

Varieties of Religious Experience in Children's Literature

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Received October 11, 2002

Abstract

This paper looks at the presence of religion and religious experience in a variety of books on children's literature by a variety of authors. The books discussed are largely those that I have read in the course of the last year. Since the selections have been chosen without rhyme or reason, they represent a random selection by a random group of authors.

William James in his classic set of Gifford lectures discussed the varieties of religious experience of individuals in solitude. For whatever reasons, he neglected the whole social or communal element of religion. This paper will include both dimensions. One problem that we face today that James didn't is the general erosion of belief in religion and religious experience. In some senses this is illusory, since the religious element is as basic to life as the air we breathe. Modern rationalism and scientism also tends to assume that only what it can describe and circumscribe is real. And since we are all children of such societies and raised with such beliefs, we tend to think that such things are true. Fortunately we have children's literature and the sense of story to tell us this is not the case.

Religion also has to deal with and explain the basic problems of life: does life itself have any meaning or purpose? Is death the end of all? Is there any explanation for evil? Does suffering have any value? Since these are basic questions, children's literature must ask them and try to provide answers. This paper will assume that the various works mentioned or discussed do attempt to deal with those questions and provide answers to them. Sometimes the answers are direct and explicit, sometimes they are only hinted at or implicit. But basically, the works do provide answers. Often the works also act as mirrors which show us what our society has become, with all its flaws and distortions. This seems especially true of those works that deal with modern technology and computers.

Discussion

The varieties of religious experience in children's literature may seem an unusual topic for a research paper, one might think. I would tend to agree, except for the fact that a number of papers I have written

over the past years on such children's writers as S. E. Hinton, George MacDonald, Madeleine L'Engle, and J. K. Rowling have been exactly on this topic.¹ But I had been too involved in writing the papers to notice that – the well-known phenomenon of not seeing the forest for the trees. There is also the matter of personal idiosyncrasy. In other words, is religious experience really part of the fabric of those books by Hinton, MacDonald, L'Engle, and Rowling or is it a matter of my imagination?

One way to find out would be to look at definitions of religion and religious experience and then look at a variety of children's literature books and see how well they match. One definition is by Frederick Buechner. "The word *religion* points to that area of human experience where one way or another man comes upon Mystery where he senses beyond and beneath the realities of every day a Reality no less real because it can only be hinted at in myths and rituals; where he glimpses a destination that he can never fully know until he reaches it."² He continues with the reminder: "Since the Reality that religion claims to deal with is beyond space and time, man cannot use normal space-and-time language (i.e., nouns and verbs) to describe it directly. He must fall back on the language of metaphor and resign himself to describing it at best indirectly." However, one problem with looking at such definitions is that one may find oneself caught in a web of related terms (such as Man, Mystery, and Mysticism in the case of "Religion"). This has consequences we need to look at later. John Henry Newman used them to great effect in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. In our case Buechner tells us for example that "Mysticism is where religions start" and they start with a personal experience of some sort: "some moment of beauty or pain" that may be ordinary or spectacular. And Man and Mystery are somehow related also.

William James gives it the following definition: "Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us *the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.*"³ As we saw with Buechner's definition of "religion", James also gets caught in the net of related terms. In his case, it begins with the term "godlike" or "divine". But James also brings before us the most basic of questions: "What is the character of this universe in which we dwell?" What is the nature of reality? Is it only what we can see around us, what is accessible to the five senses? Does it include more? James says that religion is man's most basic answer to that question. And that "the life of religion in the broadest and most general

1 Titles include "S. E. Hinton's World of Children" (1988), "Reading George MacDonald's Fairy Tales as Mystical Experience" (1993), "On Reading L'Engle and Dante" (1995), "Madeleine L'Engle and Monastic Tradition" (1996), "Harry Potter in Perspective" (2001), and "Harry Potter in Perspective II" (2002).

2 "RELIGION" in *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* by Frederick Buechner (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 78.

3 In the second lecture ("Circumscription of the Topic") of the series (hereafter referred to as *Varieties*) which was later published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), p. 42.

terms possible...consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.”⁴

This “unseen order” has been part of things for a long, long time. Evelyn Underhill refers to it in her 1907 essay on Magic.⁵ It is fundamental to a historical tradition that may be traced back thousands of years. Specifically, “that an intangible and real Cosmic medium exists which interpenetrates, influences, and supports the tangible and apparent world.” And also “that there is an established analogy and equilibrium between this unseen world and the illusory manifestations which we call the world of sense.” Plato made something of a similar division in his world of senses and world of Forms. As an aside, Charles Williams dealt with this interaction of the two worlds in many of his novels, for example *The Place of the Lion, The Greater Trumps, and All Hallows Eve*.

