

The Convergence of Sacred and Secular Spaces in Three Selected Contemporary Novels¹

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Summary

This article focuses on the return and revitalisation of traditional Christian themes, such as sacrifice, guilt, sin and redemption, and the manifestation of supernatural phenomena, such as visions, faith healing and stigmata in three selected contemporary postmodern novels (*Atonement* by Ian McEwan, *Keeping Faith* by Jodi Picoult and *Mariëtte in Ecstasy* by Ron Hansen). It offers an examination of how these themes materialise in novels written by certain writers who are not explicitly religious, or in novels which do not have an overtly religious focus. There is a co-existence of belief and unbelief, or religion and science in all the novels under discussion. The theories of Jean François Lyotard and specifically his notion of “incredulity towards metanarratives” as well as his notion that narrative and scientific knowledge are both subject to legitimisation are relevant to this article. Gianterio Vattimo’s ideas on the role of religion in contemporary life and the possible convergences of postmodernity and the Christian faith also come into play. He advocates weak thought as opposed to strong thought and sees *caritas* as essential in a postmodern society. Readers find themselves either on the side of the believing or unbelieving camp in the novels discussed. However, many readers may hover in the liminal space between belief and unbelief. Interpretation depends on many factors that constitute the world view of the readers.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel fokus op die terugkeer en hernuwing van Christelike temas, naamlik opoffering, skuld en bevryding, asook die verskyning van bonatuurlike verskynsels naamlik visioene, geloofsgenesings en die wondertekens van Christus in drie geselekteerde kontemporêre postmoderne werke (*Atonement* deur Ian McEwan, *Keeping Faith* deur Jodi Picoult en *Mariëtte in Ecstasy* deur Ron Hansen). Die artikel het ten doel om te bepaal hoe hierdie temas realiseer in tekste wat geskryf is deur sommige skrywers wat nie eksplisiet gelowig is nie of in tekste wat nie ’n openlike godsdienstige fokus het nie. Die gelyktydige verskyning van geloof en ongeloof of die religieuse en wetenskap is duidelik in al die tekste wat bespreek word. Die teorieë

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van Jean François Lyotard en spesifiek sy begrip van ongeloof teenoor metaverhale asook sy begrip dat narratiewe en wetenskaplike kennis beide aan geldigverklaring onderwerp is, is relevant vir hierdie artikel. Gianterio Vattimo se idees oor die rol van godsdiens in die kontemporêre lewe en die moontlike saamloop van post-modernisme en die Christelike geloof is ook van belang. Hy bepleit swak denke in teenstelling met sterk denke en sien *caritas* as noodsaaklik in 'n postmoderne samelewing. Lesers bevind hulle óf aan die kant van die gelowiges óf aan die kant van die ongelowiges in die bespreekte romans. Baie lesers weifel egter in die liminale ruimte tussen geloof en ongeloof. Interpretasie berus op baie faktore wat die wêreldbeskouing van die leser vorm, vandaar die talryke interpretasies.

Introduction

The postmodern is an epoch that is characterised by uncertainty about any final truth claims and provides an array of choices between a polyphony of different voices. There is no objective knowledge because knowledge is context-based and thus influenced by many factors, such as tradition, culture, background and attitude. According to Leithart (2002: 209) in the “place of truth there are truths, and in place of a single story is a lush garden teeming with delightfully contradictory narratives. Let a thousand flowers bloom”. This lush garden might as well refer to the selected contemporary novels which accommodate both the sacred and the secular. The oxymoron “delightfully contradictory” points to a status which is preferable to overarching grand narratives.

Research Questions

This article argues that the three selected novels generate a privileged space in which the re-enchantment of the religious can take place. This space, although primarily secular, is filled with traditional Christian themes such as sacrifice, sin, guilt, redemption, and the manifestation of supernatural phenomena such as miracles, visions, faith healing and stigmata, even though fiction cannot prove the reality of such phenomena. The main questions guiding this investigation are:

- How are traditional themes, used within a Christian framework, reintroduced, reshaped and revitalised in selected contemporary novels by writers who do not adhere to a specific doctrine or institutional agenda?
- Although fiction cannot prove the reality of such miracles, visions, faith healing and stigmata, the question at hand is: how and why is a space created for such phenomena amidst the mundane in selected contemporary novels?

Jean François Lyotard's Notions

This article links with Lyotard's (1924 – 1999) work and notions concerning the metanarrative and scientific and narrative knowledge. It may seem at first that his summary of postmodernism as an “incredulity towards metanarratives” denounces religion all-together. What this in effect comes down to is that exactly because of the abolishing of grand narratives – an all-embracing story or comprehensive explanation which claims to be able to explain or make comments on the legitimacy of all remaining stories – and the tolerance of many small narratives, *petit recits*, religion is once again a valid and legitimate (meta)narrative. Shah (2012: 26) asserts that “Far from being incredulous towards the ‘grand narrative’ of religion, we see [a] revival of religious narrative” and more respect towards not only religion in a traditional sense, but also such forms as spiritualism, the paranormal and what generally resorts under “the realm of unreason”. Lyotard's equalising of the two main forms of knowledge, narrative and scientific respectively, has consequently earned respect for narrative knowledge, something that lacked during the Enlightenment or Modern period when the only knowledge acceptable was scientific knowledge. Lyotard criticises scientific knowledge for making universal claims.

