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Religious motifs in contemporary speculative literature

Religious issues have been present in the novels of speculative fiction for a long time. Moreover, it does not appear there only as an aesthetic ornament. Very often it is a stylistic as well as content dominant. It then becomes an important element of literary speculation on a vast spectrum of issues related to religion. It should be noted at the outset that the religious content of this type of literature is not limited to any particular religion. Even if such texts appear, as can be seen for example in the novels of the Inklings, they do not close the spectrum of religious motifs in this literature. The search for aesthetic appeal, which is the source of the economic success of a novel, is often accompanied by a manipulation of religious themes that is specific to popular culture. Free syncretism combining various religions is often linked to important problems or seemingly trivial creations, behind which important cultural transformations are very often hidden. This happens not only through the posthumanist design of man without religion, but often through cultural palimpsests that impose completely new qualities on religious content. Of course, some of these procedures are part of the phenomenon of the creation of a new myth by contemporary culture. One should remember, however, that this myth, as Kołakowski clearly wrote, does not bring salvation to man. This state of affairs raises the question as to what in the religious content – often already literarily processed – is so important to the contemporary reader of this type of literature that he constantly expects new texts?

Popular literature that draws on religious motifs not only confirms the theses of cultural sociologists who claim that religion in times of desecularisation still

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remains a form of cultural memory². Many of these novels also point to the fact that the *horror vacui*, which according to Leszek Kołakowski was to accompany the abandonment of religion by subjecting it to various forms of pop-cultural levelling down and often even complete destruction of its basic meaning. This second procedure is analogous to the phenomena described by Roland Barthes³ in his essays devoted to the myths of contemporary culture. At this point it is also necessary to point to another important aspect of the phenomenon we are interested in. The possibility of studying this phenomenon requires an interdisciplinary approach. Religious content that has its sources in extra-literary reality requires religious or theological, sometimes folkloristic, or anthropological competence. However, the mere indication of the extra-literary matrix of novelistic figures still demands a literary interpretation. While the theologian and the religious scholar can point to the extra-literary contexts of quotations and correctly read their source meaning, the literary scholar is necessary to correctly determine their intra-textual function. Thus, a complementary analysis of this phenomenon should combine three research perspectives: literary, religious/theological, and anthropological/sociological. Only such a research perspective will make it possible to fully uncover not only the religious contexts present in this literature, but also the mechanisms governing the transformation of religious motifs and the cultural conditions of this phenomenon. This means that this type of writing may reflect important cultural transformations characteristic of modern man's attitude to religion.

The literary transformation of religious content in contemporary novels of popular literature is interesting for the researcher for several reasons. The first of these is related to the specificity of popular culture and literature. Its products not only have different aesthetic values and operate with specific patterns, but above all are often the expression of a certain rebellion of the users of this culture against variously understood centres of power. So do novels that use religious motifs do so as a specific form of protest against the traditional perceived category of authority of religious institutions present in extra-literary reality? The texts of this literature often express views inherent in the consciousness of contemporary people perceiving reality through the perspective of these values and attitudes present in these novels. People perceiving reality through the lens of literature and popular culture⁴ very often also make its texts essential and the basic sources of knowledge about tradition and the world around them. Being physically present in the contemporary world, they often mentally reduce their presence to the

² D. Hervieu-Léger, *La Religion pour mémoire*, Cerf, Paris 1993.

³ R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, Points, Paris 2014.

⁴ Since contemporary popular literature is extremely closely related to popular culture, I often refer to these two areas together. At the same time, the fundamental considerations apply only to texts of popular literature.

area defined in terms of meaning by the products of popular culture. At the same time it should be remembered that this model of reduction of cultural coexistence does not only concern children and adolescents, but for many years also adults. Attempts to define this type of attitude as closing oneself off from the surrounding reality or even escapism do not fully describe the complicated mechanism of this phenomenon. It is clear that the specific treatment of religious motifs by popular literature is often connected with a lack of competence on the part of the recipient to recognise not only the literary transformation of religious motifs themselves, but also their effects on the entire semantic structure of the world depicted. We cannot pretend, however, that the phenomenon of departing from tradition, or rather of frequently revaluing it, or even infantilising it, does not exist in the contemporary world. This gives rise not only to the research question concerning the mechanisms that govern literature and popular culture, but also to the need to trace the sources of certain attitudes and their subjective consequences. The global scope of this culture and the power of its influence seem to contradict the thesis of a certain provinciality of this literature. Similarly, one should be cautious about the content and artistic aspect of these texts. It must be remembered that this literature has been evolving for many years now. Its association with the economic aspect of the publishing market also has deeper cultural connotations. We can no longer speak of this literature as banal, simplistic and schematic. It is true that a considerable number of texts remain so, but there is also a group of writers who could hardly be called secondary authors. It is this type of writing that seems most intriguing in its use of religious motifs. Both because of the innovative treatment of these issues and the specific treatment of the very phenomenon of fantastic imagination and mediation. At the same time, one should not overlook the other group of creators of this literature, since their texts clearly indicate the specific features of the horizon of expectations of the recipients of this literature.

