are kidnapped by Northmen. Although they are initially meant to be sold to Picts in the North, the children's unique qualities—Lucy's loveliness and Jack's poetry

skills—save them. The Viking captain Olaf One-Brow decides to keep Jack as his personal bard; the shield maiden Thorgil who had captured Lucy decides to give her as a gift to King Ivar the Boneless and his half-troll wife Queen Frith. On the way to Scandinavia, Jack and Lucy suffer the fate of slaves and witness bloodcurdling events. After arriving in Northland, the siblings are brought to the royal court where Jack's praise-song accidentally breaks Queen Frith's appearance spell and destroys her beautiful hair. Threatening to sacrifice Lucy to the goddess Freya unless the hair is restored, the half-troll queen gives Jack a deadline and sends him on a quest to Jotunheim to Mimir's Well to obtain the magic necessary to redo the spell. In Jotunheim, Olaf One-Brow is killed by a trollbear, but Jack and Thorgil manage to reach the troll queen's palace. The trolls turn out to be far more civilized and friendly than Jack and Thorgil had expected; the protagonists win their friendship and assistance in reaching the tree Yggdrasil and Mimir's Well, the well holding the water of life. Having drunk from the Well, Jack and Thorgil return successfully to the human realm. Jack uses his newly acquired knowledge to defeat the evil queen. As a reward, he and his sister are taken back to England and freed.

The second book of the trilogy, *The Land of the Silver Apples*, is set one year later and begins with a magical accident not unlike Jack's destruction of Queen Frith's hair; this time, however, the victim of the magical side-effect is Lucy, Jack's sister. Having violated the sanctity of a new year's ceremony, Lucy starts behaving strangely, as if she is mentally disturbed. In fact, though, Lucy is only becoming aware of her elf nature and in the course of the novel she is revealed as an elf changeling. When taken to St. Filian's monastery for healing, Lucy runs away to join the elfish Lady of the Lake. Jack tries to use his bard's powers to prevent this and causes an earthquake; the Elf Lady punishes the entire town by withdrawing its water. To restore water to Bebba's Town, Jack and his two companions—the manumitted slave girl Pega and the monastery's slave Brutus—are then propelled on another adventure, this time to the underground kingdom of the elves. By the time the three reach Elfland, they lose Brutus but come across Thorgil who had wandered inside from a cave on the seashore. In the heart of Elfland the protagonists meet friendly hobgoblins and vainglorious elves. At the elves' banquet they see Lucy, who turns out to be the Elf Queen's daughter, but they also unintentionally dispel the elves' spell of illusion. They are imprisoned and are to be sacrificed to the devil as elves' tithe at Midsummer's Eve, but they manage to stand their ground against the devil and escape. On their way back, the protagonists enlist the help of the old god Yarthkins and become instrumental not only in restoring water to Bebba's Town but also in freeing it from the demonic usurper king Yffi.

In the third novel in the series, *The Islands of the Blessed*, Jack's village is ravaged by Odin's Wild Hunt and then haunted by a demon called a *draugr*. The *draugr* is the undead spirit of a mermaid who had given everything to a man who led to her death. Now the mermaid's spirit seeks justice for the wrong she suffered, but while roaming the earth she harms innocent beings on her way. In order to lure the *draugr* away from human settlements and lay her to rest, Jack and his mentor the Bard, accompanied by Thorgil and their Norse friends, travel to Notland, the land of the finfolk, to settle the dispute. On the way, the protagonists are captured by the treacherous Viking king Einar Adder-Tooth, fight with a hogboon—a soulless being that feeds on life—and then face the rage of the sea. In Notland, the Bard walks into the tomb with the demon; Jack and Thorgil are left by the finfolk on a desert island where they suffer from another Wild Hunt and even visit Valhalla during the storm. Upon return to England, Jack finds Bebbas's Town ravaged by plague and comes close to losing Thorgil, who gets infected. The last chapter ends happily, but on an ambiguous note: Jack and Thorgil either die of plague or are both miraculously healed. In either case, they reunite with the Bard—who explicitly denies Jack's suspicion that they are dead (463)—and are taken to the Islands of the Blessed to attend the School of Bards. At the close of the novel they stand on the threshold of a new beginning.