Scientific knowledge includes only denotative statements and excludes all others. Denotative statements signify or indicate exact, dictionary definitions devoid of emotion, attitude and colour. The notion of scientific knowledge, being superior to narrative knowledge, can be traced back to the modern Enlightenment period. Penner (2005: 22) maintains that the “modern program shares the Greek assumption that rational explanation, or knowledge and [*episteme*], is self-evidently superior to opinion [*doxa*]”. Prior to the Enlightenment, religious narratives guaranteed truth, but then science started claiming to be the only source of truth. For Lyotard (1984: 26), scientists have no more of a legitimate claim to the truth than philosophers have. According to him science needs justification and he believes that a “science that has not legitimated itself is not a true science” (Lyotard 1984: 38). Science, furthermore, needs to resort to narrative in its discourse and this, according to Lyotard, undermines the legitimacy of science as it becomes akin to the very thing to which it is opposed (Stevenson 2000: 13). In other words, stooping to what it resents. Scientists, to Lyotard, are storytellers too. They cannot describe the results of their experiments without resorting to narrative – stories.

Narrative knowledge, on the other hand, does not adhere to the rules of denotative language. It is “related to ideas of internal equilibrium and conviviality” (Lyotard 1984: 7). In other words, narrative knowledge is socially determined. Whatever is transferred orally from one generation to another is accepted as the truth. Narrative knowledge is a form of storytelling and the myths and legends of a particular social group are examples

of such stories. Narratives do not make universal claims and do not aspire to be considered absolute truths, but are accepted within a specific community. Lyotard does not imply that the narrative form is superior or vice versa because there is no objective knowledge. Narratives need no legitimation because, according to Lyotard (1984: 23), “they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do”. Narratives authenticate themselves by being told without debating or proof. Thus non-scientific forms of narrative knowledge, like fables and myths, verify themselves through their existence. These narratives have been passed down from generation to generation and this fact is enough to legitimate them in a specific community. This means that no proof is necessary to validate claims such as the manifestation of supernatural phenomena. In other words, the Christian story needs no scientific basis in order to be legitimated; it is accepted by communities as true simply because it has been part of those communities for so long. Michel (1997: 345) maintains that these myths are regarded as true stories and they bring narrator and listener into the “presence of ancient knowledge”. According to Eliade (1957: 106) “myths constitute his [primitive man’s] sacred history.” He furthermore asserts that modern man for all his claims that he is non-religious still keeps “a large stock of camouflaged myths and degenerated rituals.”

According to Lyotard’s notion of *petit recits* instead of the totalising notion of grand narratives, the Christian story can once again be considered a worthy narrative. The words “war on totality” are those with which Lyotard concludes *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*: “the answer is: Let us wage war on totality; let us be witness to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name” (Lyotard 1984: 82). Thus Lyotard advocates a tolerance for the stories of others, and this tolerance can be linked to Vattimo’s concept of *caritas*.

Gianteresio Vattimo

The Italian philosopher and politician Gianteresio Vattimo (1936-) pleads for love (*caritas*) or neighbourly love, which should form the basis of religion and which should be the guiding force in our relationship with others. Vattimo’s ideas on the role of religion in contemporary life and the possible convergence or reconciliation between postmodernism and Christianity come into play. He advocates weak thought (*pensiero debole*) as opposed to strong thought (*pensiero forte*). The idea of weak thought allows for plurality and tolerance, and implies that the world is not an uninterpreted reality. Vattimo (1999: 35) defines weak thought as [something] “that abandons its claims to global and metaphysical visions, but above all a theory of weakening as the constitutive character of Being in the epoch of

the end of metaphysics”. Weak thought is the solution at which Vattimo arrives in order to overcome the violence of metaphysical thought – paradoxically an apogee of the works of Nietzsche and Heidegger. Guarino (2011: 21) observes that weak thought with its “profound doubts about objective reality and absolute certainty, serves for Vattimo, as a way of liberating human freedom for those who would stifle emancipation and creativity with bellicose claims to certitude and finality”. Weak thought implies the giving up of power and territory without the fear of retreating. Thus, not knowing the truth opens a possibility for religion once again. Snyder, in his translator’s introduction to Vattimo’s *The End of Modernity* observes “that ‘weak thought’ may be best understood as a style of thought rather than as a fully developed and self-consistent philosophical system” (Vattimo 1988, iv). When Vattimo speaks of a return to religion, he does not mean a belief in a clearly defined body of doctrines because that is exactly what was rejected as metaphysical ideas. In *After Christianity* he explains: “The concept of postmodern faith has nothing to do with the acceptance of strictly defined dogmas or with disciplines imposed by a single authority” (Vattimo 2002: 9). In other words, there should be an overcoming of objectivistic dogmatism.

