The convergence of sacred and-secular space in selected postmodern novels

S. Romylos

21926115

B.A., H.E.D., B.A. HONS.

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Supervisor: Prof. A. M. de Lange

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Abstract

This dissertation focuses on the return and revitalization of traditional Christian themes in contemporary postmodern novels. It offers an examination of how these themes materialize in novels written by writers who are not explicitly religious, or in novels which do not have an overtly religious focus. Some contemporary novels generate a privileged space in which the return of the religious can take place. The sacred is back, not just as a re-enchantment, but manifests itself in fundamentally new and productive ways (Ward, 2001:xv). The first matter under consideration is the fact that the co-existence of belief and unbelief is apparent in all the novels under discussion. As such, the reader as active participant in the novel is bound to be affected by these mutually inter-dependent and inextricably inter-connected sides of a coin. The themes of providence, sacrifice and the miraculous become evident in John Irving's *A prayer for Owen Meany* while the themes of sin, guilt and redemption feature in Ian McEwan's *Atonement.* Secondly, the study compares two novels that deal with the same supernatural phenomena, namely visions, faith healing and stigmata. Jodi Picoult is a non-believer and is the author of *Keeping Faith*, while Ron Hansen is a devout Catholic who wrote *Mariëtte in ecstasy.* These works, on the one hand, create a space for supernatural phenomena even though fiction cannot prove the reality of their existence. Postmodern people seem to have a definite longing for the miraculous and these novels seem to satisfy that yearning. On the other hand, both novels portray disbelief in the miraculous while subtly allowing room for characters or readers in a liminal space between belief and disbelief. The theories of Jean François Lyotard and specifically his notion of "incredulity towards metanarratives" provide a framework to explore this matter. Lyotard proposes "petit recits" or many small stories instead of the grand narratives. He contends that there is no objective knowledge and that narrative and scientific knowledge are subject to legitimization. The Christian story therefore needs no scientific basis as justification, which means that it is being newly considered after the mistrust created during the Enlightenment period. Gianteresio Vattimo's ideas on the role of religion in contemporary life and the possible convergences of postmodernity and the Christian faith also come into play. He advocates weak thought as opposed to strong thought and sees *caritas* (charity or neighbourly love) as essential. This concept of weak thought allows for plurality and tolerance. Vattimo sees Christ's *kenosis* (self-emptying) as essentially linked to a secularization in which humankind needs to retrace the path to the original Biblical message of love. Emphasis is on a non-doctrinal, anti-dogmatic spirituality and this manifests in the novels discussed. This study employs diverse reader-response theories to gauge the reaction of the reader to texts containing Biblical themes and supernatural phenomena. Stanley Fish's interpretive communities and Wolfgang Iser's implied reader are helpful and Michael Edwards's pattern of sin, the fall and redemption is of particular interest to this dissertation. Edwards believes that most novels, whether written by religious or non-religious writers, follow this pattern. Readers

find themselves either on the side of the believing or unbelieving camp in the novels discussed. However, many readers may hover in the liminal space between belief and unbelief. Interpretation depends on many factors that constitute the world view of the reader, hence the plurality of interpretations.

Databases consulted: EBSCOhost Web; ABES; MLA; Humanities Index; Nexus; Gkpv

Keywords: Fiction, religion, faith, postmodernism, spirituality, *A prayer for Owen Meany, Atonement, Keeping Faith, Mariëtte in ecstasy,* John Irving, Ian McEwan, Jodi Picoult and Ron Hansen, reader.

Opsomming

Hierdie skripsie fokus op die terugkeer en hernuwing van Christelike temas in kontemporêre postmoderne werk. Die studie het ten doel om te bepaal hoe hierdie temas realiseer in tekste wat geskryf is deur skrywers wat nie eksplisiet gelowig is nie of in tekste wat nie 'n openlike godsdienstige fokus het nie. Die kontemporêre roman skep 'n bevoorregte ruimte waarin die terugkeer na die godsdienstige kan plaasvind. Die gewyde keer nie net as 'n herbetowering terug nie, maar manifesteer fundamenteel in nuwe en produktiewe wyses. Die gelyktydige verskyning van geloof en ongeloof is duidelik in al die tekste wat bespreek word en die leser as aktiewe deelnemer in die roman is genoop om beinvloed te word deur die wedersydse interafhanklike en onlosmaaklik verbonde kante van 'n munt. Die temas van voorsienigheid, opoffering en die wonderbaarlike kom na vore in John Irving se *A prayer for Owen Meany* terwyl die temas van sonde, skuld en bevryding voorkom in Ian McEwan se *Atonement.* Die studie vergelyk twee werke wat handel oor dieselfde bonatuurlike verskynsels naamlik visioene, geloofgenesings en die wondertekens van Christus. Jodi Picoult is 'n ongelowige en die skrywer van *Keeping Faith,* terwyl Ron Hansen 'n toegewyde Katoliek is wat *Mariëtte in ecstasy* geskryf het. Albei werke skep ruimte vir bonatuurlike verskynsels, alhoewel fiksie nie die bestaan daarvan kan bewys nie. Die postmoderne mens blyk 'n defnitiewe hunkering na die wonderbaarlike te hê en hierdie werke bevredig dit. Albei werke beskryf gelyktydig die ongeloof in die bonatuurlike terwyl dit subtiel ruimte laat vir diegene wat hulle in 'n tussenruimte tussen geloof en ongeloof bevind. Die teorieë van Jean François Lyotard en spesifiek sy begrip van ongeloof teenoor metaverhale verskaf die raamwerk hiervoor. Lyotard stel *petit recits* of verskeie kleiner stories in plaas van die meesterverhale voor. Hy beweer dat daar geen objektiewe kennis is nie en dat narratiewe en wetenskaplike kennis beide aan geldigverklaring onderwerp is. Die Christelike storie het daarom nie 'n wetenskaplike basis nodig as verdediging nie en word daarom weer opnuut aanvaar na die wantroue wat gespruit het uit die Verligting. Gianteresio Vattimo se idees oor die rol van godsdiens in die kontemporêre lewe en die moontlike saamloop van postmodernisme en die Christelike geloof is ook van belang. Hy bepleit swak denke in teenstelling met sterk denke en sien *caritas* (menseliefde) as noodsaaklik. Die konsep van swak denke erken pluralisme en verdraagsaamheid. Christus se self-venedering word gesien as wesentlik gekoppel aan sekularisme waarin die mens nodig het om die pad na die oorspronklike boodskap van liefde weer op te spoor. Die klem val vir Vattimo op 'n nie-doktrinêre, anti-dogmatiese spiritualiteit en dit manifesteer in die werke onder bespreking.

Die studie maak gebruik van verskillende resepsieteorieë om die reaksie van die lesers op tekste met Bybelse temas en bonatuurlike fenomene te peil. Stanley Fish se gespreksgemeenskappe en Wolfgang Iser se implesiete leser is van waarde, en Michael Edwards se patroon van sonde, val en verlossing is van besondere belang vir hierdie studie. Edwards is van mening dat meeste romans, of dit nou geskryf is deur gelowige skrywers al dan

nie, hierdie patroon volg. Lesers bevind hulle óf aan die kant van die gelowiges óf aan die kant van die ongelowiges in die bespreekte romans. Baie lesers weifel egter in die liminale spasie tussen geloof en ongeloof. Interpretasie berus op baie faktore wat die wêreldbeskouing van die leser vorm, vandaar die talryke interpretasies.

Databasisse geraadpleeg: EBSCOhost Web; ABES; MLA; Humanities Index; Nexus, Gkpv

Sleutelwoorde: Fiksie, godsdiens, geloof, postmodernisme, spiritualiteit, *A prayer for Owen Meany, Atonement, Keeping Faith, Mariëtte in ecstasy,* John Irving, Ian McEwan, Jodi Picoult en Ron Hansen, leser.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

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1.1 Contextualization and problem statement

This dissertation focuses on the return and revitalization of traditional Christian themes in selected postmodern novels.[1] It offers an examination of how these themes materialise in novels written by writers who are not explicitly religious or in novels which do not have an overtly religious focus. This dissertation will furthermore argue that the four selected texts namely, *A prayer for Owen Meany* by John Irving, *Atonement* by Ian McEwan, *Keeping Faith* by Jodi Picoult and *Mariëtte in ecstasy* by Ron Hansen generate a privileged space in which the return of the religious can take place. Selection of texts is based on a number of factors, such as the extent to which the discussed themes manifest in the novels, the manifestation of supernatural phenomena in the texts, explicit or implied comments by the novelists themselves regarding religious themes, and personal preferences of the author of this dissertation. The selected texts also encompass and welcome paradoxes and tensions between the sacred and secular. Chapter five of this dissertation is an attempt to compare the manifestation of supernatural phenomena in two very different novels, the former qualifying as popular fiction, and the latter as serious fiction. The respective writers also differ significantly regarding their stance on faith – Ron Hansen is a devout Catholic, and Jodi Picoult a sceptic.

The Bible and its content features strongly in many contemporary novels. Many writers have commented on this phenomenon. Henn asserts that "the Bible is burned into the timber of English. It has provided literature with proverbs, and parables, and themes, sacred and profane, for epic, satire, tragedy, farce" (cited in Jasper, 2007:18). Ryken (1995:148) calls this Christian element in literature "a direct indebtedness of literature to the Bible" and continues to say that writers have not only raided the Bible for titles of works and names of characters, but also for subject matter. There are numerous Biblical allusions in contemporary literature and according to Ryken the reader's knowledge of the Bible is necessary to interpret a work. It definitely seems as if a culturally informed reader is familiar with the contents of the Bible. Related to Biblical allusions are Biblical archetypes and Ryken mentions as example Dickens' Pip in *Great Expectations.* Pip's life follows the moral journey of the prodigal son in the Bible. Northrop Frye seems to agree with Ryken that one would not know what is going on in English literature without knowledge of the Bible (cited in Ryken, 1995:149). It is a point of contention what the persuasive effect of such content is on the reader, especially an atheist or agnostic

[1] The themes discussed in this dissertation do not only apply to Christianity, but are also concerns of many other religious groups. Only stigmata (dealt with in chapter 5) are an exclusively Christian phenomenon.

reader, although the intention of most writers is not persuasion in whichever direction of thought.