As this outline suggests, on both real and supernatural planes, the secondary world of The Saxon Saga represents what cultural historians call an interaction sphere: "a region in which one society disseminates its symbols, values and inventions to others" (Mann 281). The interaction sphere in each volume is 8<sup>th</sup> century northeastern England—a fact easily gleaned from maps that precede each volume—with occasional excursions into northwestern Scandinavia. Historically, this interaction sphere spanned a much longer period than is depicted in the novels—lasting at least since the first Anglo-Saxon raids in Roman Britain around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century until the Norman Conquest. This British interaction sphere peaked at the turn of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries and involved the three large and inwardly diversified ethnic groups: Anglo-Saxons, Northmen—that is Danes and Norwegians—and Britons represented by Picts and Celts. To these three historical groups Farmer adds five other mythic-fantastic cultures: trolls, elves, hobgoblins, finfolk, and unclassifiables: old gods, dragons, monsters, spirits, and humanoid shapeshifters. Each of those cultures is shown to have its own beliefs, values and cultural institutions, most of them very different from those practiced by other societies. Notwithstanding, for example, differences between hobgoblins and elves, the historically accurate human cultures that also inhabited Britain seem to have been severely conflicted. For example, British historian Norman Davies, commenting on ethnic relations in early medieval Britain, writes in his monumental work *The Isles: A History*:

[I]n Britannia the Celtic Christians and the Germanic pagans had seven or eight generations in which to reinforce and to ritualize their cultural differences. From all accounts, the Celts were as loath to share their religion with pagans as the pagans were to accept it. What is more, when the Germanics eventually accepted Christianity, they did so from Irish or Roman missionaries, not from their British neighbors. [...] The accompanying (but unwritten) message said that no forms of cultural pluralism would be tolerated. It was in that hostile social climate of the seventh and eighth centuries that [...] the British Celts and Germanics of Britannia had so schooled themselves in their separateness that in the end they could neither live together nor significantly influence each other's language and culture. (168-169)

What Davies identifies as "prolonged and continuous hostility between Britons and Saxons" (172)—one that precluded ethnic blending and nurtured deep and permanent divisions—only intensified when Northmen entered the scene. Even though "piracy was only one aspect of their rich and complex history" (196), the fact that they are best remembered as Vikings—"the Old English word for 'pirates'" (196)—leaves little doubts about how the already conflicted British Celts and Anglo-Saxons saw these new invaders. According to historians, Viking landings and attacks come as a shock to the inhabitants of England, partly because England had been free from outside invasions for almost two centuries, and partly because Northmen were well known to Anglo-Saxons as traders. Yet the successive plundering and desecration of three main centers of learning and art in England—the venerated monasteries at Lindisfarne (793), Jarrow (794), and Iona (795)—was a clear indication that Vikings were now coming with a different kind of business. By 835, says another British historian, "a big raid on Kent [...] opened three decades in which attacks came almost yearly, and which ended with the arrival of a full-scale invading army" (Blair 80).

The plots of *The Saxon Saga* are set long before the Viking wave destroyed much of Anglo-Saxon England in the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, they reflect the buildup of a conflict that was not only political but also ideological, cultural, and religious—a type of belief-based cultural conflict that is still prevalent in the modern world. And it is in this respect that *The Saxon Saga* can offer particularly instructive food for thought to modern readers, young and old alike. Neither downplaying nor idealizing any of the three main metaphysical belief structures that are presented in the series, Farmer implies that there is no singularly true narrative account of human spiritual intimations. Rather, each of those belief structures—Saxon Christian, Norse, and Druidic Celtic—is a culturally-specific but equally consistent narratization of spiritual reality. In this way, Farmer's saga embraces cultural diversity and religious pluralism, demonstrating that disagreements over beliefs often blind the parties

involved to what their cultures share. Farmer's saga also helps readers appreciate that any metaphysical belief structure can be used to uplift or exploit, to spread love and peace or dispense condemnation and hate.

