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The Favor of the Gods:  
Religion and Power in George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*

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*Abstract: This article examines the relationship between power and religion in Westeros, the continent created by George R. R. Martin in A Song of Ice and Fire. Participants in the conflict of Westeros, I argue, embrace religion as a source of legitimacy to gain power and to support their claims. By doing so, the conflict acquires a religious dimension. They are not only fighting a civil war, but also a religious war.*

*Keywords: George R. R. Martin, A Song of Ice and Fire, power, religion.*

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George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* tells a story about power. The death of King Robert Baratheon leads to a power struggle known as the War of the Five Kings. His death—and the discovery that his sons were born of incest between Queen Cersei Lannister and her brother Jaime—leaves a power vacuum that rival factions try to fill. Stannis and Renly Baratheon, King Robert's brothers, rise up in arms to claim the Iron Throne for themselves. Balon Greyjoy restarts his rebellion to become independent from the Seven Kingdoms. Robb Stark is proclaimed King in the North and marches south to attack the Lannisters in retaliation for killing Eddard Stark, Robb's father. The Lannisters, on their part, support Robert's false sons' claim to the Iron Throne. It would be easy to view these events solely as a complex series of military actions, but the power struggle has far more interesting dimensions.

Of particular interest to me is the nature of power in Martin's books—where it comes from, how it is justified, and how it is maintained. In this article, I explore how both hard and soft power are obtained and used by various characters in Westeros, and how claims to the Iron Throne are validated. Religion, I argue, becomes an important source of power and legitimacy. In Martin's world, religion is not a mere set of practices and beliefs; it is an ideological territory in which several characters ground (or attempt to ground) their political claims. Religion, of course, is not the only source of legitimacy in Westeros. Scholars (e.g., Martínez) have identified other forms of legitimacy, such as human or genealogical, in the early stages of the war. This article demonstrates how religion also becomes a foundation of power and legitimacy that kings and queens in Westeros employ to pursue their political interests.

As we will see, all the characters discussed in this article align themselves with a faith to obtain power and legitimacy, and all of them go about doing so in different ways. Stannis Baratheon resorts to the divine right that the red priestess Melisandre confers on him in his quest to win the Iron Throne. Similarly, Queen Mother Cersei attempts to use the Faith of the Seven to obtain power and legitimize the Lannisters' sovereignty. She creates a religious army and seeks the support of the Faith for her son's claim. The Greyjoys use religion as a quality that differentiates them from the other kingdoms and validates their claim for independence. Finally, Arya Stark finds in religion her last hope to obtain power and avenge her family. Actual belief is not necessary to enable one to use a religion to gain power in Westeros; as I will show, the appearance of faith will suffice.

I will begin with a discussion of power in Martin's work and then offer examples of how characters in the novels attempt to gain power through religious legitimacy. As a consequence, I will argue, the conflict acquires a religious dimension. It is not only a civil war, but also a religious one; religion becomes part of the war rhetoric of Westeros that justifies the conflict.

### **Power in *A Song of Ice and Fire***

The characters' desire for power is the main driving force in Martin's narrative. The notion of power presented in the novels is in line with Robert Dahl's "bedrock idea of power" (202). For this political theorist and Yale University professor, "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" (202–203). Basic as this definition may seem, it encapsulates the "notion that seems to lie behind [power, influence, control, and authority]" (202). That is, power ultimately aims to get others to do what you want. In this way, Martin portrays power as the capacity to control others in Westeros.

But what constitutes power for those fighting in the war? Pablo Iglesias, a politician and a professor at Complutense University of Madrid, identifies and defines two main sources of power in Westeros, the sword and the shadow. Iglesias equates the sword with hard power and the shadow with soft power (96). The sword (or hard power) is the strength of your army, which coerces your enemies. The shadow (or soft power) is your ability to influence others without threats (97). Indeed, for Joseph Nye, a political scientist and professor at Harvard University, soft power is the ability to "obtain the outcomes [that a country] wants in world politics because other countries—admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness—want to follow it.... This soft power—getting others to want the outcomes that you want—co-opts people rather than coerces them" (5). In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, power manifests itself both as coercion and as the ability to inspire and attract others in a non-violent way.