Some writers touch on the persuasive qualities of Biblical themes. Hence, Martel, in his author's note to *Life of Pi,* relates of a stranger in a coffee shop who told him about a story "that will make you believe in God" (Martel, 2002:xii). This sounds far-fetched, but this study contends that fiction that incorporates Biblical content might at the least provoke questions of a spiritual nature or a spiritual quest. One has to keep in mind though that religion in postmodern culture is not restricted to literature. Richard Dawkins's *The God delusion* (2006) and Alain de Botton *Religion for atheists*: *a non-believers guide to the uses of religion* (2013), to name but two, galvanized the debate about religion in our era. Richard Dawkins (2006:5) claims in his book, *The God delusion* that: "If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down." He does, however, admit that such a claim is "presumptuous optimism" as many years of childhood indoctrination will prevent some from even opening his book.

The title of this dissertation refers to a convergence between the sacred and secular. This study will attempt to show just how this convergence takes place in the selected texts. Salman Rushdie (1991:376), in his book *Imaginary homelands: essays and criticisms*, advocates a co-existence of these seemingly incompatible poles:

> If one is to attempt honestly to describe reality as it is experienced by religious people for whom God is no symbol but an everyday fact, then the conventions of what is called realism are quite inadequate. The rationalism of that form comes to seem like a judgement upon, an invalidation of, the religious faith of the characters being described. A form must be created which allows the miraculous and the mundane to co-exist at the same level – as some order of event. I found this essential even though I am not, myself, a religious man.

Rushdie seems to advocate this convergence of sacred and secular and sees it as necessary to portray the contemporary scene effectively. His notion points to a tolerance and inclusion of differing views. The question is, however, whether realism can still today accommodate the supernatural. The novels discussed in this dissertation all follow the realist form and although themes are still fairly easily incorporated, the supernatural poses greater difficulty.

Hass (2007:842-843) makes reference to a change in status concerning the sacred and the secular. He maintains that religion has lost "its supremacy as moral authority", but also that secularity "has lost its position as impenetrable positivist bastion against what it saw as the thinly protected myths of religion and spirituality". This change in the status of sacred and secular implies among other things that the individual can experience spirituality without the necessity of religious institutions. The church, during the Enlightenment, took control of individuals by guarding sacred texts and ways of worshipping and doctrine. Cupitt (1998:3)

mentions that the individual's religious life had to be lived in "subjection to a large and bureaucratic salvation-machine, and personal experience of the highest religious happiness was deferred to the heavenly world after death". Hass also touches on the fact that religion or spirituality is penetrating the secular once again after the modernist period, which considered any form of supernaturalism to be superstition. Although Hass does not see this relationship between sacred and secular as a give and take, a compromise from both sides, it does seem as if there is a mutual interdependence between these erstwhile antinomies. Sacred and secular are bound together and this inseparability leads to a convergence in literature. Contemporary writers find ways to keep the delicate balance between these two extremes.

The sacred implies that there is truth out there, but postmodernism is a philosophy that affirms no absolute truth, especially regarding matters such as religion and spirituality. The aim of this dissertation is not to make general statements concerning postmodernism, as it is not a uniform school. Some postmodernists are more accommodating of faith than others. Even the later Derrida seems to be moving towards a more accommodating position, though in his characteristically playful and multiplex way, while Ricoeur makes faith central, and the later Baudrillard adopts a metaphysical stance at times. The search for truth opens up debates that "can only be described as theological" (Bradley & Tate, 2010:3). Lourdunathan (2008:380) argues that postmodernism has its roots "in the intellectual tradition of modernism which markedly denies the idea of any supreme Being/God as the source of guidance of the universe". He also seems to advocate a peaceful co-existence of sacred and secular or as he calls it atheism and Christian theism. It is his belief that these two mutual boundaries should be conscious of and appreciate each other. Lourdunathan furthermore concurs that these belief-systems are culturally determined and our claims to objectivity must be rejected, which would open up a "profound space" for interaction. He speaks of binaries, e.g. God is or is not, and contends that to consider x holy, the construct requires y, which will be unholiness. The one cannot be valued without the other as a standard to gauge from. This means, for example, that sinfulness and holiness are two sides of the same coin which is marketed culturally (Lourdunathan, 2008:381-384). The practical implication in the selected texts is then the co-existence of these two binary views – belief and unbelief and all the liminal spaces in between.

One may then ask what the common ground is that is shared by religion and literature. This answer seems to lie in a search for truth. The postmodern truth is not absolute in that it allows a plurality of voices to give expression to multiple truths. The sacred and the secular are thus defined in terms of each other in that they pose the same questions. These questions are religious in nature because they address issues of ontological concern, i.e.

- What is the meaning of life?

- What is the human being's role in the universe?

- What comes after death: the face of God or nothingness?

The American philosopher Alvin Plantinga (1932 -) points out that this struggle between two opposing spiritual forces goes back to Augustine who spoke of the City of God (*Civitas Dei)* and the City of the world *(Civitas Mundi)* (Plantinga, 2005). At the time Plantinga wrote, the modernists were of the opinion that they had effectively got rid of "an infantile superstition" (Glicksberg, 1960:212). Following that, the appearance of religious themes and questions regarding the existence of God are what constitutes the contemporary scene. Postmodern people are once again concerned with spiritual issues and want to fill the vacuum that was created during the Enlightenment period. There is a search for something undefined, something ineffable, to fill this void and to provide hope. This return of religious themes and the manifestation of the miraculous in certain contemporary novels are indicative of this search.

Although Plantinga admits that the contemporary western world is "a vast and amorphous affair, including a variety of people, in an enormous variety of places, with enormously different cultural backgrounds and traditions," he mentions three main contestants in the contemporary western intellectual world. The first is Christianity or Judeo-Christian theism. The second is called perennial naturalism which contends there is no God and human beings are unimportant parts of a huge cosmic machine. The third is called creative anti-realism which sees the human as responsible for the basic structure of the world (Plantinga, 2005). The consequence with the second and third theory is that they lead to relativism. Thus, everything is acceptable and there is no one absolute version of truth. Plantinga laments the fact that such relativistic theories are enjoying preference at many universities and in intellectual discourse. Vattimo touches on this notion of relativism as well, as shown later on in this dissertation. What places Plantinga's suggested pragmatism to Christians well within the postmodern spectrum is that Christians should be aware of these other anti-Christian notions and at the same time be sensitive towards them. In another article entitled "Advice to Christian philosophers", he mentions the following three points of advice: Christians should display in the first instance more autonomy, secondly more integrity – in the sense of integral wholeness and thirdly, Christian boldness or self-confidence (Plantinga, 1984). Christians need not be defensive or apologetic, since their truth is once again valid in a postmodern world.

It would be wise to make a distinction between the key concepts involved viz. faith, belief and religion. The distinctions made by Anita Gandolfo (2007:x) are useful in this regard and she contends that faith, when used in religious terms, points to the individual's relationship to Transcendence. This involves the individual in totality and affects the way a person views the world and others. Religion, however, is related to an institution. "One is a person of faith; one

belongs to a religion. An individual can have belief, but when belief is associated with a religion, it is commonly referred to as doctrine or dogma". Faith is not necessarily connected to an institution or set of doctrines and dogma, but refers more to a spirituality within an individual.

Literature does not in essence deal with doctrine or dogma. The contemporary postmodern novel focuses more on faith and the problematic relationship of humans with transcendence than with strict adherence to any specific doctrine or dogma. Elizabeth Jay (2007:6) observes that "these creative revisionings of the grand narratives came at a time when institutional religious affiliation was markedly in decline and the Christian church, was, as a consequence, losing its power of a monolithic story of universally applicable truth". Instead of rigid metanarratives we have a whole tapestry of different interwoven threads or beliefs. This pluralism or openness towards more than one story is apparent in Martel's novel *Life of Pi.* Piscine Moliter Patel, after having experienced the Hindu, Muslim and Christian religions, was asked to choose between them. He answered: "Bapu Gandhi said, 'All religions are true.' I just want to love God," (Martel, 2002:69). It is exactly this all-is-true concept that Plantinga sees as relativism. Broadly speaking, the postmodern novel is concerned with a spectrum of belief and it either provides a space for or serves as a unique vehicle for these various belief systems that vie to explain our very diverse world. Religion is not just back as a re-enchantment, but manifests in fundamentally new and productive ways. Graham Ward (2001:xv) qualifies this re-enchantment as "a return not signalled by theologians but by filmmakers, novelists, poets, philosophers, political theorists, and cultural analysts".

Having broadly established the pervasive appearance of the sacred and secular in contemporary novels, the field of attention must be narrowed to a few novels since it does not lie within the scope of this dissertation to examine a wide spectrum.

John Irving, in *A prayer for Owen Meany,* says that the first sentence is such a good one because, "the whole novel is contained in it" (1989:14). The first sentence, through the voice of John Wheelwright, reads: "I am doomed to remember a boy with a wrecked voice, or because he was the smallest person I ever knew, or even because he was the instrument of my mother's death, but he is the reason I believe in God; I am a Christian because of Owen Meany" (1989:23). Irving seems to advocate the very real possibility of one person having an influential effect on the spiritual orientation of another. Tate (2008:86) describes Irving as "not an avowedly 'religious' novelist" and contends that he "writes without a doctrinal or institutional agenda". *A prayer for Owen Meany* is saturated with Christian themes; this dissertation will focus on providence, sacrifice, and the miraculous. Owen Meany, after accidentally killing his best friend's mother with a baseball, feels the need to sacrifice his life as a redemptive act. He believes he is an instrument in God's hand. To achieve this, he has to heed the divine calling and transcend this secular life.

Ian McEwan is, according to Bradley and Tate (2010:12), “the leading exponent of the New Atheist novel”. They continue to say that, to “McEwan's eyes, then, the New Atheist novel represents a (tentative) profession of faith in the secular redemption offered by fiction itself: the novel represents the only narrative of transcendence in which we can still safely believe” (Bradley & Tate, 2010:12). Redemption, whether it is called “a secular redemption,” is still inextricably tied to the Christian doctrine of original sin. According to Benedict (2008:481), redemption is “a concept associated with monotheistic religions that support the doctrine of a Redeemer or Messiah […] It is synonymous with salvation and on the basis of the doctrine of original sin; everyone stands in need of redemption”. Ironically, the title of McEwan’s novel is *Atonement,* which is the central doctrine of Christianity from which all others are derived. The irony lies in the fact that the title used by McEwan is a concept of great importance to Christians, while McEwan is an atheist. The doctrine of atonement sets out to explain why the sinless Jesus willingly submitted to death by crucifixion as God the Son. McEwan, however, strongly believes in the role of novels in the formation of a sense of morality. In an interview with Richard Dawkins (2009), McEwan expressed the importance for us as humans to take responsibility for ourselves and others. The fact that there is no one up there, someone to rely on, places a strain on us. We need to make the best of our lives, and we do not need a God to ordain our moral priorities.

