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Religious Themes and Characters in Nordic Children's Fantasy Films: Explorations of 'Acceptable' Religion

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Abstract: This article argues that the character of children's films make them a useful area of study when exploring attitudes to religion. A recurring idea behind children's films is that they should include what is good for the child, which means that when religion is included it will be shaped in accordance with ideas of what is seen as 'acceptable' religion. Four Nordic children's fantasy films which include religious beings or themes are analyzed and the attitudes to religion that the films suggest are discussed. The films are argued to present religious spheres as unthreatening, but often also as related to the 'Other'. The films do not question religious faith as such, but do link it to private choice and children's fantasies and thereby circumscribe its importance. Simultaneously, the transcendent sphere becomes a sphere of childhood and fantasy and children are, it would seem, bestowed the role of providing adults too an access to something beyond.

Keywords: children's films, Nordic films, fantasy, religion.

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Today, many scholars agree on the usefulness of exploring popular culture when aiming to comprehend contemporary society. As Andrew Nestingen argues, "[p]opular texts continually mediate socially significant conflicts through narration, music, and image" (9). Elizabeth Higginbotham points in the same direction when she states that "films capture and reflect shifts in ideologies and other thinking about social institutions and social positions" (ix). In the field of religion and popular culture – to which this article belongs – the way that popular cultural forms such as films can help us comprehend society and particularly the role of religion in society is also often highlighted. Christopher Partridge, for example, argues that "[p]opular culture is both an expression of the cultural milieu from which it emerges and formative of that culture, in that it contributes to the formation of worldviews and in doing so, influences what people accept as plausible" (123). Bruce David Forbes in turn writes that "[a]pproaching the study of religion through popular culture can help us learn more about widespread perceptions of religion and the role religion plays in the everyday lives of people" (2). This is not to say that popular culture directly reflects society. As Adam Possamai argues, "the mirror is not always well polished. Images

might sometimes be distorted"; but, he continues, "there will always be an element of truth in them" (22–23).

Building on the notion that popular cultural forms such as film can help us better understand a society and its attitudes to religion, this article explores this notion with a focus on a genre that has so far largely been ignored in studies of religion and film, namely children's films. Children's films here simply means films directed at a young audience. With the exception of very well-known films such as the films based on the *Harry Potter* novels (see e.g. Wagner), children's films are seldom a focus in contemporary explorations of religion and popular culture. However, researching children's films from a religion and film perspective, I argue, offers a great deal of potential insight into how religion is understood in a particular context, especially when one takes the nature of children's films into account. The mediatization of religion theory argues that religion in films is always shaped according to media logics such as genre conventions (Hjarvard). This does not entail that there is just one role for religion in a given genre, but it can lead to certain repeated constructions and ways of representing religion. The nature of children's films have changed over time, but certain understandings of children's films prevail. Malena Janson has illustrated in a study of Swedish children's films how varying discourses regarding children have shaped Swedish children's films, but how the idea of what is best for the child has continued to be the guiding theme. Janson builds on David Buckingham, who argues that culture aimed at children has often had two purposes: to protect children from harm, and to include aspects considered beneficial which can guide children. This pedagogical element in children's film has been highlighted in studies of films from other contexts as well (Wojcik-Andrews) and in studies of other cultural forms too (Nikolajeva, *Power*).

I reason that the pedagogical aspect of children's films in particular makes it worthwhile to analyze how religion and religious themes are presented in children's films. Because of the nature of children's films, representations in these can be argued to illustrate ideas about what is seen as 'acceptable' religion: religion that is considered suitable even for children. Janson argues that in art and literature children have often, because of the naiveté connected to them, been presented as saying how things really are and as an intermediary between gods and humans (73). Thus children in comparison to adults often come across supernatural religious beings and connect to them, but these representations also include a pedagogical message and highlight adult and societal attitudes to religion. However, at the same time the films point to social attitudes to and understandings of children and childhood and can be argued to underline the adult world's need to see children in a certain way and have them fulfil certain functions, functions they cannot themselves fulfill (Janson; Rose). These functions can include the role of intermediary between humans and supernatural beings, a role that adults, for various reasons, cannot realize. Both the way religion is represented in the films and the roles presented for children in relation to religion are thus worthy of exploration when one wants to capture perspectives on religion today.

