

Chapter 1

MAKING BELIEVE

I will tell you a story to make you believe in God. Not my claim, but that of the narrator of one of the most successful novels of the first two decades of the twenty-first century, Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*. This study of God in twenty-first-century British fiction does not so much assess whether any narrative can convince agnostics and nonbelievers to become theists; rather, it asks why so many contemporary British novelists persist in exploring theological, religious and spiritual themes in their fiction, despite writing in a Britain where suspicion of organised religion prevails. Why is God still in their texts?

The title of this book comes from when I was seven years old. One of my earliest memories in my literary education is of my primary school teacher explaining the difference between fiction and non-fiction in terms a child might understand. She described fiction as 'make-believe'. This is not entirely helpful. Much non-fiction, especially discursive writing, sets out to convince readers to change their minds on matters of opinion and belief, and the notion of make-believe carries a sense of inauthentic 'made-up-ness' and, even, the incredibility of wonderland worlds. And yet, this only applies to a small proportion of fiction. Nevertheless, the notion of stories as make-believe can be comforting: parents settling a child worried that a wolf might come and blow their house down can calm the child's fears by saying the story is only make-believe. I contend that fiction is make-believe, not because it is unreal, but because it has the power to convince. Novels can transport readers to other places, eras and realms, from the material world to transcendence, from tangible reality to the imagined impossible. I have, therefore, often found approaching fiction as make-believe useful and creative in my analysis of novels as a Christian reader. Seeing fiction as make-believe helps us to see the intended status and goal of fiction as narratives bearing truth, however their authors perceive that truth. Martel's *Life of Pi* persuaded very few

readers to become believers in God, but the narrative bore truths that enlightened many on the nature of humanity and had much to say about humans as religious beings.

Later in my literary education, I was immersed in eighteenth-century literature. In the provincial grammar school I attended in County Durham, the English Department chose to prepare its A-Level students for the eighteenth-century module. Teachers told us this was because it was the least popular module, and possibly the most difficult, so it increased our chances of impressing markers and achieving better results. We also studied for a general paper, where the most recent text was Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. I tended, therefore, to see the study of literature as learning the art of writing sentences of Latinate construction. I also saw it as a study, like history, to do with past times. I am, of course, grateful for the opportunity to learn about my language from high Augustan stylists such as Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson, with their witty linguistic patterns, logical sequences and sonorous amplifications, but my appreciation of beauty and worth in language and literature has since considerably widened. Although lovers of literature can easily be tempted to stay with the classics to appreciate their artistry, turning to the moderns opens up an entirely new world of writing that, often climbing on the shoulders of literary giants of the past, speaks directly to the modern world. Today's fiction is born in today's world and addresses today's world. It both reflects what we see around us and invites changes in what we see there. For this reason, this book fixes strict parameters for itself by discussing only contemporary fiction, by which I mean novels published since the year 2000, and predominantly, and preferably, novels published in the current decade. The writers whose works we discuss in these pages are men and women who live and write in the world as it is now. They tell stories for today's readers.

Unlike much theological writing, this book, despite its title, does not suggest what you should believe. It does not set out orthodoxy for Christian belief. Rather, using fiction as a form of make-believe and a source of God-talk, it invites you to think about why you believe what you believe, and in doing so there may be times when we push at and stretch the boundaries of orthodoxy. Literature provokes readers to imagine God and challenges any theology that is erroneous, thoughtless or unreasonable. To find our way into this study of God in contemporary fiction, we need first to discuss the indispensability of narrative, the roles of story and imagination in theology, the nature of belief, the context in which new novels are written and read, and reading as a social activity.

THE INDISPENSABILITY OF NARRATIVE

Throughout my lifetime, either someone has argued, or it has been the general consensus of opinion, that the novel is exhausted and dying as a literary form. In *The Times Literary Supplement* in 2017, Ben Jeffery said that novels are ‘persisting in a kind of zombie state’,¹ although each edition of the supplement reviews at least half a dozen newly published works of fiction. Novels, it is often claimed, have been made obsolete by new technology, have fallen out of sync with the values of their surrounding culture and have reached the limits of their capacity to innovate. And yet, the novel still has a pulse. According to some estimates, about 19,000 new novels are published each year in Britain, about eleven per cent of all published books, and the best-selling among them pick up large readerships. Many commuters on Britain’s trains, buses and tube continue to make their journeys to and from work bearable with a novel, some on e-books and tablets, but many still in hardback or paperback. I was told when I was young that, as I aged, I would read fewer novels and more non-fiction, perhaps biographies or history books, but that change of life, unlike other anticipated changes, has not happened yet. Fiction – the classics and the newly published – still feeds my thinking, fortifies my work as a church minister and enriches my life. I do my theology, think of God and catch my glimpses of the transcendent world through literature. Perhaps, then, the novel is in better health than the doom-mongers allege. It may be true that, by and large, there is little new in contemporary novels, but every now and again a trailblazer that does something entirely original is published, and many novels, even if not trailblazers, continue to contribute to society’s self-awareness by offering both critique of the status quo and opportunities to reform. Often they capture the spirit of the age and hold up a mirror for us to see ourselves as others see us.

