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Finding God(s) in Fantasylands: Religious Ideas in Fantasy Literature

Abstract. The following paper analyzes how fantasy literature addresses the topic of religion. The discussion of the genre's dependence on myths, supported by Mircea Eliade's claims about the sacred and profane spheres of human life, offers an answer to the questions why religion is one of the most prominent themes in fantasy fiction. The analysis of a selected group of fantasy novels (the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, J. K. Rowling, C. S. Lewis, Guy Gavriel Kay, Celia S. Friedman, Jack Vance, Poul Anderson, Philip Pullman, Dave Duncan, George R. R. Martin, and Brandon Sanderson) presents various ways in which a fantasy narrative may approach religious themes: by inventing secondary religions that enrich the imaginary realm, by reworking particular religious themes and turning them into an axis of the narrative, and by supporting, promoting, or criticizing a certain faith through the means of fantasy fiction.

Keywords: fantasy literature, religion, secondary religion.

The debate on the relationship between fantasy literature and religion has greatly developed after the immense popularity (and box-office success) of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* also significantly added to the growing controversy, but since Brown's novel is not a pure fantasy narrative – perhaps only the author's fantastic perspective on certain religious dogmas – it will not be included in this article). Suddenly, when the entire world was watching the screen version of Tolkien's trilogy and children around the globe were Potter-fans, people realized how greatly a work of fantasy can capture human imagination and this recognition was followed by general questions about the fantasy genre. Several of those questions were and are concerned with the spiritual and religious qualities of fantasy narratives. Readers and viewers of all backgrounds (people of different faiths, religious authorities, atheists, even those who consider themselves neo-pagans, as well as scholars and academics) expressed their thoughts and concerns about the transcendent nature of fantasy literature. Are books containing magic, witches, demons and generally "the supernatural" suitable for religious (Christian) people who fear that such works might lead them and their children to the occult? Do works of fantasy really possess the power to waver people's faith or lure them to the occult? Where is God in the fantasy worlds? – if there is any God at all. What values are promoted by fantasy novels? The fact that people are raising such questions and have become so involved in the discussion is evidence of fantasy literature's ability to transgress the borders of imagination and touch upon issues that people consider important, in this case religion and spiritual life.

Of course, *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* have become the center of the debate, but the treatment of these two works has been remarkably different. In the case of Tolkien's trilogy, most people generally agree that despite the lack of God's direct presence in the narrative (Tolkien introduces a Creator figure in *The Silmarillion*), the work is an unquestionable repository of Christian morality. This opinion is based, first of all, on the recognition of Tolkien's devotion to the Catholic faith, which permeates his personal letters to publishers, colleagues, family and friends (Carpenter 2010: 113-4, 167-8, 183-5, 550-2).

Secondly, critical analyses of the trilogy and of other works describing Tolkien's imaginary Middle-earth point to certain correspondences between Tolkien's creation and Christian (Catholic) faith: the genesis of Middle-earth; the recurring motifs of temptation, sin, and self-sacrifice; the presence of a benevolent Providence, and the angel-like existence of the elves to name just a few (see Bruner and Ware 2001).

In contrast, the *Harry Potter* series has been frequently and heavily criticized. Of course, Rowling's creation has also been praised by some critics who argue, for example, that the series teaches children about the importance of courage, friendship, and responsibility (Dalton 2003: 60-73, 82-97; Dickerson and O'Hara 2006: 227-260), but two claims against Rowling's work are particularly serious and cannot be easily dismissed. The first concern voiced by some people is that despite their courage and loyalty, the heroes of the series are not the best role models for children. Even though Harry and his friends manage to save their world, during their adventures they lie, cheat, and notoriously break the rules. Secondly, it is pointed out that the work contains some occult symbolism that might increase children's unhealthy interest in witches and magic, which might lead them to real-world occultism (see Abanes 2002: 132-140, 150-164).