In this study I focus on Nordic children's fantasy films, films that include either religious supernatural characters – characters that have non-everyday powers and are connected to a religious sphere – or a clear Christmas theme. The films can all largely be characterized as fantasy films and I argue that the specific genre of the films, not just that they are children's films, is important to take into account in the analysis. As has often been pointed out, there is no single accepted definition of fantasy (Clute), nor is there a strict need for one, but it is of importance that researchers clarify their use of the concept and highlight what identifying a film as fantasy brings to the analysis. In this study I understand fantasy in line with Clute's presentation of the genre; that is to say as "a story which is impossible in the world as we perceive it" (338). As I will show though, several of the films open up different readings of the non-everyday elements they present. They can be seen as the fantasies of children, but also as "real" fantastical elements, and I argue that this latter reading is the reading that generally wins out. I also agree with Brian Attebery's notion that fantasy can be seen as

a "fuzzy set" with a common center, but no defined boundaries (12), but I have found particularly Farah Mendlesohn's categories to be useful when analyzing the different films and their fantastic elements and I will return to Mendlesohn in my analysis. By looking at the films discussed in this article as fantasy I bring into my analysis an understanding of how fantasy films and stories work, an understanding that is needed, I argue, for one to comprehend the way both children and religious themes are presented in the films. In line with others in the field (Nikolajeva, *Power*, "The Development"; Butler) I particularly find that the fantasy genre can open up a space for children's agency, an agency that fantasy characters, be they connected to a religious sphere or not, can help highlight.

The films I analyze next have been chosen because they together indicate some recurring ways of representing religion in contemporary Nordic children's fantasy films, but also because they individually offer noteworthy depictions of both religious themes and children. With their very direct focus on religious themes the first three films I explore are somewhat unusual, however, they do at the same time capture what I argue are common attitudes to religion in the Nordic countries. I start my analysis with a Swedish film from 2002 directed by Ulf Malmros, *We Can Be Heroes!/Bäst i Sverige!*, a film where the fantastic is represented by none other than Jesus. I then turn to two films where the main protagonist encounters an angel, first a Danish film from 2000 directed by Natasha Arthy, *Miracle/Mirakel*, then a Norwegian film from 2008 directed by Jesper W. Nielsen, *Through a Glass, Darkly/I et speil i engåte*. After these films with obvious religious characters and themes I turn to a Finnish film that deals with Christmas. The film I focus on here has a lot in common with other Christmas films, but can in addition be connected to a current discussion on what is the religious aspect of Christmas. In analyzing *Christmas Story/Joulutarina*, a film from 2007 directed by Juha Wuolijoki, I explore what religious themes are to be found in the film and how the story of Christmas is re-interpreted. In the final section I bring the films together and discuss what attitudes to religion the films can be argued to present. I illustrate how the films can be seen to reflect themes found in research on religion in the Nordic countries, but how they also indicate less notable features.

Meeting Jesus

The story of Jesus is alive and well on film. Generally, in the field of religion and film, Jesus on film is separated into Jesus characters and Christ characters; Jesus characters are to be found in films telling the biblical story and Christ characters are conceived of as allegorical representations of the story of the Christian savior, that is to say characters with Christ like traits, such as suffering and sacrificing oneself for others (Malone). Christ characters can be found in Nordic films too (Sjö, "Påjakt") and are fairly common in fantasy stories (Sleight), but coming across Jesus in a film is something relatively original for both Nordic films and children's fantasy films. This makes *We Can Be Heroes!* a worthwhile film to explore, despite its, in many ways, traditional and well-known story.