Ultimately, novels, or at least something approximating to their form, will not die because narrative is indispensable to the human condition. In 1958, the political philosopher Hannah Arendt published *The Human Condition*, which studied the nature of what she called the active life. In it she discussed our storied selves, saying that every individual life can eventually be told as a story with a beginning and end, and that this is ‘the prepolitical and prehistorical condition of history’. History, she said, becomes the storybook of humankind with many actors and speakers, but without identifiable authors, just as each human life tells its story.

1. 24 March 2017, p.7.

Narrative is what results when human consciousness imposes its perceived order onto random and haphazard experience in an effort to make sense of, and find meaning in, existence. Indeed, Ricoeur tells us that past, present and future are not independent, metaphysical entities, but aspects of the human mind's organisational tools that enable us to organise events so that what has happened to us previously is realised in the present as a narrative's plot. In other words, the concepts of past, present and future are human constructs by which we put our experiences into a meaningful storied form. Aristotle called these plots *mythos*, which translates from Greek as myth. For Aristotle, myth was a coherent narrative with beginning, middle and ending imposing order on a series of events. Such myths or plots move from the childish story of 'This happened and then this happened and then this . . .' to a more sophisticated narrative in which cause and effect, point of view, priority and changes of order feature. We cannot fully live without our *mythoi*. We might expect to need to treat these stories with caution, because as the literary scholar Terry Wright says, 'No narrative . . . is so completely determinate of its meaning that it does not allow for disagreement over its interpretation.'² On the contrary, this feature highlighted by Wright is what gives narrative such high value in theology: the promise of narrative lies in the fact that it is not prescriptive. A story is told and people will interpret it according to their experience and insight. For instance, I recently listened to a liberal rabbi tell the story of Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael. As he told it, he knew I would hear it in ways he did not intend, and, if a Muslim imam had also been present, he would hear it differently again. But it is the same story, bearing the same meaningful truth. Together we hear the full orchestra, which is more than the melody a one-stringed violin can play or the rhythm an untuned gong can beat out. Permitted disagreements over meaning deepen, widen and strengthen the narrative.

In common with the BBC, whose purpose has always been to inform, educate and entertain, narrative has the power to inform, entertain and tell truth. Our enjoyment when listening to stories derives from natural curiosity, not only because we want to be informed of what happened next, but also because we want to learn why something happened and what the consequences were. In relation to the observation that stories entertain us – men and women have probably sat around campfires since time immemorial regaling each other with their tales of humour and terror – Wright quotes Sir Walter Scott who said that 'such is the universal charm of narrative that the worst novel ever written will find some gentle reader

2. Wright, (1988), p. 190.

content to yawn over it, rather than to open the pages of the historian, moralist or poet'.³ I must admit that I see Scott's optimistic hopes for the worst novels as somewhat ironic. The last time I decided to read *Ivanhoe*, thinking I would relive some childhood reading as we had read it in class in my first year at grammar school, I was far from being Scott's gentle reader, and I closed the book before I suffered eye-glaze. When stories inform and entertain, we also expect them to tell truth and be true to life. We expect them to ring true to our experience and, for this reason, Wright says narrative is essentially mimetic (that is, in imitation of life), and it is a matter of faith whether the hearer or reader accepts, or believes, that the plot of the narrative gives purpose to the life it narrates.⁴

When stories inform, entertain and tell truth, they become indispensable and we would not want to be without them. We affix our self-told identities to them, we locate ourselves among our kith and kin by them, and we place ourselves in our chosen groupings – ordered on the basis of faiths, shared interests or common features – through the stories we tell of ourselves. In short, we think in narratives and use the sequences of narrative to put information associated with our lives and experiences into meaningful concepts. In the stories we tell, we explore the strangeness of the universe and discover that its mystery is ultimately knowable. Such stories become what Steven Hrotic, writing specifically about religion in science fiction, called 'life-saving mechanisms' when we apply pattern, or teleology, to the story of our lives to create autobiographies. In other words, even if, when the events were actually happening, we regarded them as random, when we retell them in retrospect we often give them a pattern and thereby attribute purpose to them.⁵ Through our stories, we identify who belongs in, and who remains on the outside, of our chosen groups.

STORY IN THEOLOGY

Religion, theology and spirituality all necessarily take the form of narratives. Because narrative has been used to organise and make sense of religious experiences, and because revelation is given in narrative form, stories form the basis of religious belief and practice. George Stroup identified three styles of narrative theology. One uses story to outline the nature of a specific religion; another is religious biography; and the third style refers to biblical narratives or the Bible as a unitary

3. *ibid.*, p. 83.

4. *ibid.*, p. 84.

5. Hrotic, (2014) p. 188.

story beginning in Eden and ending in heaven. The first of these is a method by which the phenomenon of religion can be studied. The method involves identifying the story at the heart of a religion and using that story to explain the location of religion in human experience. This method prioritises story over experience. The second form of narrative theology begins, on the other hand, with the experiential roots of narrative and values the individual account of religious experience. Whenever an individual confesses his or her faith – a practice that began with biblical life story and became firmly established in the Christian tradition when Augustine of Hippo wrote his *Confessions* – confession turns into narrative. Thus, our religiosity is interpreted through the stories we tell of ourselves. A verse I remember from childhood reminds us that the third style of narrative theology is biblical:

God has given us a book full of stories
that was made for his people of old.
It begins with the tale of a garden
and ends with the city of gold.