Opponents of this last claim frequently object by arguing that books like *The Lord of the Rings* also contain magic, but are not criticized for its presence as with *Harry Potter*. However, this defense seems inaccurate for two reasons. The magic in *The Lord of the Rings* is a gifted power accessible only to a few figures: the protectors of the land and the angel-like elves. Tolkien's magic bears no resemblance to occult practices; it is inaccessible to humans (and hobbits), and appears only as an additional help, not the driving theme of the story; in addition, the destructive power used by the evil forces is clearly different from the power of elves or wizards, because it is corrupted by the hunger for domination. In contrast, Rowling based Harry's magic on "real-life" magical practices (e.g. learning spells and their intonation, preparing potions, using divination) and in her imaginary world this magic is widely accessible to humans who possess magical abilities. The only difference between the heroes and the enemies in terms of power is their personal choice of spells: while Tolkien's good and evil are clearly separated by their natures, Rowling's magic is an indifferent entity that can be used by both good and evil characters. Secondly, Tolkien's and Rowling's depiction of magic cannot be compared because even though both works belong in general to the fantasy genre, they represent various sub-categories of fantasy (for different attempts at classifying fantasy literature, see Tuttle 2005: 10-13). Tolkien's trilogy is called high/epic fantasy which is set in a completely imaginary realm, while Rowling's wizards are neighbors of ordinary British citizens. The real-life setting of Rowling's narrative is another reason why children's interest in witches and magic as developed through her books might be transformed into a real interest in the occult (while perhaps only a few people will be tempted to go out and search for hobbits after they finish Tolkien's trilogy).

In time, the discussion revolving around Tolkien and Rowling (unfortunately, while Rowling may support or refute some claims about her works, Tolkien – who died in 1973 – may be "consulted" only through his non-fictional writing) has encompassed other works. Before we can concentrate on the religious and spiritual quality of some other fantasy books, it is necessary to ask about the reasons for the presence of religious ideology within the structures of the fantastic.

1. Religious ideology within the structures of fantasy

The creation of a fantasy narrative rests upon the author's imagination, so it is true that the worlds and creatures depicted by fantasy are alive only thanks to the language – outside the pages of a book (and outside human imagination) they simply do not exist. But this does not

mean that everything in fantasy literature is fleeting, ephemeral, and devoid of significance for the real world. The fantasy genre uses its own fantastic devices (witches, dragons, elves, kings, magic, etc.) to comment on real-world issues such as love and loss, joy and despair, freedom and oppression, life and death. As Richard Mathews puts it, fantasy literature is "a literature of liberation and subversion. Its target may be politics, economics, religion, psychology, or sexuality. It seeks to liberate the feminine, the unconscious, the repressed, the past, the present, and the future" (Mathews 2002: xii). In other words, writers use the structures of fantasy literature – just as any other type of literature – to express their comments on all of these (and other) topics, including religion.

One reason why religious themes and motifs so frequently appear in fantasy literature is because the genre greatly relies on the world's mythological heritage. Myths from around the world have long been a source of inspiration and a repository of ideas for writers of fantasy who indiscriminately use the various fantastic images and themes. Certain mythic patterns have even become standard within the structures of fantasy, e.g. the cosmic struggle between good and evil, the figure of a savior, the rites of passage, and the pattern of the hero's quest, called by Joseph Campbell 'the monomyth' (in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*). Writers of fantasy do not purge these borrowed themes and images of religious/spiritual significance and that is one of the ways by which fantasy fiction is saturated with religious issues. For instance, the cosmic struggle between good and evil requires the presence of gods or other divine figures to form the basis for such a conflict, and an array of heroes that will have to choose sides and who are, as a result, entangled in a web of serious moral choices. The conflict frequently requires a savior figure, i.e. someone to suffer and sacrifice himself for the benefit of the community; this savior figure can be easily related to various myths and religions of the world, including Christianity. The rites of passage are also spiritually significant: they prepare the hero for a particular challenge, make him/her a member of the community, and grant him/her the extraordinary power and wisdom that brings the hero closer to the sphere of otherworldly events. A quest fraught with several dangers and challenges is usually one of the driving themes of a fantasy novel. The quest's stages are often those identified by Campbell within various myths and are also related to otherworldly issues: the hero frequently encounters gods and goddesses, enters a land of the dead, and even undergoes the process of divinization before (s)he is able to achieve the final goal. The monomyth is in essence the journey of one's spiritual transformation. Whether authors of fantasy incorporate the monomyth and other mythological elements into their stories consciously or not, the patterns have been used so frequently that at time the works based on them tend to be formulaic and even predictable. But this is only one of the dangers of having fantasy literature rely on mythological heritage. Scholars of the genre have observed that fantasy has granted itself the right to transform and adapt mythological material according to its own needs – a process which might be beneficial for fantasy, but not entirely so for the mythological traditions (see Attebery 2007, Trocha 2009).