Simply put, *We Can Be Heroes!* is about a lonely boy desperate to find a friend. The main character is Marcello, a young boy with a rather difficult life, something which is made clear from the first shot of the film. The story starts with three boys, filmed upside down. The reason that they are upside down is because they are shown from Marcello's point of view. Marcello has been tied upside down in a goal, as punishment for being a bad goal keeper. It is thus demonstrated that Marcello is bullied, but this is just one of his many problems. At home Marcello has to deal with the mixed expectations of his parents. Marcello's father wants him to become a great football player, but Marcello is really bad at football, something he does not dare tell his father. Marcello's mother wants him to sing in the boys' choir in the local Catholic Church, but Marcello cannot sing and he

certainly does not want to become a priest, which he believes is his mother's wish. Marcello's biggest problem is, however, that he does not have a single friend.

From the start Marcello is presented as different. His name, the Italian sounding Marcello, highlights that he is not quite Swedish, despite his mother being Swedish and his Italian father having grown up in Sweden and not being able to, as Marcello puts it, even order a pizza in Italian. By being Catholic, and not Lutheran, like a majority of Swedes, Marcello also comes across as different. However, it is this difference which in a sense opens up for the fantastic to enter the story. When in the local Catholic Church, Marcello kneels down and prays next to what looks like a statue of Jesus, who has just been taken down from the cross – at least, Jesus is lying down and wearing a crown of thorns – Jesus suddenly sits up and starts talking to Marcello.

There are different ways of interpreting the Jesus character in *We Can Be Heroes!* The film is full of fantasy sequences, scenes where what Marcello imagines or dreams are shown. Marcello has a vivid imagination and the Jesus character could be seen as part of this imagination. However, the character seems to enter the story in a more direct way than any of Marcello's other dreams or fantasies. It is therefore possible to interpret *We Can Be Heroes!* as an example of what Farah Mendlesohn calls the "liminal fantasy". In stories of this kind "magic, or the possibility of magic, is part of the consensus reality". Furthermore, Mendlesohn continues, in these stories the fantastic and its "magical origins barely raises an eyebrow" and "the protagonist demonstrates no surprise" (18-19). Marcello is not at all astonished by the fact that Jesus talks to him and later comes to visit him. When Jesus has a real physical effect on Marcello's world – he makes 899 crowns in one crown coins suddenly rain down from Marcello's ceiling – Marcello and his sister, who also sees this happening, are somewhat amazed, but Marcello quickly understands it simply as a miracle, in line with a Christian discourse.

Overall the film presents the religious sphere and its spaces and characters as mostly kind and safe. Marcello does not like to sing in the choir, but he expresses no negative emotions towards the church as such. The priest in the church is a fairly young man who talks kindly to the choir members, encouraging the person who does not sing on key, that is to say Marcello, to not sing so loudly during the Sunday service. Jesus in turn is, in accordance with the Bible story, a man in his thirties. He comes across as quite relaxed, but un-willing to perform any great miracles. His advice to Marcello is usually simply that Marcello should use his brain. The miracle with the coins Jesus explains as being a case of Marcello borrowing money from his future self, something which Marcello seems to have thought of and Jesus has helped realize.

Despite the obvious connection to religious themes in the film, there are not that many obviously religious characters in it – that is to say characters who express their faith, have a position in a religious group or are directly connected to a religious setting. While Marcello's father is the one with the Italian heritage, it is actually Marcello's mother who insists on them being Catholic. Marcello's father shows no interest in religion, but his mother regularly goes to church. Her interest in Catholicism is explained by her having worked as an au pair in Italy when she was younger and having fallen in love with everything Italian. Apart from her, the only religious characters in the film are Marcello, the priest and Jesus. However, one character who needs to be mentioned, mainly because she is in fact not presented as religious, is Fatima, the girl who becomes Marcello's friend over the course of the film. At the start of the film, Fatima moves into a neighboring house with her father and two brothers. Fatima's mother is dead, having been killed by a grenade. Where exactly this happened is unclear. Fatima is first presented as Lebanese, but later calls herself Palestinian. Her story is fairly typical for Nordic films about immigrants, both when it comes to her mother being dead and the way she has to struggle with the expectations of her family and their ideas about how she should behave as a girl (Sjö, "Go with Peace"). However, she and her family do not come across as religious – they are never shown praying or talking about faith and their house includes no direct religious symbols.