Maria Matilda Penstone's children's hymn detects an overarching canonical narrative, within which there are two other forms of story – lesser or micro stories within the bigger narrative (including the narrative structure of the Gospels), as well as parables, which Jesus used as his primary teaching tool. These narratives invite interrogation, through which the richness of the story unfolds. Wright argues that Christian faith necessarily involves telling stories in the form of creeds and sacraments. He suggests that the creeds follow the fourfold pattern of the most memorable stories. These are stories that provide a setting, theme, plot and resolution. In the case of the Nicene Creed, the opening statement of belief in God as maker of heaven and earth sets the scene for an outline of the theme of redemption, a summary of the plot of Christ's life, and death and resurrection, which leads to resolution in the last judgement bringing all human history to fulfilment.⁶ Similarly, the great prayer of thanksgiving at the Eucharist, set in the context of thanksgiving to God as giver of all good things, carries the theme of remembering the so-called Last Supper and has the plot of incorporating the faithful into the kingdom of God, which is itself the final resolution of human existence. The prayers at the sacrament of baptism also bring the newly baptised into place within the bigger narrative, thus ritualistically formalising the individual redemption that occurs when

6. Wright, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-9.

the story of God's activity in human history intersects with the personal, mundane story. At this redemptive moment, my personal story fuses with the Christian narrative, and I find my place at table.⁷

According to Wright, some of the most enthusiastic narrative theologians see telling stories as 'functionally equivalent to believing in God'.⁸ Although both religious belief and storytelling involve finding meaning and order in experience, I hold back from wholeheartedly endorsing this opinion supposedly held by some narrative theology enthusiasts, simply because many storytellers are not believers. One can tell a story without believing it. Nevertheless, I agree with these narrative theologians to the extent that there is a strong correlation between telling stories and believing in God, and I affirm the image of putting your story in God's story and finding your place in God's story as a metaphor for redemption.

IMAGINATION IN THEOLOGY

Both the telling of stories and listening to them requires the exercise of imagination, which has become recognised as an important tool in the theological enterprise. David Tracy, whose publication nearly forty years ago is still frequently referred to in much contemporary theological writing, and Gordon Kaufman, whose principal thesis is that theology, by which we talk of God as the ultimate concern of human beings, is the work of human beings, have recovered imagination from the world of 'made-up-ness'. Following Tracy and Kaufman, Garrett Green has more recently named imagination as 'the anthropological point of contact for divine revelation', its *locus* or the place where revelation happens.⁹

Green began his book on imagination in theology by suggesting that the term 'imagination', which once flourished in theology only among practitioners of the academic discipline of 'religion and literature', is now receiving wider theological attention,¹⁰ but, for a long while, imagination has been looked at with suspicion in theological circles because those who fail to distinguish between what is imagined and the imaginary think it tends towards a reductionist direction. One of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's outstanding contributions both to literary criticism and theological thought is his theory of imagination, with its implications for religion, in which he effectively 'desynonymiz[ed] Fancy and Imagination'.¹¹

7. Stroup, (1981) p. 237.

8. Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

9. Green, (1998), p. 40.

10. *ibid.*, p. 9.

11. Willey, (1949), p. 12.

Coleridge established a distinction between primary and secondary imagination in which primary imagination, which is necessarily shared by everyone, mixes together ideas or images that are already present into a mere ‘mechanical juxtaposition of parts’; whereas secondary imagination, a higher and more creative faculty, fuses ideas and images in a mark of genius into the creative unity of a ‘living whole or organism’. Green notes that the combined effect of this ‘esemplastic power’, as Coleridge called it, can be observed in one of the ways metaphor is thought to work: the primary imagination supplies the images that are then forged into creative unity by the secondary imagination.¹² So, arguing against a long tradition that regarded ‘imagination’ as equivalent to ‘fancy’, Coleridge saw imagination as ‘the mind in its highest state of creative insight and awareness’,¹³ as the creative faculty that was the highest expression of truth.¹⁴ For this reason, Green called us *homo imaginans*.

Later, in response to what was often heard as the rejection of religion as ‘the dream of the human mind’ and ‘the illusory happiness of the people’,¹⁵ a distinction between realistic and illusory imagination was established that helps us to cope philosophically with problems common to both religion and literature, the problems of temporal and spatial reality when that reality is not present. Green argues that, in the case of temporal non-present reality, imagination facilitates memory of a past that is no longer present,¹⁶ and I claim that imagination also facilitates anticipation of a future not yet present. In the case of spatial reality that is not present, imagination lets us accept the existence of a table in the next room, a Taj Mahal we have never seen before, microcosmic subatomic structures and macrocosmic astrophysics (to use Green’s own examples). I suggest, too, in the same way we can imagine the settings, events and characters we read of in a novel, we can also imagine characters’ beliefs. Green argued that, in theology, paradigmatic imagination through which ‘we look for a pattern by which we can explore objects in a larger world’¹⁷ assists us in our interpretation of experience and language and makes accessible something that would otherwise be beyond our linguistic grasp.¹⁸ We can think of these sites of revelation as ‘faithful imagination’.¹⁹

12. *ibid.*, p. 19.