A metaphysical belief structure, as I understand this term here, is a complex that involves religious and magical beliefs as well as social norms and mores of a given culture. Thus the Saxon Christian belief structure it is not synonymous with the Christian religion or even medieval Catholicism as such, even though it includes elements of religion alongside those of magic. According to the taxonomy proposed by Rodney Stark in his "Reconceptualizing Religion, Magic, and Science," both religion and magic depend upon the supernatural, defined as "forces or entities beyond or outside nature which can suspend, alter, or ignore physical forces" (108). However, whereas religion is usually predicated on the idea of supernatural beings—Gods are defined by Stark as "supernatural 'beings' having consciousness and desire" (108)—magic is "*limited to impersonal conceptions of the supernatural*" (109, italics in the original). Another difference between the two is that magic, unlike religion, "displays remarkably little curiosity or speculation" about why things are as they are, and does not "engage questions of 'ultimate meaning'" (110). Religion, by contrast, includes "statements about the nature of the supernatural and about ultimate meaning." In Stark's words, it

tells us the meaning of life (if any) and what the supernatural is like, whether beings or essences, and if the latter, about their character and concerns. Because Gods are conscious beings, they are potential exchange partners because all beings are assumed to want something for which they might be induced to give something valuable. Indeed, the core of Godly religious doctrines consists of explanations about what Gods want and what one must do to earn their blessings. (111)

Thus the Norse metaphysical belief structure, for example, encompasses elements of Norse magical practices, Norse religion, and Norse mores, but is not limited to any of those specific components. It is a broader concept than any of these, and one indicated by Farmer through a number of specific examples as a background for her story, rather than elaborated upon extensively. Represented in the words and actions of specific characters, Saxon, Norse and Celtic metaphysical belief structures form a rich mythopoeic backdrop for Farmer's saga, and most conflicts in the novels have their roots in the cultural clash of those three belief structures.

The Christian metaphysical belief structure is voiced most articulately by Saxons, particularly Jack's father Giles Crookleg and Father Severus. Theirs is a harsh kind of Christianity that sees suffering and pain as "the surest way to salvation" (*Sea of Trolls* [Sea] 13), and is highly suspicious of any enjoyment of



worldly existence. "Long life is but a chance to commit more sins," Father Severus explains to fellow slaves on the Norse ship. "The longer you live, the more Satan whispers in your ear. Your soul grows so heavy, it gets dragged down to Hell. It's better to die young, preferably right after baptism, and be taken into Heaven" (100). Christians such as Father Severus and Giles embrace gloomy fatalism, believing that life's calamities are the will of God and a punishment for their sins—something that helps them earn their way to Heaven. Part of this life-denying stance is that Christians, even in the face of it, refuse to recognize the existence of trolls and dragons, condemn other metaphysical beliefs as superstition, and denounce all forms of natural knowledge as magic or witchcraft.

Christianity, however, also has a life-affirming face. This positive side is represented by Brother Aiden, the sole survivor from the Lindisfarne monastery, and previously a Pictish child saved by Father Severus from Odin's Wild Hunt. It is also embodied in the character of Pega and the hobgoblins whose race acquired souls after they had been baptized by St. Columba (*Land of the Silver Apples* [Land] 270). All these characters understand suffering, pain, and sorrow as unavoidable elements of life but do not seek it or glorify it. Rather, they cheerfully place their hopes on eternal rewards of Heaven and are committed to helping others and doing good while they can. It is mostly through those characters that Christianity is presented as spiritually valid. At one point in the story, when Pega sings Caedmon's hymn in front of the assembly of taunting elves, the narrator comments: "You could see the glory of Heaven and the wonder of the earth as you listened to it. It was a celebration of life beyond even what Jack could call up with his staff. It humbled him to admit this, but it was so" (307). In this and several other episodes, Christianity is presented not as a domain of weak life-haters but as an empowering recognition of life's ultimate meaning and a factually accurate description of the metaphysical structure of the world. For example, *The Land of the Silver Apples* reveals the existence of hell (353-56) and presents the elves as fallen angels who had not taken sides in the war in heaven and were banished from life to fade away into nothingness (157-9). In this novel even Father Severus's harshness turns out to be spiritually saving: he does not yield to the elves' glamour and the utter bleakness of his outlook is seen to hide "a deep kindness in him" (319). When he calls on the elves to repent, Father Severus becomes an instrument of a higher power (349). It is also his absolute trust in God that enables Father Severus to volunteer as an offering to the devil in place of Pega—an act of ultimate courage and sacrifice no one else would be capable of (352).