Furthermore, fantasy fiction is filled with religious ideas because the genre has inherited from mythology not only its various themes and images, but also the sphere of *sacrum* (Latin "sacred"). The spheres of *sacrum* and *profanum* (the sphere devoid of religious entities and manifestations) within mythologies has been extensively studied by Mircea Eliade who, in his research, points out that together with rites, ceremonies, religious symbols and activities, myths once allowed people to preserve their sacred beliefs (Eliade 2008). In contrast to their ancestors, modern people have changed (or blurred) the boundaries between their own sacred and profane spheres to the point that they have created (or attempted to create) for themselves a desacralized world (Eliade 2008: 9-14). Nevertheless, Eliade claims that elements of *sacrum* can be preserved unconsciously even in such a desacralized world, for instance, in the celebration of birth, marriage, and the New Year (2008: 100-103, 220-232;

2009a: 20-23). Moreover, Eliade has no doubts about the presence of *sacrum* within the boundaries of art, including contemporary books and movies (2008: 222-223). Eliade acknowledges the fact that the form of a myth can be transformed or even corrupted when the myth becomes part of a new medium of expression, but he argues that despite such distortion (and degradation), the core message of the myth might still be preserved and transmitted thanks to the new form (2009b: 15-17). As a result, fantasy literature, which greatly relies on mythological heritage, can also be treated as one of those modern forms that preserve the *sacrum* once found in mythology. The growing readership of fantasy and its recognition among academics can be treated as a sign that modern people, who have surrounded themselves with high-tech devices, still want to read about good winning over evil, still want to experience the marvelous and other-worldly, and still want to find spiritual sustenance (the forgotten or dismissed *sacrum*).

Fantasy literature can fulfill the above-mentioned expectations and address religious issues in a few ways. Firstly, authors of fantasy invent their own secondary religions (frequently derived from religions existing in the real world) to enrich their secondary reality and place their heroes in a web of meaningful moral choices and obligations. This invention of secondary religions can be taken a step further when religious/spiritual motifs become indispensable elements for the entire quest/adventure and are situated in the center of the plot. Finally, the secondary religion may become the author's personal comment on, or criticism of, existing religious systems. This paper will give specific examples for each of the abovementioned categories.

However, as their boundaries are rather fluid than clear-cut, the three proposed categories cannot be treated as entirely separate groups; the difference between them frequently lies only within the degree to which an author emphasizes the religious/spiritual themes in the plot – and that degree may change even in a single work which consists of several volumes. To successfully illustrate the different ways in which authors of fantasy approach the topic of religion and to demonstrate that the presence of religious themes within fantasy is not simply a recent phenomenon, the selection here consists of books that are popular at the moment and of those that are a couple of decades old. Each category will be exemplified by two or three independent works/cycles, but of course several more examples could be added.