13. *ibid.*, p. 16.

14. Green, *op cit.*, p. 20.

15. Feuerbach and Marx respectively, quoted in *ibid.*

16. *ibid.*, p. 64.

17. *ibid.*, pp. 69 and 78.

18. *ibid.*, p. 133.

19. *ibid.*, p. 145.

That such faithful imagination is the essence of reading is a concept whose origins may be found in the theology of Augustine of Hippo, for whom desire was the prime motivator of his religious and spiritual inclination. As Graham Ward argues, the desire to understand, which engrosses and affects readers' appetites, metabolisms, sleep patterns and physicality, circulates around the reader and the text in such a way that, in Augustine's theology of reading, reading affects both what we do and what we become. Indeed, for Augustine, reading is a spiritual exercise: 'When we read we engage with dynamics more powerful than we are aware, enter and extend the rich store-houses of our *imagination* [my italics], open ourselves to an exterior, an other which can injure as well as heal us.'²⁰

It seems, furthermore, that this creative and spiritual concept of faithful imagination is related in some way to John Ruskin's concept of 'Imagination Penetrative'. Like Coleridge, Ruskin distinguished fancy from imagination and, according to Michael Wheeler, he regarded imagination as 'the highest intellectual power of man [*sic*]',²¹ but, unlike Coleridge, for Ruskin imagination was more interpretative than creative. Imagination, for Ruskin, was the mind's tongue capable of piercing through whatever substantial or spiritual subject is submitted to it. Like a sea mollusc that makes holes in stones, imagination penetrates the text and allows the reader to empathise and interpret it.

Imagination enjoys this creative and interpretative role in theology as much as it does in reading. Our ability to put together the 'little pieces' of imagery to fund our imagination of the greater God has nothing to do with imaginary or illusory imagination, and everything to do with realistic imagination which we might call 'imagined reality'. For this imagined reality we may employ a rare but helpful term: *irreality*.²² I am in full accord with Green when he says that, through the imagination of writers and readers, Fictional story . . . allow[s] us to see the world truly, as "the theatre of God's glory" in Calvin's phrase.²³ Perhaps to image or imagine God is to believe.

THE NATURE OF BELIEF

We need to clarify what we mean by belief. One of the interlocutors in Brian Mountford's conversations, which were engendered by Philip Pullman's description of himself as a 'Christian atheist', and which

20. Gearon, (1999), p. 59.

21. *ibid.*, p. 8.

22. A philosophical and theological term that, unlike the more familiar 'unreality', expresses the opposite of 'reality' without denying the possibility of existence.

23. Green, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

Mountford reported in a book with that title, described three different types of belief. First, he discussed history as an evidence-based discipline in which there are competing beliefs and interpretations. Then he said that, in literature, metaphor and imagery build literary worlds where readers, through empathy, can believe in the novel's imagined world and feel what it is like to live in such worlds. This, he says, is just as much part of reality as 'prove-it science'. In the case of religion, to believe in God is to believe in the objectivity of value and purpose without evidence. In his view, religious belief is no more objective than natural intuition, personal worldview or background assumptions by which we make sense of the world around us, making belief in God possible. Note that the word he uses is 'possible', not proven. He suggests that these three types of believing do not run in parallel, independent strands, but, in reality, interlock and interweave.

In the early years of this century, an American theologian, David Cunningham, wrote an explication of the Apostles' Creed, for each clause of which he discussed either a piece of literature or a film that added insights into the doctrines enshrined in the creed. Thinking of the essentially narrational structure of the classical creeds, Cunningham finds a complementarity, rather than tension, between them and the Bible. What one says at length the other says briefly. He notes that one significant difference between the Bible and the creeds is that the creeds begin with 'I (or we) believe', while the Bible simply tells the story without needing us to state our belief in it. Moreover, we say the creeds without necessarily understanding every phrase, and without specifically acknowledging that what we are thinking when we recite them in the twenty-first century differs greatly from the way they were used in the pre-scientific age, when, for example, belief in a three-tier universe was taken for granted. Cunningham's juxtaposition of doctrinal statements with fiction highlights that there are different ways of believing, and we must establish these differences before setting about this book's task of seeing why God still finds a place in contemporary fiction in an age when religious belief no longer prevails.

The notion that there are three different ways of believing began with Augustine of Hippo who wrote of three Latin grammatical constructions describing the nature of religious belief. The first is *credere Deo*, which means 'I believe God' or I believe what God says. We use this construction in everyday discourse when we say to someone, 'I believe you', meaning that we believe that the person speaking to us is telling the truth. In the case of fiction, we might say we believe the author either because her characters and events in the novel have

convinced us of the veracity of her tale, or because we accept her insights and believe the philosophical truth she seeks to communicate to her readers.

The second Latin construction is *credere Deum*, which means 'I believe God to be God.' This explicitly acknowledges that God exists and implies that the God we speak of is the only real God, but we need not do anything about that belief. Indeed, Augustine laconically added that demons and evildoers may believe God in this sense.