Vattimo bases his theories on the notions of Nietzsche and Heidegger, respectively the idea of the death of God and the end of metaphysics. Nietzsche announces the death of God in *The Gay Science*. It happens through the voice of a madman who proclaims: “After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave – a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. – And we – we still have to vanquish his shadow, too” (Nietzsche 1974: 108). Here, Nietzsche does not only attack Christian belief, but all other religious beliefs as well. Vattimo interprets this death as the death of the moral-metaphysical God. He left open the possibility that new gods might be created. Nietzsche, according to Vattimo (1999: 16), did not close off the possibility of a renewal of religious experience. He does not regard Nietzsche’s words as atheistic, in other words meaning – that God does not exist. What he understands with the words “God is dead”, is that Nietzsche meant that there is no ultimate foundation. According to Vattimo (1999: 16), Nietzsche maintains that those who believed in God have killed Him because, the faithful, who have learned not to lie, have discovered that in the end God is redundant. In other words, what Nietzsche means is that we have murdered God with our human and natural sciences.

For Vattimo, however, this means that a few factors contributed to the fact that a unified world order is impossible. He mentions: the specialisation of scientific languages, the proliferation of cultures, the fragmentation of the life spheres, and the Babel-like pluralism of late-modern society (Vattimo 2002: 15). Nihilistic thought indicates that metaphysical truths express

subjective values of individuals or social groups. This means that everything is interpretation and that the world is a world of difference. There is no longer a highest value, such as God, on which all other values are founded and therefore, each value is equivalent to all other values. According to Nietzsche, the concept of truth is an illusion – a cultural construct. No value can be considered higher or more authentic than another. Vattimo (1988: xxi-xxiii) does not see this disappearance of the former highest value as catastrophic for humanity, but that there is a possibility of new human experience. He sees this precisely through the infinite interpretability that “has led to the weakening of the cogent force of reality because it has made all that is given [by metaphysics] as real, necessary, peremptory and true into simply another interpretative possibility among a plethora of such possibilities”.

What is important, however, is that Vattimo believes that the end of modernity does not simply mean the appearance of a newer stage of history. To pinpoint the exact time when modernity came to an end is not possible for Vattimo. Thus, what he contends in effect is that modernity and postmodernity will always co-exist in a historical space (Vattimo 1988: xviii). Vattimo sees modernity as a necessary stage in the recovery of religion in contemporary culture. Eagleton (cited in Tate 2008: 17) observes that modernity was “always religious, despite its loud protestations: the Enlightenment did not really kill God but merely gave him a series of majestic new names, like Nature, Man, Reason, History, Power, Desire, and so on”. This religious revival is more of a spirituality than a rigid manifestation of doctrines of any specific religion. This notion irrevocably ties in with the ideas of this article in that the sacred and secular co-exist and share a privileged space in many contemporary novels. Postmodernity has opened up a space where the radically different or “the other” can be accommodated.

Heidegger’s notion of the end of metaphysics corresponds to Nietzsche’s notion of the death of God in that a belief in an objective world is no longer possible. Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1927) conceives of Being as event rather than objective structure. Being is not stable and eternal and Heidegger regards the event of Being as a remembrance (*Andenken*). According to Heidegger, Being should be seen as non-metaphysical. In other words, Being is something that has been forgotten and cannot be thought of as a stable presence. Heidegger (1962: 74) asserts that “the idea of transcendence, according to which man is more than a mere something endowed with intelligence, has worked itself out with different variations”. Being is interpretation. This remembrance or recollecting (*Andenken*) is accompanied by a sort of overcoming (*Verwindung*) which for Vattimo constitutes the mode of postmodern philosophy (Vattimo 1988: 172-173). *Verwindung* means to be cured, to heal, to twist, to distort or to alter. This does not mean that there is simply a transition from one stage to another, but an acceptance

and at the same time a seeking to be cured of metaphysics. The expression used by Snyder in his translator's introduction is very appropriate when he maintains that "metaphysics cannot simply be shed like a tattered, worn-out garment, or left behind like a doctrine in which we no longer believe; postmodern thought acknowledges this, and does not pretend to represent the revolutionary overthrow or reversal of the heritage of modern thought" (cited in Vattimo 1989: 1). Such a [*Verwindung*] is at once a "recovery from and a resignation to metaphysics" (Vattimo 1988: xxvi). In an article entitled "The Trace of The Trace," Vattimo concurs that:

