

Faith in Fantasy

A brief discussion of the role played by faith in fantasy, focusing particularly on work by James Islington and Tasha Suri.

Hello and welcome to this episode of the Oxford Fantasy Literature podcast. I'm Katherine Olley, a Junior Research Fellow in Medieval Studies here in Oxford and today I'm going to be talking a little bit about the role played by faith in fantasy literature. And a warning here for spoilers for the following fantasy novels: James Islington's Licanus Trilogy and Tasha Suri's *Realm of Ash*.

My interest in this topic was sparked by a passage I read in James Islington's *The Light of all that Falls*, the concluding novel in his Licanus Trilogy. The central conflict of his trilogy revolves around a group of near-immortals called the Venerate, most of whom believe that they have been recruited by El, the great benevolent creator deity of Islington's fantasy world, to save that world from the evil deity/demon Shammaeloth. They believe that El has been trapped inside his creation by the machinations of Shammaeloth who has set the world upon a predestined course from which only the Venerate can free it, thereby liberating El from the bounds of time in which he is encased and returning free will to the world. In pursuit of this goal the Venerate have committed great acts of good as well as evil. However, as their evil deeds accumulate, some of them begin to doubt that the entity that speaks to them and drives them on this mission is in fact the benevolent El, and begin to fear it is instead Shammaeloth, deceiving them into thinking they are freeing El whilst He is really encouraging them to widen a breach between worlds which will allow the evil of the spirit world beyond, the Darklands, to flood the earth with pain and suffering. Islington takes a long time to confirm for the reader which of these two opposing views is the true one, leaving a sliver of doubt as to whether it is El or Shammaeloth whom the Venerate have been serving until quite far through the trilogy.

In the course of his adventures, one of the book's main protagonists, Davian, meets a man called Raeleth, a man exiled by the Venerate for preaching against their belief in "El". Davian is somewhat taken aback by the strength of Raeleth's conviction that the Venerate are wrong about El, something that Davian himself, though he considers the Venerate his enemy, has not fully accepted/has not fully thought through. There follows an interesting discussion between them as Raeleth sets out his rationale for objecting to the aims of the Venerate and their desire to free El from the constraints of the world and, as they think, restore free will. He lays out his beliefs for Davian in the following words (pp. 325-26)¹:

"A world where all possibilities are promised is, by necessity, a world in which God cannot take part. Cannot choose to affect the world in any way. If He exerts his will even a fraction, He is by definition changing how things could have been. He is removing possible outcomes. [...] They [the Venerate] are trying to convince everyone that our creator wished to create a world in which he could not take part. Could not help, guide, or save. In which he was *functionally irrelevant*." He goes on a few lines later: "The El I believe in is not just the creator of this world but inextricably tied to it—if He were to withdraw from it, it would

¹ *The Light of All that Falls*, 325–26.

cease to be as we know it. It would become a place where all the things we value, all things that have beauty and life and meaning, are simply not possible.”

Raeleth’s passionate defence of a God who would not [quote] “abandon us to ourselves” (p. 327) but rather intervene to help and guide, struck me as a rare occurrence in fantasy literature, in that it is a depiction, and a convincing one, of faith. Very rarely in my reading of fantasy have I come across such a thing. Let me clarify at this point that when I say faith here, I mean an expression of a personal and profoundly held belief in contrast to the structures and dogma of an organised religious system. Though religion does not have to be a feature of fantasy writing (Tolkein’s *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are good examples of books in which religion plays hardly any role) it has come to have a growing presence and most fantasy works these days have some kind of imagined religious belief system or systems to flesh out their cultural world or multiple worlds.

It is quite unusual, however, for these belief systems to have more than a what I would call a fairly superficial impact on the characters’ motivations and actions. In a culture of scepticism and relativism most writers depict religion from an omniscient impersonal perspective in their work, viewing it as a cultural particularism rather than an objective reality, rather like a sort of fictional anthropologist, probing fantasy religions for understanding about their doctrines and rituals rather than seeking enlightenment. The interiority of religious belief or faith as a personal experience is rarely given much thought, instead belief is often either two-dimensional, telling rather than showing, as by frequent allusions and invocations to the relevant fantasy Gods, or else insincere, with religion used as a front for other motivations usually political or power-orientated. I would argue, in fact, that the fundamentally secular outlook of many fantasy characters, in particular main characters, is one of the features which jars most strongly against their medievalist setting, which harks back to a world shot through with faith and religion, a world in which that kind of divide, between the religious and the secular, had very little meaning.

