УДК 111.84:82-312.9

Contemporary Religious Fantasy:
Inversion of Ethical Categories

Evgeny Y. Vostretsov and Evgenia V. Ivanova*

*Ural Federal University named after the B.N. Yeltsin
19 Mira Str., Ekaterinburg, 620002, Russia*

This article is dedicated to the study of inversion of basic ethical categories – "good" and "evil" – in modern culture, especially in artistic works. The authors analyze the phenomenon of religious fantasy as an element of religious mythology, and also try to justify the attractiveness of a cultural hero endued with negative ethical connotations. The article continues the series of reflections on ontological and ethical grounds for the category of "religious mythology".

Introduction. When analyzing the appearance of such categories as "good" and "evil" in modern society, we note and acknowledge their relativity. Depending on the circumstances, a certain action may be interpreted as either "evil" or "good". This interpretation may apply to both different actions and a single deed. In other words, we deal with ethical pluralism as a particular case of global pluralism, or inversion of basic ethical categories. Can we take it that common categories of "good" and "evil" are now gone and replaced by "contextual categories" of good and evil?

Materials and methods. Based on old, archaic mythologems, contemporary myth-making shapes the new ones and communicates them through mass culture phenomena. It is fair to say that there are now several "new" mythologies:

political mythology, marketing mythology, gender mythology and informational mythology. Unlike archaic characters, modern people do not have a universal mythological outlook; however, in the context of modern social realities mythology becomes ever more compelling. The more complicated personal existence is, the more pressing is the perception of how meaningless and absurd individual abilities are, followed by fear of facing the reality, which is beyond human control. Myth-making sets modern people free of their fears, their dread of chaos, and also embodies their commitment to excellence and their Utopian hopes. Myth's schematic simplicity ensures clarity, predictability and therefore psychological comfort.

Hence, no wonder that religious mythology becomes increasingly popular. Its principal

* Corresponding author E-mail address: horusheresy@mail.ru, ieviev@mail.ru

characteristics are the following: 1) Religious myth simplifies reality and narrows all the existing controversies down to a plain formula of struggle between good and evil; 2) The world in religious mythology is straightforward and absolutely conceivable, which provides for a sense of harmony with the surrounding universe; 3) Religious myth rids people of their fears of reality, being oriented towards future improvements instead of here and now (E.V. Ivanova, 2012, P. 58). Its structure can consist of fairy tales, eschatological myths, religious fantasy, etc. In the context of our narrative studies, it should be specified that each of these elements has a certain set of mythemes (or "functions", according to V.Y. Propp) that serve for a rigid narrative algorithm.

Fantasy is a genre of fiction that emerged in the early XX century based on mythological and fairy tale motives. Fantasy stories often resemble historical adventure novels set in a fictional world, which is close to reality, yet filled with supernatural phenomena and creatures. Such realms have their own history and are inhabited by fictional or mythical creatures. One of fantasy plot- and sense-making mythemes that lies at the very core of this genre is the opposition between good and evil. This clash is often disguised as either a conflict between different types of good or a disagreement over different ways towards good. The opposition between good and evil also takes place in fairy tales, but in this case good is always victorious. Fairy tales feature "absolutely good heroes" and "absolute villains" – for this reason, throughout the ages, they have had educational functions, fostering good deeds and condemning evil ones. However, fantasy is different from "non-catastrophic" nature of fairy tales. Good and evil in fantasy are equal, whereas good always triumphs over evil in a fairytale.

