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Catholicism in YA Literature: A Theological Perspective

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Though modern children's literature owes a clear debt to religious tradition, the majority of literature written for young readers today avoids discussion of religion. Texts invested in explicitly religious exploration are often a product of religious or non-mainstream presses—and are quite often proselytic, resulting in a binary distinction of children's and young adult literature as either secular (religiously neutral [1]) or religious (overtly proselytizing). Scholars have long been troubled by this reductive but powerful divide. As Graeme Wend-Walker notes in his 2009 MLA presentation "The Inexplicable Moon and the Postsecular Moment: Turkish and American Experiences of the Moon Landing in Two Picture Books":

It has not been in the least uncommon, for example, to hear critics speaking as if the religious were a category utterly apart, and as if any seeming interstices were merely accidental appearances, phantoms to be quickly evaporated under the bright light of reason, or artificial spaces produced and colonized only by propagandizing Christians with pseudo-scientific agendas.

Jane Yolen and Gary Schmidt point out that what results in mainstream children's and young adult literature is a noticeable dearth of texts in which "the religious experience is handled as a serious and significant element of the child's life" (Schmidt 25).

Of course, there are books that straddle this ideological binary, mainstream books that include religion as a normal part of the life of the young protagonist, as well as religious press books that avoid proselytizing. *The Possibilities of Sainthood*, for example, published by Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, is a teen romance novel whose main character, Antonia, is a fifteen-year-old girl who takes her religion seriously, but for whom Catholicism is also a playground. Along with dreaming about her first kiss, Antonia regularly petitions the Vatican to add saints—of fig trees, of memory, of kissing—and to consider her a viable candidate for sainthood. Although her concerns are embedded in her religion, her saint proposals are of material significance, about how the Pope and the Church can work with living people to confirm saints that serve the needs of the general population. Rich in Catholic imagery, Antonia's concerns are also rooted in the real world. The author invokes Catholicism not as that which the protagonist must rebel against but provides it as the experiential lens through which she views her adolescent experience. Antonia exemplifies a teen character who engages with her faith in a meaningful way, without turning the story into a vehicle for Christian evangelization.

A notable example from the other side of the imagined binary is a novel by Julie A. Swanson, *Going for the Record*, published by Eerdmans' Books For Young Readers, a publishing house dedicated to serving "the reading public with high quality religious publications" (np). In Swanson's novel, seventeen-year-old Leah is a talented soccer player balancing college recruitment and an active social life with her father's impending death from cancer. She is also cast as a young Catholic whose relationship to the church shifts and changes as she moves through various stages of grief. In moments of despair Leah is angry with God and stops attending mass, but she also stops going to soccer practice and calling her boyfriend, too. At other points in the story, Leah turns to the Church for support much like she turns to her grandmother, her boyfriend, and her friends. Though it is clear that Leah has changed and perhaps even grown throughout the novel, it is also quite clear that it is no single force that helps Leah move forward, but rather a combination of entities that happens to include religion. Neither Freitas's nor Swanson's novel relies on an insider audience, nor does it work to present religion, in this case Catholicism, as a singularly relevant conversation. Nor do they proselytize.

Although the examples above both show Catholic imagery specifically, it is not our intention to suggest that it is only with Catholicism that authors can bridge the ideological divide between secular and religious in children's and young adult literature. But as, respectively, a children's literature scholar and a theologian, each of us working within a distinctly Catholic framework, we have been pleased to note that while there seem to be increasing examples of this move in literature for young readers, Catholicism specifically is a visible presence. Perhaps it is as Wend-Walker asserts:

[T]he tendency among contemporary philosophers, as John D. Caputo has noted, is increasingly to interrogate our discourses' underlying discursive investments – to "unmask the modernist unmaskers, to criticize the modernist critiques, to grow disenchanted with the disenchanters"; such that now, "even otherwise 'secular' intellectuals have become suspicious of the Enlightenment suspicion of religion."

Perhaps, then, the binary will become increasingly plural. Arguably, it already has begun to do so.

Our own interrogation began with collecting American young adult fiction in which Catholicism was an essential presence. We considered not just how religion was employed in an otherwise secular novel, but how Catholicism specifically is positioned in these texts. The novels we present here are those in which Catholicism emerges as an important factor in the lives of these novels' young protagonists, not as an oppressive structure from which they must be freed but as a viable means by which they interact with the world around them. From moments of struggle to moments of personal empowerment through religious exploration, our critical approach is to consider the Catholic imagery through a theological lens. We hope to show here how the post-post-enlightenment project to allow secular and religious discourses to intersect meaningfully without proselytizing can be seen in some recent American young adult novels with Catholic issues and imagery.

