



Book Review:

*Fantasy Literature and Christianity: A Study of the
Mistborn, Coldfire, Fionavar Tapestry and Chronicles of
Thomas Covenant Series*

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Łaszkiwicz, Weronika. *Fantasy Literature and Christianity: A Study of the
Mistborn, Coldfire, Fionavar Tapestry and Chronicles of Thomas Covenant
Series*. McFarland, 2018, www.mcfarlandbooks.com. ISBN 978-1476671703.

Discussions about Christianity in fantasy literature can often seem inordinately focused on a few specific topics, such as religious allegory in George MacDonald and C. S. Lewis or controversial critiques by Philip Pullman and Terry Pratchett. None of these topics has been exhausted, of course, but they are familiar. Weronika Łaszkiwicz expands the conversation beyond the familiar by analysing the secondary religions of fantasy novels in *Fantasy Literature and Christianity*. For Łaszkiwicz, the imagined worlds and cultures of fantasy invite readers “to question ideas which they have taken for granted and, in the case of religion, to reevaluate both their religious convictions and perception of faith” (8). Rather than using religion as a path to insights into authorial biography or to evaluate the merits of a given faith, Łaszkiwicz uses a phenomenology of religion as a literary lens. Specifically she looks at how current fantasy authors reinvent recognisably Christian iconography and practices to enrich their worlds, refine characterisation, augment story themes, and ask important questions of their readers.

Structurally speaking, the book opens with a brief overview of the methodology employed. Łaszkiwicz limits her study to the religious discourse in epic/high fantasy, which she defines as fantasy that “typically revolves around a hero or group of heroes inhabiting or temporarily visiting a full-fledged secondary reality, i.e., an imaginary world, equipped with fantastic countries, languages, cultures, maps, creatures, and religions” (12). Within these worlds she locates events, ideas,

and characters who correlate with recognisably Christian symbols and personalities. A text need not explicitly refer to Jesus Christ to present Christian themes, and throughout the book Łaszkiwicz offers a number of ways to make these connections. For example, a secondary religion in fantasy may have an uncanny resemblance to a given Christian sect, or it may have cosmologies that revolve around a single creator-deity. Others can build patterns from Biblical tales into a novel's superstructure, such as a world-cleansing flood, a heroic self-sacrifice to save others, miraculous healings, and so forth. Łaszkiwicz even suggests that biblical language or a Christian ethics underpinning a series can signal a connection. Each chapter explores a handful of thematically Christian threads present in the chosen series and explores both how those threads inform the text as well as how the text dialogues with that mythical background.

The remainder of the book is a series of practical demonstrations of Łaszkiwicz's multivalent theoretical framework. This means that, after the introduction to the general methodology, the remaining chapters can be read and referenced in isolation from each other. That being said, reading the book *en toto* sharpens each thread of the argument by virtue of contrast with the others. Not only does this strengthen Łaszkiwicz's claim that the majority of scholarship on the matter is either too focused on a specific group of authors or too limited in approach, but it also allows readers to see a variety of methods they can apply in their own scholarship. Furthermore, Łaszkiwicz's book is neither an endorsement nor a critique of Christianity (whether in fantasy or elsewhere), but an evenhanded literary analysis, safe from overreaching with its claims while still useful.

Łaszkiwicz begins with Stephen R. Donaldson's *Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever* series. This chapter notes Donaldson's deliberate invocation of Christian mythos to provide the central themes of the series. However, rather than simply cataloguing moments of overlap, Łaszkiwicz focuses on how Christianity is the structural bedrock for the series' metaphysics, morals, language, and world-building; as she explains, "References to Christianity in *The Chronicles* are so numerous and ubiquitous that they condition the shape of the imaginary world and regulate the protagonists' behavior" (79). Łaszkiwicz assembles a formidable list of biblical allusions and subversions, as well as the presence of Christian ethics throughout to demonstrate how Donaldson reconstructs familiar Christian narratives to create a story that sidesteps scriptural allegory while also very much engaging in dialogue with the religion of his childhood.

In contrast to a narrative world composed of references to Christian ideas and images, the next chapter uses Guy Gavriel Kay's *Fionavar Tapestry* to discuss Christianity as one religious option within a pluralistic fantasy world. While a singular creator, called The Weaver, correlates with the Christian God, other deities appear and interact with the human cast. For Łaszkiwicz, whereas *The Chronicles* borrows and restructures Christian myth, the *Fionavar* books integrate Christianity into a larger cosmology. The religious focus of Kay's series, then, is not in apprehending how the universe came into being but rather in learning to inhabit "a world in which the limits and virtues of humankind are tested by the divine" (123). Łaszkiwicz suggests that such a story emphasises the unknowability of Creation's reaches, and so tolerance and goodness are essential to a productive human life and, in the end, a form of divine grace that makes things right.