It is significant that in times of increasing secularisation and abandonment of faith in this literature religious motifs are not abandoned⁵. They play extremely important roles both in the construction of literary worlds and in the characters themselves. There are basically two Genological models of using these motifs. The first, connected with fantasy literature, most often uses religious motifs taken from cosmic religions. The most important thing about it, however, is that it adopts a simplified, but nevertheless dualistic conception of reality. Operating mythopoetics on the level of literary plots, he almost always creates worlds in which the moral order is based on principles stemming from the dualistic concept of the world and the primacy of the spiritual over the material. However, due to

⁵ Initial recognition of the phenomenon can be found in the article by A. Mazurkiewicz, *Fantastyka religijna jako zjawisko osobne (rekonesans)*, red. M. M. Leś, P. Stasiewicz, Wydawnictwo UB, Białystok 2014.

the increasingly influential current of posthumanism and transhumanism and its use in the contemporary cultural dispute between faith and science, it is speculative literature that seems more interesting from a research point of view. While fantasy most often reaches for mythopoeic renarrations, sometimes only deepened by theologies, as it is the case with Carl Staples Lewis or John Reul Ronald Tolkien, speculative fiction introduces religious issues into the world of the near or more distant future, asking both about the condition of man himself and the influence of new technologies on his spirituality. The main feature of speculative fiction is its use of fiction to test potential states of affairs, which are of course based on the juxtaposition of fiction with a real element.

The specificity of this type of literature has already been noted, especially by the recipients and creators of catalogues of this type of novel. However, thorough studies dealing with this issue are still lacking. Religious motifs in speculative fiction can be tentatively divided into three thematic groups. The first related to God, the second to man, and the third, most often dealing with issues of community. None of these groups, however, contains thematically and contentually uniform texts.

1. In the circle of God's motives

In the first group, several important motifs should be pointed out. One of the most interesting is the specific renarrations of biblical content used in several functions. In Philip Pullmann one can point to an evidently anti-Catholic attitude present in his novels such as *His Dark Materials*⁶ and *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*⁷. Pullmann himself claims to be an agnostic, and his literary polemic is not directed against Christianity but only against certain church institutions. Dark Matters has among its inspirations not only John Milton's *Paradise Lost*⁸. The actions of this trilogy dedicated to children and young people are set in a vision of an alternative 19th century England. However, several facts are relevant here. The institution of the church is set on a lie. It is a treatment pioneered by Dan Brown and frequently used in religious thrillers. In Pullmann's work religious motifs are used on several levels. The first one is connected with references to the Book of Genesis. However, here it turns out that the process of creation has more in common with Babylonian mythology than with the biblical account. The authority, that is the first angel, came out of the Abyss first and made the other angels coming out of it believe that he was

⁶ Ph. Pullmann, *His Dark Materials Trilogy*, Random House Children's, New York 2011.

⁷ Ph. Pullmann, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, Faber and Faber, London 2017.

⁸ J. Milton, *Paradise lost*, Penguin Group, London 2014.

their creator. Based on this fact, Pullmann shows the angels' rebellion against God, for whom the Authority is claimed, in a completely different context. However, the confusion of the orders of biblical theology with the mythology of cosmic religion also has other consequences for him. The first of these is the absence of the Absolute and all the consequences that this entails. The second is the complete confusion of the two religions' semantic plans. The creation of this peculiar hybrid has made it possible, moreover, to extend the metaphysical problems of the world presented with the elementary particle called Dust, which the Magisterium, which is the literary equivalent of the Christian church (in this alternative reality there is no trace of the Reformation), regards as evidence of original sin. The main characters – a boy-girl are caught up in an intrigue of cosmic significance. Or rather multi-cosmic, as Pullmann introduced the category of multiversum to this trilogy. The boy, together with the rebel angels Baruch and Balthamos, becomes a participant in the rebellion against Authority. The girl, on the other hand, together with her father, will prevent the Magisterium from destroying Dust. The whole plot is an extremely specific renarration of the theologians connected with creation, the angels' rebellion and God's saving action. At the same time God is not a biblical God here, although there appears in this trilogy the figure of the cabalistic seraph Metatron, who in Pullmann's work fulfils the function of the Regent of Heaven. The main motifs that Pullmann created on the basis of the theologems he evoked are related to the presentation of the God of the Magisterium as a liar and usurper. The Magisterium itself has many features of a criminal institution, which can be seen, for example, in depriving children of their souls in order to work on Dust. The most interesting thing, however, is the very the motif of rebellion against Authority. It is not only as legitimate as possible. The lie of Authority sanctions also positively valorises iconoclastic human attitudes. At the same time, there is no profanation in such a model of creation. The effect of such a construction of the plot is also the introduction of the motif of the crucified Saviour's descent into Hell. In this case, however, it is a man who, unusually, frees the souls of the dead imprisoned there by the Authority. The final consequence here, however, is the death of the Authority incurred in the course of the rebellion. It has, however, the hallmarks of a suicide death. Interestingly, this literary game with apocalyptic motifs does not introduce the figure of the Parousia, and in its place new Adam and Eve appear as the main characters. What is important, however, is that this beginning is founded in a universe without God and, as it were, after the death of the God-figure. Assuming that the theological knowledge of the average reader of this trilogy is less than rudimentary and that he can treat the procedures presented in it without properly recognizing the game based on literary fiction, we are dealing with a text in which a model of life in the world after the death of God is visible.