Polish Nobel Prize winner Czeslaw Milosz tells us that “man is inwardly contradictory because he resides in between (the three zones of Heaven, Earth, and Hell).”⁶ And “we have some faculty that makes us alien, intruders in the world, solitary creatures unable to communicate with crabs, birds, animals.”⁷ Madeleine L'Engle says that like penguins, we are creatures of two elements (“the penguin flies in the water and waddles on land”). But “what is the natural element for us mortals?”⁸ Our two elements are the material or physical and the spiritual. According to Demetrius Dumm: “we humans belong to two worlds---to the physical world through our bodies and to the spiritual world through our spirit.”⁹

What is religion? Somewhat like William James, Alan Garner defines it as dealing with “the question of our being within the cosmos.”¹⁰ Bernard Häring tells us that it is “essentially the life in communion with God which demands cult or worship as its direct manifestation.”¹¹ Earlier (in Volume One) he tells us “it is fellowship with the living God.”¹² However, there are five different aspects we must consider if we would avoid misunderstanding the term “religion.”¹³ First, religion means union or community with

4 In the third of The Gifford Lectures (“The Reality of the Unseen”) later published as *Varieties*, p. 59.

5 “A Defense of Magic” as printed in *Evelyn Underhill: Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy*, edited by Dana Greene (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 31-46.

6 “Essay in Which the Author Confesses That He Is on the Side of Man, for Lack of Anything Better” in *To Begin Where I Am: Selected Essays of Czeslaw Milosz*, edited by Bogdana Carpenter (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001, p. 237.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 238.

8 *Penguins and Golden Calves: Icons and Idols* by Madeleine L'Engle (Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1996), p.13.

9 *Flowers in the Desert: A Spirituality of the Bible* by Demetrius Dumm (Petersham: St. Bede's Publications, 1987), p. 20.

10 “Achilles in Altjira” in *The Voice That Thunders: Essays and Lectures* by Alan Garner, p. 55.

11 *The Law of Christ, Volume Two*, by Bernard Häring, translated by Edwin Kaiser (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1966), p. 119.

12 *The Law of Christ, Volume One*, by Bernard Häring, translated by Edwin Kaiser (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1966) p. 95.

God. Second, it means the public or private cult of worship, i.e., giving God honor and glory. Third, religion is the community of those who have the same beliefs and worship. Fourth, it means communities, orders, or societies of people who have bound themselves together by vows to worship and honor God. Fifth, it is a personal bond of unity with God as well as union and solidarity with those united in a similar way.

For John Henry Newman, for example, there were only two supreme realities: the soul and God. And that was basically the position of the whole Evangelical tradition in which Newman was raised.¹⁴ But it's much older than that. Häring gives it in the words of St. Augustine: "*Deus et anima*" (God and the soul). By implication, that includes the existence of a whole other world and belief in it. As James said, it is "an unseen order" and therefore one which is generally inaccessible to the five senses. This is something that goes back to Plato and Aristotle and is known as the hierarchy of being. Everything in existence, inanimate and animate, has a place in the hierarchy depending on its powers of soul. Since man has both physical and spiritual sides, he is in the middle: at the top of one group (the physical beings) and at the bottom of another (the spiritual beings).¹⁵ It is because of this participation in both worlds that we are like L'Engle's penguins or the magic we see in Rowling's Harry Potter novels is possible.

One problem we encounter in talking about religion is that God isn't always on the table. As William James says: "There are systems of thought which the world usually calls religious, yet which do not positively assume a God." He cites Buddhism and modern transcendental idealism (Emersonianism) as examples. Alan Garner would include atheism and humanism. Psychologist Paul Vitz would include much of modern psychology.¹⁶ Poet and essayist Wendell Berry would include science.¹⁷ And of course there are Communism and Fascism and the Market. Are we just bandying words here? Existentialist philosopher William Barrett says that as civilization has progressed religion has lost its strength and the notion of a relation with God "threatens to become a relation to Nothingness."¹⁸ However, philosopher Deal Hudson wonders "why a Nietzschean upbringing should be privileged over a Christian upbringing" and answers that "the obvious, but not sole, explanation is that Nietzschean conclusions are consonant with the politically correct separation of religious belief from the moral and political consensus."¹⁹

And we come here to the nature of modern society and its connection with religion. Cultural historian

13 The following five points are all discussed in *Volume Two of The Law of Christ*, pp. 119-120.

14 The point is discussed in *The Newman Brothers: An Essay in Comparative Intellectual Biography* by William Robbins (London: Heinemann, 1966).