The themes of sin, guilt and redemption in Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement* are central. Boscaljon (2007:760) contends that literature “not limited to theological assumptions of another world or an all-powerful creator is able to explore how life on earth may be redeemed and how humans can mediate their own redemption”. Thus, ‘secular’ literatures can be seen as performing ‘theological’ work. Briony Tallis, the precocious 13-year-old with a lively imagination, witnesses an incident between Cecilia, her older sister, and Robbie, the son of the Tallis family's charlady. She misinterprets this scene as Robbie’s overt male sexual exploitation of her sister. This unconstrained imagination leads her to accuse Robbie falsely of having raped Lola, and subsequent feelings of guilt over having separated the lovers. Briony spends a lifetime trying to atone for this crime. She attempts to use fiction to rectify mistakes that fiction, or her lively imagination, had prompted her to commit. Her re-writing of the novel is an attempt at atoning for a sin. A question to be examined in this dissertation is whether such atonement is possible.

Whereas the themes of sin, guilt and redemption feature in McEwan’s *Atonement,* other religious content feature in *Keeping Faith* by Jodi Picoult. Visions, faith healings and stigmata manifest in this novel and will be discussed. The manifestation of the supernatural in novels has often been questioned by humankind. It is possible that the inclusion of religious experience in novels may be regarded as sentimental, or even trite. This is very possible and there is indeed a fine line that writers need to maintain when incorporating these supernatural elements in their novels. Pericles Lewis (2010:27) in his book *Religious experience and the*

modernist novel, asks the question: “If the modern age has so comfortably dispensed with the supernatural, why do we continue to produce so much discourse about the need to abandon it, from Nietzsche and Freud through the existentialists to the post-structuralist critique of ‘grand narratives’ and the metaphysics of presence”? Thus, the paradox in postmodernism is highlighted: both the contempt for providence and a longing for the sacred are maintained.

Faith White, in *Keeping Faith*, is the daughter of a Christian father and a non-practising Jewish mother. Faith is raised without any religion and this makes the experience recounted in the novel believable as authentic manifestations of the Divine. After the divorce of her parents, Faith starts having conversations with her “guard.” A psychologist suggests that Faith might have misunderstood the name and that her Deity might be God. Faith performs healings and manifests stigmata, phenomena which are difficult to defend in an era that gives precedence to the visible. This refutation of miracles because of an absence of proof echoes the classical argument of David Hume, 18th-century philosopher, essayist and sceptic. Hume (cited in Thomson *et al.* 2008:398) said, “A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence.” The tension between belief and disbelief is highlighted with the two opposing camps in the novel: those spiritual seekers trying to get a glimpse of this child prophet and those who are sceptical, represented by the characters of Ian Fletcher and the Catholic clergy.

Ron Hansen's *Mariëtte in ecstasy* also deals with supernatural phenomena and Anita Gandolfo observes that such phenomena are more expected here since the setting of the novel is a religious order (2007:142). Ron Hansen is a devout Catholic and this study will endeavour to highlight the different ways in which a non-believing author – Jodi Piccoult – revitalizes and incorporates Christian elements as compared to a believer. Mariëtte, who dedicates her life to God as a nun, experiences a series of trances and visions after her sister dies of cancer that ultimately culminate in stigmata. Her sister Celine is the prioress at the convent. Once again the rift between belief and disbelief in the authenticity of such manifestations is apparent. The reader has to decide whether Mariëtte is a modern-day saint or a charlatan manipulating the impressionable's need to believe in the miraculous.

Many secularists, and atheists for that matter, may regard fiction with a definite Christian slant as propaganda. However, this is not true of these novels and they would definitely be greatly reduced in value if that was the case. Tate (2008:91) also argues that [the novel] “is not crudely designed to elicit a religious response in its reader”. The aim seems to be rather to present or give a platform to multiple voices without endorsing any one specifically. As in all the novels discussed in the scope of this dissertation, there is a tension between sacred and secular and this is where the world view of the reader plays a significant role. Leland Ryken (2000:104) mentions the differing views of Augustine, who came to believe that literature “infected people with unwholesome emotions and led them to immoral behaviour” and Sir Philip Sidney who

believed that literature moves a reader "to virtuous behaviour". The conclusion Ryken (2000:150-151) comes to is that both Christians and non-Christians have a specific world view that they compare to the views present in fiction. He believes that Christians should not have a narrow vision and should comprehend and respect views contrary to theirs. Finally, literature is a catalyst for our interpretation – both about our own world view and the diverse other views presented in literature. A fundamental question in this dissertation is the significance of this paradoxical relationship between religion and literature and the effect of such texts on the reader.

Roland Barthes (1968), in his most celebrated essay, "The Death of The Author" insists that the reader "had overturned the traditional authority of the author" (cited in Castle, 2007:198). Thus, the author is not the only authority for interpretation and the reader is free to enter a text from any direction. There are various theories concerning the role of the reader in contemporary novels, but the aim of this dissertation is not to discuss them in detail. Lewis (cited in Ryken, 2000:129) asserts:

> We demand windows. Literature [...] is a series of windows, even of doors. One of the things we feel after reading a great work is "I have got it out" […] The primary impulse of each is to maintain and aggrandise himself. The secondary impulse is to go out of the self, to correct its provincialism [...] Obviously this process can be described either as an enlargement or as a temporary annihilation of the self […]The man who is contented to be only himself […] is in prison. My own eyes are not enough for me, I will see through those of others.

This does not imply that the contemporary novel is then necessarily a vehicle for conversion possibilities, but rather a space in which ingrained prejudices could be effaced. Traditional Christians readily stereotype secularists as nihilists, while atheists stereotype Christians as fundamentalists. There seems to be a mutual suspicion. The novel form provides a space where diverse viewpoints can be offered and possible places of convergence can be reached.

Against this background, the main questions guiding this investigation can be formulated as follows:

1 How are traditional themes, used within a Christian framework, reintroduced, reshaped and revitalized in selected contemporary novels by writers who do not adhere to a specific doctrine or institutional agenda?

2 Although fiction cannot prove the reality of supernatural phenomena such as miracles, visions, faith healing and stigmata, the question at hand is: how and why is a space created for such phenomena amidst the mundane in selected contemporary novels?

3 What is the significance of the paradoxical relationship between religion and the selected contemporary novels and what is the effect of these mutually inter-dependent and inextricably inter-connected sides of a coin on the reader?

1.2 Aims

1 To examine the reintroduction, reshaping and revitalization of traditional themes, within a Christian framework, in selected contemporary novels by writers who do not adhere to a specific doctrine or institutional agenda.

2 To examine how and why a space is created for supernatural phenomena such as miracles, visions, faith healing and stigmata in selected novels, even though fiction cannot prove the reality of such supernatural phenomena amidst the mundane.

3 To examine the significance of the paradoxical relationship between religion and the selected novels, and the possible effect of these mutually inter-dependent and inextricably inter-connected sides of a coin on the reader.

1.3 Thesis statement

This dissertation will argue that the four selected novels generate a privileged space in which the return of the religious can take place. This space, although primarily secular, is filled with traditional Christian themes and the manifestation of supernatural phenomena, even though fiction cannot prove the reality of such phenomena. This co-existence between belief and disbelief is apparent in all novels under discussion and the reader as active participant in the novel is bound to be affected by these mutually inter-dependent and inextricably inter-connected sides of a coin. The reader creates his/her own space for interpretation and such interpretations are subject to the world view of the reader.

1.4 Method

The methods used to analyse texts in this dissertation correspond closely to those of postmodernism. The theoretical approach is heterogeneous as no single theory is adequate to cover all the angles that should be examined in this dissertation. The theories of Jean François Lyotard, specifically his notion of “incredulity towards metanarratives” offers a suitable framework. He argues that this incredulity “is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences” (Lyotard, 1994:xxiv). He believes that the “grand narratives” dictate an illusion of totality and absolute truths. He “prefers little narratives which do not attempt to present an overarching “Truth” but offer a qualified, limited “truth”, and one relative to a particular situation”

(Nicol, 2009:12). These little or, as Lyotard calls them, “petite narratives” are stories that allow for a diversity of opinions. This theory corresponds with that of postmodernism in as far as it is a philosophy that affirms no absolute truth, especially in matters of religion and spirituality. During the period before the Enlightenment, the metanarrative of western society was religion, whereas the metanarrative of the Enlightenment was science. Neither of these metanarratives was successful in explaining the many mysteries of the universe. Thus, Lyotard contends that the postmodern “puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable” (Lyotard, 1984:18-19). Lyotard in effect says that the mysterious remains and that not everything can be explained by science. In other words, Biblical content and the supernatural qualify as subject matter that was negated during the Enlightenment period. Postmodernism is tolerant of an array of stories, whether they can be legitimated in a scientific way or not.

As this dissertation deals with the two sides of a coin and a both/and spectrum of belief and disbelief, it is imperative to have different theories that support the former and the latter respectively. The recent work of well-known Italian philosopher, Gianni Vattimo forms an underlying ideology for this dissertation. His work centres on the modern-day role of religion and the possible convergence of the Christian faith and postmodernity. Ironically, he found a return to the Christian faith constructing a philosophy inspired by Nietzsche and Heidegger, the fathers of scepticism (Vattimo, 1999:33). His theory of “weak thought” forms the basis of his philosophy. He defines weak thought as [something] “that abandons its claims to global and metaphysical visions, but above all a theory of weakening as the constitutive character of Being in the epoch of the end of metaphysics” (Vattimo, 1999:35). The theory of weak thought refers to a reconstruction of modernity’s rational thought and claims to objective truth to a more multi-faceted interpretation. In other words, weak thought implies the realisation that the world does not imply an uninterpreted or uncontested reality. This rediscovery of religion entails a movement away from dogmatics and the claims of certitude and finality. Guarino (2011:23) in an article entitled “The Return of Religion in Europe: the Postmodern Christianity of Gianni Vattimo” asserts that, the “return of religion means that it can no longer rely on any strong body of doctrine, or on any claims to absolute and definitive knowledge”. The solution is not found in doctrine but in *caritas* (charity), which comes down to tolerance of plurality. This charity for Vattimo is rooted in God's *kenosis* (self-emptying) which is in itself a parable concerned with giving up power. This is indicative of the notion of postmodernism where there is an emphasis on “the other”.