Being religious thus sets off Marcello as different, but his faith is at the same time represented as something quite useful that helps him deal with his problems. As a character Jesus fills the role of guide and helper, but a guide and helper that opens up a space for Marcello to act and take control, rather than giving any simple solutions. Interestingly the film does not do away with Marcello's fantasies either, but instead towards the end allows the fantasy to come true. It is Marcello's dream to be able to fly and towards the end of the film he jumps off a multistory building with a hang glider and instead of falling to his death graciously flies around the houses, showing himself off to his family and friends. At the end of the film, Marcello has thus not just found a friend, but also found something he is really good at.

Among Angels and Children

There are both some notable similarities and differences between *We Can Be Heroes!* and the second film I want to discuss here, *Miracle*. The main character in both films is a young boy with lots of problems. Dennis P in *Miracle* has to deal with an overprotective mother who has not been able to move on with her life after the death of Dennis P's father and is constantly worried that something else bad will happen. Furthermore, Dennis P and his best friend Mick are in love with the same girl and the girl, Karen Elise, seems more interested in Mick than in Dennis P. Last but not least, Dennis P is the only boy in his class who does not yet have any pubic hairs, something that upsets Dennis P a great deal. Similarly to Marcello, Dennis P has also got a vivid imagination. The film is full of daydreaming sequences, sequences that are clearly presented as different from everyday reality. When Dennis P starts imagining things his life turns into a musical, with all the characters dancing and singing while dressed in colorful attire. A final similarity between the boys is that they both encounter a religious supernatural being. In Dennis P's case it is an angel who looks very much like his dead father.

The first time Dennis P sees the angel is when he and Mick walk past a church on their way to school. For a moment a man dressed in white and with wings on his back appears in the doorway, but when Dennis P looks back the man is gone. Neither Dennis P nor his mother comes across as religious, but Dennis P is friends with the owner of the local grill, Giorgos, a very religious man. Giorgos is often shown crossing himself and in his restaurant he has a small alter with a statue of the Madonna and an icon. Apart from this he regularly tells the boys old proverbs, proverbs that often have as their main point that if you have problems you should turn to God. When Dennis P's situation finally becomes too difficult for him to handle, he takes Giorgos' advice and goes to church. In the empty church, Dennis P prays for help and help arrives, in the form of the angel on top of a motorcycle. Soon the whole church is full of people dressed in white and singing and Dennis P enthusiastically joins in the musical-like performance. Dennis P is told by the white angel, who calls himself a white messenger, that he will be granted an angel license. This means all his wishes will come true. However, if he curses, his abilities will immediately disappear. Since Dennis P is known to curse quite a lot, this is a challenge and causes Dennis P problems, but at first he is very happy about his abilities.

In line with fantasy stories of this kind, stories in which the main protagonist is given god-like powers, things start off well, but soon spiral out of control. Dennis P does not only wish things into existence, he also changes the personalities of people around him who cause him problems, such as his mother and his teacher. He makes Karen Elise fall in love with him after she has told him she likes him but likes his friend Mick better. Finally, Dennis P changes Mick, whose fashion sense he has already drastically altered, so that instead of loving Karen Elise he hates her. What follows is chaos, and naturally, when things get too much for Dennis P, he curses.