A similar literary trick of questioning the dogma of the Creator God is present in the novel *Childhood's End*⁹, in which the benefactor of mankind is not only an alien, but above all a figure resembling the devil from the medieval imaginary. However, in this novel there is no speculation on the dual nature of evil as seen in *Faust*¹⁰, the Evil One is shown in a completely reversed function as a benefactor in a literary world in which religious experience is no longer the fundamental determinant of worldview.

Pullmann's second novel is part of an interesting collection of texts that attempt to present alternative evangelical visions. In the novel *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* Maria gives birth to twins. At the same time Christ is treated by his parents as God's chosen one. And yet, it is Jesus who is the person guiding relations with people with deep sensitivity and mercy, while Christ is the character acting on the basis of calculation. Furthermore, it is Jesus who meets John the Baptist and not Christ. Christ begins to record the events of Jesus' life creating an alternative gospel plot. A similar procedure can be found in both high art literature, exemplified by the novel by Henryk Panas *Według Judasza Apokryf*¹¹. In the latter, three interesting literary realisations can be pointed out. The first appears in Michael Moorcock's novel *Behold the Man*¹² from the New Wave period in fantasy. It is a period known for its openness to new trends and literary experimentation. Here the main character is transported back in time to 29 AD to Palestine. The reason for the choice of time and place is obvious. People want to know the extra-evangelical truth about Jesus of Nazareth. It would seem that we may be dealing with some innovative attempt to create a new type of apocrypha in the poetics of science fiction. Nothing could be further from the truth. The main character, Karl, suffering from a messiah complex, despite having lost his time machine, ends up in Nazareth. However, what he discovers there has nothing to do with the stories described in the gospels. When he finds Joseph and Mary, it turns out that she is a woman little better than a whore. Joseph, on the other hand, does not believe that she became a mother thanks to an angel. This strange picture is completed by the figure of Mary's child. He is a handicapped, hunchbacked young man who sits for days in front of Joseph's workshop repeating the word Jesus over and over again. Karl, we can presume driven by a messiah complex, begins to take on the role of the historical Jesus. He selects his disciples by the names of the evangelical apostles. He repeats the parables he

⁹ A. C. Clarke, *Childhood's End*, Del Rey, New York 1987.

¹⁰ J. W. Goethe, *Faust*, tłum. A. Lam, PIW, Warszawa 1953.

¹¹ H. Panas, *Według Judasza Apokryf*, Wydawnictwo Pojezierze, Warszawa 1973. The first case was described by me in the article *Savremene apokrifne renaracije lika Jude u romanima Kirila Jeskova i Henrika Panasa*, in: *Juda Iskariotskij u slovenskim kulturama: sbornik radova*, ed. D. Ajdačih, Alma, Beograd 2016.

¹² M. Moorcock, *Behold the Man*, The Orion Publishing Group, London 1999.

has memorised, he heals the sick, but only the hysterical. There are no miracles, only tricks intended to be equivalents of events in the gospels. He also decides to play his role to the end. He orders Judas to denounce himself to the Romans. While dying on the cross, however, he utters not the familiar words *Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani*¹³ but this *lie... it is a lie... is a lie...*¹⁴. The whole is completed by the motif of the theft of the crucified body of Karl/Jesus by a doctor who believes that it may have miraculous properties. This theft leads to rumours of a resurrection, which the plot itself of course rules out, bringing the image of Karl's crucified body rotting and being abandoned by the doctor. This extraordinary literary experiment from 1969 draws its speculative idea from the passage in the Gospel of John in which Pontius Pilate utters the well-known phrase: Behold the man. The procedure itself has several important consequences. Firstly, it initiates a process of fantastic speculations on the contents of revealed scriptures, secondly, it activates a mechanism of falsifying speculations having practically nothing in common with 20th century literary apocrypha like the novel *The Robe*¹⁵ or *The Big Fisherman*¹⁶.