The dialogue between Renly and Stannis Baratheon in *A Clash of Kings* (hereafter *ACOK*), the second book of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, illustrates the importance of both hard and soft power in Martin's work. The brothers, two contenders in the War of the Five Kings, meet to discuss a possible alliance:

[Stannis:] "The Iron Throne is mine by rights. All those who deny that are my foes."

[Renly:] "The whole of the realm denies it, brother.... Old men deny it with their death rattle, and unborn children deny it in their mothers' wombs. They deny it in Dorne and they deny it on the Wall. No one wants you for their king. Sorry."

...

[Renly:] "Look across the fields, brother. Can you see all those banners?"

[Stannis:] "Do you think a few bolts of cloth will make you king?"

[Renly:] "Tyrell swords will make me king. Rowan and Tarly and Caron will make me king, with axe and mace and warhammer."

(Martin, *ACOK* 356–59)

As Renly's elder brother, Stannis is the rightful heir and has the best claim to the Iron Throne, yet he is the underdog at the moment of this conversation. Renly has attracted an enormous army to his cause, while hardly anyone acknowledges Stannis as their king. Why? Renly cleverly uses soft power to create a narrative around himself that supports his claim to the Iron Throne. He presents himself as a "great king, strong yet generous, clever, just, diligent, loyal to my friends and terrible to my enemies, yet capable of forgiveness, patient" (Martin, *ACOK* 360). Stannis, however, appears ill-tempered, anti-social, and rigid. Even if Renly is not the rightful heir, the other lords perceive his claim as more appealing and more just than his brother's. Renly is undoubtedly more powerful than his brother; he has a much larger army (hard power) as a consequence of the love of his soldiers and the other lords who believe in his cause (soft power). Stannis' failure to acknowledge the importance of soft power proves detrimental to his claim.

Both soft and hard power are necessary to rule in Westeros. As several political experts point out, "all true contenders to the throne will have to embody a principle of legitimacy; power by itself, force by itself, however terrible it might be, will never be strong enough to guarantee a stable legality" (Iraberri, Alegre, & Iglesias 41).<sup>1</sup> An army by itself is not enough to rule. It must be accompanied by legitimacy (a form of soft power)—that is, the narrative that supports and gives validity to one's claim beyond physical might, as in the case of Renly.

But what legitimizes a cause in Martin's story? Rubén Martínez, a law professor at the University of Valencia, identifies three types of legitimacy: genealogical, divine, and human legitimacy. All three elements contribute to the creation of a narrative that legitimizes a ruler. First, genealogical legitimacy refers to the inherited right of kings and queens to rule. Second, divine legitimacy relies on god's will and presents the ruler as god's chosen. Finally, human legitimacy relates to Machiavelli's notion of being simultaneously loved and feared (Martínez 60–63). Martínez suggests that the two main types of legitimacy in Westeros are genealogical and human. According to him, "[religious legitimacy] is weaker because the fantastic construction of the world in the show manages without the existence of Christianity" (62).<sup>2</sup> However, as we will see, religious legitimacy does, in fact, come to occupy the central position in the war.

The theory proposed by Martínez is a useful lens through which to analyze legitimacy in the early stages of the war. The Lannisters base their legitimacy on the assumption that Joffrey is King Robert's son (genealogical legitimacy). However, as soon as the incest scandal comes to light and Joffrey is revealed as the bastard son of Jaime Lannister, his claim to the Iron Throne weakens considerably, and the War of the Five Kings breaks out. Lacking legitimacy, the Lannisters maintain power only because they have the biggest army once Renly is killed by his brother. Robb Stark, another contestant in the war, is legitimized as King in the North by his people (human legitimacy). He embodies the values of the North as opposed to those of the South, and his people prefer to be ruled by someone who holds their values. As he loses the love and respect of his people, his army grows progressively weaker. Stannis, as we have seen, justifies his claim on genealogical grounds.<sup>3</sup>

Genealogical and human legitimacy become increasingly irrelevant as the books progress. After the murder of Robb Stark and the defeat of Stannis in King's Landing, the political and social situation in Westeros grows so chaotic that the traditional order based on genealogical and human

<sup>1</sup> All translations from Spanish are mine.