In C. S. Friedman's *Coldfire Trilogy* Łaszkiwicz identifies a secondary-world religion specifically rooted in Christianity, and so she examines the Church on Erna,

then juxtaposes “it against ‘original’ Christianity to evaluate their similarities and differences” (137). Instead of exploring the relationship between people and their gods, Łaskiewicz suggests that *Coldfire* focuses “on exploring different dimensions of a person’s faith in God and dedication to Church service” (145). Additionally, the Church on Erna’s doctrines and commandments recognizably echo Christian ethics, and the series’s moral arguments emphasise the virtue of persevering in faith, granting forgiveness, and performing self-sacrifice. This emphasis on spiritual development amidst undetermined truth claims is one of the more outstanding facets of Łaskiewicz’s argument, since in the absence of a known deity to initiate the belief system of the Church of Erna, the religion is not absolute on the diegetic level and can only find validation in how well the practitioners can persuade the audience. By including the *Coldfire Trilogy*, Łaskiewicz demonstrates how Christianity might manifest in a fantasy series without gods, emphasising the moral and social qualities of religion, both collectively and personally. Regardless of what powers lie behind a person’s faith, tracking their spiritual and moral development in relation to that faith is an important part of exploring the power and value of faith in the human experience.

With Brandon Sanderson’s *Mistborn* series, rather than the spiritual ethics of the *Coldfire Triogy*, Łaskiewicz is most interested in how characters themselves respond to and use religion for their own ends, as well as the potential for deification. Initially religion manifests as a cultural construct, first as one that maintains an authoritarian power structure and later as a means of revolution. However, as the series progresses, the truth claims of religion and the necessity of faith are tested, while religion becomes a path to apotheosis. Łaskiewicz draws attention to how events in the *Mistborn* books complicate representations of religion, as faith traditions are both subverted and validated throughout the series, weighing the culpability of institutional faith against the importance of earnest belief. Łaskiewicz cites Sanderson’s membership in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for influencing these motifs. Some critics may dispute Łaskiewicz’s choice to include a Mormon author in a discussion of Christianity, but as Łaskiewicz points out, members of the Church do consider theirs a Christian faith.

From a technical perspective, Łaskiewicz performs excellently. Her argument is lucid, avoiding the pitfalls of obscure, dense, and/or esoteric theorising. While there are occasional typos (e.g. referring to Joseph Smith as “John Smith” in one instance, p. 189) they are few and never obscure the text; hopefully future printings will correct these. It should be noted, however, that the text is not always forthcoming about its limits. Religion is an old topic, and the academic discourse thereof is legion. With the exception of Sanderson, Łaskiewicz does not distinguish a specific denomination, relying on a more monolithic concept of Christianity. Because she relies on easily recognisable images (crosses, atoning sacrifice, etc.) present in any Christian sect, though, such generalisation does no real harm to the book. In fact, parsing specific creeds in relation to the chosen texts would likely distract from Łaskiewicz’s argument. So long as readers are mindful that the book trades in generalities to allow for a rich theoretical framework, they should have no trouble following and applying the argument. Still, further research could (and should) definitely be performed to adjust and apply Łaskiewicz’s apparatus through the lens of specific sects and even other faith traditions.

All in all, *Fantasy Literature and Christianity* is a definite boon to scholars of the fantastic interested in religion, especially outside of the usual suspects (i.e. Lewis,

MacDonald, etc.). Furthermore, aside from Donaldson, Łaskiewicz's chosen authors have received very little scholarly attention, and so those interested in writing about Kay, Friedman, and Sanderson can benefit from the space she has made for further criticism. The book is useful as a model for further phenomenological and narratological studies, as well as for explorations of world-building and religious rhetoric in fantasy literature.

Biography: Paul Williams received his M.A. in English from Idaho State University in spring 2018. His article, "Stepping into Story: Narrative Grammar in Robert Holdstock's Mythago Cycle" was published in *Gramarye*, issue 14. A former high school English teacher, his interests include narrative theory, alternative history fiction, religion, and any other topic he can fit under the umbrella of fantasy literature. He is now pursuing his PhD at ISU where he serves as Editorial Assistant for the *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*.