In religion, something that we thought irrevocably forgotten is made present again, a dormant trace is reawakened, a wound re-opened, the repressed returns and what we took to be an *Überwindung* (overcoming, realization and thus a setting aside) is no more than a *Verwindung*, a long convalescence that has once again come to terms with the indelible trace of its sickness.
(1998: 79)

The word "trace" here refers to a vestige or relic, which is then the re-enchantment of religion in contemporary society and then simultaneously in the novel. Vattimo (1999: 15) contends that God is "disclosed as a trace that makes itself felt in our language". Luca D'Isanto in his thesis, *Theology and Gianni Vattimo's Ontological Hermeneutics* (1993: 336) asserts that "tradition is a network of meanings, of references, of linguistic messages that are always already inscribed in our language." He aptly calls these messages monuments which preserve the memory of a nation, a culture or community. Monuments are important as they remind of the past, but our future is also projected out of them. Luca D'Isanto (1993: 221) translated the words of Vattimo: "The possibility of access to the truth [...] is not so much bound up to the present or the future, but to the past. This past which is still open – like a classic text, a work of art, a hero capable of making itself a model – can be named a monument".

Vattimo sees the importance of retaining the traces of the past because it is through the past that we can construct a future. Postmodernity is not simply a new period in which all traces of the past have been abandoned. Eliade (1957: 202) concurs that many vestiges of primitive and archaic societies have long since been left behind, but they have not disappeared without a trace. He sees these traces in modern man's superstitions, myths, rituals and rites of passage. These traces are evident in the selected novels as sacred contents that were abandoned during Modernity, but are now resurfacing in re-shaped and revitalized forms. These sacred contents are the religious themes and supernatural phenomena that are resurfacing once again, in fresh ways.

Religious Themes

The three novels that are critically analysed for Christian themes or supernatural phenomena are: *Atonement* by Ian McEwan, *Keeping Faith* by Jodi Picoult and *Mariëtte in Ecstasy* by Ron Hansen.

Ian McEwan's *Atonement* deals with a fundamental Christian concept namely the possibility of atoning for one's sins and subsequent redemption. Briony Tallis, the precocious 13-year-old with a lively imagination, witnesses a scene between her older sister Cecilia and Robbie Turner, the son of the family's charlady. She misinterprets the scene and believes that Robbie is taking advantage of her sister. During the course of one day she misinterprets many small incidents. At the end of a long day, Briony falsely accuses Robbie of having raped her cousin Lola. Her interpretive ability is totalitarian and she is oblivious to the fact that interpretation is pluralistic. McEwan subtly warns the reader against the pitfalls of misinterpretations and its dire consequences. She admits to herself that it was not simply her eyes that told her the truth, because it was too dark for that, but rather her construction of a story in her mind: "She trapped herself, she marched into a labyrinth of her own construction" (McEwan 2007: 47). McEwan uses the word "labyrinth" here to emphasise the confusion, the uncertainty of her accusation, as it was solely based on her self-delusion rather than on verifiable facts. She is indeed in a labyrinth after the false accusation of Robbie. One in which she becomes trapped in her own feelings of guilt for the rest of her life. The constant memory of her crime is her symbolic albatross. Briony is incapable of seeing other people as important as she is. This is what Vattimo sees as the problem with postmodern society – the failure to extend neighbourly love. He propagates *caritas* as perhaps the only solution to avoid violence and as a way to heed "the other". Briony asks herself: "[...] was everyone else really as alive as she was? For example, did her sister really matter to herself; was she as valuable to herself as Briony was?" (McEwan 2007: 36).

Briony debases herself by becoming a nurse and caring for "the other" and thus fulfilling a very urgent requirement of Christianity – to heed "the other". Briony's *kenosis* is when she gives up a place at Cambridge and becomes a nurse. The word *kenosis* comes from the Greek word for self-emptying, namely "κένωσις". This essentially refers to the self-emptying of one's own will and the process of becoming completely receptive to God's will. This self-emptying began with the incarnation of Christ. Christ became a slave and debased himself here on earth. The incarnation of Christ is summarised in Philippians 2: 7: "Instead of this, of his own free will he gave up all he had, and took the nature of a servant" (*Goodnews Bible* 2001: 22). This incarnation of Christ is similar to a handing down or giving up of power. Vattimo sees this debasing of the Son of God as convergent with the weak thought of Heidegger who teaches the end of metaphysics and of

Nietzsche who teaches the death of the moral-metaphysical god (Guarino 2011: 25). Kourie and Ruthenberg (2010: 116) concur that “this incarnational self-relinquishment meets with conceptual sympathies in post-modern thought”. To serve others seems a far cry from Briony’s self-absorbed life in which she manipulates those around her in her fictional dramas. It is through caring for the wounded and the maimed in World War Two that Briony finally realises that other people are as real as she is. She is assigned the task of caring for Private Latimer, whose cheek has been blown away. It is only then that Briony realises that “a person is, among all else, a material thing, easily torn, not easily mended” (McEwan 2007: 304).