<sup>2</sup> Martínez's article examines the question of power in the first four seasons of the TV adaptation of *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Those four seasons cover the events narrated in the first three books of Martin's saga, where religion did not play as key a role in King's Landing as it does in the following books. Yet Christianity is present from the beginning in both the show and the books. As Ryan Mitchell Wittingslow, a professor at the University of Groningen, points out, "The Faith [of the Seven] functions in much the same way as the Roman Catholic Church did during the High Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as an indelible and unavoidable part of the lifeworlds of Westerosi, whether by virtue of its undeniable influence upon social and cultural mores, its political clout or its metaphysical content" (114). The role that the Faith of the Seven plays in the politics of the capital becomes evident in book four with the arrival of the sparrows.

legitimacy crumbles. There are no known rightful heirs to the Iron Throne. In addition, treason and conspiracy are everywhere, eroding the trust on which human legitimacy depends. In this new situation, contestants need a different type of legitimacy to gain and maintain power, and they resort to religious legitimacy.

Religion, then, becomes a foundation of power in Westeros. For Arthur Greil, a professor of sociology at Alfred University, religion is “a cultural resource over which competing interest groups may vie. From this perspective, religion is not an entity but a claim made by certain groups and—in some cases—contested by others to the right of privileges associated in a given society with the religious label” (qtd. in Introvigne 109). In Martin’s story, the different factions taking part in the war use (or attempt to use) a religious label to ground their political claims and legitimize their privilege to rule over the other houses of Westeros.

### **Stannis Baratheon and R’hllor**

Stannis embraces religion as a source of both soft and hard power during the war. Importantly, his dependence on religion to maintain his claim becomes increasingly necessary as the books advance. Eventually, as we will see, religion will become his last hope to win the Iron Throne. Stannis adopts the foreign faith of R’hllor, the Lord of Light. This religion is based on the existence of two opposing gods: “On one side is R’hllor, the Lord of Light, the Heart of Fire, the God of Flame and Shadow. Against him stands the Great Other whose name may not be spoken, the Lord of Darkness, the Soul of Ice, the God of Night and Terror” (Martin, *Storm* 288). Yet Stannis is not a godly man: “I stopped believing in gods the day I saw the *Windproud* break up across the bay. Any gods so monstrous as to drown my mother and father would never have my worship” (Martin, *ACOK* 123). Why, then, does he embrace this exotic religion and take part in the conflict between these two gods? The answer is power. As Stannis himself declares, “I know little and care less of gods, but the red priestess has power” (Martin, *ACOK* 123). He hopes that this power will help him gain the Iron Throne.

However, adopting this new religion and having Melisandre, the red priestess, by his side harms his claim as well. In order to comply with the dictates of his new religion, Stannis must make unpopular decisions such as burning alive those “infidels” who refuse to accept the new religion. Likewise, statues of the Seven, the traditional gods of Westeros, are also burned, greatly offending many of his people. Yet Stannis knows that if he is to win the throne, he needs to do something out of the ordinary to overcome his adversaries. Despite being the rightful king, his claim has always been the weakest; as his brother points out, nobody wants him to be the king. Stannis perceives religion (and the power of the supernatural that derives from it) as a powerful ally to beat his enemies regardless of the aversion it causes among some of his people. Stannis uses religion to increase his army (hard power) and to justify his claim according to god’s will (soft power).