Out of all types of fantasy (heroic, epic, historical, feminist, etc.) we focused our attention on "religious fantasy". This type is particularly known for addressing supernatural characters of infernal religious mythology (witches, dwarves, vampires, etc.). However, the authors, who create fantasy realms, do not renounce their confessions; in fact, these affiliations may even define certain events and character actions. For instance, the twilight universe by S. Meyer features several elements that indicate author's affiliation with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, such as posthumous marriage, Bella's visions, or imprinting (E.V. Ivanova, 2013, P. 199–200). "The Chronicles of Narnia" by C.S. Lewis and "Lord of the Rings" by J.R.R. Tolkien were designed based on Christian symbols to create a new universe, which even a child or a non-believer of any age could understand. Religious fantasy authors build up imaginary worlds with secular issues in mind, though applying their own religious reflections and experience. That is why fantasy realms are different from traditional religious constants and dogmas, being more flexible in terms of ethical judgements and standards as well as reappraisal of values. This is how L.J. Smith, the creator of "The Vampire Diaries" and many other novels about infernal culture heroes, describes "the other world": "The Realm of the Night is not indicated on any geographical map, though it exists in our world. It is all around us. This is a secret society of vampires, werewolves, mages, witches and other spawn of darkness that live among us. They are beautiful and dangerous, fiercely drawn to humans, and no mortal is able to resist them. Your school teacher or your soul mate may turn out to be one of them" (L.J. Smith, 2010, p. 5). Thus, religious fantasy often immerses the reader into mundane secular life of characters, where they don't bother pondering over religious problems like afterlife retribution, the meaning of life, personal values; but having met a "mysterious stranger", they drastically rethink mundanity and secularity of their existence and wonder "what is humanity?" or "what makes us human?".

The creators of fantasy worlds together with their readers and viewers also ponder over these general philosophical problems.

Such "rethinking" inherently requires ethical reflections. Is it possible to witness manifestation of absolute good or absolute evil in a commoner's reality? Can these ultimate ethical concepts be found in modern culture, or have they remained metaphysical constants throughout history? Let us recall that even Aristotle stated that it's one thing to conceive good and evil, but it's quite another to make use of them. It seems that answers to these questions lie in the Oriental wisdom. The case is that West European culture (and philosophy) has a tradition of tackling the aforementioned issues in terms of dualism between good and evil going back to Heraclitus. The conflict of two opposites is resolved by the strongest, which in this case is good. Medieval theocentric worldview personalized good and evil; however, this was yet another opposition of absolute good and absolute evil. Postmodernism and secular mass culture addressed the other conception of this ethical interaction, similar to the Taoist model. Hence, religious fantasy gives birth to a new type of a culture hero – "attractive villain", "fallen angel" or "predator" performing good deeds. And since mythological sense-making is adjustable to meet the needs of modernity, while also preserving its implications, we face a dialectical concept of binary ethical contradiction: good turns into evil, and evil turns to be good and compelling. Traditional good culture heroes become dull and doubting their purpose and ability to perform good deeds. Reappraisal of values in mass culture also leads to romanticizing negative infernal culture heroes, especially among women.

Results. The relativity of categories of good and evil in fantasy discourse can be particularly traced in character's actions in literature, musicals and TV series. Special attention should be paid to the analysis of modern mass culture, cinema,

musical imagery as well as images in fiction of the late XX – early XXI century, which introduce the process of infernal remythologization.

Let us define the first aspect of inversion of good and evil. For this purpose, we will analyze "The Silmarillion" by J.R.R. Tolkien, which is a narrative describing the world of Arda that Tolkien worked on throughout his entire life, and "The Black Book of Arda" by N. Vasilyeva, which retells the same story from the perspective of dark forces. We will also focus on "Melkor" musical by Vera Trofimova, which is an interpretation of "The Black Book of Arda" that has grown to become a standalone piece (E.Y. Vostretsov, 2014. P. 29–30).

Tolkien's "Silmarillion" represents a traditional conflict between good and evil. There is a God – Eru, the Father of All. There is rebellious Lucifer – Melkor. There are Valar – the Angels, who together with Melkor created the world of Arda, and are now opposed by him, who strives to put all their work to an end. This is a traditional Christian storyline of conflict between good and evil with clearly set boundaries for each of these categories. "The Black Book of Arda" is quite a different story. Ethical boundaries in it are vague and reconsidered. Eru is neither All-Father, nor all-merciful. Melkor is a rebel – not the epitome of evil, but rather one, who values the Freedom to create most of all. This is particularly well depicted in "Melkor" musical by Vera Trofimova. Melkor transforms the ideal world created by Valar by adding not only time, life and death, but also development, growth, and unprecedented diversity. For his love of freedom, Melkor is eventually bitterly punished – his work is destroyed and buried in oblivion, all of his loved ones are killed, while Melkor himself suffers, held captive by Valar, who together with Eru turn out to be petty, vain and cruel beings. They shelter themselves behind the concepts of Light and Darkness, do wicked things in the name

of goodness, and believe in their own absolute righteousness. In many ways, these actions of Valar and Eru drive Melkor to do all evil, which he has done according to "The Silmarillion".