Briony, like McEwan, is a non-believer and this fact opens up a debate whether atonement is possible. Briony is not religious and therefore cannot feel remorse before God. She is, however connected to society, and endeavours to rectify the fact that she has fallen short of the expectations of society. Mathews (2006: 153) observes in his article entitled “The impression of a deeper darkness: Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*”, that McEwan echoes Friedrich Nietzsche’s argument of creditor and debtor. What this means is that sin is not “just an offence against God; it is a debt that, under the old law of Moses, must be repaid”. The question remains how Briony will repay this debt, if at all. The text shows that a secular redemption is indeed possible, even in the absence of a Deity because Briony states in the novel that the attempt is enough. This point is however debatable. Foster (1987: 2) maintains that in religious confession “the forms are purely conventional, an acknowledgement of the predictable, almost ritualistic nature of sin”. In other words, submission to the sacrament is all that is needed to be absolved (Foster 1987: 3). On the other hand, D’Hoker (2006: 31-32) sees secular confession as subordinate to religious confession, because despite the presence of a reader or listener there are no authorities invested with the power to redeem. It is up to the reader to grant Briony absolution or not. Atonement is in fact a key Christian concept and in effect what Gianni Vattimo advocates with his *caritas*. Briony does not appeal to a Deity for forgiveness, but strives through fiction to rectify her wrongs. Her repeated drafts of Robbie and Cecilia’s story is her way of penance for her sin of failing to see “the other” as important as herself. Whether the reader grants Briony absolution or not, one may at least admire the longing for redemption and the attempt to atone, albeit on a secular level. Some readers may call into question the sincerity of Briony’s desire for forgiveness when taking into consideration that she is writing for an audience at the end. Is she being sincere, or is she attempting to please the audience? Christians may have a belief in the possibility of atonement and may long for a reassurance that forgiveness is possible, whereas for a non-believer the attempt may be enough.

Supernatural Phenomena

Jodi Picoult's *Keeping Faith* displays an emphasis on sincerity in the portrayal of the supernatural within a realist form. Faith White is a very unlikely candidate to be endowed with supernatural abilities. She hails from a family who is not embedded in any Christian foundation, yet she has knowledge of Biblical content, which in the light of her secular background is impossible. Mariah, Faith's mother, is from Jewish progeny and is married to Colin White, a Protestant. The fact that Faith has no knowledge of God, the Bible or any doctrines strengthens the authenticity of her claims. Picoult mentioned her intention of looking at faith rather than religion, thus once again this postmodern concern with spirituality as opposed to a rigid dogmatism is apparent. She very aptly touches on the notion of tolerance within plurality when she poses the question of what if we were able to entertain someone else's point of view about God. Multiple perspectives are integrated in the novel and thus a platform is created for competing voices (Picoult 2008). Faith claims to have seen God in a female form; she is capable of faith healing and displays stigmata. Picoult's distortion of the accepted, traditional image of God as male is a re-shaping of this theme in order to make a powerful statement about interpretation in a postmodern society. She questions this constant image that prevails of God being an all-powerful male. This female God of Faith is indicative of a feminist *kenosis* – a rejection of patriarchal concepts. Picoult creates an opportunity for probing questions in a postmodern society regarding the gender of God. Faith White tells Father Rourke from St John's Seminary in Boston about her vision: "“God's a mother.’ ‘I beg your pardon?’ ‘A lady. God's a lady.’ Rourke's face reddens. A female God? Absolutely not” (Picoult 2008: 154).

The introduction of supernatural phenomena is done craftfully without being offensive to either believer or non-believer. There are many pitfalls of incorporating the miraculous or supernatural in novels. Flannery O'Connor (cited in Ryken 2002: 163) calls such an enterprise a “well-nigh insurmountable one” due to the fact that religious feeling in today's society has become “if not atrophied, at least vaporous and sentimental”. These non-religious writers, with the exception of Hansen who is a confessed Christian, are sensitive to such a feat and seem aware of the spiritual climate of the time. Picoult introduces visions and faith healing without placing too much emphasis on the otherworldly quality and when these occurrences are read out of context they seem like an extension of the natural world. Picoult describes Faith's vision as follows: “She's never seen anything like it. It seems so soft you might fall into it and never find your way out” (Picoult 2008: 38). There is simultaneously a suggestion of an otherworldly and infinite quality present in the description, but the language remains flat. Father Rampini elicits the following description: “She wears the same thing over and over. It's a brown skirt and top, but it's all together in one piece,

and it looks like the things people from the olden times wear on TV.” (Picoult 2008: 255-256). An explicit confrontation with the supernatural could lead to a mistrust and suspicion. This vagueness is a way of Picoult to keep the vision a mystery and indefinable. Lyotard also refers to the fact that the supernatural cannot be contained. He contends that the postmodern “puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable” (Lyotard 1984: 18-19).