Regarding hard power, Stannis is interested in the power of the supernatural that his newly adopted religion can offer to coerce his enemies. Through Melisandre, he uses this power to kill Renly and seize his army. The sacrifices Melisandre demands raise moral issues for him, yet as his army grows smaller, he needs to rely ever more heavily on those sacrifices. In the TV adaptation of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Stannis even burns his own daughter to gain the favor of the Lord of Light while he is in a dire situation before a battle. This is what Neil Price, a professor of anthropology at

<sup>3</sup> This article analyzes the treatment of power in Westeros. Because Daenerys Targaryen is not yet part of the political scenario, she is omitted from this analysis. However, she does not use religion as a source of power during her quest for dominance in the continent of Essos. Her three dragons—the most powerful army in the world created by Martin—and the Unsullied constitute her hard power, while her soft power derives solely from human and genealogical legitimacy. If she manages to control her dragons and assert her genealogical legitimacy as a Targaryen in Westeros, she would have the best chance to win the Iron Throne.

Uppsala University, calls “supernatural empowerment of violence”—essentially the way in which the physical prosecution of warfare was supported by a structure of rituals intended to produce success in battle” (abstract). In the same way, the religious sacrifices of Melisandre are meant to help Stannis win battles and destroy his enemies.

The faith of the Lord of Light also gives Stannis a new justification for his cause (soft power); he needs to become king, not only because he is Robert’s rightful heir, but also because he is the reincarnation of Azor Ahai, a legendary hero who is meant to save the world from the Lord of Darkness. Stannis is R’hllor’s chosen one, as the red priestess Melisandre reminds us throughout the books. Clearly, this confers on Stannis the divine right in his quest to win the throne. After the terrible defeat that he suffers at the Battle of the Blackwater, his quest seems finished; his fleet is destroyed, and most of his men have died or bent their knee to the Lannisters. It is the religious dimension of his task that keeps his claim alive: “After the battle, when I [Stannis] was lost to despair, the Lady Melisandre bid me gaze into the hearthfire” (Martin, *Storm* 414). In the flames, Melisandre shows him that “the battle is begun [the battle between the Lord of Light and the Great Other]. . . . Westeros must unite beneath her one true king, the prince that was promised, Lord of Dragonstone and chosen of R’hllor” (Martin, *Storm* 414). It does not matter if Stannis has lost the war against the Lannisters; he still has to fulfill his destiny as Azor Ahai and fight the religious war, which, according to Melisandre, will eventually gain him the Iron Throne.

As we see, the war acquires a new dimension for Stannis, for he is no longer fighting a civil war, but a religious war. We do not know whether Stannis truly believes in this religious prophecy, yet it assures that he will rule Westeros one day, and that is all that matters to him. After the Lannisters destroy his whole army, religion is his only hope to win the throne; his claim to the Iron Throne is still legitimized by his divine right as Azor Ahai.<sup>4</sup>

## Cersei Lannister and the Faith of the Seven

In a similar manner, Queen Mother Cersei Lannister attempts to use the Faith of the Seven as a tool to obtain power and to achieve her political goals. The religion of the Seven believes in the existence of one god that manifests itself in seven different forms: the father, the mother, the maiden, the warrior, the smith, the crone, and the stranger. Each of these manifestations grants a different gift; worshippers pray to the warrior for strength or to the mother for mercy, for example. The most widespread religion in Westeros, the Seven is also the faith of the royal family in King’s Landing, the capital of the Seven Kingdoms.

Initially, this religion is completely irrelevant to the political life of the kingdom. As Carolynne Larrington, a professor of English literature at St. John’s College, notes, “the Faith [of the Seven] has been deliberately excluded from the political processes of the realm; there’s no place for the High Septon on the Small Council . . . no regular attendance at the equivalent of mass for the nobility or the knightly classes” (134). Religion is a mere formality. People at court are expected to be religious, but nobody truly takes it into account. Even the High Septons, the heads of the Faith of the Seven, are sometimes portrayed as corrupt and lavish.