At this point Dennis P meets the angel again and begs him for a last chance to make things right, and he is given one more wish. As can be expected, he wishes that all his wishes will be

undone. This is of course a classic ending to a story of this kind, which often seems to grant children agency just to show them that they do not know what is best for them. As Nikolajeva (*Power*, 139-153) has illustrated, there is often an ideological tone to these stories, with the norms of the grown up world being set up as the best alternative. However, in *Miracle* the classic story has been allowed to develop. Yes, Dennis P's wishes come undone, but at the same time his wishes have had an effect. For one thing, Dennis P's mother has met Dennis P's teacher and they have fallen in love, something that has made both of them happier and nicer. While Mick and Karen Elise are now allowed to become a couple, Dennis P is also finally allowed to find someone to fall in love with when a new girl moves into his house. And most importantly for Dennis P, he has managed to get his own first pubic hair all by himself.

Thus in *Miracle* one finds a rather classic fantasy tale where the fantastic element is connected to the religious sphere. It is a tale that to some extent has a rather traditional message, but also allows the child to have agency. Again religion is thus allowed to, in a sense, work in the child's favor, but at the same time it is not given too much focus or presented as the best choice in the end. *Miracle* is, like *We Can Be Heroes!,* largely an example of liminal fantasy, in the sense that the magic is not questioned and not much time is spent on explanations (Mendlesohn). Coming across angels can, however, cause more of a surprise and represent more of an intrusion, as it does in *Through a Glass, Darkly.*

The title, *Through a Glass, Darkly*, refers to a Bible passage, 1 Cor. 13.12. In *Through a Glass, Darkly* this verse and the preceding one is read: "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (*King James Version*, 1. Cor. 13.11-12). As the title and the Bible verses connected to it suggest, the film deals with existential issues, specifically death. This might sound like an unusual subject matter for a children's fantasy film. However, as Bjerkeland has illustrated, death is a rather recurring topic in Nordic children's and youth films. It is furthermore a topic often and interestingly connected with Christmas. In short, the films are often given a Christmas setting, with the joyous holiday working as a contrast to the theme of death, and the topic of death at the same time bringing a darker aspect to Christmas.

Despite its dark theme, *Through a Glass, Darkly* is not a particularly dark film. The film is based on a novel by the Norwegian children's and youth author Jostein Gaarder. According to Bjerkeland, Gaarder's books present "a fearless treatment of major existential questions that does not talk down to its child audience" (233). In *Through a Glass, Darkly* the theme to be treated is death, but also life. This is all done with the help of a religious supernatural being, the angel Ariel. As with the two films discussed earlier, in *Through a Glass, Darkly* too the fantastic elements can be interpreted in different ways. They can be seen as a dying girl's hallucinations or fantasies, but by being directly represented and given center stage it is at least clear that the angel the main character Cecilie meets becomes very real to her. In contrast to both Marcello and Dennis P, Cecilie approaches her heavenly visitors with a great deal of skepticism. In line with the intrusive form of fantasy, as defined by Mendlesohn, the setting is one we know, but the fantastic brings a challenge to this setting and is not directly accepted as it is in liminal fantasy stories. Instead the fantastic represents an intrusion that needs explaining. Cecilie is thus surprised when the angel appears and she is full of questions about who he is and where he comes from. The angel is also interested in the world of humans, and Cecilie and Ariel agree to share experiences: Cecilie will tell Ariel about what it is like to be human and Ariel will tell Cecilie about the place he comes from.

Through her agreement with Ariel Cecilie is allowed to experience many things for a last, and sometimes even for a first time, and she is in a sense prepared for her own death. In the company of the angel Cecilie does not feel sick, and she is even allowed to experience what it feels like to fly. What awaits her on the other side is, however, never really revealed. Ariel, as it turns out,

has no clear answers, or if he does he is not willing to share them. This frustrates Cecilie at times, but in the end, she follows Ariel to whatever comes next.

The Christmas setting is central to *Through a Glass, Darkly*. It becomes clear to everyone that this is Cecilie's last Christmas, which makes what should be a holiday of joy into just as much a time of loss and sadness. The cold winter landscape of Norway in the Christmas season is furthermore notably contrasted with a trip to Spain when Cecilie was well and where she fell in love with a local boy, a trip which she cannot stop thinking about. Cecilie's memories of her trip are, in contrast to the now of her story, filmed in soft colors and a warm yellow light, highlighting this as a very different time and space. In the company of the angel too, however, time and space becomes something different and Cecilie becomes the energetic girl she was in Spain.