Faith healing also appears so naturally without any theatrical or spectacular fanfare that it is rendered credibility. Faith White is able to accomplish miraculous cures. The first is when she brings her grandmother back from the dead. This is as such a preposterous feat, but the reader never feels that he or she is in the presence of a charlatan. If one reads the extract without knowledge of the context, one might think it is a simple act of love: “But her gaze [Mariah’s] never wavers from Faith – not when Faith lifts herself up on her elbows, not when Faith places her hands on either side of Millie’s face and kisses her full on the mouth, not when Millie’s arms rise stiff and slow and cling to her granddaughter for dear life” (Picoult 2008: 90).

Faith eventually experiences stigmata. The word Stigmata comes from the Greek word *στίγμα* which could be translated as spot, brand, disgrace etc. It dates back to 1580-90 and in ancient Greece meant physical marks inflicted by sharp instruments or fire on those considered as outsiders, slaves, criminals or lechers. The plural stigmata refer to the bodily marks that were evident on the body of Christ during the Crucifixion. These wounds appear in the palms of the hands, the feet, the side and the forehead. St Francis of Assisi was the first recorded stigmatic in history. He exhibited the wounds of Christ in 1224.

Picoult creates a very unusual stigmatic in Faith and in effect revitalises an ancient manifestation. There are certain criteria that seem to be common for stigmatics. They are usually female, from a poor background, with a reserved and humble behaviour, an extreme devotion to Christ and an obsession with Christ’s passion (Lachapelle 2004: 80). Faith does not adhere to any of these criteria. In a televised interview with clergy from different denominations, Larry King asks Rabbi Solomon: “How come a Jewish girl would develop the wounds of a savior she doesn’t believe in?” (Picoult 2008: 203). This perhaps shows how life is full of surprises and that the reader should be prepared to be confronted by the unexpected. Picoult effectively shows the inability of science to explain certain miraculous phenomena through her findings of the medical staff who examine Faith. Dr Blumberg is unable to explain the cause of the wounds on Faith’s hands. He tells Mariah: “It’s an inexplicable thing” (Picoult 2008: 131). Being a man of science, he is reluctant and maybe embarrassed to admit the possibility of

stigmata. Dr Herbert, a psychiatrist, says that such phenomena “are beyond the range of both logic and science” (Picoult 2008: 141). Faith’s story is not ultimately about the victory of science over religion. The outcome remains open-ended and it is up to the reader to decide what evidence would be enough to convince a believer of the hand of God in this, and what evidence would convince an unbeliever that the hand of God is not evident here.

Mariëtte Baptiste, in Ron Hansen’s *Mariëtte in Ecstasy*, is a 17-year-old postulant who enters the priory of the Sisters of the Crucifixion in 1906. Prior to her admission, she lived with her father, Dr Baptiste. Her mother died of cancer when she was very young and she has one other sibling who is twenty years her senior. Her sister Celine is Mother Superior, the current prioress of the convent called Our Lady of Sorrows. Her father is against her entering the convent, and tells the nuns facts about her that may make them believe that she is not a perfect candidate for a religious life: “I have a letter from Father that accuses you of being too high-strung for our convent. And he is troubled by gossip from friends and patients about trances, hallucinations, unnatural piety, great extremes of temperament, and, as he put it, inner wrenchings” (Hansen 1995: 31). The seed of doubt is introduced by a sceptic; in this case her father, who is a man of science.

It is uncertain whether Mariëtte sees anything when she hears Christ’s voice. She simply tells Père Marriott (the priest of the convent) that she had an experience: “Jesus spoke to me” (Hansen 1995: 40). He warns her though to be wary of Satan’s temptations: “When you see Christ or hear Him, you must be mistrusting and wary, for Christ is a word that does not give voice to the ear but goes directly into the mind” (Hansen 1995: 41). Suspicion seems to be the first reaction of most characters. Mariëtte herself seems baffled about these strange experiences. The visions are not described and it is up to the reader to form an image in his or her mind. More detail is given to the environment in which these visions and voices appear than the actual image. The description of the sacristy is so vivid and the reader feels the sacred atmosphere among the religious paraphernalia: “[...] washing a great wall of leaded window glass with vinegar as Sister Catherine polishes a golden ciborium and paten and pyx and Père Marriott’s own chalice, with its agates and emeralds and sapphires” (Hansen 1995: 73). These supernatural phenomena are, once again, introduced in mundane situations as if they are natural manifestations: “Her wet blue eyes are overawed as she stares ahead at a wall and she seems to be listening to something just above her, as a girl might listen to the cooing of pigeons. Shutting her eyes, she talks voicelessly, with great passion, and opens her hands as priests do at the par vobiscum. And then she swoons as though she’s lost herself and has become only her clothes” (Hansen 1995: 62). The stigmata are preceded by a number of trances and fainting spells. Another pang of pain in the hands serves as indicator that the postulant will be granted the gifts of Christ: “And then she flinches and looks down at her hands. She tries to rub the hot sting from one