Why someone believes in a certain faith is very rarely explored in fantasy writing. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, for example, we are never given any real insight into why Melisandre believes so completely in R’hllor, even in the chapter written from her point of view in *A Dance with Dragons*. We must simply accept that she does, for unspecified reasons. So, while her behaviour is shaped by her beliefs it’s superficial in the sense that her beliefs rest upon a shallow foundation and we cannot see how her faith is individually and personally inflected and how that feeds into her actions. Similarly, in David Hair’s *Moontide Quartet*, which for a series all about religious warfare contains strikingly few characters who hold a genuine belief in the religions Hair creates, all of which are closely-based on real-world examples, there is no interior explanation for or exploration of Ramita Ankesharan’s Omali faith, it is simply a product of her upbringing in Lakh. While her faith is occasionally challenged throughout the series, by each of her husbands, for example, both of whom are religiously ambivalent or atheist, Ramita simply brushes these disagreements aside, they do not provoke her, or by extension the author, to reflect on her personal experience of her faith.

So, I was particularly struck by Islington’s sudden sidestep into what you might call fantasy theology where we get a sense of exactly why Raeleth believes in El the way he does and

though it may initially seem to be a minor scene I actually think Raeleth's words are key to understanding the Licanus trilogy as a whole. The narrative arc of Tal'kamar, the most prominent member of the Venerate, throughout the series is a journey towards the most pivotal moment in his life, the moment which sowed a seed of doubt in him, causing him to question the directions of, as it turns out, the false "El". Indeed, that scene, which sets Tal'kamar on the road he walks over the course of the books constitutes the very final scene of the trilogy, emphasising that the most important struggle in the books has not been the protagonists' fight against Shammaeloth and those Venerate still loyal to him but has been the interior struggle of Tal'kamar himself, a struggle that is spiritual rather than actual. In a series that has doubt as such a central theme, Raeleth's exposition of faith in spite of personal suffering, in spite of doubts that he too has suffered emerges as a kind of interpretative key to the whole trilogy, elevating it from a highly traditional fantasy narrative of good versus evil into something more nuanced about the symbiotic relationship between faith and doubt and the world-changing consequences of profound personal belief.

I would like to turn briefly before finishing to another novel which likewise locates power in the person of the believer and in their faith itself rather than seeing it as invested solely in the deity being venerated. Tasha Suri's *Realm of Ash* contains a scene in which the heroine Arwa confronts a nightmare, a kind of demonic creature intent upon provoking massacre in a pilgrim camp/caravanserai. While the nightmare infects the camp with a preternatural fear the residents of the home for widows in which the nightmare has been hiding are spared because they have unwittingly been offering the nightmare prayers and tokens of worship. "Worship had power" Suri writes (p. 358) and with this knowledge Arwa is able to save the camp. A similar attack by another nightmare later in the novel is likewise fended off by an act of collective prayer on the part of the travelling pilgrims until, as Suri describes it, "The fear remained but it was...quiet. So very quiet. Arwa thought again, of a tide against the shore, of the way a river of voices could wear a nightmare's bones smooth, given time." (p. 382). As in Islington's work, Suri highlights here the power of faith (rather than just the power of the gods, which is actually something quite different) to effect real-world change and she is quite particular about faith rather than ritual being the wellspring, emphasising that the pilgrims all "had different prayers. Their litanies and mantras and songs jumbled together in a great cacophony of noise." (p. 381-2) Once again, as with Islington's *The Light of All that Falls*, these small scenes prove pivotal to the novel's main narrative arc which concerns finding a remedy for the curse which lies over the Ambhan Empire for it is in these acts of prayer and worship that Arwa ultimately finds what she calls "a slow way through the dark" (p. 404), offering remedy for the Empire's ills that does not entail further exploitation of its people.

Both Islington and Suri find and explore the larger power inherent in seemingly small personal acts of faith (and its obverse, doubt) demonstrating that it is possible to treat faith seriously in fantasy while maintaining a fully imaginary world, i.e. without needing to make their work an allegory of any real-world religious belief, and thereby bring in my opinion an extra and much needed dimension to the fictional worlds that they create. Thanks for listening. [11 mins]