2. Secondary worlds and secondary religions

Religious/spiritual issues are present in fantasy books when writers of fantasy invent secondary religions which might either simply enrich their imaginary lands or become a central theme in the narrative. These imaginary religions frequently come fully equipped with gods, venerated figures, holy places, dogmas, codes of conduct, mythologies and prophecies; they are well-established and believable within the boundaries of the imaginary realms. Dave Duncan, for instance, in his series *A Man of His Word* (*Magic Casement, Faery Lands Forlorn, Perilous Seas, Emperor and Clown*; 1990-92) presents an original way to link religion with magic. People of Duncan's world can gain power by learning very rare magical words. Throughout the work it is repeated that knowing four words is the maximum and anyone who has tried to obtain a fifth was destroyed by the power. However, at the end of the story it is revealed that when two people – who share in total five magic words – are in love, a new god is created from their union; the lovers become one immortal entity. So the words are powerful not because they offer magic, but because they lead people closer to the state of divinity in which nothing is beyond reach; and for Duncan love is the key to divinity. Though such a divine union of a man and a woman does not happen often, Duncan's world possesses several gods who display both male and female features. But Duncan's

protagonists, Rap and Inosolan, do not want to be immortal; they do not want to judge human existence, punish people who do not worship them enough, or play with human lives (this is Rap's accusation against the gods). So in the end they find a way to reduce their powers and live together without the threat of unwanted divinity.

A greater diversity of competing denominations and ways to worship the gods exists in the world created by George R. R. Martin in the multi-volume, on-going series *The Song of Ice and Fire* (started in 1996). Martin's characters resemble real people because they ask questions about the spiritual life, respect or disregard the faiths of other people, or do not believe in any kind of god(s) at all. In Westeros the majority of people believe in the Seven, which seems to be an extended version of the Catholic doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The Seven represent seven divine aspects of one god: Father, Mother, Maiden, Crone, Smith, Warrior, and Stranger (who represents the mystery of death). Another reference to Catholicism comes with the hierarchy of this faith (the leader is the High Septon elected by a council) and with the existence of orders devoted to serving the Seven. However, some parts of Westeros worship other gods. People of the northern parts, for instance, pray to the Old (nameless) Gods who had been worshipped long before the faith of the Seven appeared in Westeros. The belief in the Old Gods was established by the Children of the Forests (an ancient race inhabiting the lands before the first people came from the East) and focused on the forces of nature (a form of animism). Contemporary people of the North do not need scriptures or spiritual leaders; following ancient practices, they pray before Weirwood trees: white trees with red leaves and red sap. The trees have faces carved in the bark and the red sap creates an illusion of bleeding (or bloody tears). The tree's colors and the atmosphere of otherworldliness that surrounds them create a sacred sphere that links people of the North to the ancient mysteries and forces (though Christian imagery is present also in this case: the tree and bleeding are an echo of Christ's crucifixion).

The people of the Iron Islands also have their own faith: they believe in the Drowned God who rules the seas. The Iron people are thus portrayed as ruthless seamen who never fear the open waters. Martin presents a ritual (which might be an echo of Christian baptism) in which a person is drowned in sea water and brought back to life by a priest of the Drowned God to become stronger. So while for the people of the North the sacred sphere is associated with the forests and the Weirwood trees, the Iron people worship the sea.

Martin also invents the cult of R'hllor, who is called the Red God and whose attributes are fire and light. R'hllor's divine opponent is called the "Great Other" who is the god of ice and death. The cult of R'hllor claims that the cosmic battle between the two gods will be resolved by the reincarnation of Azor Ahai, a messianic figure destined to save mankind (the motif of a messianic savior figure is still not fully developed in Martin's series, but might become more significant for the entire plot in future volumes). However, despite the religion's messianic character, the worship of R'hllor is quite disturbing: priests of R'hllor engage in cruel and dark rituals, for instance, bringing the dead to life (which does not resemble resurrection, but rather creating zombies), sacrificing people in fire to obtain the god's favor, and creating shadows that follow the creator's every command.

Apart from these religions, *The Song of Ice and Fire* frequently has short references to other exotic or forgotten cults. Still, none of the invented religions seems to be the dominant one or the one most accurately reflecting the sphere of the divine (manifestations of power appear on every side), though Melisandre frequently states that only belief in R'hllor is the true religion that can bring salvation (and perhaps she is right, because Westeros is threatened by an invasion of ice-cold, blood-thirsty creatures appearing during winter). Readers may thus speculate about the relations between the different faiths, their followers, and their displays of "magic". The religious variety offered by Martin enriches his secondary world and makes it more believable.