Susan Beth Pfeffer's *The Dead and the Gone* (2008) is an interesting example of a text in which Catholic images are central to the story, although Catholicism is not solely what the story is about. Nonetheless, protagonist Alex's specific response to tragedy is positioned as a reflection of his particular moral development within the context of the Catholic community. *The Dead and the Gone* follows seventeen-year-old Alex Morales as he works to keep his younger sisters safe during the months that follow a worldwide tragedy (a meteor has struck the moon and caused cataclysmic changes in weather), as it becomes increasingly clear that his parents and older brother will not be returning home. This means finding food in New York City when electricity is out, the stores have been looted, the black market controls what little food remains, and cash is scarce. Catholicism takes on two very important roles in the novel. For Alex, his faith serves as a way to make sense of the disaster and also as a moral guidepost: should he rob other people of food or steal in order to pay for food if it means saving the lives of his sisters? Furthermore, after all of the major institutions fall apart around him—his family, the free market, public transportation, science, the government—religious organizations remain the only places that provide stability for Alex. Though early on he places his trust in the government and scientists to fix things, these institutions quickly fail, and it is only at his school, St. Vincent de Paul Academy, and at his church, St. Margaret's, that Alex finds information about shelters, food, and other aid, as well as a place to discuss his spiritual concerns. In the end, it is Father Mulrooney and Sister Rita, teachers at St. Vincent de Paul's, who help Alex and his youngest sister escape the city, further reinforcing the positive light in which the Catholic Church is presented.

Prior to the catastrophe, Alex's concerns were his part time job at a pizza place, being the editor of the school newspaper, and attending Georgetown, all things that become trivial later on. It is instead Alex's lifelong faith and religious practices that helped prepare him for the tragedy, even in those moments where he most questions his faith. At one point, readers see Alex wondering "[h]ow could God do this to him? What had they done to deserve such punishment?" only moments later reminding himself, "God wasn't singling him out. If he placed his faith in Christ and used whatever brain cells he had left, the solution would come to him" (Pfeffer 243). Although it is clear here that it is Alex's faith in Christ that helps him navigate his present quandary, this faith is a product of an explicitly Catholic upbringing and cultururation. Such moments are common throughout the book. In a particularly horrifying scene early in the novel, Alex travels to Yankee Stadium, now being used to house the dead, in order to try to locate his mother. He is reassured by the strict guidelines imposed by the police to prevent disorder because Alex "found that rules imposed a structure, and he preferred that. He always did better when he knew exactly what was expected of him" (59). This analogy proves true throughout the book, as Alex and his sisters regularly attend Mass, regardless of the weather conditions, and pray before every meal; these routines infuse meaning to and provide order in an otherwise disorderly world. What they also represent is habituated behavior that does not stifle development but truly gives a context to the growth of the adolescent.

Pfeffer constructs a book that asks difficult questions of religion from a protagonist who struggles with his own faith. Alex admits to Father Mulrooney, the headmaster of his school, "I used to pray and mean the words, but now they're just words . . . I hate it. I don't hate God. I hate not loving him" (Pfeffer 184). But Alex's struggle is shown in a positive light, and in many ways he survives because he is struggling. Throughout the book, Pfeffer carefully discusses broad issues of faith in the context of specific religious practices, such as seeking solace in religious elders, a balancing act that places this book in both religious and secular camps. Alex questions and even partially abandons his faith through the course of the novel, as his friends and family—his entire community—get hungry, sick, and die. It is Alex's Catholic identity and faith, well-established before the tragedy occurs, that provide for him the set of rules he so longs for by which he leads his life when the traditional rules and secular institutions break down completely. His fight to understand the chaos around him repeatedly leads him back to what he is sure of—the Church and the formation he has received therein. Catholicism is a source of safety for the characters in the novel, literally and figuratively. The main point of the book is not, however, about achieving Catholic faith—the book does not exist solely to do that—but it is an essential part of an otherwise secular novel. In this book, Pfeffer is exploring what happens when society falls apart, and presents a character who finds his moral identity characterized not by civil institutions but by a community of faith.