palm with her thumb but the hurt persists like hate inked on a page” (Hansen 1995: 99). Mariëtte’s reaction seems ambiguous and the word hate is definitively linked to the immense pain, but just one line later she is said to be “hoarding” the pain. Even though the pain is excruciating, she still wants to accumulate and store it. The stigmata appear eventually and significantly on Christmas Day: “Blood scribbles down her wrists and ankles and scrawls like handwriting on the floor” (Hansen 1995: 107). Mariëtte’s ecstasies and the visible perception that something is happening to her during these occurrences remain opaque and are not described in any detail: “Every thought I have is of his infinite perfection [...] I have a vision of him but I cannot see his face or his form, only an infinite light and goodness [...] I hear his voice in an interior way, his words have sweetness and charm but no sound” (Hansen 1995: 128). This inability to give expression to the supernatural is what Jean François Lyotard calls the “incommensurable” that needs to be tolerated and acknowledged. That which is unrepresentable and not rationally explicable should enjoy the same preference as that which is scientifically explicable. The introduction of the supernatural does not occur in a blunt, explicit way, but rather with a sensibility that subtly speaks to the sub-consciousness of the reader.

Ron Hansen’s *Mariëtte in Ecstasy* is an example of a novel that does not have a parochial focus. He explores the very rare and often avoided subject of the relationship between spiritual and sexual experience. Hansen develops this age-old theme which manifests in “The Song of songs” in the Bible and revitalizes it here in the very confines of a convent. Iyer (1993: 495) comments on the fact that Hansen is aware of the fact that “eroticism is only as strong as the proscriptions against it” and he places Mariëtte’s ecstasies within “the tight corset of the nuns’ daily routine”. This sexual rapture is indeed irreconcilable with the sacred to those dwelling within this ascetic, monotonous and harshly disciplined environment. It is because of this very blending of sacred and secular that Mariëtte is dismissed. Her erotic sexuality is seen as a contamination of a sacred institution. The real reason for her expulsion is of course the inexplicability of her alleged stigmata, which points to a clash between science and religion. It really points to the fact that both science and religion remain baffled. As Mother Saint-Raphaël admits: “And yet she is a challenge to our theology, psychology, medicine” (Hansen 1995: 149). Père Marriott’s final opinion is ambiguous when he admits: “I don’t believe it’s possible. I do believe it happened” (Hansen 1995: 130).

In both *Keeping Faith* and *Mariëtte in Ecstasy* the manifestation of Christ’s wounds or stigmata is responsible more than any other phenomena for causing a rift between science and religion. Both novels introduce camps respectively supporting the supernatural or dismissing its possibility. The spectrum is not always so clear-cut or binary and some characters hover in a liminal space that is representative of postmodern society. A liminal stage is

a stage of in-betweenness, a pivotal moment in a person's life that could mean regression, stasis or progression. Mark Taylor (1984: 5) remarks that many people are suspended "between the loss of old certainties and the discovery of new beliefs, these people constantly live on the border that joins and separates belief and unbelief". This rift is not just between sacred and secular, but within theological circles where no consensus can be reached. Many clergymen in the novels believe that no miracle is possible today, but that only those mentioned in the Bible are legitimate; they are suspicious of the inexplicable and have set ideas about the ways in which God works, and believe that whatever is contrary to doctrine is simply not true. Two very different writers deal with the same subject matter. Their world views are at variance and their two female characters are greatly at odds even though they both experience stigmata. Picoult represents those non-religious writers who nevertheless see the need for giving scope to the sacred and Ron Hansen is a faithful Catholic who feels the need to employ religious content because of the general unbelief in society. Stigmata appear in a secular environment in Picoult's novel and in a sacred environment in Hansen's novel. This evidence points to the supernatural being random and not subject to prediction.

Both novels have as extremes belief and disbelief, but in between are those who are in a liminal space, unable to fully accept the supernatural, but at the same time unable to fully reject it. Both novels give scope to a plurality of voices, which is imperative in a postmodern society. A very subtle balance between belief and unbelief is maintained and the reader is left to his or her own devices to construct meaning. Many characters make compelling cases either for or against belief in the supernatural. An appeal to the allegedly superior knowledge of science is made in both novels to explain that which is inexplicable. Both science and religion are perplexed at the phenomena and ultimately no final answers are provided. Rational thinking or reason has its limits. Lyotard's (1984: 7) assertion that "scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge" is proven when both science and religion have to admit that there are mysteries which might never be explained.