"The Black Book of Arda" and "Melkor" musical raise such issues, as relativity in judgements of good and evil, problems of freedom, creative work, Maker's responsibility, etc. Speaking in terms of ethics, the fact that there is neither absolute good nor absolute evil is of primary importance to our study. We cannot judge anyone as good or bad, even based on a specific action. Good and evil are closely linked and intertwined. Melkor is evil from Valar's perspective; on the other hand, creatures of Arda may think of him otherwise. He was the one, who made life, as we know it – complicated, yet beautiful. He created growth and time. Valar, who destroy everything that Melkor created, honestly believe that they rid God's design from corruption. What they don't see, is that it is not evil they destroy, but common men and elves, who mean no one any harm, and just want to live and build their lives on their own together with their master.

The second aspect of inversion of these ethical categories can be traced in TV series dedicated to infernal characters – witches, vampires and werewolves. Traditional attitude towards "evil" characters and "antiheroes" is revised in secular culture. The attractiveness of evil was emphasized as early as in B. Stoker's "Dracula", while absolute good was regarded as fiction and mere fantasy. Let alone postmodern mass culture expressed through TV series. Character's actions are harmoniously fused with actor's performance. Ethics is deeply intertwined with aesthetics – infernal characters are played by attractive actors, while their ugly appearance becomes a thing of the past. Infernal characters are attractive because they are no longer "petrified mythical archetypes" of medieval monsters and horror movie standards. New postmodern paradigm appears in humanization of demons, which is also influenced by tolerance and political correctness in secular culture. Culture heroes of the infernal world, which are "freaks", "former humans" or "humans with supernatural powers" do not withdraw from the world of men, but rather choose to coexist in peace. Therefore, they have to solve the same ethical problems as the ones posed by humans. Such paradigm is peculiar for its humanistic approach, which emphasizes human value. For this reason, demonic characters switch to "dietary nutrition" – they drink animal blood, get human blood from blood banks, or at least spare their victims' lives. Throughout the series' chronotope, such characters do not remain static "villains". Their "humanity" is expressed in their feelings: just as men they suffer, love, make friends, appreciate comfort, and value family ties. Characters of the "True Blood" series are no longer hiding from men – they acquire equal political rights and eat only artificial food.

The third aspect of inversion of ethical categories can be traced through dynamics of development of infernal culture heroes in fantasy. The "classic" vampire in B. Stoker's "Dracula" is a demonic character, whereas modernist hero of Anne Rice is "weary". As for postmodernism, such character is romanticized, endued with own feelings and sympathies. Once you turn off the feelings, you become a beast, a monster, a dreadful villain. Lestat from "The Vampire Chronicles" by A. Rice is an example of ambivalent coexistence of the dark gift and goodness. According to Rice, the dark gift rids Lestat of his humanity and makes him search intensely for something to replace this painful and disorienting loss – power, strength, rivalry, atrocities, etc. Lestat is selfish, arrogant, reckless and impulsive, but he too suffers and falls into depression quite often. The Salvatore brothers

(Damon and Stefan) from "The Vampire Diaries" by L.J. Smith, as well as the Cullen family from "Twilight" tetralogy by S. Meyer, suffer from realization of their "monstrous" nature, and so try to preserve what is left of their humanity – love that brings suffering and calls for protection. Pondering over human values, they seek answers to fundamental questions – what's the use of eternal life? They try to do people good (Carlisle Cullen, the family founder, became a doctor and introduced vegetarian diet). So are "monsters" no longer "monsters"? Do they deserve love? How is this possible? Medieval demonology is crumbling down – archetypical evil culture heroes do good deeds.

The fourth aspect. Modern mass culture fantasy replaced traditional fairy tales. Therefore, stories of infernal characters resemble fairy tales. As the fantasy narrative develops, and the plot unfolds, a character acquires personal identity (even though it may take ages). Both protagonists and antagonists solve their own personal problems without committing heroic deeds towards society. In other words, they side with either good or evil forces in pursuit of their own interests. It should be noted that in traditional fairy tales heroes also cannot rely on themselves alone – they need a henchman, a counselor, a wizard, who would guide them on their path of transformation. These helpers ask heroes: "Where?", "Who?", "Why?", thus allowing to sum up the situation and shape a plan of further actions (or giving a chance to think it over – "Sleep on it, the night brings counsel"). A helper knows the dangers ahead, warns a hero about them and also provides equipment for him to be ahead of the game. So on one hand, helper represents knowledge, acumen, intuition, and on the other – such moral qualities as good will and helpfulness. It seems that without helpers, fairytale heroes would not be able to achieve their personal identities and appear before the reader as carriers of positive ethical values.