Some would argue that Alex's reliance on the Church by virtue of its rigid structure and the comforts found therein, specifically its leadership in Father Mulrooney and Sister Rita, shows a spiritual and moral-cognitive immaturity that would serve as a criticism of the social realities of the Roman Catholic Church. It is clear, however, that Alex's spirituality is one marked with probing questions and honest evaluation of choices. Although he is comforted on some

level by the Church as a prevailing institution among disintegrating institutions, his faith provides a means by which he can explore mature moral questions and grapple with identity amid crisis. Thus Pfeffer offers a view of the Catholic Church as a facilitator of adolescent development as opposed to a merely attractive avenue of escapism. Truly, the Church (functioning through the characters of Father Mulrooney and Sister Rita) grounds Alex's development in a particular community, not a merely comforting structure, casting a positive light on Pfeffer's portrayal of Catholicism.

Another novel that positions Catholicism in similar ways is *Leap of Faith* (2007) by Kimberly Brubaker Bradley. Although *Leap of Faith* is a very different story than *The Dead and the Gone*, Bradley's use of Catholicism is likewise central to the plot without making the story essentially Catholic, which would most likely marginalize the novel in a secular market. Instead, *Leap of Faith* maintains a secular focus, which reaches a wider audience, and is ultimately a positive addition to mainstream conversations about Catholicism. In the novel, sixth grader Abby Lorenzo is newly enrolled at St. Catherine's, a Catholic school, after being expelled from her public school for assaulting a classmate. She thrives at St. Catherine's, starring in the school's spring play, earning good grades, and making friends, even though early in the novel Abby declares that she doesn't believe in God (Bradley 11). Throughout the course of the novel, Abby experiences a true Catholic education, at school and at Catechism classes, and by the end, despite not having it all figured out, wants to believe and is invested in her new faith and the Catholic Church.

Abby's journey to faith is a difficult one for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is her lack of religious education early in her life. Readers also discover that Abby is in a lot of emotional pain. She tells her friend Chris that since the third grade a former classmate had bullied her, verbally and physically antagonizing her in school. Although she complained, no one—not her friends, parents, teachers, or school administrators—took her seriously. Out of frustration and helplessness, Abby defended herself by first warning and then stabbing the young man in the arm with a pocketknife. But it is clear that Abby is not a violent person and feels profound guilt about her choice to hurt the bully. She admits to Chris that she had been thinking a lot about it, especially when faced with the concept of unconditional love and forgiveness in her Catechism classes. Abby admits, "I think he should have been punished, and I think he should have been stopped. I don't think he should have been stabbed" (Bradley 157). It is also clear that Abby feels a lot of anger at herself for resorting to physical violence, and at the bully for making her feel trapped and powerless in the first place. She is also angry with her parents for having failed to protect her from harm and then for endeavoring to deflect their own complicity in the event.

Making things even more complicated is the fact that Abby is not Catholic—nor a Christian, she contends—which makes her feel like an outsider at her new school and among her new friends, even when things are going well. At home her parents, especially her father, are outspokenly anti-Catholic, calling Catholics "closed minded," and fearful of her interactions with Father Micah (Bradley 93). Abby is torn between the two institutions, her family and her school, neither of which she feels completely comfortable with, and so she decides to become Catholic. At the very least, she concludes, she will learn more about the Church and "not [make] a fool of myself in mass" (54). Abby also knows that becoming Catholic will "really get under my parents' skin . . . They'd go nuts" (36). Although Abby hatches the plan to become Catholic for less than genuine reasons, her experience of going through Catechism classes forces her to ask herself some hard questions about who she is and how she wants to live her life. Abby soon realizes that being Catholic is not a reaction against her parents, but something that can form her into who she strives to become.

Abby struggles with forgiveness and at one point states, "I do not believe in being forgiven, because I do not want to have to forgive" (Bradley 162). But when she comes to understand that she is worthy of forgiveness, she begins to understand the importance of doing the same, even if the forgiven parties do not feel sorry for what they have done. By the end of the novel, Abby still struggles to believe in all of the tenets of Catholicism, including the idea that believing in Jesus is to believe in forgiveness. When she is asked at her baptism if she believes Jesus is the Son of God, she replies, "I do. (I'd do my best)," admitting to the reader that she is still also wrestling a bit with forgiveness (183). But by the end of the novel she wants to believe in Jesus and she knows that eventually she will forgive her parents. Abby begins to see herself beyond her material conditions, how her life is more than just how she feels about a particular person or event. It is this more sophisticated, more holistic perspective that makes it clear that Abby has grown as a person and is finding her way to a life in the Church.