The Norse metaphysical belief structure is a world of religious beliefs, magic and mores practiced throughout northern Europe and Scandinavia until roughly 10<sup>th</sup> century. It is a belief structure that elevates violence above any other

qualities, seeing it as the cause, purpose and the only joy in life. Northmen such as Olaf One-Brow and his crew revel in violence just like their gods—at one point, when Jack meets Odin, the Norse god tells him “*War is inevitable. [...] All exists to kill and be killed, and only courage in the face of death is beautiful*” (*Islands of the Blessed [Islands]* 398, italics in the original). For Northmen, the only goal worthy of human activity, the only thing that will outlast everything, is “the fame of a brave warrior” (*Sea* 148)—one to be gotten by fighting. Violent death in battle is the only way that secures the entry to Northmen’s paradise, and that paradise, Valhalla, is a place where warriors feast and fight forever. As Olaf paints the picture of this most desired form of eternal existence, Valhalla is the place where

the best and brightest [spend] all day in ferocious battle, killing and being killed. At evening the dead [rise] and [spend] the night feasting and drinking with their murderers. The roast boar never [runs] out, the mead cups [are] always full. It [is] a wonderful place, but only those who had been slain in battle [are] allowed in. (*Sea* 124-125)

The Vikings as shown in Farmer’s saga are violent and unpredictable people, and their society too is based on domestic violence. For polygamous Northmen, wives are acquired either by kidnapping or through purchase, children—as Thorgil’s story illustrates—are often abused, beaten or rejected, and wealth is amassed through pillaging. At the same time, despite their devotion to war and bloodshed, Vikings are capable of admirable qualities. They are loyal and courageous. They are people of honor, who value friendship and solidarity, and who always keep their word. The love and consideration Olaf shows toward his family is beyond anything Jack had ever seen in a Christian home. Olaf’s compassion toward the abandoned slave child Thorgil is spectacular: he takes her into his household, manumits her, and eventually adopts her as his daughter. Also, as Jack comes to realize at one point, Olaf “towered above ordinary men with his openheartedness.” Unlike Father Severus, “Olaf would never have rejected a lonely mermaid on a beach” (*Islands* 447).

Not only are some Northmen such as Olaf, Rune, or Skakki presented as noble and even admirable (*Sea* 149, *Land* 209), the Norse metaphysical belief structure—despite its bloodlust—is also validated as true to facts. *The Sea of Trolls* confirms the existence of Yggdrasil, Mimir’s Well, Norns, trolls and their enchanted realm Jotunheim. The Norse custom of berserking is explained as having developed from the need to fight trolls who, as mind readers, would easily overcome an ordinary human opponent. Thorgil’s and the Bard’s ability to understand the language of birds is the consequence of their having accidentally drunk dragon’s blood—as also happened to Sigurd. If this was not enough, *The Islands of the Blessed* contains episodes which assert the reality of Odin, Odin’s

Hunt, Valhalla, and Norse afterlife—at one point Jack and Thorgil converse with their long dead companions and with the Norse god. All of those suggest that the Norse belief structure is a valid one after all.

The third metaphysical belief structure to be found in *The Saxon Saga* is the Celtic one represented by the Bard, Jack, and several other characters. Although it overlaps with its Norse counterpart—affirming the existence of Norse gods, Yggdrasil, Norns, Jotuns, and other elements of Norse religion and mythology—the Celtic belief structure is life-affirming, even holistic by modern standards. As embodied in the character of the Bard, it is based on recognition of the life force: the all-encompassing energy that sustains all forms of life. Within this belief structure, human responsibility is to serve the life force in one large circle of life that includes humans, animals, and the seen and the unseen worlds. The life force is the unpersonified divine that permeates all things. “It is this that feeds the great forests and meadows sweet with grass,” the Bard explains:

It is this that calls forth the flowers and the butterflies that are so like flowers. The deer follow its courses as they browse. The badgers and moles build their homes over it. It even draws the swallows in the midst of the sea. All things are subject to it [...]. (*Sea* 33)

Since “[t]he life force is ever moving, altering its appearance” (*Sea* 70)—and since it animates all levels of creation—the Celtic belief structure recognizes a bewildering variety of forms of existence: “sprites and boggarts, will-o’-the-wisps and pixies, spriggans and flibbergibbets” (*Land* 79), pookas, kobolds, hobgoblins, finfolk, old gods such as the Man in the Moon, the Forest Lord, or Yarthkins, monster creatures such as kelpies (*Land* 171-172, 414-415), knuckers, Pictish beasts, *draugrs*, and hogboons. Serving the life force means eschewing all forms of violence, killing, and hurting—even hurting through negative emotions. It also means sustaining human bonds with the natural world—for example through the performance of ancient rites such as the Need-Fire Ceremony that opens the plot of *The Land of the Silver Apples*. The Celtic belief structure recognizes magic as a legitimate form of knowledge, acknowledges shape-shifting as a form of casting one’s soul into another body, and embraces reincarnation, eternal circulation of life in all nine worlds, expressed through the concept of being immersed in “the living stream” (*Land* 159, *Islands* 362).