The third is *credere in Deum*, the clause with which the creeds begin, meaning 'I believe in God.' That little word 'in' makes all the difference. For Augustine, and for Aquinas after him, believing in God involved more than the intellect. Believing in God means that God is the object of our faith and the goal towards which our whole life is directed. According to Augustine, believing in this sense is loving God, delighting in God, walking towards God and being incorporated in God. Believing in God in this Augustinian way implies not believing in anything else; it implies exclusive devotion to God as the object or focus of our faith.

However, let us not run off with the notion that belief in God is restrictive. Belief in God can be, and should be, liberating, as Hans Küng says,

Belief in God was and certainly often is authoritarian, tyrannical and reactionary. It can produce anxiety, immaturity, narrowmindedness, intolerance, injustice, frustration and social isolation; it can even legitimate and inspire immorality, social abuse and wars within a nation or between nations. But:

Particularly in recent decades belief in God has again been able to show itself increasingly to be liberating, orientated on the future and beneficial to human beings: belief in God can spread trust in life, maturity, broad-mindedness, tolerance, solidarity, creative and social commitment; it can further spiritual renewal, social reform and world peace.²⁴

As James Wood's introduction to a series of essays on literature and belief showed, the kind of religious belief that literature encourages is liberating. Wood sought to make a clear distinction between literary belief and religious belief. Fiction, he said, makes gentle requests to readers to believe. While novels require belief from the reader, the reader is not compelled to believe and can decline the implicit invitation. In contrast, Wood, Durham-born but now living in America, brought up in a Christian churchgoing family, but now expressing himself as an atheist, says that if

24. Küng, (1993), p. 14.

religion is true it must be believed in absolutely, and that once religion has revealed itself to you, you are never free because refusing to believe is categorised as denial or betrayal.²⁵ In the case of religious belief, belief in Something or Someone 'as if' it is true would, according to Wood, never be enough, but in reading fiction one is always free to choose not to believe. What troubles the distinction Wood makes is the special case of the New Testament Gospels. In the old estate, in pre-nineteenth-century ages, the Gospels may have been read as supernatural reports making divine truth claims, but in the 1800s they began to be read as a set of fictional tales gathered around an historical figure. At this point, the distinction between religious truth and fictional truth blurred and merged so we now live in what Wood called a 'broken estate'. Indeed, the old estate may be broken, but the new estate is an exciting and fulfilling place to live, and I hold a more optimistic view of religion than my fellow Durhamite. In my view, only bad or corrupted forms of religion restrict the individual believer, while good religion permits mature, broad-minded and variant ways of believing. Here, good religion shares common ground with literary belief, thus making reading fiction fertile ground for forming theology.

When I look back on my career so far as a theologian, I see my indebtedness both to Paul Tillich, to whom all who work in the field of religion and culture owe profound debt, and to Hans Küng, whose introduction to Christianity, *On Being a Christian*, was one of the most substantial theology books I read while preparing to study for church ministry. I want to conclude this discussion of the nature of belief by quoting a section in which Küng asks whether Christian faith is a matter of understanding, will or emotion:

To take faith simply as an act of understanding, as theoretical knowledge, as acceptance of the truth of biblical texts or ecclesiastical dogmas, even as an assent to more or less improbable assertions: this is the intellectualist misunderstanding of faith.

To understand faith simply as an act of will, as resolution of the will in face of inadequate evidence, as a blind venture, as a *Credo quia absurdum*, even merely as a duty of obedience: this is the voluntarist misunderstanding of faith.

To understand faith simply as an act of feeling, as a subjective emotion, as an act of faith without any content of faith, where the fact of believing is more important than what one believes: this is the emotional misunderstanding of faith.

25. Wood, (2000), p. xv.

Christian faith is none of these things. In absolute trust and complete reliance, the whole man [*sic*] with all the powers of his mind commits himself to the Christian message and to him whom it announces. It is simultaneously an act of knowing, willing and feeling, a trust which includes an acceptance of message and person as true.²⁶

Reading, which brings the joy of immersing oneself in another's world, which stimulates new thought and provides fresh insight into old truths, and which liberates one from the yoke of bad, exclusivist, oppressive and restrictive religion is, I contend, to find a new God-given form of believing. In reading secular literature, we may encounter holiness and truth for our times.

THE CONTEXT FOR CONTEMPORARY FICTION

Our times form the context for this study, and we must engage with this context if we are to engage with British fiction, for, as Philip Tew, who founded the UK Network for Modern Fiction Studies, asserts, fiction cannot be segregated from its context. He argues that enjoying British fiction of our time requires us to place it within a contemporary 'larger and changing conception of Britishness'.²⁷ The difficulty, however, is nailing Britishness down. What *is* this Britishness? Is the changing shape of religion part of it? And, if so, what is peculiarly British about religion, faith or spirituality? This book is not a sociology of religion, but we can proceed no further without noting those aspects of the contemporary religious scene that bear on how we read of God in fiction.