Interestingly, Bradley constructs Abby's friend Chris as Abby's foil, a cradle Catholic who has trouble articulating why he believes as he does, though he is clear and firm in his faith. When Abby asks, "How do you know you believe in God?" Chris responds, "I dunno. Ask my mother, not me. I don't know what to say about that kind of stuff" (98). When pressed, Chris reaffirms that he does indeed believe in Jesus and God and the significance of Communion, commenting, "Sure. Why not?" (98). Nonetheless, it is clear that Chris is a faithful person who takes his faith seriously even if he does not immediately have the words to articulate this for Abby. After Chris chastises Abby for eating chicken on Ash Wednesday, for example, Abby admits to Chris that she is only going through Catechism classes to get back at her parents. Upon hearing this, Chris loses his temper. He becomes angry at Abby for her failure to take seriously the basic tenets of the faith. When Abby challenges Chris, reminding him that he could not articulate why he believed things, Chris replies, "I can't explain it . . . that doesn't mean I don't believe it" (123). At first Abby is seeking a more logical relationship with the Church. After Father Micah reminds her, "Knowledge and logic will only take you half way there" (160), Abby searches for the middle ground where she is doing more than taking the ideas literally, but doesn't accept ideas unreflectively, either.

What we see in this foil model is the heart of the argument. The way in which we can see the positive portrayal of Catholicism is through its juxtaposition of new Catholics with characters for whom Catholicism is a seemingly automatic part of their identity. One could argue, and many have, that an author creating an unthinking “cradle” Catholic is a way to show how the Church fails to allow honest questioning and a reasoned faith. We argue, however, that the difference between two characters such as Abby and Chris is that Abby is allowing herself to be formed by the community, whereas Chris may not yet see beyond the ritual, though he too is being formed by his participation. In fact, the inability to see beyond the ritual is the principal mistake of critics of faith communities. What Abby’s character does, then, is reinvigorate the argument for moral development within the Church community. Her character demonstrates that although people come to join faith communities for myriad reasons, there is authenticity to the questions raised as they embark on this journey.

We argue that this narrative style imagines the reader in ways similar to how American Confirmation programs imagine the ideal Confirmation process. Today, the majority of American Confirmation programs position the young teen as the typical Confirmation candidate and asks the young candidate to do just this type of questioning. Having been baptized as a baby and having received the Sacrament of the Eucharist, the Catholic young person that is about to be confirmed is seen as ready to commit more deeply to Christ, the Church, and a life of faith. The process by which practitioners are prepared for this rite is one of serious emotional and intellectual discernment. The sacrament of Confirmation asks the candidate to actively participate, physically and mentally, publicly and privately, in prayer and church activities, in order that he or she is prepared to be a full, adult member in the Catholic community who assumes the “apostolic responsibilities of Christian life” (*Catechism* 203, num 1309). In certain ways, so can works of fiction expect similar things of the young reader.

Although the specifics of the Confirmation process are often debated and will surely differ from parish to parish, few would disagree with the notion that Confirmation candidates must be responsible for asking themselves some hard questions about their relationship to the Holy Spirit and the Church. For many, the Confirmation process is one that asks the candidate to self-reflect and to visit anew that which has become routine, to make conscious the meaning and significance of the rituals that have for so long already been a part of a life, so that the candidate may consciously and willingly enter into a mature Catholic sensibility. As Sr. Kieran Sawyer recommends, the Confirmation candidate should ask herself: “Who is my God? How should I live in the human family? What do I ask of the Church? What is worth spending my life on?” (37). To be sure, it is a significant moment in a young Catholic’s life when he or she is asked to see the difference between going through the motions of Catholic life and knowing why, as well. Through the course of *Leap of Faith*, Abby is asked these very same questions, and one might argue so is the reader, perhaps for the first time, perhaps again in this new way. In either case, the theological questions of the Confirmation process underpin *Leap of Faith*. As it is in *The Dead and the Gone*, Catholicism is in no way presented as an easy solution to the complicated issues that Abby has faced and continues to face. But we see through the course of the novel a young protagonist who comprehends the complexity of faith life and who works through some of the harder questions of who she is and wants to be in the world. Like Pfeffer, Bradley present texts in which the characters are engaged in situations that would be hard for anyone,--child, teen or adult--who turns to a faith community, another challenging concept for people of all ages, to help them through.