Though the Christmas setting and the presence of an angel makes it easy to connect the film to Christianity, this is a film that at a closer reading presents few direct connections to a specific religious tradition. While Marcello and Dennis P both encounter their heavenly guides in churches, Cecilie first sees the angel in a mirror, and he later appears at her home. Cecilie's grandmother, to whom Cecilie is very close, reads the Christmas story from the Bible on Christmas, and also reads the passage from Corinthians quoted above, a passage she says is her favorite. However, like the angel, she has no clear answers to give, and neither Cecilie's grandmother nor Ariel ever talk about god. What comes next is thus an open question in *Through a Glass, Darkly*; instead, similarly to other films about death, the film is really about life, love, and finding joy in the little things.

Re-imagining Christmas

The last film I want to discuss, *Christmas Story*, also focuses on Christmas and at least partly re-works the story of Santa Claus. Finnish film-makers have lately contributed a great deal to the Christmas film genre and sometimes in rather unusual ways. In the animated film *The Flight before Christmas/Niko – lentäjänpoika* from 2008, directed by Michael Hegner and Kari Juusonen, and its follow up *The Magic Reindeer/Niko 2 – lentäjäveljekset*, from 2012, directed by Kari Juusonen and Jørgen Lerdam, the focus is on the adventures and troubles of young flying reindeer. In *Rare Exports: A Christmas Tale/Rare Exports* from 2010, directed by Jalmari Helander, the Christmas tale of Santa Claus is re-imagined for an adult audience, but with a child in the leading role. The result is an apocalyptic story with the child as savior (Copier). The subject matter of *Christmas Story* is more peaceful, but just as in *Rare Exports* the true story of Santa Claus is the central theme. Similarly to other Finnish Christmas films, the film does not directly focus on the Christian Christmas story, the birth of Jesus Christ, but it is still interesting to see which religious themes are included in the film.

In short, *Christmas Story* tells the story of how the young orphan boy Nikolas became Santa Claus. Nikolas lives in northern Finland, in the area where Santa Claus is believed to live, the mountain Korvatunturi. The time of the story is an undefined past. Early on Nikolas loses his parents and young sister, but even before this we are told that Nikolas has come up with the idea of giving children presents at Christmas. When his family drowns on the lake, Nikolas is preparing a gift for his sister, a gift he gives her after her death by placing it in the lake.

Since the village where Nikolas lives is very poor, it is decided that each family will take care of Nikolas for one year. In this way Nikolas gets to know the whole village, and each Christmas when he leaves for his new family, he gives all the children in the family and all the children in the families where he has stayed before gifts. Nikolas finally ends up with the mean old carpenter Isak. In the end Isak turns out not to be so mean, but just very lonely. Nikolas stays with Isak, and Isak leaves him his house and enough money to continue making gifts for children his whole life. Now Nikolas truly steps into the role of Santa Claus, even training some reindeer to pull his sled.

When Nikolas becomes old he and his young friend Ada, named after Nikolas's dead sister and one of the few who knows Nikolas's secret identity as Santa, decides that this is the last year that Nikolas will deliver gifts. During the trip he mysteriously disappears. When the next Christmas arrives, Ada finds out that her husband and other parents in the village have decided to continue giving the children gifts, pretending they are from Santa Claus. At first Ada is upset; however, when she and her family deliver the last gift Nikolas has left for his sister to the lake, a bright star suddenly appears in the sky, and out of the star flies Nikolas with his reindeers. Thus through others' continuing of the tradition of giving, Santa would seem to have really come alive.