The concepts of secularisation and secularity are as much the subject of academic debate as the concept of postmodernism. There is little agreement over what these terms describe, so, for the sake of this study, I will avoid using these labels. There are, however, salient factors we can identify. The first is that, over the last 100 years, Christianity has experienced a decline in the influence it once had. Most expressions of mainstream Christianity in Britain enjoyed their heyday in the years immediately before the First World War; since then, the Church has found it difficult to sustain involvement in many aspects of people's daily lives. Nevertheless, a visible presence remains. Church buildings dominate village skylines and lurk around many city street corners. The pomp and circumstance of royal, judicial and public ceremonial events usually involve ecclesiastical

26. Küng, (1976), p. 162.

27. Tew, (2004), p. 185.

personnel. Britain is one of the last Christian nations in the world to enshrine **in its constitution a role** for unelected church appointees, with bishops sitting in the House of Lords and a Speaker's Chaplain leading daily prayers in both Houses of Parliament. Even so, the Church is no longer able to influence or discipline the population's beliefs or behaviour, and, too often, it finds itself at the rear guard of reform, rushing to catch up with developments in morality when, formerly, as with pioneers such as Wilberforce and Elizabeth Fry, it might have led the way.

Second, the Church's declining influence in Britain results partly from the reduction in numbers of people engaged with organised religion. Churches remain important to many people at certain moments in their lives, but most churches have witnessed a decline in requests for the occasional offices such as baptisms, weddings and funerals. In some cases this is because churches have intentionally made themselves more inaccessible to irregular attendees by insisting on attendance at pre-baptism or pre-marriage classes. In the case of weddings, it is also because the law has been written so that ceremonies outside churches are unable to include any religious elements, and, in the case of funerals, the perception encouraged by secular officiants is that funerals led by Christian clergy are often impersonal. Because British society is a consumer society, the model is one of choice not compulsion. People may choose to use a church to mark the special moments in their lives, but many choose to go elsewhere for naming ceremonies and weddings, and choose to engage non-church officiants for their funerals.

As a result of these two factors, the British population is less educated about religion than it ever has been, despite compulsory religious education continuing to be taught in state schools. Fewer people know the Lord's Prayer. Familiarity with hymnody has reduced to the extent that many people would find it difficult to name a handful of hymns. Many in our population have never attended a Sunday service. This creates problems both for artists and for those who teach the arts. So much of our culture – its music, its art and its literature – makes no sense without its Christian context. Here lies a major difficulty for modern artists: 'Britain remains a Christian country in terms of its culture and history. Nothing will alter that. Significant sections of the population are, however, becoming not only more secular but noticeably more critical of religion.'²⁸ When we can no longer assume any level of religious knowledge, those who teach literature often have to establish a degree of religious understanding among their students before they can engage with the text in a meaningful way.

28. Davie, (2015), p. 37.

The third factor further complicating Britain's religious scene is that humankind's latent religiosity – for we are naturally *homo religiosus* – leads to the emergence of new rituals because people no longer feel part of institutional religion. These go unchecked by any monitoring body, and, although they may have originated in some orthodox practice, they become increasingly heterodox. Beliefs about what happens when people die offer an obvious example: illogical, but common, ideas that the deceased is a star in the sky above, or an angel looking over loved ones on earth, originate in, but veer far from, orthodox Christian notions of heaven after death. Meanwhile, latent religiosity also leads to the blurring and blending of sacred and secular, and the discovery of alternative ways to feed spiritual needs. For instance, mindfulness forms a helpful crossover between the worlds of therapy and spirituality, while, on the other hand, the gulf between church and society widens as people turn to art galleries and concert halls to find succour for their souls. As consumers, people may choose what gives them life in its fullness. Is it possible, then, that today's artists, including today's novelists, are the priests, prophets and spiritual directors of our time?

Paradoxically, the fourth factor is a turn to religion. In the latter years of the twentieth and the first decades of the twenty-first centuries, conservative and Pentecostal churches in Britain grew in number and in strength. Partly the result of migration, and partly the result of a desire both for an experiential form of worship and for clarity in doctrinal teaching, this phenomenon cannot be ignored. A cautious estimate gives a half a million as a ballpark figure for attendance in black churches of this ilk in 2015.²⁹ Korean, Chinese, Brazilian, Eastern European and other language-based congregations add to this number.

But the fifth factor is the most obvious and the most reported on: the perversion of religion as a weapon in both the public and personal spheres in the post-9/11 world. Abusive spirituality and expressions of faith intolerant towards people of difference, most notably in terms of sexuality, suppress individuality and impose often unwanted authority over believers. We read and hear of it most in reports from journalists reporting on the progress of violent perversions of Islam, but in each religion in the modern world violent exclusivist forms can be found. Indeed, one of the ironies of religion is that each religion carries the seeds of restoration and liberation for humanity, while also carrying the seeds of humanity's ruin. What is intended to be liberating can be constrictive. What can benefit humankind also has the capacity to cause great harm.

29. *ibid.*, p. 58.

In short, in the early years of the twenty-first century in Britain, increasing levels of secularity have been accompanied by pressing debates about religion in public life, and Grace Davie calls this a persistent paradox.

In this book, I am interested to discover where, when and how novels enter this arena of heated exchange. Why do novelists persist in writing of God? And what happens when they do? In relation to these questions, the phenomenon of church reading groups and the growth of interest in book clubs has significance, for reading groups and book clubs provide good opportunities for popular exploration of theology within literature and of the role of literature in the making of theology.