One could argue that Abby’s original motivations for embarking upon her catechesis demonstrate an inherent and recurring problem in the Catholic Church, thus exposing a rather negative aspect of the faith. Indeed, so much of the critique of religion from modern sensibilities has concerned the motivations of religious people. Abby’s initial motivation for becoming Catholic—to rebel against her parents—brings into relief some of the more messy aspects of the decisions one must face in her journey of faith. Admittedly, young people have for decades received the sacrament of Confirmation for reasons other than their desire to become adults in the community of faith. The character’s progression, however, sheds a rather positive light on the role of the Catholic faith in the life of a questioning and searching adolescent. In fact, the author seems to be presenting an alternative view to a prevailing opinion of Catholicism, one that maintains that catechesis, especially of young people, encourages a kind of unthinking conformity that is an impediment to true moral development. Conversely, Bradley suggests that an education in the Catholic faith is a real forum for asking some important questions in acquiring an awareness of the moral and spiritual self for an adolescent.

Karen Cushman’s *The Loud Silence of Francine Green* (2006) does similar work by asking similar questions. Francine Green, the novel’s protagonist, is thirteen years old and a devout Catholic in 1949 when the novel is set. She is quiet and thoughtful; Francine says of herself that she is “so patient, moderate, and self-controlled that sometimes I feel invisible,” and she likes it that way (Cushman 2). Francine’s life is changed when Sophie Bowman, an outspoken, smart, and beautiful girl from her neighborhood, is expelled from public school and enrolls in Francine’s class at All Saints School for Girls, and the two become best friends. Though many of Sophie’s questions come from truly not knowing information, rituals, and beliefs that other girls in the class take for granted, Sophie is depicted as being invested in stirring up trouble just for the sake of it, too. When Sophie argues that she is a freedom fighter, Francine responds, “But you’re not fighting for freedom . . . You fight for the right to play the radio, to ask questions about God and nuns in underwear, and to say what you really think in school essays” (171).

Here we are reminded that Francine understands the levels of Sophie’s outbursts; sometimes Sophie asks relevant questions, but just as often she chooses the wrong battles. Just like Francine, the reader can easily appreciate Sophie’s

strengths and weaknesses. When Sophie's protests are frivolous—even her own father admits that she is a puzzle, “so much spunk and so little common sense, so much energy and so little imagination” (Cushman 57)—the reader feels Francine's frustration. Francine explains, “I felt a little dizzy, as if the earth had tilted a bit on its axis. Talking to Sophie often made me feel like that” (171). But when Sophie's points make sense to devout Francine, she is put in the position of sometimes defending, sometimes explaining, and sometimes finding for herself a richer, deeper understanding of the Catholic faith.

A great example of this happens early in the novel when Sophie wins a spot in a speech contest on the topic “What Today's Youth Can Learn from Yesterday's Saints” (52). Sophie chooses to talk about Blessed Martin de Porres of Peru who, during the period in which the story is set, has not yet been made a saint. Sophie defends her choice by arguing, “I think what is important about him is not whether or not he was canonized but that he helped people who needed help” (53). Francine protests, arguing that Sophie should have picked a holy saint who is already acknowledged as important, “who performs miracles and has weeping sores on his body and can talk to God,” or can do things that not just anyone could do, such as fly like Christina the Astonishing, or live for forty-eight years on top of a pillar like Saint Simon Stylites (53). Sophie responds that she picked this saint “because I am supposed to pick a model for today's youth. Do you think we should be encouraged to fly or live on a pillar? . . . Martin de Porres did things that anyone could do to help people. That was his way of honoring God. That's why I chose him” (54). In the rest of Sophie's speech she mentions Martin de Porres' generosity and compassion as “a shining example of social justice” which makes Francine stop and think (55). Francine admits, “I had never thought about the saints like that, as human beings like me who did good things and tried to make the world a better place” (55). In no way does Francine see herself as a saint, though she does begin to see how the saints could be her inspiration to do good work meaningfully in the world.

Although Sophie's role in the novel is to question—out of ignorance and obstinacy—the rules and practices of traditional, pre-Vatican II Catholic school and church, there remains throughout the novel a compassionate eye to the Church as the teen characters learn to discern for themselves what is right when faced with the questions and misunderstandings of the world around them. In the end, despite its complexity, the Church's beauty and love is made abundantly clear to Francine and the reader. When Francine struggles with making good decisions, she turns to her parents, Father Charles, Sister Peter, and even tries to call the Pope. Not all of her searches end in the easy answers she seeks, and some avenues may seem silly—Francine searches the Los Angeles phonebook for The Vatican's phone number, and then calls the operator and asks to be connected to Pope Pius XII (208)—but the result is a renewed faith, and a sense of herself as a part of the Catholic Church, whose teachings guide her life in real ways.