15 This is discussed in more detail in "Harry Potter in Perspective (II)" by Leonard Lundmark, *Bulletin of the Faculty Of Education, Wakayama University (Humanities) No. 52 (2002)*, pp. 249-250.

16 *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship, second edition* by Paul Vitz (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

17 *Life Is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition* by Wendell Berry (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000).

18 *Irrational Man: A Study in Existentialist Philosophy* by William Barrett (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), p. 28.

Christopher Dawson published a book about the problem in 1935. In that book he says that all the political forms "are moving by different but parallel paths to the same goal, which is the mechanization of human life and the complete subordination of the individual to the state and to the economic process."²⁰ Like a poisonous vine, the modern state insinuates itself into all areas of life, and with increases in technology, its control over people and human relationships increases. Wendell Berry talks of much the same thing: "All the institutions seem to have learned to imitate the organizational structures and to adopt the values and aims of industrial corporations."²¹

Supposedly such technological development is beneficial, but one has only to think of "scientific management" and how its ideology has become the foundation of modern society: everyone must bow down before the gods of Efficiency and Cost Control.²² These days the popular topic is computers and the Internet and how they "help" people live better lives. But one has only to read computer expert and social critic Clifford Stoll to see the falsehood involved.²³ Television, computers, and the Internet all have tremendously destructive effects on individuals, families, and communities. Madeleine L'Engle captures the spirit of the evil involved in *A Wrinkle in Time* when she talks about "the sickness of the shadow which darkened the beauty of the earth."²⁴

Would you like religion with God? Would you like religion with no God? Would you like something materialist? Something New Age? Does one simply take the different belief systems and lay them out like goods for sale and then choose one? Each one deals with the nature of reality, so the choice is not one to be lightly made. As Eugene Peterson reminds us: "we need to know the truth about who we are and what's going on around us."²⁵ The problem is in evaluating the worth of the different choices: are they all of equal value? As Peterson warns: "The world...offers an incredible array of religious, psychological, cultural, and political options to choose from—most of them attractive and all of them fraudulent."²⁶

Poet Kathleen Raine didn't even begin to write her autobiography until she had passed the age of sixty, but even then the emotional injury she experienced during childhood due to her religious background left

19 "The Philosopher and the Supernatural" in *Things in Heaven and Earth: Exploring the Supernatural*, edited by Harold Fickett (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 1998), p. 121.

20 *Religion and the Modern State* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1935).

21 *op. cit.*, p. 15.

22 See Robert Kanigel's *The One Best Way: Frederick Winslow Taylor and the Enigma of Efficiency* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1997).

23 *High-Tech Heretic: Why Computers Don't Belong in the Classroom and Other Reflections by a Computer Contrarian* by Clifford Stoll (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

24 *A Wrinkle in Time* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1973), p. 87.

25 In *Leap over a Wall: Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians* by Eugene Peterson (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 138.

26 *Ibid.*

very deep marks.²⁷ Yet there were also experiences (then and during adulthood) which were clearly mystical and the injuries left in childhood due to warped versions of Christianity were matched by materialist views of life learned at Cambridge and elsewhere. As she puts it: “We disregarded his [T.S. Eliot’s] theology; yet a generation saturated in Atheism, Freudianism and Marxism inhabited, as we inhabited no other poem, Eliot’s *The Waste Land*.”²⁸

Whether a religion has God, man, or an ideology as its center, somehow it has to deal with the problem of suffering and evil. As Frederick Buechner says, “The problem of evil is perhaps the greatest single problem for religious faith.”²⁹ It and the problem of suffering are things some people use to justify their atheism, but as Buechner comments, atheism raises problems of its own: “To say there is no God means among other things that there are no Absolute Standards.”³⁰ This may be a trivial point, except where evil is involved. In Buechner’s example, how can one say murder is wrong if there is “no Absolute Standard by which it can be shown that one view is better than the other.” If one says it’s common sense to think so [that murder is wrong], “then he has simply made common sense his Absolute Standard. What is in accord with common sense is Right and what isn’t is Wrong.”³¹ But if “common sense” has anything near its usual meaning, then Buechner’s atheist skates very close to Natural Law or the Moral Law. As C. S. Lewis says “There is nothing indulgent about the Moral Law. It is as hard as nails. It tells you to do the straight thing and it does not seem to care how painful, or dangerous, or difficult it is to do.”³²

Peter Kreeft reminds us that we all are hurt, all suffering—it’s just that most of the time we hide our hurts, we hide them from ourselves and from others: “people are hurting far more psychologically and spiritually today than ever before.” Yet “our society is the first one that simply does not give us any answer to the problem of suffering except a thousand means of avoiding it.”³³ Mother Teresa said much the same many times: that the loneliness and spiritual poverty of the advanced nations was a much greater problem than the material poverty of India.