Guy Gavriel Kay develops his own secondary *sacrum* in *Fionavar Tapestry* (*The Summer Tree, The Wandering Fire, The Darkest Road*; 1984-86). Kay's Fionavar is a blend of mythological borrowings (particularly from Celtic and Norse mythologies) and Christianity. The supreme being is called the Weaver and his antagonist is evil Rakoth Maugrim, but Fionavar has also other, lesser gods: Mörnir of Thunder, Dana the Mother, Cernan of the Beasts, and Liranan the sea god just to name a few. Though for most of the time the gods are hidden somewhere in the background of the story (particularly the Weaver who is only worshipped as the Creator), they sometimes become active participants in the adventures, displaying very human emotions and behavior. Kay's heroes – five people transported from modern-day Toronto to Fionavar – become immersed in the land's *sacrum* by participating in sacred rituals, acquiring divine-like power, and coming into close contact with the gods, which are all very important moments for the development of the entire narrative. On such occasions it becomes clear that, despite its mythological borrowings, Kay's *sacrum* is interwoven with Christian ideas.

For instance, the significance and power of self-sacrifice is strongly highlighted when Paul, one of the five visitors, volunteers to hang for three days and nights on the sacred Summer Tree – a scene which strongly resembles the Crucifixion. The results of his decision are the redemption of the land (the dying kingdom is saved by long awaited rain) and of Paul himself, because the man – who is spiritually reborn after the event and called "Twiceborn" – is able to reconcile with the death of his girlfriend. Another theme recurring throughout the trilogy is the significance of one's free will. Kay's heroes (Diarmuid, Kim, Darien) struggle against fate, make their own moral choices, and deal with the painful consequences. Kay shows that acting according to one's own conscience and making individual choices will in the end lead to success: Diarmuid's sacrifice for a fellow warrior, Kim's refusal to use her power, and Darien's choice of light instead of darkness ultimately contribute to the final victory. Kay clearly elevates the freedom of will above other divine gifts and praises people's ability to choose good over evil according to their own conscience (which is also a virtue emphasized by the Christian tradition).

In Brandon Sanderson's *Mistborn* series (*The Final Empire, The Well of Ascension, The Hero of Ages, The Alloy of Law*; 2006-2011) the invented secondary religion is, from the very beginning, one of the central themes of the plot. Sanderson's Final Empire is a world of red skies and constant ashfalls, dominated by the apparently immortal and divine Lord Ruler and a nobility (the descendants of his early supporters), while thousands of humans are slaves called Skaa. A half-Skaa, Kelsier, attempts to end the Lord Ruler's reign and free the Skaa with the help of his companion, including a young girl, Vin. Kelsier devises a clever plan how to make the apparently immortal and indestructible enemy weaker and more vulnerable. But his companions do not know about the central element of the plan: Kelsier's sacrifice. At the end of the first volume, the man attempts to rescue one of his companions from a public execution. However, when the Lord Ruler comes to the scene, Kelsier is unable to harm him; instead of running away, he allows the tyrant to kill him. That is because Kelsier had analyzed several religions and come to the conclusion that only unyielding courage and self-sacrifice for a good cause could give an enslaved people the hope and determination required for a rebellion against the ruler. That is why his martyr-like death (and the subsequent appearances of a man physically resembling him) pushes the slaves into revolution.

Vin manages to kill the Lord Ruler, but learns that in fact he was not the one destined to rule at all. He was a usurper who unrightfully gained divine power at the Well of Ascension, which allowed him to secure his evil reign, but also somehow kept the destruction of humanity at bay. With Lord Ruler's death, the people are again threatened by destruction. As the story unravels, the cosmic battle between two gods (Preservation and Ruin) and Vin's struggle to save the world become the central elements of the plot. Sanderson's formula is

simple: to dethrone the old god a new one is needed, and the revolution in his secondary world is of both a social and religious nature.