The next step is a close reading of the selected texts: *A prayer for Owen Meany* by John Irving, *Atonement* by Ian McEwan, *Keeping Faith* by Jodi Picoult and *Mariëtte in ecstasy* by Ron

Hansen. The first two novels are representative of the return and revitalization of traditional, Biblical themes, while a comparative study of the last two novels investigates the manifestation of miracles, visions, faith healing and stigmata. This discussion incorporates additional theoretical concepts relevant to the texts in question.

The reader-response theories used to gauge the reaction of the reader to these texts are diverse. Stanley Fish's theory of interpretive communities in which the reading of a text is constructed by a culture is useful to this investigation. Fish (1980:171) argues that interpretive communities share interpretive strategies and these strategies "exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read". For instance, the Church constitutes an interpretive community with the Bible as guiding text. Christians can believe in its truth-claim if they acquire these beliefs through membership of a Christian community. Those who belong to a different community and who deny the truth-claim of the Bible do so on the basis of the beliefs and values that characterize their communities (Ferretter, 2003:137).

Iser speaks of an implied reader. This reader is a hypothetical reader whose background and attitude are presupposed. This presupposition is necessary for the text to have its full effect. He maintains that there are two basic, interrelated aspects to this concept, namely the reader's role as a textual structure and the reader's role as a structured act (Iser, 1978:35). The textual structures are the perspectives to which the reader must respond. These responses are inspired by textual components, such as point of view, narrators and characters. These provide principles that lead the reader to a meeting place where he gains a new perspective. Iser (1978:35) calls this meeting place "the meaning of the text". In other words, the textual structures offer guidelines for the structured acts of the reader and the role of the text is to offer vantage points; whereas it is the function of the reader as structured act to evaluate these viewpoints. This evaluation depends on many factors such as the world view, the background, community and tradition of the reader. The implied reader is in many incidents not the actual reader. A religious writer may have a religiously implied reader in mind, but the actual reader may be an atheist. One might say that the reader-response theory works in much the same way in such a case. The text provides vantage points and the reader constructs meaning. A possible difficulty may be to construct meaning without prior knowledge or appreciation of what the text offers. This refers to the fact that knowledge of the Bible is essential in order to construct meaning from such content in a novel, or at least in order to arrive at the intended understanding.

The question as to why and how literature generates a privileged space for the return of the sacred is a crucial part of the puzzle. The dialectical theory of Michael Edwards is of particular significance. Edwards is influenced by Pascal's concept of *grandeur* and *misère:* the greatness and wretchedness of the human condition (cited in Edwards, 1984:2). This dialectical theory

implies that narrative fiction functions within a structure of creation, fall and redemption. He asserts that “language allows us to become aware of this process and literature is a means of enacting it, and especially of contesting the Fall and of reaching towards possibility” (Edwards, 1984:2). Literature happens because we live in an imperfect world. We create stories in order to reach another, better world, a world, which is different from our fallen world, or to comprehend the awful side of the world. Edwards (1984:73) asserts that: “The start of a story is so fresh that it occurs in another dimension than our own, which replaces ours in the twinkling of an opening sentence.” He in turn describes the story endings as a form of salvation. Readers desire these other worlds that are redeemed and promise a better life. It is, of course, true that not all narratives follow this pattern of sin, fall and redemption, but for the purposes of this dissertation and for certain novels, this theory is applicable. It should be noted that the conclusions drawn from the selected novels are not generalizations of the contemporary novel.

Chapter 2: Theoretical framework

2

Introduction

Doctorow (2000:14) in his novel *City of God: a novel* writes: “But how do we distinguish our truth from another’s falsity […] except by the story we cherish? Our story of God. But, my friends, I ask you: Is God a story? Can we, each of us examining our faith […] can we believe anymore in the heart of our faith that God is our story of Him?”

Postmodernism is concerned with a plurality of stories which are all considered to be equal. Lyotard (1984:xxiv) defines postmodernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives”. This implies a distrust of any grand narratives and their claim to ultimate truth. Postmodernism does not negate religion as modernism does, but religion is seen as one story among many others (a matter of individual choice). As Bradley and Tate (2010:2) claim, Lyotard’s famous criticism of grand narratives paradoxically lets the Christian story in by the back door. Contemporary Christians need not be apologetic or shy to proclaim their beliefs in literature, precisely because postmodernism encourages this fundamental right. The question remains whether this failure of belief in an overarching grand narrative has ruined the relationship between religion and literature. This does not seem to be the case if one looks at the incorporation of religious themes, motifs and archetypes in the contemporary novel, and this in many instances by non-religious writers.

One writer who includes Christian content without endorsing Christianity is Philip Pullman. He is openly hostile towards the Judeo-Christian theology, but in his trilogy *His dark materials* (1995-2000), he employs the Biblical themes of John Milton’s *Paradise lost*: humanity’s fall from grace and the battle between good and evil. Callum Brown (2009:193) observes that literature and “particularly the novel – has become the primary space in which once deep-rooted, if widely forgotten and deracinated, religious ideas can be revisited, tested and reshaped”. Incredulity towards metanarratives did not result in their disappearance; if anything it provided an opening for these to appear in fresh ways in certain contemporary novels.

2.1 Jean François Lyotard

2.1.1 Introduction

This study employs the views of philosopher Jean François Lyotard (1924 – 1999) concerning the postmodern as a theoretical framework. His views on the metanarrative provide the heuristic tools necessary to support the thesis. Many who are familiar with the general ideas of the postmodern, would argue that Christianity does not really have a legitimate place any longer

because of the erosion of the metaphysical ideals. However, Lyotard, with his attack on science and its claim to a higher kind of knowledge, opens up the possibility of reconsidering and appreciating the Christian narrative once again. Hence, the appearance of religious themes in contemporary, postmodern novels and in particular in novels written by novelists who are not overtly or in any way regarded as Christians, seems to support Lyotard's thesis.

Lyotard is noted for his articulation of the impact of the postmodern on the human condition. Although he wrote many books on Postmodernism, the focus will be selective for the purposes of this dissertation. Lyotard's *The postmodern condition: a report on knowledge* (1984) offers his most thorough treatment of the postmodern and provides an important discussion of the concept of metanarratives, especially its status and function. This work is then often seen as the beginning of postmodern thought. As mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, Postmodernism cannot be clearly defined as a certain set of norms or standards. Dahms (1992:476) concurs that there is, however, a common denominator, which is the rejection of the norms, values, and especially the claims of the Enlightenment. He calls it "an attitude that modernity as a project has ultimately failed in its attempt to accomplish human self-realization". *The postmodern condition: a report on knowledge* was originally written in 1979 at the request of the Quebec government as a report on the status of science and technology, of technocracy and the control of knowledge and information. Lyotard (1984:xxiii) states in the introduction of this book: "The object of this study is the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies."

Lyotard was sympathetic towards Marxism during the 1950s and 60s, but he made a radical break to Postmodernism in the 1980s. Prior to the Algerian war, he taught and was politically active in Algeria. He became politically involved and joined the group *Socialisme ou Barbari.* Lyotard separated from this group and in 1966 he said: "A stage of my life was ending; I was leaving the service of the revolution. I would do something else, I had saved my skin" (cited in Best and Kellner, 1991:148). This break is indicative of his rejection of totalizing modes of thought or in his words "the incredulity of metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1984:xxiv). Postmodern people are aware of diversity and difference and realise that people's beliefs are antithetical. Therefore, postmodernity offers an array of *petit recits* or small narratives to explain the world. Middleton and Walsh (1995:71) come to the conclusion that no metanarrative "is large enough and open enough genuinely to include the experiences and realities of all people". This viewpoint supports Lyotard's notion of *petit recits* or many small narratives which all vie to be of value.

2.1.2 The metanarrative

At this point it would be useful to look at what exactly is meant by metanarratives. A metanarrative is an all-embracing story or comprehensive explanation which claims to be able to explain or make comments on the legitimacy of all remaining stories. In other words, it is a big story which poses as a totalizing or transcendent truth. Lyotard (1984:37) refers to the metanarrative as "the grand narrative" that "has lost its credibility". In other words, people do not believe in one single overarching story any longer. There is no objective knowledge because knowledge is context-based and thus influenced by many factors, such as tradition, culture, background and attitude. According to Leithart (2002:209) in the "place of truth there are truths, and in place of a single story is a lush garden teeming with delightfully contradictory narratives. Let a thousand flowers bloom". This lush garden might as well refer to the contemporary novel which accommodates both the sacred and the secular. The oxymoron "delightfully contradictory" points to a status which is preferable to over-arching grand narratives. What is acceptable as truth in one society or culture is not necessarily true for another: "the moves judged to be good in one cannot be of the same type as those judged good in another, unless it happens that way by chance" (Lyotard, 1984:26). Penner (2005:25) mentions Geivett's concern that if this theory of metanarratives is valid and Christianity is also a metanarrative, then this narrative turn diminishes the Christian doctrine to mere fictional stories. This is a point to which the discussion will return again after discussing Lyotard's concept of knowledge. It could very well be that precisely because the Christian narrative is no longer seen as the overarching story, it can once again be considered a worthy narrative. This can explain the resurgence of Christian themes in some contemporary novels. Christianity can only be "allowed" in again if it holds to postmodern rules. The conclusion to be drawn from Lyotard's theories concerning the metanarrative is that the belief that the Bible is not true is no more valid than the Christian belief that the Bible is true.