Though Cushman's book is set pre-Vatican II and clearly contains some barbs at the way things used to be, the questions Francine struggles with are more about personal responsibility, finding her own voice, and choosing her own battles than they are about issues that were reformed. In an interview with *Kirkus Reviews*, Cushman reiterates this point, arguing that the central discussions of this book are timeless: “The book is much more about questions than answers. Is Sophie a hero, or is she just provocative? Does Sister Basil really have the girls' best interests at heart? Is protecting our safety worth sacrificing some liberties?” (9).

While there is an atmosphere of “sit still and don't ask questions” at All Saints grade school in 1949, more significant to the story are the moments where Francine investigates the beliefs that she has thus far been asked to memorize and accept without necessarily encouraging personal, intellectual consideration. What she learns is mostly without concrete answers to her questions. For example, by the end of the book, one of Francine's greatest revelations is, “What we learn in religion class is not the way things really are” (207). Now, as it is in 1949 when this book takes place and as it will be in years to come, young Catholics learn what Sister Peter reminds Francine, that while the Church cannot tell you what to do all of the time, “The Church gives you guidelines, Francine. And you can pray to know God's will” (211). What this articulates is a different understanding of Catholicism from the more critical portrayal of the Church as a monstrous entity which claims to have all the answers and therefore sees all questions as frivolous. Even in the mid-century picture of the Church, we see it imagined as a community that sees moral development as a formation of character as opposed to a list of rules to dictate decisions. As Francine discerns what it is she needs to do to settle her conflicts, she remembers, as Sister Peter advised, “Just be sure that what you do is right and honest and pleasing to God” (211). Indeed, Francine discovers that there are rarely easy answers to any of her problems or concerns, but that the Church offers a framework with which she might discern the better solution.

Ideally, religious issues and imagery in a piece of literature need not be pragmatic nor polarize the text; literature does not only exist in a utilitarian realm and religious discussion does not merely exist in a proselytizing one. To be sure, those who invoke images of Catholicism in general are under no obligation to—and in fact would be irresponsible to—report only idealistic, happily-ever-after wishful thinking. M. Sara Smedman, in “Mansions in the House of Christian Fiction,” argues that unless we allow children's books to “depict the darker, seamier aspects of life in the real world” we allow for the “falsification of life and a false optimism rather than Christian hope” (31). Susan Beth Pfeffer, Kimberly Brubaker Bradley, and Karen Cushman refuse to simplify matters of faith and instead create teen characters who thoughtfully work through (or begin to work through) their relationships with God and the Catholic faith. Although not entirely positive, the questions and concerns these teen characters have are not, as some would argue, anti-Catholic. Instead, what seem to be challenges to their faith are healthy, realistic, and ultimately loving questions that signify the formative process necessary for a morality that is beyond following a rigid structure of rules because they represent

"good authority" (King and Kitchener 52). Most importantly, nothing about these texts would suggest that Catholicism or Christianity or religion at all is THE way of life.

As art, young adult literature offers images of Catholicism from an array of perspectives, most of which rely on a common understanding of the American Roman Catholic Church. It is the ability of these authors to highlight the nuances and complexities of adolescent spiritual exploration within a Catholic context that makes their portrayals of Catholic belief more sophisticated and more realistic. The success of these authors speaks to the move away from the often-polarizing treatment of religion in the secular realm. These novels represent a productive shift in the ever-complex subject of religion in children's literature that is progress toward moving beyond the last taboo that Schmidt, Yolen, and Nodelman discuss. It moves beyond that taboo, in fact, as writers who invoke Catholicism specifically not only challenge the "polite and inoffensive whisper" about religion common to the field of children's literature but also hold themselves up to more specific critique of their theology and responsibility to Church teachings (Schmidt 26). As Frank Riga reminds us in the 1989 religion in children's literature issue of *The Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, "the subject of religion in children's books involves us, not only in specific questions and themes, but in the social and critical perspectives of which children's books are a part" (Riga 4). Lest we return to the religious children's books of the past that "speak with the confident, monolithic voice of one who has no doubts, has never doubted, will never doubt any of the great religious claims of the faith community" (25) it is instead best to look for those young characters who face the complexity of faith, with its comforts and challenges alike, not as the only way of living in the world, but a realistic one for many.

Notes

1. Though many would argue that ideologically, American texts are inherently Christian in purview even if they are ostensibly religiously neutral.

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