However, it is important to note that speculative treatments will not always be created with a falsificatory intention directed towards their revealed source. Another common treatment involves such a speculative approach to gospel content that allowed the sender to create alternative worlds of interest. Such a mechanism can be identified throughout Jacek Piekara's sixteen-volume *Inquisitorial cycle*¹⁷. It is a banal story set in a 16th century alternative Europe in which the church has an important political, religious and cultural function. It is, however, the church of Jesus the Merciless. Piekara has founded this literary world by literally playing with the description of the execution on Golgotha. Jesus, crucified on the cross and called upon to save himself actually comes down from the cross, and the summoned angels slaughter and massacre the inhabitants of Jerusalem¹⁸. Jesus conquers Rome and instead of Constantine the Great himself makes this strange literary version of Christianity the state religion. Most significant in this case is the very procedure of speculation on the description of the Passion. In the whole series we do not find any more interesting references to the theological dimension of this procedure. Its consequences, however, are supposed to justify the actions of the church based on a specifically understood inquisition and a change of the theological dominant from merciful love to suffering inflicted without mercy. What is significant in this series is the very fact of introducing into literary

¹³ Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34.

¹⁴ M. Moorcock, op. cit., p. 148.

¹⁵ L. C. Douglas, *The Robe*, HijezGlobal, Houston 2017.

¹⁶ L. C. Douglas, *The Big Fisherman*, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston 1948.

¹⁷ J. Piekara, *Cykl inkwizytorski*, t. 1-18, Fabryka Słów, Lublin 2006-2020.

¹⁸ Matthew 27:40.

circulation a novel which speculatively manipulates the theologian for a strictly aesthetic purpose, thus reducing its content to the role of an aesthetic ornament of the literary world presented. Another model of speculative processing of gospel content is found in the novel *Voice of God*¹⁹. In this case the reference to the gospel content is subject to even further reductions. What we are dealing with here is first of all the evocation of the gospels on the level of selected motifs embedded in a very generally outlined plot scheme. This leads to the creation of a plot in which elements of the gospel storyline are combined and mixed causally with other evocations from both philosophical and literary texts.

Within the circle of motifs referring to the issues centred around the figure of God built in a literary manner, a few more significant literary phenomena should be pointed out. The first is undoubtedly the motif of the search for God. The most interesting examples of this motif can be found in the recent novels of Philip K. Dick. This novelist, described by American critics as the Dostoyevsky of science fiction, in several novels took up religious themes by referring to Judaism or Christianity²⁰. In the novel *Valis*²¹, the search for God is closely related to the fundamental philosophical questions about nature and the meaning of the world. Searching for the answer to the questions about the sense of the world, Dick entangles himself in questions about the nature of God, reducing the whole issue to a question so important for the thinkers of the Enlightenment, concerning the reasons for God's consent to the existence of evil in the world. In *The Divine Invasion*²² the problem of God's hiddenness in transcendence is reduced to a cosmic dimension, but the part of the plot that deals with God's issues is the effect of the main character's cryonic suspension. In his conscious dreams, a psychedelic vision appears which is a speculative renarration of evangelical content. The result is a plot in which the astronaut manages to make contact with a deity named Jah inhabiting a distant planet where he is banished from Earth. After assuming a human body as a result of impregnating the main character's wife, he is to return to Earth and defeat Belial who holds power over people. The child that is born is given the name Emmanuel. However, it has a brain defect that causes amnesia, as a result of which Emmanuel does not know that he is God. The vision ends with the appearance of a figure Zina, a girl with similar qualities to Emmanuel. Both of them, while in a special school, work on restoring Emmanuel's memory. Eventually, the game with the planes of parallel worlds and cryonic dreams leads the viewer to a situation in which an ending of the *deus ex machina* type

¹⁹ J. Sobota, *Głos Boga*, Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, Wrocław 2016.

²⁰ I have described this problem in more detail in the article *The Psychedelic reinterpretation of Corpus Christi by Philip K. Dick*, "Культурологічна Думка" 17(2020), pp. 82-88.

²¹ Ph. K. Dick, *Valis*, HMH Books, Boston 2011.

²² Ph. K. Dick, *The Divine Invasion*, HMH Books, Boston 2011.

used by Euripides is needed. The novel *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*²³ is a literary travesty of the views of the American Episcopal bishop James Albert Pike, whose views have been described as modern heresy. In this novel, the search for the mystery of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is connected not only with the mystery of the Zadokite scrolls, but above all with the psychotropic fungus – *anokhi*, whose effects were supposed to be responsible for the visions of the apostles after Jesus' death.