Church reading groups can provide safe places to discuss innovative ideas and alternative ways of thinking. They can deepen theological understanding and articulacy. My own experience of book clubs is that I have been a member of three. The first was The Caterpillars Literary Club, a group I joined in 1996. What was unusual about this group is that it was men-only and that, when I joined, it was in its sixty-fifth session. It had been founded as long ago as 1922, presumably by men who had not long since returned from war service. Reading groups are not a modern fad! Men from several churches met six times a year to discuss a wide range of books, including some novels, usually introduced by the member who had suggested the title. As I was a minister who showed interest in literature, one of the club members invited me to join when he was about to lead a discussion of A.S. Byatt's *Possession*. Thereafter, I chose to attend whenever a novel was being discussed. In my next church appointment, I quickly set up a reading group, called Marlborough Readers, which met monthly from January 2004 mainly to discuss novels, although an occasional biography, poetry collection or play script would break the pattern. This was a mixed-gender group made up of both retirees and people in paid employment. Up to twenty readers would gather in the host's generously proportioned lounge. At the beginning of the year we would invite nominations for books to read and agree a programme for the next six months. Not everyone who suggested a book was willing to introduce it, so we agreed who would kick the discussion into play, usually either by giving their own judgement of the book or by asking a range of questions about it. At the same time, I dabbled briefly in a book club at my local pub, having been attracted by publicity indicating that the following month they were to discuss a novel Marlborough Readers had discussed a few months previously. I was interested in finding out whether a pub discussion of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* would take a course that differed in any way from that taken in a church setting. I learnt from my participation

in these three groups that my interest in novels often differed from that of other participants who were more focused on characters than I was. I found my desire to explore the ideas of the novels was not always taken up by others in the groups. This may expose my interest in reading as a way of doing theology.

Silent, interiorised reading is the norm in modern times, but the popularity of reading groups reminds us that reading is essentially a social activity. It was only late in the nineteenth century that reading aloud ceased to be common. For many centuries it had been the norm, for silent reading is a more advanced skill than reading aloud. For instance, as an amateur musician I can read music, but I usually read it by playing it on the piano or singing the melody, otherwise I am limited in my ability, in my mind alone, to hear what it sounds like. So it was with the reading of texts. A frequently recounted tale tells of Augustine's astonishment when he found Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, reading silently. Even so, Ambrose was not a solitary reader; he did not read alone. He read in conversation with the author and, less directly, in consultation with editors and publishers without whom the transmission of the text would not have been possible. In the Hebrew scriptures, Nehemiah 8 records a public reading of the written law after the Jews have returned from Babylon to Jerusalem, and this event embedded the practice of public reading of the Torah in the historical life of the Jewish community. The community stands around every reading of the law. Around every act of reading stands a cloud of witnesses, conventionally referred to in literary studies as interpretive communities, a concept that goes back to a series of lectures given in 1913 by Josiah Royce.³⁰ His main concern in the lectures was to examine whether it remained consistent for twentieth-century Christians to hold to the ancient creeds. In the process of formulating his answer to this question, he developed the notion of interpretive communities. He argued that interpretation is a social necessity and argued for the establishment of a social order he dubbed 'a Community of Interpretation'. In the process of the interpretation of texts, the interpreter interprets a sign by producing another sign that is itself addressed to another person and calls for further interpretation. A sermon, for example, interprets a Bible passage and the sermon is in turn interpreted by those who hear it, talk about it and put it into practice. The process of interpretation is thus both temporal in that a person interprets a past into a future, and endless in that it is broken only on the death either of a particular participant in the process or of the entire interpretive group. Ideally this interpretive process links all signs and all

30. Royce, (1968).

interpreters into a single community where each component belongs, without blurring and losing their distinctive voice.³¹ In other words, the vitality of a text requires ongoing conversation around it.

First-time authors quickly learn, if they did not already know, that writers do not control their texts. Writers will usually restrict themselves to one language, one style, one social register and, perhaps, one message in any single text, but a reader of that same work is unrestricted and can choose to interpret and react to an author's work in multiple ways, either intentionally or otherwise. 'No text,' said Steven Roger Fischer, 'not even the most fundamental religious, dictates to a reader.'³² The reader controls how meaning is derived from the words the author has put on the page. If a text is regarded as ultimately, undeniably and unquestioningly authoritative, that can only be because the reader who holds that view has bestowed such authority upon it. No text can enjoy objective, immutable authority. Authors can only publish their words and set them adrift on the sea of interpretation. In this sense, the reader plays God.

Above the south door of the thirteenth-century cathedral in the northern Spanish city of Burgos, there are carvings of the apostles. They lean over to each other in seemingly animated conversation and, as they do so, they keep their places in their books with their fingers. The implication is that shared reading holds them together in community. Collective reading nurtures our spirituality and intellect. The great Quaker prison reformer, Elizabeth Fry, would have known this benefit of collective reading when, among the many reforms she campaigned for and introduced, she set up prison reading groups.

Book clubs, bolstered by Oprah Winfrey in America, Richard and Judy on British television and James Naughtie on BBC Radio 4, have increased exponentially since the late 1980s. Recent studies of book clubs in Britain have shown that many more women are attracted to them than men, that well over eighty per cent of the books being read and discussed are novels, that most book clubs prefer to read recent publications rather than classics, and that, alongside such generalist clubs, a few specialist book clubs, focusing on a particular literary genre or even individual texts such as *Finnegan's Wake*, or catering for a particular profession or workforce, can be found. Churches, which once hosted Bible reading groups in which participants shared their own response as readers to the texts, have since diversified so that general book clubs based in churches are no longer out of the ordinary. Often, however, Christian pre-understanding informs discussions of secular literature in such groups.