Are there any religious themes to be found in this story? The community where Nikolas grows up celebrates Christmas, but, with the exception of the Turku cathedral appearing in the background when Isak and Nikolas sell their products at a market in the city, no clear, specific Christian references are to be found in the film. As mentioned, this is often the case in Finnish Christmas films and in Christmas films more generally too (Agajanian). It is also not that surprising, since a Christmas story without a clear link to a religious tradition can no doubt reach a larger audience than an obviously religious film. On the other hand, the film can also be argued to point to a secular view on Christmas. As Christopher Deacy (*Christmas*) among others has highlighted, many today underline how secular Christmas traditions are taking the place of religious ones. As Waits argues, "secular aspects of the [Christmas] celebration, such as gift giving, the Christmas dinner, and the gathering of family members, have dwarfed its religious aspects in resources spent and in concern given" (3) However, Nikolas's gift giving very clearly becomes a central ritual for him and for others. Furthermore, from the beginning this ritual is something that goes beyond the here and now and those in the present, since it starts with Nikolas giving a gift to his dead sister. Laine has convincingly argued for *Christmas Story* being about generosity and hospitality. The film illustrates the complexity of giving and receiving gifts. However, the film can also be related to a current discussion by Deacy ("The 'religion'"; *Christmas*) on what is the religious in Christmas. That traditional religious themes are not the focus of Christmas for many today does not, according to Deacy, mean that Christmas cannot still fill a religious function. Gift giving at Christmas might, argues Deacy, not have a traditional religious purpose, but it is a ritual behavior that, like many other secular activities, provides meaning and a central break with the everyday. It is thus, argues Deacy, "not a 'secular' analogue of Christian 'sacred time'. It is 'sacred time' per se" ("The 'religion'", 199), something clearly illustrated by Nikolas in *Christmas Story*.

Whether one agrees with Deacy's understanding of the religious potential of contemporary Christmas celebrations or not, the way that both the young and the old Nikolas invests himself in gift giving and the celebration of Christmas illustrates the importance of ritual settings such as Christmas and the potential sacred role – in the sense of providing meaning – that a secular celebration of Christmas too can provide. The film also illustrates in an important way, by its focus on the role of the child and Christmas, how it is through children that this alternative sacred sphere is actualized in our contemporary context.

Meaning beyond Tradition

What do the four films discussed above suggest about attitudes to religion today? In this final section I want to bring the films together, without, however, proposing that they all tell an identical story. Placed under the same lens they do, nonetheless, I argue, present certain common outlooks on religion in contemporary Nordic society.

Generally in the films, traditional religious spaces are presented as rather inviting and unthreatening. In many Nordic films churches are the setting of quite traumatic events and difficult emotions (Sjö, "Filmic constructions"), but this is usually not the case in children's films. On the other hand, though traditional religious spaces appear in two of the films, the focus on traditional

religious beliefs is quite limited. None of the films are thus particularly interested in specific belief systems or ideas of correct ways of being religious. As long as one does not curse, it would seem, one can have heavenly forces on one's side. The religious spaces do to some extent become areas where agency is offered the young protagonists, but the lack of any discussion of what faith means and entails is worth noticing. This lack of specific beliefs and principles of correct behavior highlights a certain ideal: as long as religion fills these principles it is okay; if it demands something more it does not seem to have a place in children's films, nor, perhaps, in children's lives – or for that matter the lives of adults.

Though the films do not express any direct aversion towards religion, they do not present religion as something everyday or 'normal' either. In both *We Can Be Heroes!* and *Miracle* a direct and open expression of faith is in fact connected to the character who is in some sense 'Other' or different. Marcello, being Catholic and part Italian, is no average Swedish boy. It is, I would argue, unlikely that a story about an ethnic Swedish boy entering a Lutheran church and meeting Jesus would work as well as *We Can Be Heroes!* In *Miracle* in turn, Giorgos, Dennis P's religious friend who encourages him to go to church, is no regular Danish man. He is of Greek descent, and Greek orthodox. In a Nordic context religion is thus evidently connected to those who are presented as somewhat different from the norm. Consequently, when an angel comes to an ethnic Norwegian girl, as he does in *Through a Glass, Darkly*, he comes across as rather secular and not connected to an obvious religious tradition.