Suffering is built into the human condition. Being alive means experiencing suffering and pain. Somewhere or other Elisabeth Kübler-Ross says that people are like uncut diamonds: their beauty does not come out until they are cut and polished, and it is pain and suffering that do that job. Kreeft tells of children’s stories teaching the same point and cites *The Velveteen Rabbit*: “Suffering makes you more

27 The three volumes of her autobiography are *Farewell Happy Fields* (1973), *The Land Unknown* (1975), and *The Lion’s Mouth* (1977), all originally published by Hamish Hamilton, London.

28 *The Land Unknown*, p. 39.

29 “EVIL” in Buechner, op. cit., pg. 24.

30 “ATHEIST” in Buechner, op.cit., p.3.

31 Ibid.

32 *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis (Glasgow: William Collins, 1955), p. 36.

33 *Making Sense Out of Suffering* by Peter Kreeft (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1986), pp. 11-12.

real.” And suffering for the toy animals in the story (and by implication the readers of the story) is connected with being loved, so they (and we) don't mind being hurt then.³⁴ In other words, suffering has a positive value. There are other small examples of suffering in E. B. White's story *The Trumpet of the Swan*.³⁵ The hero of the story is a trumpeter swan named Louis who is born unable to speak: “He couldn't understand why he had come into the world without a voice. Everybody else seemed to have a voice. Why didn't he?”³⁶ Out of love Louis's father crashes through the plate glass window of a music store, cutting himself, to get the trumpet that his son can use in lieu of a natural voice.³⁷ Madeleine L'Engle tells us “There are terrible questions to be asked as we think about the nature of love and the nature of God...We flawed, limited human beings do not know what God knows. We only know...that God loves. That is enough.”³⁸

If suffering is built into the human condition, we must admit its ordinariness. Eugene Peterson talks about having visions of doing glamorous things in his parish work as a minister, but then understanding that working with people “necessarily means taking seriously, and in faith, the dull routines, the empty boredom, and the unattractive responsibilities that make up so much of most people's lives.”³⁹ Elsewhere he talks of realizing the whole Bible talks of ordinary people. He also talks of realizing that what on the surface seemed the most bland and ordinary life was charged with holiness: “The Jesus story was being reworked and reexperienced in each of these people, in this town, this day.”⁴⁰

This holiness of everyday life also means the ability to deal with repeated failure, on a personal level as well as accepting it in others. Peterson gives the example of watching a kingfisher diving to catch a fish: the bird failed 27 times in a row before finally getting its meal.⁴¹ Accepting everyday life also means sharing in the suffering that others bear. Sometimes it is called sacrifice or bearing one another's burdens. As L'Engle says: “Jesus did not carry his own cross the whole way. Simon carried it for him. So we, too, may accept help when the cross is too heavy. And sometimes we are called to be Simon and carry the cross for someone else.”⁴² Sometimes it is called co-redemption. According to St. Paul (Colossians 1:24) “I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church...” As Kreeft

34 Ibid., p. 76.

35 *The Trumpet of the Swan* by E. B. White (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

36 Ibid., p. 369.

37 As told in Chapter 9 “The Trumpet” of *The Trumpet of the Swan*.

38 *Bright Evening Star* by Madeleine L'Engle (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 1997), pp. 172-174.

39 *Under the Unpredictable Plant* by Eugene Peterson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 86.

40 Ibid., p. 126.

41 In *Living the Message: Daily Reflections with Eugene Peterson* edited by Janice Peterson (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 332.