2.1.3 Scientific and narrative knowledge

According to Lyotard (1984:4) the "nature of knowledge cannot survive unchanged within this context of general transformation". He is concerned with how knowledge comes into being, who decides what it is, and how it becomes accepted as truth. Lyotard (1984:25) distinguishes between two different types of knowledge: scientific and narrative. Scientific knowledge includes only denotative statements and excludes all others. Denotative statements signify or indicate exact, dictionary definitions devoid of emotion, attitude and colour. This notion of scientific knowledge, being superior to narrative knowledge, can be traced back to the modern Enlightenment period. Penner (2005:22) maintains that the "modern program shares the Greek assumption that rational explanation, or knowledge and [*episteme*], is self-evidently superior to opinion [*doxa*]". Lyotard criticizes scientific knowledge for making universal claims. Prior to the

Enlightenment, religious narratives guaranteed truth, but then science started claiming to be the only source of truth. For Lyotard (1984:26), scientists have no more of a legitimate claim to the truth than philosophers have:

> […] drawing a parallel between science and non-scientific (narrative) knowledge helps us understand, or at least sense, that the former's existence is no more – and no less – necessary than the latter's. Both are composed of sets of statements; the statements are 'moves' made by the players within the framework of generally applicable rules; these rules are specific to each particular kind of knowledge.

Science, furthermore, needed no justification and this is what Lyotard criticizes. According to him science does need justification and he believes that a "science that has not legitimated itself is not a true science" (Lyotard, 1984:38). A scientist needs a receiver who can in turn become the sender; he needs a partner, otherwise the verification of his statements would be impossible. Stevenson (2000:13) observes that, according to Lyotard, science ultimately becomes a language game played only by those who are considered competent to take part in it. There must be a consensus between sender and receiver in order to achieve a legitimation. This concept of language games comes from Wittgenstein (1889-1951) and Lyotard (1984:10) explains what Wittgenstein means by this term: "each of the various categories of utterance can be defined in terms of rules specifying their properties and the uses to which they can be put – in exactly the same way as the game of chess is defined by a set of rules determining the properties of each of the pieces, in other words, the proper way to move them". This is because science needs a specialized community of participants to produce knowledge and this process of producing knowledge is not part of the general society. Every discipline has jargon understood only by those who are within this discipline, in other words, the sender and receiver. They must agree on the rules of the game. Science, furthermore, needs to resort to narrative in its discourse and this, according to Lyotard, undermines the legitimacy of science as it becomes akin to the very thing to which it is opposed (Stevenson, 2000:13). In other words, stooping to what it resents. Scientists, to Lyotard, are storytellers too. They cannot describe the results of their experiments without resorting to narrative – stories. This "discourse of legitimation" is called "philosophy". Lyotard (1984:xxiii) uses the word modern to "designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth". In contrast to modern, postmodern then indicates incredulity towards those grand narratives.

Science can only be legitimated within a certain community where the participants have reached consensus: "the rules of the game of science, are immanent in that game, that they can only be established within the bonds of a debate that is already scientific in nature, and that there is no other proof that the rules are good than the consensus extended to them by the

experts" (Lyotard, 1984:29). Narrative knowledge, on the other hand, does not adhere to the rules of denotative language. It is "related to ideas of internal equilibrium and conviviality" (Lyotard, 1984:7). In other words, narrative knowledge is socially determined. Whatever is transferred orally from one generation to another is accepted as the truth. Narrative knowledge is a form of story-telling and the myths and legends of a particular social group are examples of such stories. Lyotard (1984:18) continues to say that knowledge is "not only a set of denotative statements", but also includes notions of "knowing how to live, "how to listen" [*savoir-faire, savoir-vivre, savoir-écouter*]. It is a "question of competence that goes beyond the simple determination and application of truth, extending to the determination and application of criteria of efficiency (technical qualification), of justice and/or happiness (ethical wisdom), of the beauty of sound or color (auditory or visual sensibility)". Narratives lend themselves to a great variety of language games and do not need any verification. Cultures that prefer narrative knowledge need not have them legitimated; they simply need to recall their past and transfer such knowledge to the next generation.

While a speaker and a hearer engage in a communicative act, they perform the legitimation process. Here the concept of the social bond or community comes into play again. Narratives do not make universal claims and do not aspire to be considered absolute truths, but are accepted within a specific community. Lyotard does not imply that the narrative form is superior or vice versa because there is no objective knowledge. Narratives need no legitimation because, according to Lyotard (1984:23), "they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do". Narratives authenticate themselves by being told without debating or proof. Thus non-scientific forms of narrative knowledge, like fables and myths, verify themselves through their existence. These narratives have been passed down from generation to generation and this fact is enough to legitimate them in a specific community. This means that no proof is necessary to validate claims such as the manifestation of supernatural phenomena. Michel (1997:345) maintains that these myths are regarded as true stories and they bring narrator and listener into the "presence of ancient knowledge". This implies that the Christian story needs no scientific basis in order to be legitimated; it is accepted by communities as true simply because it has been part of those communities for so long.

2.1.4 Grand narratives of legitimation

Lyotard identifies two grand narratives of legitimation in the modern era: the speculative narrative (Hegel's story) and the narrative of emancipation (Marx's story). Here, Michel's explanation of Lyotard's two grand narratives is useful. According to Michel (1997:346) scientific knowledge legitimates itself with the speculative narrative, i.e. science as science or knowledge as knowledge. Knowledge itself as Spirit or Life is the metasubject; the legitimator of the narrative and its language game consists of denotative statements with truth as the sole

horizon. The emancipation narrative, on the other hand, has humanity as its metasubject, the autonomous will, which may make use of scientific knowledge to reach conclusions (Michel, 1997:346). Emancipation narratives are all those concepts which try to make sense of history. The individual needs to be freed (emancipated) from for example the oppressive demands of the state. Marx, unlike Hegel, believed that the force of history is material and therefore not spiritual. Economics, according to Marx, determined social phenomena. He included religion in this status quo in which people were oppressed. Hence, his statement that religion is the opium of the people. What is important though is that both these narratives are considered unpersuasive in postmodern thought and that is the reason why postmodern society is characterized by "an incredulity towards metanarratives" (Michel, 1997:346).

2.1.5 Lyotard's solution: paralogy/dissension

Lyotard offers as solution a new form of legitimacy called paralogy, derived from the Greek words: παρα, which means past, beyond or beside and λόγος, meaning reason – in other words, against reason. In Modern Greek, the word paralogy means something that does not make sense, which makes it baffling as to how something that does not make sense can be considered a solution to the problem of legitimation. What Lyotard actually means by paralogy is not some argument that does not make sense, but reasoning in a new way with new ideas and new rules for the language games. Elsewhere, Lyotard (1984:61) calls it dissension, and this is considered a preferable term: "it is now dissension that must be emphasized". Dissension challenges existing rationalities. Lyotard (1984:xxv) maintains that: "Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. The incommensurable includes that which is inexplicable in rational terms. Its principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy." By paralogy, Lyotard means that cultural and social life will always be characterized by differing ideas. Lyotard prefers paralogy as consensus has become an outmoded and suspect model. Therefore, these differences should be articulated so that minority groups and oppositional groups are given a platform, unlike in totalitarian discourses where differing voices are silenced. Stevenson (2000:23) sees the result of paralogy (dissent) as stronger discourses dominating weaker discourses. Stronger discourses mean more institutionalized discourses such as churches. The ultimate consequence may be that of violence being inflicted on the silenced party. This is a concept akin to Gianni Vattimo and will be developed in the next section. Grand narratives are totalizing and exclude other narratives. Many metanarratives can be considered to be ideological and therefore the suspicion can be justified. Although Lyotard's main targets are Hegelianism and Marxism when talking about metanarratives, one can inevitably apply his theories to Christianity as well.

2.1.6 Is Christianity a metanarrative?

Having discussed Lyotard's bifurcation of the two modes of knowledge, namely scientific and narrative, this section returns to his concept of metanarratives. The question whether religion or Christianity is a metanarrative is relevant to this dissertation, although not of major concern. It is not the intent of this investigation to provide an objective answer to that question simply because it is not possible to say, with absolute certainty, whether religion or Christianity qualifies as a metanarrative or not. Nietzsche's belief that there are no facts, only interpretations provides some direction for this question about metanarratives. Best and Kellner (1991:22) concur that "Nietzsche attacked philosophical conceptions of the subject, representation, causality, truth, value, and system, replacing Western philosophy with a perspectivist orientation for which there are no facts, only interpretations, and no objective truths, only the constructs of various individuals or groups". To make the assumption that religion is a metanarrative could qualify as being a metanarrative itself. There are arguments claiming to prove the fact that religion or Christianity is a metanarrative and arguments refuting the fact that religion or Christianity can be regarded as a metanarrative. Both will be presented later on. Some critics argue that Christianity with its metaphysical and doctrinal assertions cannot be anything but a metanarrative, while others totally reject Christianity as an example of a metanarrative; yet others argue that Christianity is a metanarrative, but that it can escape those postmodern criticisms. What is an irrefutable fact is what Westphal (2005:147) says about the impact of Lyotard's statement on Christians:

> In my experience no other theme from our gang of Six [Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, Marx, Rorty and Foucault], not even Derrida's (in)famous "There is nothing outside the text," generates as much apoplexy among Christian scholars or as high a degree of certainty that Christianity and postmodernism represent a dyad-like truth and error, light and darkness, good and evil, and so forth.

What Westphal asserts is that the labelling of Christianity as a metanarrative elicits extreme reactions of anger among Christians, but at the same time the realization that Christianity and postmodernism are dichotomies.

Smith (2005:124-125), in an article entitled "A little story about metanarratives: Lyotard, religion and postmodernism revisited," endeavours to prove that Christianity is not the target of Lyotard's critique and is, therefore, not a metanarrative in Lyotard's sense of the word. Smith (2005:125) believes that what is at stake is not the scope of these narratives, but the nature of the claims they make. He maintains that the Biblical story and Christian faith do not claim to be legitimated by an appeal to reason, but rather by an appeal to faith. In other words, Lyotard's incredulity does not apply to religion because Christianity depends on faith to legitimate itself. He does admit, however, that the Biblical story makes grand, universal claims: "Yes, it makes

grand, even universal claims (e.g. that every person is created in the image of God); but it does not – at least within a broadly conceived "Augustinian" tradition – claim to be legitimated by Reason, but rather trusted in faith" (Smith, 2005:125). Geivett wants to know what Smith means by "an appeal to faith" and he also questions Smith's argument that Christianity is not legitimated by an appeal to universal, autonomous reason. His question is: if not universal, autonomous reason, what other reason can it be? Geivett (2005:164-165) continuous to question Smith's assumption that "all knowledge is grounded in narrative" which, according to Geivett, could mean that narrative is instrumental in defining truth". This is not possible according to Lyotard because narratives cannot make an appeal to truth. This is because the meanings which constitute world views cannot be known to be objectively true.