Paradoxically, the motif of seeking God is connected in speculative fiction with the motif of his death. Two main mechanisms of the use of this motif can be pointed out. The first one is present in *American Gods*²⁴, where the gods of cosmic religions brought by their followers to America die together with the loss of faith of their followers. The death of the gods of cosmic religions is accompanied by the appearance of new gods such as Pan World, Techno Boy and Media associated with new times and new dimensions of culture: globalisation, digitisation and media.

However, a much more interesting picture is provided by James Morrow's novels *Towing Jehovah*²⁵ and *Blameless in Abaddon*²⁶. The former begins with the description of the death of angels whose feathers fall to the ground. This is the first effect of the death of God himself, whose dead body falls into the ocean. However, this does not initially provoke any religious catastrophe. Rather, it gives rise to tourist excursions to the divine corpse floating in the water. The divine body is also edible, which leads to people eating it. However, the most interesting is the second volume. In the first volume, we saw a selective treatment of the relationship between metaphysics and the construction of the presented world. After the impossible death of the Unmoved Mover, only ideal beings died. Consequently, we should not only accept the separation of the ideal world from the material world, but also exclude the idea that man is a *compositum* of soul and body. Obviously, such statements are dependent on are up to the competence of the reader of this text, for literally no one has put them there. The most important consequence of the "death of God" and of other spiritual beings is the creation of a figure of human existence in which evil does not come from the Evil One, since the latter would also have to die together with the Creator. Thus man is freed from metaphysical entanglement with evil. The question arises: has he become a being radically free from evil, or has he begun to function beyond good and evil, as Friedrich Nietzsche suggested earlier? In Morrow's work the death of God freed man from the hidden presence of spiritual beings, but it turned out that evil did

²³ Ph. K. Dick, *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*, HMH Books, Boston 2011.

²⁴ N. Gaiman, *American Gods*, Hachette Collections, New York 2021.

²⁵ J. Morrow, *Towing Jehovah*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, Boston 1994.

²⁶ J. Morrow, *Blameless in Abaddon*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, Boston 1996.

not disappear, and its source this time is not the Evil One, but man himself in his desires, choices and actions. The death of God brought not so much freedom, but rather chaos.

Even more strongly, the absence of God as a specific *horro vacui* appears in the novel *Central Station*²⁷. Man is already a conqueror of the Cosmos. He modifies the functioning of his organism through cosmic symbionts. He is no longer an entirely natural being. His individual DNA is completed industrially and pregnancy itself also takes place in machines. Humans are subjected to technological adjustments leading to changes so great that only the awareness of the fact of being human in the distant past remains human. In this so strongly posthuman reality, it is man who becomes the God-Maker²⁸. He creates gods in a world in which the virtual order permeates the physical order so strongly that people know until the very end in which reality they are stuck. It is significant that in a world in which man has transcended his biological limitations and lost the memory of institutional religions, he still seeks meaning in the plane of religious experience. This applies to humans, posthumans and, interestingly, also to Artificial Intelligence enclosed in robotic mechanisms.

Thus, speculative literature points to the possibility of futuristic forms of polytheism. They are visible in the already quoted American Gods, they take the form of human artefacts, which was visible in Tidhar's work. They also appear as deities present among other thinking beings inhabiting the Cosmos, but most often they have features of deities of cosmic religions, as in the prose of Robert Silverberg²⁹. An interesting case is the motif of the formation of religions around active artefacts of alien civilisations, whose action transcends human understanding and is sometimes reduced to the category of miracle, as in *Fallen Dragon*³⁰.

2. Man – alternative visions of the Image of God

The beginnings of the creation of literary images of the origins of man detached from creationist concepts should be sought as early as the 1960s. It is shown, for example, in the well-known novel *Hothouse*³¹, in which man is shown as a product of a strange, fantastic evolution, but the most interesting thing is that he is not originally the first and intelligent biological being on Earth. For such a being is a strange, self-conscious and rationally thinking fungus. It is only the specific symbiosis of this "plant" with man that creates a thinking man. This novel by

²⁷ L. Tidhar, *Central Station*, Tachyon Publications, San Francisco 2016.

²⁸ Ibidem, pp. 199-244.

²⁹ R. Silverberg, *Downward to Earth*, The Orion Publishing Group, London 2015.

³⁰ P. E. Hamilton, *Fallen Dragon*, Pan Books, London 2021.

³¹ B. W. Aldiss, *Hothouse*, Penguin Books Ltd, London 2008.