We see that the novels give expression to and explore the supernatural and miraculous without giving a final verdict as to their truth value. As a result the novels culminate in a sort of blurred religion with elements of piety, traditional belief, scepticism and outright disbelief. What is important though is not the truth value of such phenomena, but the fact that writers give heed to or satisfy a need of postmodern people to once again interact with the miraculous, even if in a secular form. Lyotard (1984: 24) agrees that not "every consensus is a sign of truth, but it is presumed that the truth of a statement necessarily draws a consensus". Science also needs to legitimate itself and it is clear that it is not possible here.

Conclusion

In the introduction to *True Religion*, Ward (2003: vii) asserts: “Religion is once more haunting the imagination of the west”. Graham Ward, who has been Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford since 2012 and Priest of the Church of England, maintains that religion is not just back as a re-enchantment, but manifests in fundamentally new and productive ways. He qualifies this re-enchantment as a “return not signalled by theologians but by filmmakers, novelists, poets, philosophers, political theorists, and cultural analysts” (Ward, 2001: xv). These statements made by Ward do not imply that religion has been absent, so that it can return now. What is implied though is explained by Hass (2007: 842-843) when he refers to the changing status concerning not only the sacred but also the secular. He maintains that religion has lost its supremacy as moral authority”, but secularity “has lost its position as impenetrable positivist bastion against what it saw as the thinly protected myths of religion and spirituality.” Ward’s use of the word “re-enchantment” also indicates that religion has not disappeared, but that it charmed before and is now doing so again.

Some postmodern novels show indebtedness to Christianity or the Bible because the Bible serves as the novel’s symbolic origin. If the Bible serves as a kind of Ur-text, then the subject matter is unlimited when considering the Bible’s wide subject matter. Henn asserts that “the Bible is burned into the timber of English. It has provided literature with proverbs, and parables, and themes, sacred and profane, for epic, satire, tragedy, farce” (cited in Jasper 2007: 18). Ryken (1995: 148) calls this Christian element in literature “a direct indebtedness of literature to the Bible” and continues to say that writers have not only raided the Bible for titles of works and names of characters, but also for subject matter. It is a point of contention what the persuasive effect of such content is on the reader, especially an atheist or agnostic reader, although the intention of most writers is not persuasion in whichever direction of thought.

Without paying specific attention to Biblical content in novels, the general pattern of most novels confirms a sort of fictive kinship with theology in that there is a definite pattern of sin, the fall and redemption. Michael Edwards (1984: 4) refers to this pattern as “Christian cosmology” which entails “creation, fall and re-creation”. He also contends that our need for story “comes from the exile from Eden” and this is true whether one actually believes in the metanarrative of Eden or not (1984: 73). Flannery O’Connor (cited in Ryken 2002: 167) asserts that without salvation, or as she calls it “loss of the soul” there is no story, while John Updike, in an interview with the *Paris Review* (1968) claims that “unfallen Adam is an Ape” (cited in Samuels 1994: 34). What he means is that humankind becomes unimportant if there is no sin, guilt or deserving blame. This identification of a pattern of sin, the fall and redemption in novels does not mean that one simplifies

literature by earnestly searching for glimpses of Christian truths and turning secular writers, and at that non-religious ones, into Christians. The intention of this article is not to impose such an interpretation on the novels, but it supports Fiddes's (1991: 33) claim that one may compare the writer's fiction with its ascribed Christian content to those who do adhere willingly to the Christian tradition as long as one does not simply assume that the secular writer has made "the jump from one dimension to another". Fiddes (1991: 33) argues that because all fiction has as content human experience and is concerned with themes that touch on Christian faith; this human tendency towards self-transcendence is destined to intersect with the theological notion of the human reaching towards transcendence.

McEwan believes that religion is in effect a metanarrative and at that a totalitarian one, but he seems to realise that science also fails to give the final answers. In his article "The End of the World Blues" (2007: 360) he argues that: "Scientific method, scepticism, or rationality in general, has yet to find an overarching narrative of sufficient power, simplicity, and wide appeal to compete with the old stories that give meaning to people's lives." The "old stories" serve as inspiration for the non-religious writers and open debates that will occupy our minds infinitely. Lyotard's incredulity towards metanarratives has not caused an abandonment of sacred themes and motifs from certain contemporary novels. The revival of the sacred proves its resilience and the nostalgia for the spiritual. Gianni Vattimo (1998: 79) calls it a "dormant trace" and a "wound re-opened". Eliade (1957: 209) affirms these traces and intricate connection between sacred and profane [secular]: "profane man is the descendant of homo religiosus and he cannot wipe out his own history – that is, the behaviour of his religious ancestors which has made him what he is today." The existence of the miraculous is always difficult to prove, but the fact that certain contemporary novels testify to such phenomena is indicative of a debate that is still to be settled.

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