42 *Bright Evening Star*, p. 185.

puts it: “All our sufferings are transformable into his work, our passion into his action.”⁴³ Mother Teresa says much the same: “The important thing, is not to waste suffering. Join it to the suffering of Christ: offer it up with his suffering. Don’t waste suffering...It is co-redemption.”⁴⁴ Padre Eusebio explains it simply (speaking of his recently canonized fellow Capuchin Padre Pio): “He was a man who put the theology of the cross in a special way: why you have to suffer *to help God*, because God wants you to help Him to bring souls to Him.”⁴⁵ Häring tells us that “Sacrifice is the most perfect expression of the virtue of religion.”⁴⁶ The sacrifice or co-redemption may also be done in a positive way. As Katharina Tangari puts it: “The good I have received from Padre Pio does not belong exclusively to me, for as I see it, the good we receive is not exclusively for us, but we receive it so that we may also give it to others.”⁴⁷

This sharing is also basically what is meant by community and by worship. We are connected to each other. As Frederick Buechner says: “To worship God *means* to serve him.” And gathering together to do that means admitting: “I need you to help fill my emptiness just as you need me to help fill yours. As for the emptiness that’s still left over, well we’re in it together, or it in us.”⁴⁸ Eugene Peterson reminds us: “We live before God, in community.” And that “individuals don’t ‘make up’ the community, they are produced by it.”⁴⁹ And the fascinating thing about community is that it encompasses all of creation, that we are all related and interconnected. Madeleine L’Engle makes this theme the title and subject of her book *Troubling a Star*: “thou canst not stir a flower/Without troubling of a star.”⁵⁰

In religious terms, we are talking of salvation: we cannot be saved without each other. Just as in eternal terms the only ultimate realities are the soul and God, in human terms there are only “I” and “Thou” (to use the words of Buber). As Buechner puts it: “When you love somebody, it is no longer yourself who is the center of your own universe. It is the one you love who is. You forget yourself. You deny yourself.”⁵¹ Eugene Peterson describes it this way: “We are containers...in which love and salvation and mercy are conserved and shared. Everything is connected and makes sense now—the shape of creation and the shape of salvation, God’s shaping hand and the shape of my life.”⁵² This theme of connectedness is also one of Charles Williams’ key principles, only he uses the word “co-inherence” for it.

43 Kreeft, op.cit., p.136.

44 In *Suffering into Joy* by Eileen Egan and Kathleen Egan, OSB (Ann Arbor: Servant Publications, 1994), p. 56.

45 Interview with Padre Eusebio, Capuchin in *A Padre Pio Profile* by Rev. John A Schug, Capuchin (Petersham: St. Bede’s Publications, 1999), p. 121.

46 *The Law of Christ, Volume Two*, p.301.

47 *Stories of Padre Pio* by Madame Katharina Tangari translated by John Collorafi (Rockford: TAN Books, 1996), p. x.

48 “WORSHIP” and “LORD’S SUPPER” in Buechner, op.cit., pp. 97 and 53.

49 *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* by Eugene Peterson (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), pp. 89 and 84.

50 The words occur in the 22nd stanza of “The Mistress of Vision.”

51 “SALVATION”, Ibid., p. 84.

52 *Run with the Horses* by Eugene Peterson (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983), p. 81.

L'Engle makes this interconnectedness the theme of *Troubling a Star*. It also appears in novels by Gillian Rubinstein (for example her *Space Demons* and *Skymaze*).⁵³ In *Space Demons*, cooperation is the only way Andrew, Elaine, and Mario are able to survive because the game feeds on anger and hate: "They latched onto any feeling you had of anger or hate, and then they use it to make you more afraid." The three children are literally trapped inside the game, in an unknown dimension: "We can go on hating each other and stay in here forever. Or we can cooperate and beat the system." The only way to counter the anger and hate of the space demons of the game is by love: "Everything nice we can think about Mars [Mario's nickname] is lethal to those little demons out there. We've discovered the ultimate demonicide!"⁵⁴ Andrew's discovery of the power of love is very close to that of Meg's in *A Wrinkle in Time*. Her younger brother Charles Wallace has become enslaved by IT (which like the Space Demon game feeds on anger and hate). Meg discovers that the only way to free him is by love. As she cannot love IT directly, she loves IT through her brother and is thus able to free him.⁵⁵

Likewise, in *Skymaze* the only way Ben and Elaine are able to survive the attacks of Darren (who has been turned by the game into a destructive agent called a Pale Guardian) and reach the center of the maze is by cooperating. When she wins the game she has an insight into the nature of reality: "And she knew also that they were all part of the Earth, no part more important than the others, and that their interdependence was the Earth's life, their disunity its death."⁵⁶ The same message is in Susan Cooper's *Green Boy*, a story of our world today and what it might become if we continue destroying it. The two little boys from the Bahamas who are the heroes are only able to act by the help of other creatures. For example, Lou needs two fossil star shells in order to open a door in Otherworld. He has one, but is able to get the other by the help of a pair of ospreys who guide him and Trey to it high in the wall of a long abandoned house.