For all of its life-affirming qualities, the Celtic belief structure has a darker side too. The life force, when allowed to completely take over the human mind, breaks it and makes a man into a wild beast—as illustrated by the story of the Valley of Lunatics (*Sea* 34-6). The old animistic gods, now exiled, are not part of Yggdrasil and have their own agendas, often openly hostile to the human world. It was the old gods that drove Pictish women mad, causing their collective

suicide, as a result of which “the Picts never quite recovered from that tragedy” (*Islands* 330), eventually becoming slaves of the Elves and practitioners of black magic or—as it is called in the series—“Unlife” (*Islands* 295). Unlife is also presented as a primeval power that may devour human souls, demands human sacrifices, and celebrates death. Hard to believe as many elements of the Celtic metaphysical belief structure are, all of them are incorporated in the saga as palpable realities: as Jack and other characters learn, the life force is a real phenomenon, elf-shots happen (*Land* 100), shape-shifting is possible, human sacrifices can call up “assistance” from Unlife, and the Islands of the Blessed—in the Bard’s words “the doorstep of Heaven. [A place] . . . for those who are not finished with the affairs of the world” (*Islands* 467)—are as real as the hobgoblin’s underground kingdom or Notland, the realm of the finfolk.

What is the modern reader to make out of this picture? Given that Farmer’s representation of Anglo-Saxon Christian metaphysical belief structure is thoroughly in line with the kind of worldview that can be found in the combative, pain-exulting, and violence-dominated Christianity recorded, for example, in the 9<sup>th</sup> century *Heliand* and embraced by the Germanics in early medieval Europe and England<sup>2</sup>; given that her representation of Norse gods, customs, beliefs and mythology accurately reflects modern knowledge about this culture as established by scholars<sup>3</sup>; and given that her speculation about Celtic and Pictish beliefs, to the best of our knowledge, may not be far from historical truth<sup>4</sup>, what The Saxon Saga offers is a surprisingly informative insight into three very different historical cultures and systems of belief. Although the spokesmen for each of those assert that only their metaphysical belief structure describes and explains the world accurately, the readers of the saga get a different picture: one that validates all three belief structures as equally true, equally factual, and equally consistent. Even the Christian belief structure is not elevated above any other belief structure available for those who lived in 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century Northern Europe. In this way Farmer successfully achieves a balanced representation of

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, G. Ronald Murphy, S.J.’s *The Saxon Savior: The Transformation of the Gospel in the Ninth Century Heliand*.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Farmer’s description of Yggdrasil (*Sea* 359-60) is almost the verbatim version of that to be found in Hilda R. Ellis Davidson’s *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (26-7). Farmer’s depiction of Ragnarok (*Islands* 398-399) and of Odin also correspond closely to Davidson’s accounts (37-38, and 48 respectively) and to information that can be found also in John Lindow’s *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals and Beliefs*.

<sup>4</sup> Farmer herself acknowledges the speculative nature of our knowledge about these cultures when she admits in the Appendix to *The Land of the Silver Apples*: “We don’t know what the Picts worshipped. [...] I have given them the Forest Lord (also called the Green Man), the Man in the Moon, and the Wild Huntsman as gods. But no one really knows” (484).