Aldiss opens up a literary phenomenon of creating an alternative vision of man to the biblical one. And it should be added at the outset that, although some of these literary visions will be unsuccessful experiments, often collectively called “Frankenstein’s children”³², however, many of them will function without arousing the horror of the people in the depicted worlds. Their one common feature will be the creation of an image of man existing outside of God’s plan of salvation, striving on his own, using reason and technology, to transcend his biological limitations. Up to the point where he reaches the attributes culturally ascribed to the divine being. Initially, this is a testing of purely technological solutions without religious references. This can be seen, for example, in the novel *The Stochastic Man*³³, where the theme of man’s potential omniscience is taken up. At the same time, there is a clear theme of human limitations, which man cannot cross. It is also interesting to note the connection between these literary visions and the state of scientific knowledge at the time when these novels were written. In the sixties, when the literary visions appear in the case of the technology of creating human clones, as is the case, for example, in the *Dune Sage*³⁴, the fundamental problem is not the search for the Absolute, but the preservation of the memory of the cloned human being. This technological concept of transgressing the biological limits of the human condition leads to the search for various variants of “improvement”. These are most often combined with two models – technological and biological. In the former, the human body and mind can be enhanced through technological implants to the point where it is reduced to a conscious identity that the body can alter at will. Such technology may be commonplace in this literature, but it often depends on economic position, leading to a situation in which the enhanced subject begins to function like a man who is a god to another man in Ludwig Feuerbach’s well-known statement. Speculative literature brings forth various forms of this non-God-leading technological improvement of the human condition previously inscribed only in the project domain of divine action. A literary posthuman can not only change his ageing body in search of the illusion of eternity (*Altered Carbon*³⁵), he can also become a virtual being existing in virtual reality, which he will create according to his own desires (*Permutation City*³⁶). It happens that in this pursuit of perfection he will lose his own humanity.

The most important thing, however, is that this transgression of temporal biological limitations is most often not accompanied by a desire to meet God. These actions create a new horizon for human existence, in which God has been

³² A. Boese, *Potomkowie Frankensteinina. Nauka straszliwa, fantastyczna i osobliwa*, tłum. M. Kittel, Bellona, Warszawa 2008.

³³ R. Silverberg, *The Stochastic Man*, Independently Published, Chicago 2019.

³⁴ F. Herbert, *Dune Sage*, Vol. 1-6, Ace Books, New York 2020.

³⁵ R. Morgan, *Altered Carbon*, Gollancz, London 2018.

³⁶ G. Egan, *Permutation City*, Night Shade Books, San Francisco 2014.

replaced by man. Another important feature of this type of speculation is the creation of a model of human existence in which ethics will not have its origin in God, nor will the purposefulness of human existence. Thus, in these literary speculations spirituality will most often have the character of atheistic spirituality. It will not completely exclude religious spirituality, but it will significantly reduce it. At the same time, it should be remembered that this model is related to the speculative testing of the issues of transhumanism and posthumanism. A completely specific procedure of genetic breeding of a human being who may possess divine attributes is brought by the Herbert *Dune Sage* series. There we can find a strange female quasi-religious assembly Bene Gesserit combines technological knowledge with political action hidden behind a religious backdrop. However, its primary objective is a genetic project, calculated over generations, which was to result in the birth of a man called Kwisatz Haderach, who would not be limited by time or space.

This whole cycle contains two models of spirituality. The first one present in the Bene Gesserit is based on self-improvement leading to complete control over oneself and above all over one's fears. This is illustrated by the mantra "One must not be afraid. Fear kills the soul. Fear is small death, but great annihilation. I will face it"³⁷. The second model of spirituality evidently refers to the Islamic tradition and is visible among the inhabitants of the desert planet Arrakis. It is there that the young Paul Atreides will accidentally become a Kwisatz Haderach. As a result, he will set in motion the mechanism of cosmic jihad. The most important points here, however, are two. The first shows how religion can be reduced to a technology of power and the sacred itself reduced to an object of eugenics. The second, much more interesting, brings a literary image of the consequences of such a biological shortcut leading to a specific divinisation. There is no place here for the sybaritism of the eternal moment, as the literary Faust would have it. It is more a picture in which human consciousness is confronted with the horror of omniscience. As a result, this literary messiah chooses suicide. Herbert's series is one of the more important literary speculations taking up religious themes by writers of speculative fiction. This is because it focuses most of the religious problems of modern man in its plot.

3. Speculative religious communities

There are several interesting motifs referring to institutional religious communities with clear connotations to Christian churches. The same is true of institutions of Islamic provenance. The already quoted trilogy *His Dark Matter* by Pullmann

³⁷ F. Herbert, *Dune Sage*, Vol. 1, op. cit., *passim*.

provides a literary image of a church institution with features of a criminal organisation. This trick is also often used by authors of the so-called theological or religious thrillers, such as Dan Brown. Even if the whole the institution is not a criminal organisation, it nevertheless allows for activities of this nature.