Another series which revolves around religious/spiritual issues and reinterprets Christian themes is *The Coldfire Trilogy* (*The Black Sun Rising*, *When True Night Falls*, *Crown of Shadows*; 1991-95) by Celia S. Friedman. Friedman introduced two protagonists: Damien Vryce and Gerald Tarrant, whose world is a planet called Erna, colonized by humans hundreds of years ago. Damien is a Warrior Priest of the Church of Human Unification (which promotes faith in one God) and Gerald was once the Prophet of that Church before he had committed a sin in his pursuit of power and had been cursed by the Church. The main adventure revolving around the battle to save Erna forces these two men to cooperate despite their mutual hatred. This cooperation has a great impact on Damien's and Gerald's existence, and through their dilemmas Friedman addresses some questions of morality and faith. Damien, for instance, has to decide whether good goals justify bad means. In his quest to save Erna, he neglects his duty to kill Gerald (who is no longer a human, but an immortal creature feeding on humans), believing that Gerald might help him rescue Erna's community. His faith in Gerald is one of the reasons why Damien is expelled from his beloved Church, but the priest continues to do what he deems right to the point of rescuing Gerald from his private hell. Damien's friendship and sacrifice are the reasons why the selfish and power-obsessed Gerald slowly begins to care about other people and in the end decides to sacrifice his immortal existence to save Erna from evil reign.

Through Gerald, Friedman shows that even the worst sin is no stronger than the power of self-sacrifice in the name of good. Apart from reworking the themes of sin, sacrifice and redemption, Friedman addresses some issues connected with religious institutions, because her Church of Human Unification seems to be a descendant of the Catholic church. The leader of the Church, the Patriarch, is a complex character troubled by the same question as Damien: are bad means justified by good goals? The Patriarch's answers are different from Damien's and he decides to protect Erna according to his own religious beliefs (without resorting to fae – the magic-like power of the planet). In the end, the old man also sacrifices his own life for a greater cause: to show his followers that violence is never a justifiable solution to problems, and to cleanse his people of the sin of violence with his own death (the scene is skillfully constructed as a distant echo of Christ's baptism and crucifixion).

3. Religion in fantasy: allegory or criticism?

The works mentioned so far have – to a various degree – developed their secondary religions on elements borrowed from existing religions and turned them into a more or less significant part of the narrative. The authors of the works to be studied in this section use their secondary worlds and secondary religions to make comments about the primary world and real religions; in some cases, the religious comment is one of the most explicit messages of the fantasy story. Such is the case with, for instance, C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-56), which is often called "religious fantasy", because of the distinctly Christian message running throughout the narrative, e.g. the motifs of treason, self-sacrifice, forgiveness, redemption, and the ultimate glory of the Narnian savior figure. Lewis's Narnia has even been called an allegory of Christianity to emphasize the impact of the spiritual/religious message present in the story. But reconciling fantasy writing with the notion of (religious) allegory might be troublesome, because "in fantastic literature, the allegories, if they are there, always serve the story, and not the other way around. Their presence in the story is only part of the story's richness" (Dickerson and O'Hara 2006: 59). Thus, elevating the religious message over other qualities of the fantastic narrative is perhaps not the most desirable option, and interpreting a fantasy book only for the religious message might be equally wrong, because

once we find the allegorical, we feel that we have done our jobs as readers and needn't think any more. 'Aslan is Christ,' we say, much as we'd say $1 + 1 = 2$, and we cease to wrestle with what Lewis might be showing through Aslan's complex character. Thus, when a reader focuses on the allegory, . . . the reader ceases to learn. (Dickerson and O'Hara 2006: 59)

After all, a fantasy novel cannot be equated to nor become a substitute for biblical revelation, so the work should be acknowledged also for its other merits, not only for its reconstruction and promotion of religious dogmas.