Thus, in his pursuit of global and individually relevant meanings, a fairy tale hero acts within the strictly defined social limits – family and individual; and his search is of moral priorities ("Tale of sense, if not of truth! Food for thought to honest youth."). The conflict between good and evil is clearly traced in fairy tale hero's evolution, and such semantic manifestation carries the most valuable meaning for human existence in an ordinary world.

Fantasy heroes need helpers too. But in this case, helpers act as romantic heroes themselves. Feminization in secular culture endued the fantasy world with a distinct type of helpers. It is usually a common teenage girl with her own life – friends, school, first relationship experience with members of the opposite sex, who consider her to be very attractive. She lives a dramatic inner life, worrying about her family. The main heroines of S. Meyer and L.J. Smith do not appear similar at all. Bella Swan (S. Meyer) is clumsy, reserved, but with a rich inner world. It is no coincidence that her last name is Swan – the author implies that she may yet reveal such qualities as sacrifice, heroism and ability to protect her loved ones. Elena Gilbert (L.J. Smith) is aware of her beauty and knows how to behave with young men. But she is in distress –her parents died in a car crash, and she cannot get over this loss, blaming herself for the accident. However, she is also a "Cinderella", because all her qualities – attentiveness, devotion, readiness to fight for love – are yet to be discovered. These girls do not dream of marrying a prince, they want to love and build relationships here and now. Their common trait is that having met a "mysterious stranger" they try to solve his mystery, watch him, gather facts, and finally come to the conclusion that their hero is a "non-human". However, this fact does not stop them from desire to be together. Pondering over romantic relationships with immortal creatures, girls have their doubts – is such love possible?

S. Meyer does not give her heroine an alternative choice – Bella Swan decides she wants to be with Edward forever, and therefore abandon her human life. L.J. Smith, on the other hand, allows her heroine to choose – she does not want to be like Stefan, but circumstances make her transform after all. Girls as helpers make infernal heroes change for the better, just as in fairy tales.

Conclusions. The most important value of religious fantasy is the postulation of man's independence and self-sufficiency. The final aria of "Melkor" musical contains its central idea: "Make your lives on your own!" Let's focus on the meaning of these words. There is neither absolute good, nor absolute evil. People can and must decide for themselves, what is good and what is evil. The effect of relativity and ethical subjectivity is ever more increased in the modern world (E.Y. Vostretsov, 2014, p. 34). This thesis can be illustrated with a Buddhist parable: dying Buddha tells his students that they have walked in his light for too long, and now is the time for them to become their own light. In other words, in the absence of clear guidance, people should set their own criteria of good and evil. The goal is to build our own lives and rely on no one but ourselves. The goal is to strive for the impossible and to become more than we are now. This is only possible through realization and overcoming of our essence. If we want to escape postmodern uncertainty, we have to drastically change our way of thinking, which will lead us to qualitative changes. What changes? This we cannot know. We may discover them only when we start to build our own lives. Perception of artistic images is a comprehensive emotional and ethical activity, which involves imagination, creativity and interpretation of personal ethical experience. Thus, through fantasy ideals, readers or listeners identify themselves with artistic characters and evolve their own personal meanings.

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Современное религиозное фэнтези:

инверсия этических категорий

Е.Ю. Вострецов, Е.В. Иванова

Уральский федеральный университет им. Б.Н. Ельцина
Россия, 620083, Екатеринбург, пр. Ленина, 51

Статья посвящена проблеме выяснения причин инверсии основных этических категорий – «добро» и «зло» – в современной культуре, в частности в художественном творчестве. Анализируется феномен религиозного фэнтези как элемента религиозной мифологии. Делается попытка анализа привлекательности культурного героя, наделенного отрицательными этическими коннотациями. Статья продолжает цикл размышлений об онтологических и этических основаниях категории «религиозная мифология».

Ключевые слова: миф, религия, добро, зло, религиозная мифология, этика, культурный герой.

Научная специальность: 09.00.00 – философские науки.