Another interesting theme emerges in relation to speculations centred on post-apocalyptic issues. This literary subgenre in itself is interesting. For it does not always refer to the apocalypse in the biblical sense. And even if it does, it shows a completely alternative vision of it, assuming, however, the continuation of biological life. Most often, however, post-apocalyptic novels create images of society after cataclysms that destroy civilisation. These images are interesting in that they quite often combine religious and cultural motifs. This is the case in two of the most interesting post-apocalyptic novels. The first one is *A Canticle for Leibowitz*³⁸ published in 1959, in which a picture of the world after the nuclear holocaust was created. The consequence of such a war was the total collapse of civilisation. People with any education were morodied by the surviving mob. Leibowitz is an American engineer of Jewish descent. After the cataclysm, he converts to Catholicism and founds the Albertine Congregation, whose primary task is to save books and the knowledge they contain. Leibowitz himself dies as a martyr. The action of this novel takes place intermittently over the course of more than a thousand years. It makes it possible to show two interesting mechanisms governing this alternative religious community. The first one is connected with cultural forgetting and filling the gaps of historical knowledge with fiction. The second points to the ever-recurring cultural dispute between religion and science. Another novel, or rather a dylogy, consists of texts by Octavia E. Butler³⁹. Already in the titles we have a reference to the gospels. The literary idea itself, however, is much more complex than a simple travesty of the Gospel parables. In post-apocalyptic America, famine, chaos and, above all, anomie, with all its consequences, begin to reign. In the novel *Parable of the Sower*, there is a theme in which religion is confronted with the need to answer questions about the cause of the cataclysm itself. Above all, however, its role in restoring order and organising human attitudes is shown. However, there is also an interesting situation in which the lack of such answers leads to the emergence of a new religion, creating a vision of God as Transformation. These two novels show not only the crisis civilisation, but also its consequences. Anomie, bestiality, but also atheism and religious fundamentalism leading to political tyranny. The most important images, however, are those pointing to religion in its function of restoring a sense of meaning and order, and consequently saving humanity.

³⁸ W. M. Miller, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, Spectra, New York 1961.

³⁹ O. E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, Hachette Collections, New York 2019; O. E. Butler, *Parable of the talents*, Hachette Collections, New York 2019.

Further speculations refer to the institutional connection of religion used to exercise political power. The best-known writer to use this motif is David Weber. As a rule, his visions of religious communities have very strong fantastic contexts. Two literary realizations are most interesting in his work. The first is related to the cycle *A Honor Harrington*⁴⁰. In the volume *Honor Queens*⁴¹, the Church of Humanity Unleashed is based on the slogans of a return to the Bible combined with anti-technological ideas, which often in this type of literature are the aftermath of a dispute between science and religion. The result of the activities of this church is the creation of enclaves free from technology called New Zion. This community underwent a doctrinal evolution after the death of its founder, Austin Grayson. It was recognised that technology in itself is not bad, but its use leading to the technical age is. As a result, the community began to strive to create an entirely new society based on God's Holy Word. This doctrine accepted the absolute primacy of man over woman, leading to cultural relations analogous to those present in some forms of Islam. The community functioned entirely on the basis of regulations derived from religious codes. These concerned not only matters of faith or morality, but also politics in the broadest sense. The community in this literary cycle created its paradise on a separate planet. After its complete annexation, a process of military-religious expansion began, aiming not so much at economic but at radically religious goals. Weber indicated in this cycle a vision of the future in which religions would arise and have enormous power to influence human relations, but would also be entangled in a grand political theatre. An even more interesting mechanism of manipulation of religion is brought by the cycle *Safehold*⁴². The starting point is the very moment of creating a new religion. It appears as a result of a lost war with aliens. The only group of human survivors escapes to the planet Salvation. There they are subjected to technological destruction of memory and creation of a new one based on artificially created religion. Those in charge of the whole operation create for them the religion of the Church of the Expectant People based on the Bible, in which people are visited by "archangels" who are in fact the people who manage the functioning of this community. A new scripture is created containing the quasi-religious norms necessary to manage the people and keep them in religious discipline. In the following volumes one can follow this artificial creation in some interesting aspects. The endeavour, by the managers of this quasi-religious project, to keep the truth about the founding of this Church hidden, and the completely opposite movement aimed at making public the deception underlying this community. Another interesting aspect is the vision of the evolution of this community and the accompanying degradation bringing not only nepotism but also

⁴⁰ D. Weber, *A Honor Harrington*, Vol. 1-16, Brilliance Corp, Seattle 2000-2019.