each culture—avoiding, for example, the negative stereotyping of Vikings as beastly raiders on the one hand and the positive idealization of their northerness on the other. In her account each culture is different, often in fundamental ways. For Christians proper burial is necessary to ensure resurrection and entry into paradise; for Northmen entering Valhalla is possible only after one has fallen in battle, and if the body can be recovered, it should be cremated in a way that honors the status of the deceased—preferably with their ship, treasures, and human sacrifices on board. For the Celts, finally, the most proper burial is to “set [the] body afloat in a little boat in the belief that it would take [the person] to the Islands of the Blessed” (*Land* 106). For all these differences in values, the three cultures celebrate the same virtues. This overlap in understanding virtues informs mutually enriching relationships that straddle cultural difference, such as those between the Celtic wizard Bard and the Christian monk Brother Aiden, the Saxon Jack and the Norse shield maiden Thorgil, the Northman Olaf and the Troll Queen. The fact that hobgoblins are good Christians, that the Christian saint Columba was one of the best Celtic bards ever and did not forget his ancient lore even when he became Christian (*Islands* 61-63), and that trolls are not monsters but a different culture with highly developed morality and a sense of ethics—all these and more suggest that positive interaction between representatives of different metaphysical belief structures is not only possible but immensely enriching.

The importance of this message to the readers living in a post-9/11 world cannot be overstated. While many reasons can be legitimately given here, two seem to be central. The first is that Farmer’s saga indirectly educates readers in religious diversity, suggesting that difference in beliefs does not have to be the source of conflict. Although this message is also important for adults, it seems especially critical for teenagers and young people who form the Saga’s primary audience. According to Jennifer Sanders, Kris Foyil and Jennifer M. Graff, the authors of “Conveying a Stance of Religious Pluralism in Children’s Literature,” “[r]eligious diversity education is increasingly important in the current climate of religious violence and world-wide religious dissonance” (169). For Sanders *et al*, novels that address issues related to the clash of belief structures and advocate religious pluralism help “develop socially competent, global citizens and create a peaceful society” (168). The research they conducted on a sample of religiously pluralistic children’s texts—interestingly, limited only to non-fiction and realist fiction—suggests that “children’s literature provides a valuable medium through which we can begin open, respectful dialogue with the goal of becoming more understanding of diverse multicultural perspectives, which include religious beliefs and preferences” and that teaching about diverse religions “promotes a child’s sense of safety, personal and family values, self-respect and self-worth, religious and personal identity, empathy toward others, and understanding of

diverse perspectives" (170). All these aspects are offered in *The Saxon Saga* through Farmer's stress that each of the three belief structures she describes is a valid account of human spiritual experience and thus that various religious worldviews can exist in harmony with one another. "From a stance of religious pluralism," Sanders *et al* claim,

the educational goal is not merely teaching for tolerance; rather, the goal is teaching for multicultural understanding, social competence, and social justice. [...] Tolerance is the acknowledgment that others may believe something different from one's own beliefs but carries a negative connotation of obligatory compliance despite personal contempt, whereas a multicultural view includes acceptance, appreciation of difference, and social equality. Acceptance, in our view, does not mean that one must accept a person's religion at the expense of one's own beliefs, but rather that one accepts the person as s/he is, with her/his accompanying beliefs, while still valuing and respecting that person as whole and not "less-than." (171)

The second reason why Farmer's representation of the equal legitimacy of three belief structures may benefit readers, especially the young ones, is that it provides moral education. Through character ambiguity Farmer suggests that there are no purely good characters and that all humans have their flaws and commit mistakes. She steers clear of the dualistic opposition of good and evil, an unfortunate staple in much fantasy, choosing character ambiguity instead. In this way Farmer communicates that people who do something wrong or make a mistake may still be good people, and that the clear-cut division between good and evil is, at best, rather limiting. Most of her characters are realistically ambiguous personalities, with both good and bad qualities, and subject to many complex drives. The mean queen Frith is torn between two worlds as a half-human and half-troll and she is as miserable as she can be cruel. Hobgoblins are good and pure-hearted, but they love stealing. Father Severus can be courageous, even heroic, but he can also be inhumanly mean and bossy when he succumbs to his love of power. Olaf One-Brow is likeable and honorable, but he has no qualms whatsoever about attacking and slaughtering a defenseless monastery or a Saxon village. Instead of associating wrong action with ethnic or religious affiliation, Farmer stresses that doing the right thing is a matter of individual choice. There are as many types of Christianity as there are Christian characters, and the principle applies just as well to Northmen and Celts. Each metaphysical belief structure, Farmer suggests, can be used creatively or destructively, depending on an individual's understanding and intentions. Nor is any one of those belief structures the ultimate and exclusive answer to all human questions.