A completely different approach to addressing religious issues through a fantasy narrative is adopted by Philip Pullman in *His Dark Materials* (*The Golden Compass* – originally published in England as *Northern Lights*, *The Subtle Knife*, and *The Amber Spyglass*; 1995-2000), a series which is Pullman's means of criticizing the Christian faith. The trilogy revolves around a battle between the evil Authority (God) which rules the Kingdom (and is worshipped by the church), and the Republic which wants to overthrow him. Pullman also creates Dust, a mystical force that is associated with the rebellious angels and that has influence on human existence. The central characters – Lyra and Will – are children entangled in the cosmic struggle, with Lyra being the prophesized new Eve (who succeeds with certain tasks mostly thanks to her ability to lie convincingly). By means of this fantastic reality, Pullman attempts to develop his critique of Christianity and God.

However, this critique might not be very successful. Dickerson and O'Hara, for instance, point out that the story lacks in several departments: the concept of the transcendent Dust is not well-developed as if the author was not sure how to define it, the final battle proves to be mildly significant and provides no real solution to the divine conflict despite the Authority's death, and Lyra's positions as the new Eve and her supposed temptation to love Will are unreasonably significant for the battle (2006: 194-199). In addition, all the questions about human freedom and submission to objective morality serve one purpose: to portray the Authority as an usurper who unrightfully claimed the position of Creator, and as a liar who promised his believers heaven after death, while all they get is a barren land of the dead. As a result, the trilogy might seem too didactic, and it becomes clear that the author has

an unrelenting animosity toward God, church, religion in general, and especially Christianity. Every dialogue, every moment of revelation, every speech from a wise character, and every portrayal of an evil character becomes yet another chance for Pullman to rail and preach against the evils of the church. Everything that has ever gone wrong in any of the universes, it seems, is the fault of the Church or of those who believe in God. (Dickerson and O'Hara 2006: 199-200)

However, in contrast to Dickerson and O'Hara, Kurt Bruner and Jim Ware claim that even despite the author's obvious attempts to discredit Christianity, the works correspond to certain truths of the Christian tradition. One of their most interesting arguments focuses on the descriptions of the Authority; Bruner and Ware state that the figure hidden behind that name does not resemble the Christian God, but the rebellious Lucifer who desired power for himself (2007: 78-80). In addition, though Pullman continuously criticizes the Authority and Magisterium (the church that promotes the rule of the Authority), he never criticizes Jesus Christ who, in fact, does not even appear as a figure in his vision of religious tyranny (Bruner and Ware 2007: 86). And in the end, Pullman's heroes choose good, not evil:

Lyra, the consummate liar, eventually has to face the fact that truth is her only viable option. That's why Will, the strong, self-reliant hero, is forced to admit his need for

companionship, assistance, and grace. That's why Mary, the atheistic rationalist, feels such a desperate need for purposeful "connection" with the rest of the universe. (Bruner and Ware 2007: 155)

The heroes' search for truth, support and love does not point to an evil God (the Authority invented by the author), but to a God – the Heavenly Father – who is painfully absent from the story. Bruner and Ware argue that the visible absence of true God, paired with the presence of love, courage, and sacrifice, points to Pullman's own quest to understand God, paradoxically expressed by his claims against Christianity (2007: 153-164). All in all, even though *His Dark Materials* presents the quest for religious answers and spiritual truths in a disturbing way (the fight against the evil Authority and the corrupted church), the trilogy shows that even a genre based on imagination can be deeply involved in addressing the problems and dilemmas of human existence.

While *His Dark Materials* is a very explicit critique of Christianity, in some fantasy books Christianity is incorporated into the secondary reality to be presented as something antagonistic to the imaginary world. For example, one of the despicable characters of Jack Vance's Lyonesse trilogy (*Suldrun's Garden*, *The Green Pearl*, *Madouc*; 1983-89) is Father Umphred, a missionary who comes to Lyonesse to build a church and convert the pagan people. Umphred finds an avid supporter in Queen Sollace who, encouraged by the priest, pesters the King for money in order to build the church and to buy some holy relics (there is even a hint at the Holy Grail). But the Queen does not see that despite his magnificent proclamations about a holy mission, the priest is a cowardly egoist interested only in his own glory. When evil King Casmir is finally overthrown and Queen Sollace sent into banishment, Umphred tries to sneak away from Lyonesse with some gold. In the end, he is captured and punished for his lies and hypocrisy with death. Of course, Umphred's presence in the narrative should not be treated as Vance's critique of Christianity in general. But intentionally or not, the characters that support the Christian faith are either unappealing or morally disputable, while the good and kind protagonists seem not to really care about the new religion (as long as they do not have to deal with Umphred). As a result, Vance's Lyonesse is portrayed as a legendary and mythic land where Christianity is not yet established (and apparently not needed).