Despite the aversion to tradition and set beliefs and behaviors, the films do express the idea of religion being of use in a crisis, or at least that one tends to turn to religion in a crisis. Both Marcello and Dennis P prays when their problems become too great. Cecilie in turn meets an angel when she is about to die, and Nikolas performs a ritual act of giving when he loses his family. Though faith does not come across as useless in the films I have analyzed above, it can be discussed how useful it is. Instead of giving simple answers, Jesus encourages Marcello to use his head. Instead of directly solving Dennis P's problems, the angel gives him angelic powers that mostly seem to screw things up more. And instead of giving a clear answer and something to believe in regarding a life after death, Cecilie's angel makes her appreciate the life here and now. Religious faith, according to the films discussed here, can thus be of some help, but it does not provide any simple answers.

The way Christmas is represented in *Through a Glass, Darkly* and *Christmas Story* underlines the central role of this holiday in the Nordic context. It is not inconsequential that Cecilie's story takes place around Christmas. The time frame is surely chosen because of what Christmas time means to people in the Nordic countries and the way people's connection to the holiday when contrasted with death can heighten certain emotions (Bjerkeland). However, in neither *Through a Glass, Darkly* nor *Christmas Story* is it the Christian aspect of Christmas that is central. Though, following Deacy, one can argue that Christmas, whether it is celebrated as a religious holiday or not, can still offer religious meaning in the sense of opening up a sacred time and space, the Christmas setting as such cannot simply be interpreted as a sign of the importance of religion.

On a general level, all of this fits quite well with contemporary views on religion in the Nordic contexts. The Nordic countries are usually understood to be fairly secular nations where religion is of marginal importance (Casanova). Religion is often considered to be a private matter that one should be able to decide about oneself, and specific traditions and dogmas are for many not of any great interest (Botvar). A Christian heritage is still noticeable (Bäckström), and Christmas continues to be a central holiday, but a holiday not necessarily connected to questions of faith. One could also argue that the fact that it is in children's films and in fantasy that angels and Jesus appear underlines the limited position of religion in the Nordic countries: religion is placed in the margins. But this is only one way of reading the films and one perspective on religion in the Nordic

countries. An alternative story that the films present, and which research also highlights (Partridge; Sjö, "Bad religion"), is the continuous interest in questions of meaning, faith and transcendence in Western secular contexts. In the films I have analyzed, it is children that are allowed to encounter religious supernatural beings. This can highlight that religion is given restricted importance – it belongs to children and fantasy and is something you grow out of – but it can also point to an understanding of the transcendent as something difficult and hard to reach that is partly thought of as out of bounds for the grown-up world, but which can be glimpsed in the worlds of children. Building on previous research on what representations of children say about society (Rose; Janson; Nikolajeva), the films can be argued to suggest that because of our own restrictions as adults, we need children to fill the role of mediators between us and a transcendent sphere. This does not mean that religion in a traditional sense of groups and dogmas is on its way back and that secularization is not taking place, but it does point to the fact that in a secular society too questions of meaning and reflections on something beyond have a place. Through among other things children's fantasy films a door to something beyond is kept open.

To summarize, the way religion is represented in children's fantasy films underlines certain ideas about religion and 'acceptable' religion. The films discussed above suggest that not all forms of religion are considered suitable in contemporary Nordic society. Religious spaces come across as quite safe, as do religious supernatural beings, but they do not offer a lot of answers. Dogmas are of little interest and being religious is seen as more "normal"' for the Other. However, religion and questions of faith and transcendence do still have a role to play, but this role is complex. Placing encounters with the transcendent in the world of children and fantasy can be seen as a way of restricting its importance, but also of highlighting its continuing significance but intricate position. Future studies will hopefully continue to explore what we can learn about religion through popular culture and what children's fantasy films from different contexts can bring to the debate. The four films I have analyzed in this article tell a noteworthy story, but they do of course not tell the whole story.

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