After the War of the Five Kings, the seemingly politically irrelevant Faith of the Seven becomes central in the political life of King’s Landing with the arrival of “the sparrows.” The sparrows are a social religious movement that “invades” the capital out of necessity; they are poor men and women who have nowhere else to go once their lives are destroyed by the war. Having

<sup>4</sup> The support of the Iron Bank is also important for Stannis’ claim. In *A Dance with Dragons*, Tycho Nestoris from the Iron Bank searches for Stannis and plans to back his claim with gold if Stannis agrees to take on the crown’s debt. As it does in the TV adaptation, this gold may allow Stannis to further enlarge his army—hard power is still quite necessary.

seen the atrocities of the war against their faith, they demand the protection of the Iron Throne. Every day great numbers of sparrows arrive at the capital, and their leader ultimately becomes High Septon. Unlike his predecessors, this new “High Sparrow” is a deeply religious man who aims to protect the Faith of the Seven and enforce its dogma.

Cersei sees an opportunity to use this new religious group to increase her hard and soft power. To that end, she offers to arm the sparrows so that they can protect themselves and their faith. The Queen Mother decides to restore the ancient “Faith Militant,” the religious military orders of the Seven. She hopes that this new religious army will help her fight the “infidel” Stannis Baratheon and the northmen. According to her, “[the killing of septons and septas] is the work of Stannis and his red witch, and the savage northmen who worship trees and wolves” (Martin, *Feast* 416). She conveniently blames her enemies for killing the faithful and claims revenge for the victims, thereby helping to turn the conflict from a civil war into a religious war.

The Queen Mother also uses religion as a source of soft power to legitimize her son's reign. Among the things that she demands in exchange for restoring the Faith Militant, she wants the High Sparrow to give King Tommen his blessing: “The blessing was an empty ritual, she knew, but rituals and ceremonies had power in the eyes of the ignorant” (Martin, *Feast* 414).

Adherents to this renovated faith, however, do not see legitimizing other people's power as their primary end. Instead, they aim to become a power in their own right to enforce the law of the Seven in the kingdom. To that end, they create their own religious tribunal where they utilize “the practices of the Inquisition: isolation, threats, torture and public confession” (Larrington 136). Their power grows so strong that they even imprison the Queen Mother Cersei and Margaery Tyrell, Tommen's queen. When they release Cersei, the sparrows make her walk naked on the streets of King's Landing as a punishment for her sins. Religion clearly subverts traditional forms of power and legitimacy in King's Landing. Traditional legitimacy, such as birthright, is now overshadowed by religious legitimacy; the law of the gods stands above kings and queens. The once powerful Queen Cersei is humiliated by a religious group that, paradoxically, she hoped would help her obtain more power. Because the saga of *A Song of Ice and Fire* is not yet finished, we cannot predict how events will unfold in King's Landing. However, it is clear that the once irrelevant Faith of the Seven now occupies the central position in the politics of the capital.

## House Greyjoy and the Drowned God

Religion is also used as a political tool to distinguish territories in Martin's story. The Greyjoys want to break away from the Seven Kingdoms, and they embrace religion as an element that differentiates them from the other Houses and, especially, from the Iron Throne. The motto of the Dominican Republic would perfectly encapsulate the Greyjoys' cause: “God, Homeland, Liberty.” Like many countries throughout history, the Dominican Republic used religion to distinguish themselves from other territories and to reinforce the idea of being an independent nation. Edward Paulino, a professor of history at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, points out how Dominican politicians crafted a national identity around being Catholic, being Spanish descendants, and having western culture in their part of the island. All these elements differentiated the Dominican Republic from Haiti, where people, according to Dominican politicians, practice voodoo, come from African descent, and speak Creole (3). In this context, Paulino highlights how “[the church] played a major role in the anti-Haitian rhetoric that used Catholicism and Christianity as a defining marker of difference between Dominicans and Haitians” (105).

House Greyjoy uses religion in a similar way—to distinguish a country and build a national identity. The Greyjoys and the ironmen, the residents of the Iron Islands, worship the Drowned God.