Smith (2005:127) disagrees with Middleton and Walsh's understanding of Lyotard's notion of metanarratives. He maintains that they have misread Lyotard in three ways: they argue that the problem with metanarratives is their scope – they are universal stories that make total claims that could lead to violence; they say that metanarratives are merely "social constructions masquerading as universal truths"; and they posit that the Biblical story as a metanarrative is also "subject to the postmodern charge of totalizing violence". Middleton and Walsh (1995:75) are of the opinion that Christianity is a metanarrative, but that it can escape the postmodern critique because Christianity has an ethical aspect which saves it from giving in to violence. They maintain that: "If metanarratives are social constructions, then, like abstract ethical systems, they are simply particular moral visions dressed up in the guise of universality" (Middleton and Walsh, 1995:70). One can agree that Christianity has an ethical aspect, but so do all religions. What is also true is that a person can be ethically just without being religious at all. Are all the other religions, excluding Christianity, grand narratives? To say that Christianity escapes the totalizing violence might be true in more civilized times, but the same cannot be said of Christianity during earlier times: between 315 and the 6th century thousands of pagan believers were slain, Emperor Charlemagne in 782 had 4500 Saxons beheaded because they were unwilling to convert to Christianity. During the time of the Crusades 1095-1291, many atrocities were committed in order to advance Christianity against the insurgence of Islam. There are numerous other examples to mention, but it would suffice to make the point that Christianity has not been devoid of totalizing violence.

Lyotard and other authors like Derrida, Foucault and Eagleton go further than the language of social construction to describe our violent relation to the world in terms of metanarratives and totalization. They believe that the world is socially constructed, but in violent ways where the marginal is oppressed and the most-constructing power is legitimated (cited in Middleton and Walsh, 1995:145). Middleton and Walsh, however, believe that the Biblical metanarrative has the message of God, which is compassion and justice, and that the body of Christ (the actual Christians) can refute this charge by living a non-totalizing life. This links with Vattimo's criteria

for escaping relativism or a concept of everything goes. He also sees as criteria the love (*caritas*) of all humankind towards others and God.

Smith (2005:127) criticizes Stanley Grenz's notion that the scope of metanarratives is the problem:

> What makes our condition 'postmodern' is not only that people no longer cling to the myths of modernity. The postmodern outlook entails the end of the appeal to any central legitimating myth whatsoever. Not only have all the reigning master narratives lost their credibility, but the idea of a grand narrative is itself no longer credible. […] Consequently, the postmodern outlook demands an attack on any claimant to universality – it demands, in fact, a "war on totality".

The words "war on totality" are those with which Lyotard concluded *The postmodern condition: a report on knowledge*: "The answer is: Let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name" (Lyotard, 1984;82). Smith insists that this plurality of language games (narratives, myths, beliefs) actually presents an opportunity for religious thought. One can agree with Smith that this plurality offers Christianity an opportunity to be provided a space for religious discourse, but his view that Christianity is not a metanarrative is disputable. The Christian story legitimates only one kingdom and delegitimates all other kingdoms. This fact in itself is enough to make Christianity a metanarrative.

Whether or not Lyotard included Christianity as metanarrative remains a point of contention and as with so many other postmodern questions, there are no easy answers. According to Smith (2005:128), Middleton and Walsh, as well as Grenz present a "more nuanced dichotomy". Brian Ingraffia presents this bifurcation in the starkest of terms: either Biblical theology or postmodern theory. Ingraffia (1995:14) maintains:

> Most work in postmodernism and theology to date seeks reconciliation between these two discourses, a postmodern theology of some sort (even if this be 'a/theology'). […] I seek to deny the possibility of such a synthesis. […] I seek to separate the God of the Bible from the god of the philosophers, for it is the confusion between these two Gods which has caused Christianity to be uncritically equated with ontotheology.

Ingraffia seems to want to separate the study [logos] of beings [onta] from theology, which is the study of god [Theos]. This rigid dichotomy is in contrast with common trends in postmodernism where emphasis is on a both/and, rather than an either/or synthesis. One could agree with Smith that "incredulity towards metanarratives" should be seen as an ally rather than a foe. Smith's argument is that because all knowledge is rooted in narrative, this incredulity should be seen as an ally. He argues that according to Lyotard no knowledge escapes prejudice or faith commitments and for that reason the playing field is levelled (Smith, 2005:134). The playing field is levelled when every view is considered to be equal when we realise that all views

(including religion) are nothing more than interpretations. In this way Christianity or religion is a legitimate narrative, even if only within a certain community. In such a community or cultural group the sender and receiver understand the rules of the game and consensus can be reached with mutual understanding of the language game.

2.1.7 Criticism of Lyotard's concept of metanarratives

Lyotard's concept of metanarratives did not escape criticism. Best and Kellner (1991:171-173) argue that Lyotard's postmodern condition advocates a radical break from modernity and this as such presupposes another master narrative or totalizing perspective, which shows a transition from a previous stage of society to a new one. They argue that Lyotard cannot call for plurality and then exclude those grand narratives he believes have monopolized the discussion. Middleton and Walsh (1995:75) maintain that it must be admitted that some of the postmodern suspicion is justified because many metanarratives are rooted in ideologies which impose their realities and in the process marginalize or suppress minority stories. The pair even agrees with the remedy of a plurality of voices that should be heard. However, they identify a few problems with this remedy: local stories can be and have been responsible for violence on a scale similar to metanarratives. Like Best and Kellner, they also believe that postmodernity functions as a "larger interpretive frame that relativizes all other world views as simply local stories with no legitimate claims to reality or universality" (Middleton and Walsh, 1995:77). Ultimately, the solution that Middleton and Walsh come to is that metanarratives and local stories should be seen as both remedy and poison. They quote the words of Jacques Derrida from his essay "Plato's pharmacy" in which he deconstructs Plato's *Phaedrus* and where he comes to see that the word *Pharmakon* (medicine) has both a positive and negative meaning: "This pharmakon, this 'medicine,' this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence. This charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination, can be – alternately or simultaneously – beneficent or maleficent" (cited in Middleton and Walsh, 1995:79). Metanarratives and local stories can be functional and remedial if there is tolerance for plurality and difference. This is necessary as the search for truth is a never-ending and fluid process which is moulded by cultural beliefs. However, metanarratives or local stories can be responsible for intolerance, a marginalization of minority beliefs and may ultimately result in violence.

The question one may ask is: does Lyotard's concept of the grand narrative having lost its legitimacy undermine this close relationship between religion and literature? On closer analysis of selected postmodern novels it seems as if the sacred and secular share a mutual space in the novels. Incredulity towards metanarratives has not dispensed with religion or spirituality because these manifest themselves in various ways in the novels: Biblical themes, symbols and intertextual writing. Many contemporary writers, both believers and non-believers, incorporate

and revitalize stories of Christ, angels, faith healing and stigmata. There is at the same time a disdain for the spiritual, as well as a longing for the divine.

Kourie and Ruthenberg (2010:104) maintain in an article entitled "Contemporary Christian spirituality and postmodernism" that: "Contemporary spirituality gives some recognition to a non-foreclosed spiritual search; it recognizes the inevitable ache of absence common to Christian devotion and postmodern spiritual fragmentation." This belief and disbelief are simultaneously present in the contemporary novel. It is as if there is interdependence: the one cannot exist without the other. In other words, the collapse of the grand narratives does not simply imply that we are now in a new dispensation. Nicoletta Pireddu (2002:303) argues that this collapse of the metanarratives in Lyotard's *The Postmodern condition* (1984) is not exempt from doubts or an impasse in Gianni Vattimo's view. Vattimo proposes a sort of rethinking of traditional philosophy without attempting to overcome it. This overcoming (*Űberwindung*) is a term used by Hegel and later adapted by Heidegger and Nietzsche to *Verwindung*, which is a "declination and distortion of the category of dialectical overcoming (or *Űberwindung)*, but also a convalescence from, and resignation to, metaphysics" (Pireddu, 2002:304). This means that Vattimo believes that we cannot simply discard what we have inherited, but that we should approach these categories with *pietas* or respect. The recurrence of Christian themes can be found in the traces that are present in the contemporary novel, traces of the past that cannot simply be abandoned in preference of new categories. These traces reveal themselves in Vattimo's concept of weak thought (*IL pensiero debole*), which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. Lyotard and Vattimo differ essentially in that Lyotard proposes a new condition whereas Vattimo does not see the postmodern as a celebration of the new, but rather a recollection of the past, an acceptance of modernity, but with the understanding of transforming its nihilistic tendencies.

Christianity can certainly be classified as a metanarrative. It has always been regarded as the ultimate truth and the only road to salvation for Christians. Those who argue against Christianity being a metanarrative have legitimate reasons for their argument and the common denominator for them all is probably the possibility of marginalizing or degrading Christianity to the level of myths and stories. This is, however, not necessary because if Christianity is the *petit recit* (small narrative) of a community or culture, why should an argument whether Christianity qualifies as a metanarrative or not detract from the value of such beliefs? Is God undermined by having conversations with postmodernism? However, there should be tolerance among different groups and *caritas* or charity (love) for one's neighbour should be the basis on which one judges conflicting interpretations. This is indeed what Gianni Vattimo proposes. Frederiek Depoorte (2009:887) concurs that with Vattimo's *caritas*, relativism can be avoided. In other words, not everything is acceptable or relative, but love is the ingredient necessary to legitimate a metanarrative.

2.2 Gianni Vattimo

2.2.1 Introduction

Gianteresio Vattimo's (1936 -) ideas on the role of religion in contemporary life and the possible convergences of postmodernity and the Christian faith are of importance for this dissertation. In his book, *Belief* (1999) he mentions specific reasons for this "return" to religion. This bears relevance to this dissertation as the book examines the return of religious themes in selected contemporary novels. Vattimo does not just explain the concept of the postmodern, but through critical distortion endeavours to recover or revive the Judeo-Christian tradition as the origin of postmodern thought. Vattimo paradoxically believes that the return of religion is made possible because of the ideas of Nietzsche and Heidegger. This section is an endeavour to clarify how the ideas of these two masters of suspicion paradoxically led Vattimo to his notion of the return of religion. In his book, *Belief* (1999:33) he says: "I have begun to take Christianity seriously again because I have constructed a philosophy inspired by Nietzsche and Heidegger, and have interpreted my experience of the contemporary world in the light of it." Vattimo's notions of weak thought, *caritas* and *kenosis* are central and in many ways unique in terms of postmodern ideas.