After Lou had negotiated the maze of the underworld labyrinth in Otherworld, Trey and the others have a vision of Gaia, the spirit who embodies all creation, who says: "You mistake me always. You dream of monsters, who will kill your heroes. No! No monsters are needed. I asked not for sacrifice, but for renewal."⁵⁷ How similar his words are to the "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" of the prophet Hosea (Hosea 6:6) and Jesus (Matthew 9:13, 12:3). She also tells that the agent of the renewal of creation is a child, in this case Lou (Lugh). Again, how similar this is to the words of Jesus: "Unless you turn and

53 *Space Demons* by Gillian Rubinstein (New York: Dial Books, 1986) and *Skymaze* by Gillian Rubinstein (New York: Orchard Books, 1991).

54 The quotes are from pages 180-187 in *Space Demons*.

55 This is discussed in "On Reading L'Engle and Dante" by Leonard Lundmark *Bulletin of the Faculty of Education, Wakayama University (Humanities) Number 45 (1995)*.

56 *Skymaze*, p. 173.

become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3-4).

We also get this interconnectedness of creation in the novels of E. B. White and of Beverly Cleary, where humans and animals are able to communicate with each other.⁵⁸ In *Stuart Little* the communication is natural and direct. Stuart communicates with people in English and with other animals analogously. Stuart Little, a mouse, occupies something resembling man’s place in the hierarchy of being, that is, he has a dual nature: animal in some ways, human in others. Are we dealing with a version of the hypostatic union here (the union of human and divine natures in Christ)?

In *Charlotte’s Web* the various creatures are able to communicate in some way analogous to human speech and the farmer’s daughter, Fern, somehow is able to understand them. At the dinner table she tells her parents what she’d heard. Her mother thinks she may be mentally ill and consults their family doctor. He admits the great mysteries of nature and that it is quite possible Fern has the sensitivity and purity to understand what the various animals and Charlotte the spider are saying to each other.

In Beverly Cleary’s novels Ralph the mouse, like Stuart Little, is able to communicate with both animals and some humans. His human communicants are children who are social misfits or lonely, but with an interest in motorcycles and cars. Something of the same ability appears in Gillian Rubinstein’s novels.⁵⁹ Jen in *At Ardilla* somehow has a totemic relationship with cormorants. Tod in *Foxspell* is somehow able to feel all the stages of a young fox that is shot to death, and later to become a fox himself. And *Under the Cat’s Eye* describes worlds in which animals and humans are able to communicate and interact freely and in some worlds as equals.

This relatedness and complexity of all creation also comes out in the novels of Patricia Wrightson that deal with Australian myths.⁶⁰ But the problem is that some people don’t want to look at things that way. As Eugene Peterson says: “One group of people sees religion as a way to successful happy living. The other group sees religion as a way in which hurt, flawed and damaged persons become whole in relation to God...One way is the way of enhancing what I want; the other way is a commitment...to become what God wants.”⁶¹ C. S. Lewis once put it in similar terms: the choice for each of us was either to choose God and say “Thy will be done” or to choose self and say “My will be done.” As Italia Betti says: “Man is a creature of God, yet he must realize that he is a part and not the whole; he must be aware that he is a

57 *Green Boy* by Susan Cooper (New York: McElderry Books, 2002), p. 165.

58 White’s novels are *Stuart Little*, *Charlotte’s Web*, and *The Trumpet of the Swan*. Cleary’s animal communication novels are *The Mouse and the Motorcycle*, *Runaway Ralph*, and *Ralph S. Mouse*.

59 The novels in question here are: *At Ardilla*, *Foxspell*, and *Under the Cat’s Eye*.

60 Those novels are *An Older Kind of Magic*, *The Nargun and the Stars*, and *The Song of Wirrun trilogy*.

61 *ibid.*, p/86.