A similar idea appears in Poul Anderson's *The Broken Sword* (1954), a dark fantasy novel immersed in Norse mythology. Through Orm and his warriors readers learn that Christianity is slowly setting in among the Danes, and in order to marry an English woman Orm decides to convert to Christianity. However, he continues to worship the Norse gods and quite soon gets rid of the Christian priest. That is why his first-born son cannot be instantly baptized and is consequently stolen by a capricious elf. This is only the first of many scenes showing the clash between the old realm of legend and the new era of Christianity: elves, trolls and other creatures of legends speak about "the White Christ" with fear and contempt (but the greatest evil is represented by the figure of Sathanas and his witch-servant).

The stolen child, Skafloc, becomes a great elfish warrior and gets entangled in battles between trolls, giants, and the evil Valgard (the child left to Orm in his place); he becomes a part of the legendary realm that is so clearly separated from Christianity. But at the same time, Skafloc enters into an incestuous relationship with his mortal sister, Freda (not knowing they are related by blood). When the truth is revealed, Freda and Skafloc's conversation reflects the difference in her and his perception of the world based on their morality and (lack of) religious faith:

'Come – Freda, come, forget the damned law—'

'It is God's law,' she said tonelessly. 'I cannot disobey it, my sins are too heavy already.'

'I say that a god who would come between two that love is an evil creature, a demon – I would smite such a god with my sword if he should come near. Surely I would not follow him.'

'Aye – a heathen you are!' she flared. (Anderson 2008: 154)

Their parting – the result of Freda's adamant faith and Skafloc's refusal to share it – is clearly the beginning of Skafloc's downfall. He becomes blood-thirsty and obsessed with war, while Freda is tormented by sorrow and remorse. She also loses her newborn child to Odin to pay her debt for his past help. As a result, grief-stricken and extremely lonely, Freda decides to forsake her faith: "She took the crucifix from about her neck and kissed it. 'Forgive me,' she breathed. 'Forgive me if You can, that I love him more than You or Your laws. Evil am I, but the sin is mine, not his.'" (Anderson 2008: 219)

Her love is greater than her faith and Freda is able to reunite with Skafloc before his death. Despite the final victory, the ending is grim: Skafloc is dead, Freda has no prospects for the future, and the elf lord fears that gods and creatures of folktales will eventually disappear because of the advent of human civilization and its "white god". Like Vance, Anderson creates a world in which the mythical and Christian spheres cannot coexist, but in contrast to Vance, for Anderson the opposition 'Christianity – realm of folk tales', expressed partially by Skafloc and Freda's relationship, is one of the main axes of the narrative.

Summing up, the analysis of the novels selected for this article provides an outline of how fantasy literature addresses religious and spiritual themes. Authors of fantasy invent secondary religions which are, to a various degree, saturated with references to existing religions (Duncan, Martin); they turn religious/spiritual issues into a more or less significant part of the narrative (Kay, Sanderson, Friedman) or an antagonistic element (Vance, Anderson); they also imbue the narrative with allegory or criticism of a particular faith (Lewis, Pullman). Each of these categories might be studied separately, because there are still many more novels awaiting analysis (the category of secondary religions seems particularly interesting, because it offers a glimpse into the authors' imaginations). The writers' endeavors to address religious themes in their fiction not only enrich the secondary realities, but also prove that fantasy literature – by asking questions about the religious/spiritual quality of life and by inventing a fantastic sphere of *sacrum* for the literary heroes – is interested in connecting its readers, and the authors as well, with the *sacrum* present in the primary world.

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