This god mandates what the ironmen know as the “Old Way,” an ancient culture of raiding coastal villages that includes pillage, rape, and vandalism: “War was an ironman’s proper trade. The Drowned God had made them to reave and rape, to carve out kingdoms and write their names in fire and blood and song” (Martin, *ACOK* 129). Aegon Targaryen abolished the Drowned God’s culture when he conquered Westeros and unified the Seven Kingdoms. Yet the ironmen never renounced the Old Way. After Robert took the Iron Throne, the Greyjoys tried to gain independence with Balon’s rebellion, but failed. They perceive the death of King Robert as a new opportunity to break away from the Seven Kingdoms and to restore their old traditions.

In the context of the War of the Five Kings, the religion of the Drowned God distinguishes the Iron Islands from the other kingdoms and legitimizes the Greyjoys’ claim for freedom and, later on, for expansion.<sup>5</sup> Their religion precludes remaining in the Seven Kingdoms; they need to become independent in order to restore their old traditions and honor their god’s will. Michael Sigrist, a professor of philosophy at George Washington University, discusses fate and freedom in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Following the philosopher Martin Heidegger, Sigrist suggests that freedom in Martin’s books is achieved through the principle of authenticity, which is “defined in terms of ownership and singularity: freedom as ‘owning’ oneself and being one’s own” (232). As we have seen, one of House Greyjoy’s main goals in the war is freedom, and religion is an essential part of “being one’s own” for them. They use religion to legitimize their contention that they do not belong in the Seven Kingdoms, and as such, religion becomes their main source of soft power that justifies and validates their claim for independence.

## Arya Stark and the Many-Faced God

In addition to being a source of power and legitimacy for those fighting in the war, religion also plays an important role in gaining power at the individual level. Most of the surviving members of House Stark find in religion their last hope to obtain power. Arya Stark, for instance, joins a religious sect in order to carry out her revenge. After her father’s execution, Arya escapes from King’s Landing with the help of Yoren, a brother of the Night’s Watch, but the Mountain and his party eventually capture her and take her to Harrenhal. During her journey from the capital to Harrenhal, she witnesses torture, killing, and all sorts of atrocities. All the violence that she sees both in King’s Landing and on her way to Harrenhal awakens in her a strong sense of revenge. Like a prayer, she recites the names of all the people who have wronged her or other innocent people in hopes of being able to get revenge one day. “‘Ser Gregor,’ she’d whisper to her stone pillow. . . . ‘Ser Amory, Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn, King Joffrey, Queen Cersei.’ Back in Winterfell, Arya had prayed with her mother in the sept and with her father in the godswood, but there were no gods on the road to Harrenhal, and her names were the only prayer she cared to remember” (Martin, *ACOK* 314). Arya rejects her parents’ gods, complaining that they have never helped her family. Revenge becomes the only thing she believes in.

How can a ten-year-old girl alone in the world fulfill her strong vengeful spirit? Arya finds the answer when she meets the Faceless Man Jaqen H’ghar, a servant of the Many-Faced God. Jaqen offers to kill three people of Arya’s choice to pay off a debt with his god. Before meeting Jaqen, she was powerless in Harrenhal and mistreated by almost everybody, but with Jaqen’s offer,

<sup>5</sup> Some members of House Greyjoy also attribute a religious dimension to their mission to conquer other parts of Westeros. According to Aeron Greyjoy, “the waters of wrath will rise high, and the Drowned God will spread his dominion across the green lands!” (Martin, *ACOK* 298). While this example supports my argument that a religious war is occurring in Westeros, the religious dimension of the conquest is not shared by all the members of House Greyjoy. When Euron Greyjoy takes over the Iron Islands, religion as a reason to legitimize conquest seems to shift to the background. Because Martin’s saga is unfinished, we have yet to see how the political importance of religion will evolve in the case of the Greyjoys.

she finally finds a means to carry out her revenge. By whispering in Jaqen's ear, she can kill anybody she wishes: "She had killed Chiswyck with a whisper, and she would kill two more before she was through. I'm the ghost in Harrenhal, she thought. And that night, there was one less name to hate" (Martin, *ACOK* 351). Jaqen and the Many-Faced God empower Arya in a time when she feels completely helpless. She expresses this empowerment, saying, "Jaqen made me brave again. He made me a ghost instead of a mouse" (Martin, *ACOK* 512). It is never made clear how Jaqen kills his victims, but his power fascinates Arya.