little force that at every instant needs a guide in order to proceed."⁶²

Patricia Wrightson talks about these differences in viewpoint in the first book of the Wirrun trilogy, *The Ice Is Coming*. Much like Caesar dividing Gaul into three parts, she divides the inhabitants of Australia into three groups: the Happy Folk, the Inlanders, and the People. The Happy Folk (who live near the sea and beaches) belong to Peterson's first group, who basically say "My will be done" — only they phrase it in terms of happiness. As Wrightson says: "They live for happiness; it is their business and their duty." The Inlanders used to be Happy Folk, but they moved inland and became connected to the land as farmers and herders. The People are what others call aborigines. "And they belong to the land; it flows into them through their feet."⁶³ It is the Inlanders and the People who serve the land, who say "Thy will be done." But in addition to the humans, there are many other creatures and spirits that inhabit the land (they are named in *An Older Kind of Magic* and *The Nargun and the Stars* as well as in *The Song of Wirrun*). They also face the same set of choices. But the hero of the saga, Wirrun, is chosen in a special way to serve the land. The mountain says to him: "*I am Land, the First Thing. Serve me.*" And Wirrun accepts servitude. He meets a spirit named Ko-in, who looks like one of the People, but tells him "I am hero" and his care for all things in creation. When Wirrun (as Jeremiah) pleads he is only a boy, Ko-in tells him that there are no men. Like David, Wirrun is anointed and given the stone of power as a sign of his kingship and his mission. Interesting enough, Padre Pio (now St. Francesco of Pietrelcina) when he was fifteen had a vision of being forced to fight a Goliath-like spirit. He too wanted to escape, but was told he must do it. With the help of his guide, he was able to defeat the giant.⁶⁴

Much like the Happy Folk, we think we know, we think we understand, and we know nothing. We are filled with the arrogance of the scientism Wendell Berry describes. Yet, like Job, we are unable to answer the questions of the Lord (Job 38: 12-17): "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the world? Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?" Yet these are exactly the questions posed by such books as Rodman Philbrick's *REM World*, *The Last Book in the Universe*, and *The Werewolf Chronicles*.⁶⁵ And they are all around us. *REM World* gives another version of an inner world where each of us is isolated from the other.⁶⁶ *The Last Book in the Universe* talks of a world divided into a genetically and technologically improved minority living in a near paradise and a majority abandoned to hell on earth. The vision is in some ways very close to the insights of Ellen Ullman, software engineer and virtual company president. She talks of seeing the world divided into very wealthy

62 As given in *Stories of Padre Pio*, p. 193.

63 In *The Song of Wirrun*, pp.11-12.

64 This vision is narrated in a number of books about Padre Pio. One example is Patricia Treece's *Meet Padre Pio* (Ann Arbor: Charis, 2001), pp. 11-13.

people and their caretakers and servants.⁶⁷ Likewise, part of the horror of the world of *Space Demons* is that it is the world of today as Ullman experiences it: a virtual world based on a computer environment of fear.

How are Andrew, Elaine, and Mario able to enter the world of the Space Demons computer game? We don't know. Andrew returns to his room with the gun from the game in his hand. How is Arthur in *REM World* able to put on a \$10 diet aid helmet and be carried into another world? We don't know. Tod in *Foxspell* is able to turn into a fox. He is able to enter the spirit world and talk with a fox spirit that can have a man's shape. Yet how is this possible? *Under the Cat's Eye* talks about a world where animals and humans are both able to talk as well as the existence of multiple worlds. Are such things possible? If so, how? These questions are the subject of Philip Pullman's *Dark Materials Trilogy*.⁶⁸ They (God's existence, free will, choice, and the existence of evil) are also some of the central problems of religion. Philosopher Alvin Plantinga, for example, discusses the problem of possible worlds in connection with them in *God, Freedom, and Evil*.⁶⁹ Plantinga also discusses evil in relation to the existence of "personal beings, whether human or not" and "the free agency of other rational and significantly free creatures."⁷⁰ Whether the existence of such beings is popular or open to ridicule "is interesting from a sociological point of view, but evidentially irrelevant."

Gruff, the hero of *The Werewolf Chronicles*, is repeatedly given the choice of immortality, if he will but kill during the three days of the full moon when he is in his werewolf shape. But, he will not. The only way that Andrew and Elaine are able to escape the Hell of the Space Demons game and rescue Mario is by consciously rejecting violence and hate and choosing love. This is the way Meg was able to rescue her brother Charles Wallace from IT. As Dante said, "If the will won't will, nothing can make it will."

Many of the above stories are spectacular, but the same themes and experiences can be found in novels showing ordinary life. As Eugene Peterson says: "Biblical faith...has always insisted that there are no special aptitudes for a life with God—no required level of intelligence or degree of morality, no particular spiritual experience." It has always insisted that "There are no religious types. There are only human

65 *REM World* (New York: Scholastic, 2001). *The Werewolf Chronicles* by Rodman Philbrick and Lynn Harnett (New York: Scholastic, 1996). *The Last Book in the Universe* (New York: Blue Sky Press, 2000). *REM World* is about an overweight teenager who somehow enters another world by putting a diet aid helmet on his head.