31. See Marshall, (1995), pp. 79-82 for a discussion of these lectures.

32. Fischer, (2003), p. 344.

I suggest six guidelines for running a successful church book club. First, the members of the group should have free choice of texts to read. It is better not to impose a choice on a reluctant group and better not to censor the selections. I remember that, when I announced that a book selected by Marlborough Readers had been changed, the assumption made by some was that I disapproved of the book. Nothing of the sort: the person who had suggested the book on the basis of reading a review only, on reading the book later, felt it was too shallow to support an evening's conversation and asked to change it. Let the group choose.

Second, I recommend adopting a regular predictable schedule, according to the appetite and time restraints of the club's members. The most common pattern is monthly meetings on a regular afternoon or evening, perhaps with a break in August, after which September's book could be a longer text, perhaps the long classic you have always wanted to read or the latest 500- or 600-page novel. I have learnt that neither occasional nor irregular book club meetings, as in my current church, rally sufficient commitment.

Third, book clubs benefit from having a designated facilitator for each session and an overseeing facilitator for the group. The latter oversees the running of the group, particularly the selection of books, the appointment of facilitators for each session and making sure the venue and hosts provide a comfortable setting. Session facilitators are responsible for starting the discussion and gently directing it, so that all who want to contribute feel neither pushed out nor derided by domineering colleagues or dominant views.

Fourth, allow discussion topics to emerge naturally when possible. *The Church Times* hosts a virtual reading group by publishing notes and questions on a book each month, having announced the choice of book in the previous month. The notes take the form of an introduction to the text, and groups could follow the questions one at a time to structure an evening's conversation. My advice, however, is not to disrupt the natural flow of conversation by moving on to what inexperienced facilitators might think of as 'the next question'. Often a free-flowing, enlightening and enjoyable conversation can begin when the facilitator simply asks, 'What did you think of it?'

Fifth, the conversation should always be open. In other words, nothing is ruled out. The dissenting voice should not be silenced, and in a spirit of open-mindedness and safe experimentation, the unconventional thought should be encouraged.

As we explore God's presence in contemporary novels in this book, questions will naturally arise that could be discussed in church groups, but this is not the primary aim of *Make-Believe*. In a spirit of exploration

and fun, in which the boundaries of orthodoxy are not strictly observed, we ask, ‘What happens when novelists write of God?’ What happens to our perception of God? Reading works best when readers foster a spirit of playfulness and fun because we learn best from play. We rejuvenate ourselves – spirit, mind and body – when we relax and have fun together. I hope that in this study of the divine in recent novels, we can relax together and feel free to ask ourselves the sometimes troubling questions novelists raise, for then our theological horizons can expand and we can draw nearer to, or deeper into, God.

* * *

The choosing of titles is a tricky business. Titles must grab attention and be an honest representation of what the book, film or artefact depicts. As I draw this introductory chapter to a conclusion, the titles of two novels and one painting come to mind. In 2002, Jon McGregor published his first novel entitled *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*. It focused on the lives of the residents of a single street in an unidentified and unremarkable English city during a single late summer’s day. One of these residents is a shy, anonymous student who collects objects that have been discarded in the street, and he photographs everyday events and catalogues them in what he calls an ‘archaeology of the present’. He fictionally does what the author actually does. Twenty-first-century novelists artistically record the surrounding world, lifting the mundane into a special place, re-enchanting a disenchanted world. The special spaces novels afford may be many things – magical, miraculous, spiritual, epiphanous, redemptive. They are always remarkable.

More recently, in 2017, Nick Laird published *Modern Gods*, which we will consider at greater length in the next chapter. For now, let us look no further than the title. Any book about religion in fiction is a book about remarkable things and modern gods, inasmuch as remarkable things and modern perceptions of, and images for, divinity are the raw material of contemporary fiction. They are what novels are about, sometimes explicitly and always implicitly.

In 1567, Brueghel the Elder made a picture that is usually known as *The Adoration of the Magi in a Winter Landscape* and occasionally called *The Adoration of the Kings in the Snow*. It depicts people hurrying through the streets of an imagined Bethlehem gathering fuel and heading home before a storm sets in on a freezing winter’s day. We see the weather closing in. Typically, Brueghel translates the events that took place in ancient Bethlehem to a familiar sixteenth-century Flemish town so that

the extraordinary is pictured within the commonplace. A secular scene plays host to the sacred. What is more, the viewer has to look carefully to see the Holy Family in the lower-left corner of the painting, hardly meriting the painting its title. I offer the strange titling of this picture as an image for what I am doing in this book. The novel is a secular phenomenon in which there are diverse genres, each hosting the sacred in the form of religious, theological and spiritual themes. Often, by focusing on these themes, I am, as it were, looking closely in one corner and this may distort the whole picture. *Make-Believe* runs this risk of distortion, but in taking the risk it sets the theological debate in its wider perspective and greater context.

SAMPLE