⁴¹ D. Weber, *The Honor of the Queen*, Baen Books, Wake Forest 2000.

⁴² D. Weber, *Safehold*, Vol. 1-10, Tor Books, New York 2010.

corruption or simony. In this series we have not only a vision of the religion of the future, but rather a picture of the manipulations that accompany the functional use of institutional religiosity. Religion is presented in this literary vision from two perspectives. Once as an extremely important element of political power. In both perspectives, however, the author refers to contemporary fundamentalist Islam. He links it, admittedly, with high technology, but still presents it as a religion that accepts military missionaryism and the inequality of man and woman.

4. Summary

Significant in the presented novels is a rather specific approach to the literary use of religious motifs. The first attempt is based on the technological transgression of man's biological limitations. This leads not only to a polemic with the religious view of this state of affairs, but above all creates the illusion that entering the posthuman state will free man from religion. Rather, the illusion turns out to be technological attempts to divinize man, which always show his limitations residing rather in his spiritual and psychological nature. It is interesting to note, however, that in most of these literary projections, technology does not only change the human condition, but first and foremost presents man with new challenges. However, in this technologically modified world of the future, religion will no longer have the important function it has in the present. The figures of technological change, whose fundamental goal is not perfection based on the pursuit of sanctification, but rather an existence based on various forms of sybaritism, which, however, does not exclude existential questions and the search for the religious dimension of existence, are readily apparent.

A second interesting aspect of these literary attempts points to attempts to contest contemporary revelatory religions, especially Roman Catholicism. This aggressive approach is most often realized on the plane of polemics against dogmatics and the institutional form of the Church. This is evident both in the fantasy novels discussed and much more so in the religious thrillers referenced. It is interesting, however, that in both cases we are dealing with dramatic, in its expression, attempts to obtain a definitive answer to the question of the existence of God. This aggressive polemic seems to point to a certain aspect of the condition of the contemporary participant in popular culture. Rather, the aggression seems to be an expression of discomfort with the fact of a certain inconvenience of one's atheism posed in the face of open questions. Of course, this is not the only attitude. A completely different one is represented by the spirituality present in the StarWars universe, which, although lacking the metaphysical dimension as understood by Aquinas, introduces a modified mythical Living Cosmos in which man is responsible for the balance of good and evil in the world.

The third aspect operates with religious motifs referring to a community institution. It usually brings the image of religion strongly connected with political power reduced to the positivist understanding of religion as an important element of power.

In general, it must be said that speculative literature does not often take up religious motifs as foreground. Which clearly indicates the importance of these issues among the audience of this prose. However, the motifs already introduced into it not only clearly indicate the specific relationship of individual religious attitudes to the posthuman human condition but are practically always centered around various forms of *homo religiosus*. However, since this literature is always quick to respond to the challenges of the present day, we should expect to see texts that not only address the importance of religious man's subjectivity, but also center around religious experience and spirituality – whether posthuman, atheistic, or speculative. It can be noted, however, that the religious motifs present in this literature form a specific paradigm. It is also related to the specific functions that these motifs perform within the literary text. The very fact of the presence of religious motifs as extra-literary quotations in speculative prose poses a certain research problem. Its essential features were presented in the first part of this article. At this point, however, it should be emphasized that in order to fully interpret the meanings that these quotations carry in the literature described here, the cooperation of researchers of religion and theology, as well as literary scholars is necessary. The first group guarantees the correct interpretation of religious and theological contents, and the second group guarantees the determination of the literary functions that the author assigned to them in a particular novel.

Motywy religijne we współczesnej literaturze spekulatywnej

Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie i uporządkowanie motywów religijnych występujących we współczesnej fantastyce spekulatywnej. Ten typ literatury bardzo często reaguje na trendy i tendencje społeczne obecne w kulturze popularnej. Przedstawione w artykule motywy zostały uporządkowane tematycznie, tak aby można było dostrzec pewien zarys paradygmatu figur literackich, poprzez które tworzący je pisarze odwołują się do treści religijnych. Zestawienie motywów wyznacza trzy główne perspektywy traktowania religii w omawianym typie literatury.

Słowa kluczowe

fikcja spekulatywna, religia, posthumanizm, doświadczenie religijne, Bóg, Kościół, *homo religiosus*

Religious motifs in contemporary speculative literature

Summary

The object of this article is to present and organize the religious motifs found in contemporary speculative fiction. This type of literature very often reacts to the social trends and tendencies existing in popular culture. The motifs presented in this article are arranged thematically, so that one can see a certain outline of the paradigm of literary figures through which the writers who create them refer to the religious content. The juxtaposition of motifs determines three main perspectives of treating religion in the discussed type of literature.

Keywords

speculative fiction, religion, posthumanism, religious experience, God, Church, religious man

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