By stressing ordinary characters' capacity for both good and evil, Farmer separates people from acts. Serving as the focalizer and a participant in this moral education in character ambiguity is Jack who, throughout the novels, ponders the nature of the people and creatures he encounters. He visits different cultures and learns of the various beliefs that inform them, moving between fear and admiration, rejection and acceptance. He struggles to understand ideas and beliefs embraced by Northmen, Trolls, Picts, Elves, Christians, Celts, hobgoblins, finfolk and even old gods. He learns to admire some things and remains appalled by others, yet he also realizes that no character can be judged as purely good or evil. This character ambiguity does not mean that one cannot tell good from evil, but it means that they often coexist even in the same person. In an interview with James Blasingame, Farmer stated that her characters' ambivalence and complexity was inspired by her life experience. She admitted to having met very dangerous people, who "could be charming under the right circumstances" (79), but were nevertheless terrorists on vacation. By seeing her villains and protagonists alike as humane, but flawed, Farmer provides her readers with moral education about the complexities of human nature, while retaining a positive message that evil can be resisted or transformed. At the same time she does not raise unreal expectations about everyone ending up in mutual understanding and respect. Although Jotuns are appealing and hospitable, they do not stop eating people when Jack leaves their kingdom. The Vikings continue raiding England throughout the novels, and Christian radicals such as Father Severus terrorize local populations with threats of eternal damnation. All these are facets of humanity that Jack learns to see as part of the complexity of the world, a complexity that inculcates the reader in separating people from actions and in avoiding labelling and stereotyping whole groups as good or evil.

In conclusion, Nancy Farmer's *The Saxon Saga* represents one of the most notable recent examples of fantastic dialogue between the past and the present. The novels' medievalism is used to shed light on mythological and historical legacies of specific cultures from the past: Saxon Christian, Norse and Druidic Celtic. If Farmer herself admitted that *The Sea of Trolls* was inspired by the attacks of 9/11 (Blasingame 79), there is much more in the series that connects the past and the present. *The Saxon Saga* creates a secure environment where young readers can learn lessons about cultural conflicts informed by a difference of belief and indirectly deal with a number of upsetting issues. They can appreciate that a non-conflicting diversity of worldviews is possible and that different metaphysical belief structures can coexist in one universe. While seeing the 8<sup>th</sup> century world through Jack's eyes, they can become aware of what choices should be made in the story, relate this knowledge to their own lives, and explore their own systems of beliefs to their outer edges. In representing the three belief structures—medieval Christian, Norse, and Celtic—as alternative

and equally consistent accounts of human spiritual reality, Farmer adopts a pluralist perspective, embraces diversity, and suggests that a difference of beliefs does not have to be a source of conflicts. Her modern medievalist saga not only offers a whiff of what Tolkien has called “the spirit” of “‘pagan’ belief” (36), but also enables its readers to confront one the major challenges of the future: integration of diverse metaphysical belief structures in an increasingly interrelated world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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The Mythopoeic Society is a non-profit international literary and educational organization for the study, discussion, and enjoyment of fantastic and mythic literature, especially the works of Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams. The word "mythopoeic" (myth-oh-PAY-ik or myth-oh-PEE-ic), meaning "mythmaking" or "productive of myth", aptly describes much of the fictional work of the three authors who were also prominent members of an informal Oxford literary circle (1930s-1950s) known as the Inklings.

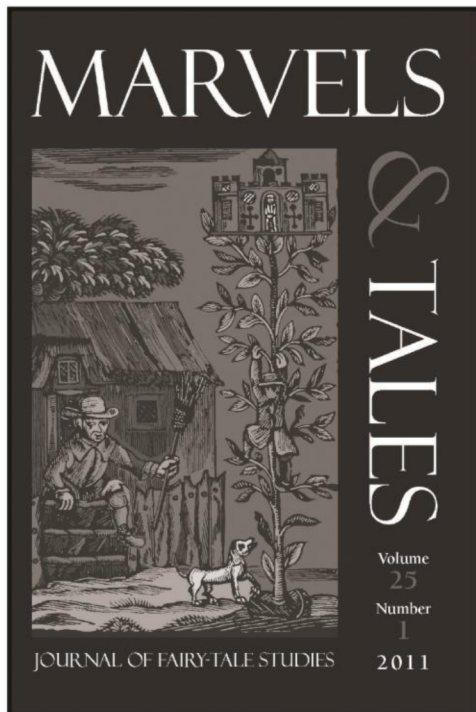
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