66 Clifford Stoll, op. cit., pp. 198 and following, cites work by psychologists Kraut and Lundmark who found that depression and loss of social skills is related to amount of time spent on-line.

67 *Close to the Machine: Technophilia and Its Discontents* by Ellen Ullman (San Francisco: City Lights, 1997), p. 158.

68 The trilogy is made up of *The Golden Compass* (1995), *The Subtle Knife* (1997), and *The Amber Spyglass* (2000), published in New York by Ballantine Books.

69 *God, Freedom, and Evil* by Alvin Plantinga (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977).

70 Ibid., pp. 58-62.

beings, every one created for a relationship with God that is personal and eternal.”⁷¹ As Peterson said of his experience working as a pastor in suburban America: “Suburbia lobotomized spirituality. In the flatness and boredom I lost respect for these anemic lives...And then Dostoevsky rebuked me. He lived in an almost identical society...he dove beneath the surface of their lives and discovered in the depths fire and passion and God.”⁷² Elsewhere he talks of sudden enlightenment while reading James Joyce's *Ulysses*: “Joyce woke me to the infinity of meaning within the limitations of the ordinary person in the ordinary day...the story line...if only I can stay awake long enough to see it, is...the Gospel story of Jesus.”⁷³

And this is what we can see, for example, in the Ramona novels of Beverly Cleary, in the Anastasia series of Lois Lowry, and the Tillerman family cycle of Cynthia Voigt.⁷⁴ We see relationships with God and with other human beings worked out in what appears to be ordinary, bland, everyday life. This is what Charles Williams saw so often in the everyday: the supernatural breaking through. This is what he meant when he talked about the principles of co-inherence, exchange, and substitution worked out among people. We exist in relationship with others; we are bound to each other in ways we understand and ways we don't understand. This is the meaning of religion. Of course, in his novels the principles tend to be worked out in a rather spectacular fashion.⁷⁵ In the Cleary, Lowry, and Voigt novels (as well as in many of L'Engle's novels), the principles appear in the guise of the ordinary.⁷⁶

Conclusion

This paper started out trying to define religion. According to William James, it is “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude...in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.” Others, like Häring or Peterson, include a social dimension. But in either case, it deals as Buechner says, with Reality “beyond space and time.” But we are creatures of space and time, so we deal with it through myth and story (the Bible, for example). The interesting part, as Newman said, is that it is possible to reason correctly about a thing or have knowledge of it without necessarily being able to express that knowledge or understanding. It is not even necessary to be aware of it.⁷⁷ In the case of religion, it means

71 *Run with the Horses*, p. 137.

72 *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, p. 62.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 125.

74 Since each of the series mentioned has multiple volumes, for brevity's sake only the initial title in the series will be given: *Anastasia Krupnik* by Lois Lowry (New York: Bantam, 1979), *Beezus and Ramona* by Beverly Cleary (New York: Avon, 1955), and *Homecoming* by Cynthia Voigt (New York: Ballantine, 1981).

75 The work of Williams is described in “Harry Potter in Perspective II”.

76 There is some discussion of these principles (though not using Williams's vocabulary) and the holiness of everyday life in my essay “Madeleine L'Engle and Monastic Tradition.”

that we can have knowledge of the divine without being conscious of it.

Newman also discusses the net of evidence, that is, how evidence about one point connects with and confirms another point and how this process is cumulative.⁷⁸ That means that points made in this paper on the presence and varieties of religious experience give evidential support to each other. Regardless of the milieu, whether science fiction spectacular or garden-variety ordinary, the various children's books do deal with both the supernatural and ordinary life and do show religious experience. Our problem is that since we live in largely non-religious societies today, we are often ignorant of the whole religious element—unless an author rubs our nose in it.

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77 Newman discussed these points in his sermons “Implicit and Explicit Reason” and “The Theory of Developments in Religious Doctrine” which were later published as the *University Sermons* (London: SPCK, 1970). The reference here is to my paper “Stephen Crane and the Wafer Controversy”, *Bulletin of the Faculty of Education, Wakayama University (Humanities)*, No. 49, 1999.

78 The reference here is to Newman's *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, sixth edition, (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1989). The direct reference here is to “Stephen Crane and the Wafer Controversy.”

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