In the end, Arya herself decides to serve the Many-Faced God to learn Jaqen's deadly power. After her brother Robb and her mother are killed, she has neither home nor family, and the religion of the Many-Faced God offers her one last hope to avenge her family. Arya rejected her parents' religion, but now, like Stannis, she embraces a foreign faith to keep alive her hopes of revenge. Yet Arya is forbidden to use the power that she hopes to acquire for personal reasons. In order to serve her new god and learn the secrets of the Faceless Men, she must become "no one" and forget all about her past and who she is. Nevertheless, Arya maintains several ties to her past (her prayer, her wolf dreams, and Needle) that indicate that she is not willing to forget who she is and the true reason why she has joined the religion of Him of Many Faces: to gain the power that would help her carry out her revenge.

In addition to demonstrating how religion can be used to obtain power at a personal level, the Starks also contribute to the creation of a religious war. Brandon Stark's quest to become a greenseer allies him with the Old Gods and the Children of the Forest. We have yet to see how powerful he will become and what part he will play in the development of the story. Nevertheless, Arya and Brandon Stark stand for two different religions that will surely join the Seven, R'hllor, and the Drowned God in the conflict in Westeros and in the coming struggle against the White Walkers.

## Conclusion

Religion, as we have seen, constitutes an important source of power and legitimacy in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. While it empowers some characters at a personal level, such as Arya, more importantly, religion is used as a tool to obtain hard and soft power for those taking part in the conflict in Westeros. The Greyjoys use religion to distinguish their kingdom and legitimize their claim of independence from the Iron Throne. They try to build their identity as an independent country around the religion of the Drowned God and its "Old Way." In addition, Stannis' quest to win the Iron Throne is legitimized by his messianic role as Azor Ahai, which is a form of divine right. Stannis often reminds his enemies that "the Iron Throne is mine by rights" (Martin, *ACOK* 356). After his defeat by the Lannisters, his rights are not legitimized by genealogical reasons, but by religion. The need to fulfill his destiny as Azor Ahai keeps Stannis' claim alive. Likewise, Queen Mother Cersei tries to gain both soft and hard power through the Faith of the Seven. In doing so, she reestablishes the Faith Militant, a religious military order, and a religious tribunal that very much resembles the Inquisition.

Consequently, the struggle to win the Iron Throne acquires a religious dimension. Religion becomes an important part of the war rhetoric in Westeros that fuels the rivalry between the different warring houses. Stannis burns the statues of the Seven and those who refuse to accept the religion of R'hllor. Cersei reestablishes the religious armies of the Seven to fight the "infidel" Stannis and the northmen. And the Greyjoys gather around the religion of the Drowned God to defend their distinctive identity. As such, the war in Westeros is motivated not only by competing



temporal interests, but by religious differences. The claimants are no longer fighting solely to win the Iron Throne, but also to defend their religion or destroy the others.

Martin's epic cycle is not yet finished, and the ongoing construction of the world of *A Song of Ice and Fire* opens up new avenues for further research on religion. Future studies on this topic should account for the evolution of religion in the conflict of Westeros in the upcoming books, *The Winds of Winter* and *A Dream of Spring*. In addition, the books and the TV adaptation are taking different paths. As Martin himself declares in his personal blog, "some of the 'spoilers' you may encounter in season six may not be spoilers at all... because the show and the books have diverged, and will continue to do so" (1). Scholars should also examine whether the TV adaptation picks up on the religious themes of the books, and how religion contributes to the differing plot developments between the TV adaptation and the printed saga.

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