2.2.2 Nietzsche and Heidegger

Vattimo bases his theories on the notions of Nietzsche and Heidegger, respectively the idea of the death of God and the end of metaphysics. Nietzsche announced the death of God in *The gay science.* It happens through the voice of a madman who proclaims: "After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave – A tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. – And we – we still have to vanquish his shadow, too" (Nietzsche, 1974:108). Here, Nietzsche does not only attack Christian belief, but all other religious beliefs as well. Vattimo interprets this death as the death of the moral-metaphysical God. He left open the possibility that new gods might be created. Nietzsche, according to Vattimo (1999:16), did not close off the possibility of a renewal of religious experience. Vattimo does not regard Nietzsche's words as atheistic, in other words meaning – that God does not exist. What he understands with the words "God is dead", is that Nietzsche meant that there is no ultimate foundation. According to Vattimo (1999:16), Nietzsche maintains that those who believed in God have killed Him because, the faithful, who have learned not to lie, have discovered that in the end God is redundant. In other words, what Nietzsche means is that we have murdered God with our human and natural sciences.

For Vattimo, however, this means that a few factors contributed to the fact that a unified world order is impossible. He mentions: the specialization of scientific languages, the proliferation of

cultures, the fragmentation of the life spheres, and the Babel-like pluralism of late-modern society (Vattimo, 2002:15). Nihilistic thought indicates that metaphysical truths express subjective values of individuals or social groups. This means that everything is interpretation and that the world is a world of difference. There is no longer a highest value, such as God, on which all other values are founded and therefore, each value is equivalent to all other values. According to Nietzsche, the concept of truth is an illusion – a cultural construct. No value can be considered higher or more authentic than another. Vattimo (1988:xxi-xxiii) does not see this disappearance of the former highest value as catastrophic for humanity, but there is a possibility of new human experience. He sees this precisely through the infinite interpretability that "has led to the weakening of the cogent force of reality because it has made all that is given [by metaphysics] as real, necessary, peremptory and true into simply another interpretative possibility among a plethora of such possibilities". Vattimo regards the Internet as an example of such a plethora of possibilities. The answers to questions such as: Does God exist? Which values are ultimate? will be multivalent and there will be inexhaustible explanations. In *The transparent society*, Vattimo (1992:8) includes an essay entitled "The human sciences and the society of communication," in which he mentions the influence of the mass media:

> If the proliferation of images of the world entails that we lose our sense of reality, as the saying goes, perhaps it is not such a great loss after all. By a perverse kind of internal logic, the world of objects measured and manipulated by techno-science (the world of the real, according to metaphysics) has become the world of merchandise and images, the phantasmagoria of the mass media.

Thus, for Nietzsche and Vattimo, nihilism is a progressive alienation of humanity in the period of techno-science. Ironically, Vattimo does not see technology as a force that alienates, but as an opportunity for new experiences. He embraces Nietzsche's concept of an active nihilism, which means that one readily accepts, without resentment, the invalidity of the world. Vattimo believes that postmodern philosophy emerged when Nietzsche's mature works were published. What is important, however, is that Vattimo believes that the end of modernity does not simply mean the appearance of a newer stage of history. To pinpoint the exact time when modernity came to an end is not possible for Vattimo. Thus, what he says in effect is that modernity and postmodernity will always co-exist in a historical space (Vattimo, 1988:xviii). Vattimo sees modernity as a necessary stage in the recovery of religion in contemporary culture. Eagleton (cited in Tate, 2008:17) observes that modernity was "always religious, despite its loud protestations: the Enlightenment did not really kill God but merely gave him a series of majestic new names, like Nature, Man, Reason, History, Power, Desire, and so on". This religious revival is more of a spirituality than a rigid manifestation of doctrines of any specific religion. This notion irrevocably ties in with the thesis of this dissertation in that the sacred and secular co-exist and share a privileged space in many contemporary novels. Postmodernity has opened up a space where the radically different or "the other" can be accommodated. Snyder

in his translator's note to *The end of modernity* mentions the idea of exchange value. This means that each value is equal to all others and can be exchanged for any other (cited in Vattimo, 1988:xxi).

Heidegger's notion of the end of metaphysics corresponds to Nietzsche's notion of the death of God in that a belief in an objective world is no longer possible. Heidegger's *Being and time* (1927) conceives of Being as event rather than objective structure. Being is not stable and eternal and Heidegger regards the event of Being as a remembrance. According to Heidegger, Being should be seen as non-metaphysical. In other words, Being is something that has been forgotten and cannot be thought of as a stable presence. Heidegger (1962:74) asserts that "the idea of transcendence, according to which man is more than a mere something endowed with intelligence, has worked itself out with different variations". Being is interpretation. This remembrance or recollecting (*Andenken*) is accompanied by a sort of overcoming (*Verwindung*) which for Vattimo constitutes the mode of postmodern philosophy (Vattimo, 1988:172-173). *Verwindung* means to be cured, to heal, to twist, to distort or to alter. This does not mean that there is simply a transition from one stage to another, but an acceptance and at the same time a seeking to be cured of metaphysics. The expression used by Snyder in his translator's introduction is very appropriate when he says that "metaphysics cannot simply be shed like a tattered, worn-out garment, or left behind like a doctrine in which we no longer believe; postmodern thought acknowledges this, and does not pretend to represent the revolutionary overthrow or reversal of the heritage of modern thought" (cited in Vattimo, 1989:1). Such a [*Verwindung]* is at once a "recovery from and a resignation to metaphysics" (Vattimo, 1988:xxvi). In an article entitled "The Trace of The Trace," Vattimo (1998:79) says that:

> In religion, something that we thought irrevocably forgotten is made present again, a dormant trace is reawakened, a wound re-opened, the repressed returns and what we took to be an Űberwindung (overcoming, realization and thus a setting aside) is no more than a Verwindung, a long convalescence that has once again come to terms with the indelible trace of its sickness.

Interesting is the word choice of "wound" here, which has connotations of pain and trauma, but also of something that can be healed over time. This could imply that the issue of religion is one associated with suffering, but with the possibility of recovery and restoration to a former more glorious state. The word "trace" here refers to a vestige or relic, which is then the re-emergence of religion in contemporary society and of course simultaneously in the novel. Vattimo (1999:15) contends that God is "disclosed as a trace that makes itself felt in our language". Luca D'Isanto in his thesis, *Theology and Gianni Vattimo's ontological hermeneutics* (1993:336) says that "tradition is a network of meanings, of references, of linguistic messages that are always already inscribed in our language." He aptly calls these messages monuments which preserve the memory of a nation, a culture or community. Monuments are important as they remind of the past, but our future is also projected out of them. Luca D'Isanto (1993:221)

translated the words of Vattimo: “The possibility of access to the truth […] is not so much bound up to the present or the future, but to the past. The past, repeated as a possibility which is still open, liberates us from the opacity of everyday obviousness. This past which is still open – like a classic text, a work of art, a hero capable of making itself a model – can be named a monument”.

Vattimo sees the importance of retaining the traces of the past because it is through the past that we can construct a future. Postmodernity is not simply a new period in which all traces of the past have been abandoned. These traces are evident in the selected novels as sacred contents that were abandoned during Modernity, but are now resurfacing in re-shaped and revitalized forms. These sacred contents are the religious themes that are resurfacing once again, in fresh ways.

2.2.3 Vattimo’s concept of weak thought

Weak thought is the solution at which Vattimo arrives at in order to overcome the violence of metaphysical thought – a culmination of the works of Nietzsche and Heidegger. Weak thought acknowledges that human life has an interpretative nature and that the world is not there as an uninterpreted reality. Everything has already been interpreted. We operate within different language games as Lyotard said. Thus, truth is relative to culture. Weak thought takes on the form of an ontological hermeneutics and it attempts to interpret the world and texts in a way that will be persuasive to other cultures. Weak thought is only an interpretation too and tries to avoid the difficulties of metaphysics recognized by Nietzsche and Heidegger. In other words, weak thought could be seen as anti-metaphysical and against dogmatism. Strong thought makes claims to finality and truth and believes it has final and clear answers. Guarino (2011:21) observes that weak thought with its “profound doubts about objective reality and absolute certainty, serves for Vattimo, as a way of liberating human freedom for those who would stifle emancipation and creativity with bellicose claims to certitude and finality”. Weak thought implies the giving up of power and territory without the fear of retreating. Thus, not knowing the truth opens a possibility for religion once again. This reminds of Smith’s notion of levelling the playing field discussed earlier on. Snyder, in his translator’s introduction to Vattimo’s *The end of modernity* observes “that ‘weak thought’ may be best understood as a style of thought rather than as a fully developed and self-consistent philosophical system” (Vattimo, 1988, 1iv). When Vattimo speaks of a return to religion, he does not mean a belief in a clearly defined body of doctrines because that is exactly what was rejected as metaphysical ideas. In *After Christianity* he explains: “The concept of postmodern faith has nothing to do with the acceptance of strictly defined dogmas or with disciplines imposed by a single authority” (Vattimo, 2002:9). In other words, there should be an overcoming of objectivistic dogmatism.

2.2.4 *Caritas* (charity) and *kenosis* (self-emptying)

In the place of dogmatism and doctrines, Vattimo proposes *caritas* (charity). This correlates with love for thy neighbour, and in Vattimo's words: "the Christian inheritance that 'returns' in weak thought is primarily the Christian precept of charity and its rejection of violence" (Vattimo, 1999:44). *Caritas* implies a tolerance towards others, an acceptance of differences – the living fruit of the Christian faith. This concept of charity or tolerance is embedded in the *kenosis* (self-emptying) of God. The word *kenosis* comes from the Greek word for self-emptying "κένωσίς". This essentially refers to the self-emptying of one's own will and the process of becoming completely receptive to God's will. This self-emptying began with the incarnation of Christ. Christ became a slave and debased himself here on earth. The incarnation of Christ is summarised in Philippians 2:7: "Instead of this, of his own free will he gave up all he had, and took the nature of a servant" (Bible, 2001:22). This incarnation of Christ is similar to a handing down or giving up of power. Vattimo sees this debasing of the Son of God as convergent with the weak thought of Heidegger who teaches the end of metaphysics and of Nietzsche who teaches the death of the moral-metaphysical god (Guarino, 2011:25). This necessarily results in a different relationship between Divinity and the human race: God, who was Father, becomes friend. According to Vattimo, secularization should be seen as friend and not foe, because there is room for everyone. Vattimo sees secularization as "the recognition that the world is a festival of interpretative plurality with no one claiming privileged access to the ontos on" (Guarino, 2011:26). In other words, secularization does not simply imply an alienation from the divine, but as Vattimo says "a path to be retraced in reverse by believers in order to recover the truth of the original Biblical message" (Vattimo, 2003:41). Just like Lyotard believes that the end of metanarratives actually allows religion in at the back door, Vattimo sees secularization as a sort of "truce" between philosophy, religion and science. It is exactly because meta-narratives are no longer credible to all that religion is considered once again as one legitimate story among many others.

2.2.5 Reasons for the return to religion

Vattimo says in his book *Belief* that he is not ashamed to admit that for him personally, this return to religion is linked to the experience of death – the premature death of people he thought would be around when his time comes. He continues to say that although it is true that whenever people get old they tend to start thinking more about God, this return is closely connected to historical circumstances. We realize that we could not establish justice here on earth and while death is looming over us, we turn to God (Vattimo, 1999:24). He believes that this return to religion is bound up with "the apparent insolubility, with the instruments of reason and technology" (Vattimo, 1999:25). Here Vattimo mentions issues in bio-ethics, from genetic manipulation to ecology, and problems concerning the explosion of violence in the new

conditions of existence within mass society. The fact that these problems remain unresolved could be a reason for this renewed interest in religion. In other words, if science cannot explain and find solutions, humans turn to God again. During the Enlightenment period, humankind felt that reason alone could provide the answers and that science could bring about lasting change. Humans expected the modern period to be of ultimate help, but was once again disenchanted. Now, during the postmodern period, there is a renewed spirituality, a search for the ineffable. Humankind endeavours to transcend this void, to overcome this inevitable and demoralizing truth of death. The challenge that the contemporary writer faces today is how to construct a meaningful faith in a world that recognizes the futility of human life. In the end it does not matter what religion the writer subtly promotes or which doctrines he or she espouses, but how he deals with the subject matter. As Ryken (2002:32) rightfully says: "We do not have to inquire into a writer's orthodoxy to determine whether a novel or poem is worthy of praise." Sacred and secular are inextricably bound in the same novel because novelists address a very diverse audience who is torn between belief in God, disbelief and a kind of neutrality.

Vattimo also mentions politics as a definite contributor to this return to religion, although he sees it more as an effect than a cause. He mentions as example the increased attention given to Muslim fundamentalists as a result of the petrol war. This would not have been possible without this political conflict (Vattimo, 1999:27). As discussed earlier on in the section on Nietzsche and Heidegger, Vattimo sees secularization as a positive influence on the return to religion. It is precisely this *caritas* or tolerance that led to a modern understanding of rights, social relations and the dissolution of class structures.

Andrew Hass mentions four categories as markers for a return to religion: post-secularity, globalization, culturality and interdisciplinarity. After the Enlightenment, terms like post-secular philosophy, post-secular reason and post-secular theology came to the foreground. According to Hass (2007:843) these terms indicate that the new millennium has not discarded religion or spirituality as something archaic and unsustainable, but that "religious or spiritual matters, whether in the form of lingering cultural vestiges or resurfaced interests, continue to influence and inform our fundamental thinking, actions and creations". This reminds of Vattimo's monuments or traces that manifest in postmodernity and as stated earlier on, the traces are the resurfacing of religious themes in many contemporary novels. Hass (2007:845) furthermore mentions globalization through the media, the internet or travel as a significant contributor to the return of religion. However, this globalization could lead to an awareness of other cultures and as such then to an acceptance of other modes of thinking, but at the same time it could also lead to "the other" being seen as a threat, resulting in fundamentalism. This is the violence that Vattimo refers to when believers cling rigidly to doctrines and totalize their beliefs as absolute truths. When systems of belief start intermingling, one arrives at a multicultural spirituality with elements of many belief systems. Vattimo (2002:18) also explicitly mentions this multi-ethnic

society in most industrialized nations and the fact that the voices of other cultures are heard after the demise of colonialism. Hass (2007:847) concurs that culturality is closely linked to globalization. He defines culture as "the accretion of a people's achievements, customs, and values as they are symbolized and given meaning within a given historical period; culturality is the dynamic *interplay* between various realms of experience and between the conceptualizations of those experiences as they feed into one another across a wide range of social production and theoretical circumscription". Religion is then part of a cultural hermeneutic – we incorporate cultural practices into our stories and our understanding of the divine. Religious themes are used in many contemporary novels not just to revitalize religion, but also to ask questions concerning the nature of religion and to emphasize the very diverse cultural approaches there are. The last of the four categories that Hass discusses is interdisciplinarity. This can be seen as the overlapping or interpenetration of disciplines and fields of study. One writer can include many different disciplines in his writing, for example, history, philology, sociology, feminism, anthropology, art and music. Hass (2007:853) concludes by saying that literature "brings us out of our closets of abstraction, and shows us our material contingencies and the new possibilities that might thereby arise".

Both Vattimo and Hass maintain that there is not a single reason that is solely responsible for the return of religion, but that these reasons intersect with one another. One can elaborate on the reasons for a return to religion, but that would entail moving into another discipline entirely, namely sociology. For the purposes of this dissertation, we shall suffice with the reasons offered by Vattimo and Hass. What is, however, of importance is that religion is back and manifests itself in fresh ways in some contemporary novels. The way in which sacred and secular co-exist in the novel without anyone making universal claims or aspiring to provide final answers, is what provides a forum, a space for discourse.

2.3 Reader-response theory

2.3.1 Introduction

Marshall (1995:71) in an essay entitled "Reading and interpretive communities" asserts that the modern image of a reader as an individual engrossed with a text and the previous assumption that the reader allows the text to reach its audience through loud reading, both have implications for an understanding of interpretation. He furthermore reflects on the way Descartes emphasized the importance of the self with his famous declaration; "I am thinking, therefore I am" (cited in Law, 2007:279). The Reformation principle that an individual is responsible for his/her own salvation ties in with this emphasis on the individual. Marshall (1995:74) states that this new way of thinking about the individual and his/her acceptance of responsibility directs our attention to the problem of finding the correct way to interpret literary

works. He insists that the individual must ensure that he/she comes to his/her own understanding of literary works instead of relying on others for interpretation.

It is clear that in modern times the individual and his/her needs came more to the foreground, but emphasis was also placed on social collaboration and the individual as part of a community. Marshall refers to a series of lectures by Josiah Royce, "The Problem of Christianity" (1913) in which Royce mentions the notion of interpretive communities. Royce's main concern was whether it is possible to understand the individual and the community in a way consistent with specifically Christian ideas. The conclusion to which he comes is that it is possible if one sees society as made up of individuals being part of an interpretive community (cited in Marshall, 1995:79). He sees a community as "something practical, a being that attempts to accomplish something in time and through the deeds of its members". There are three criteria for such members: the members must perceive of their lives as extended time-processes, they must be linked together by communication, which presupposes that they do not merely melt together, and each member must have at least some remembered and some hoped-for events in common with other members (cited in Marshall, 1995:81).

The members of a Christian community will necessarily have common goals and there will be mutual feelings, thoughts and will among them. This implies a certain commitment and thus loyalty to the community. It is clear that the concept of interpretative communities is not a new phenomenon but a notion that existed in earlier times. This may be indicative of Lyotard's metanarrative and the subsequent belief that religion is a social construct.

2.3.2 Roland Barthes – The Death of the author

The twentieth century has seen major changes in the way the reader is perceived as he/she has been elevated from being considered unimportant to playing a key role in the interpretation of literary texts. Reader-response theory acknowledges the reader as an active participant who through interpretation completes the meaning of a text. This notion stands in direct contrast to the theories of New Criticism and Formalism regarding the role of the reader. Both these schools of thought ignore the reader's role and concentrate on the textual artefacts. All autobiographical, historical and social aspects are also negated by these schools. Roland Barthes (1925 – 1980) in a 1967 essay "Death of the author" argues that the intention and other aspects of the author's identity such as ethnicity, political convictions and religious affiliation should not be taken into account when analysing texts. Barthes says: "As institution, the author is dead: his civic status, his biographical person has disappeared" (cited in Burke, 1992:29). Readers have the task to separate literary works from the writer and the meaning of a text is ultimately dependent on what the reader does with it – his impressions of it. In other words, the death of the author means the birth of the reader. Barthes feels that to assign a single

interpretation to a text that is permeated by the writer's passions and tastes is to limit a text. He says that "a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (cited in Burke, 1992:25). One might agree with Schad (1995:253) that Roland Barthes may have got it wrong when he concurred that "to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God". Schad (1995:253) believes that even though the signs and texts may not make sense, this does not mean that there is no God because the Christian God "is not wedded to sense, or meaning – or at least meaning as something definite".

2.3.3 Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish and interpretive communities

Whereas Barthes and others completely disregard the influence of the author, Wolfgang Iser offers a more balanced approach, when he states that there is a "dialectic approach between text, reader and their interaction" (Iser, 1978:x). He calls this response of the reader an aesthetic response rather than a reader response, for it involves the reader's imaginative and perceptive abilities used to adjust or distinguish his or her own centre (Iser, 1978:x). Iser furthermore argues that there are always gaps in texts which need to be filled by the reader. These occur when the "flow" is interrupted and readers are led off in other directions. The reader makes sense of what is not said, in other words of that which is concealed. Iser (1978:34) refers to an implied reader, as this reader's character is not predetermined. This reader has all the "predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect". As mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, Iser believes that this implied reader's role has three components: the different perspectives in the text, the vantage point from which the reader joins them together, and the meeting place where they converge. The whole process is interactive and meaning is dependent on all these processes coming together.

Stanley Fish (cited in Ferretter, 2003:133) also believes that the Formalist and New Critical schools of thought take no account of the reader's experience. His notion of interpretive communities is relevant to this dissertation as religious themes are definitively part of the content of certain communities. He believes that members of a certain community have similar methods while reading. The members having the same methods is a consequence of members sharing the same presumptions before they read, and these presumptions influence their interpretations of texts. Those who share those conventions inherent to their communities may agree on interpretations of texts. This may lead to members of a community agreeing on the meaning of texts. One has to keep in mind that an individual is a member of numerous interpretive communities at the same time. This may result in conflict in an individual and will lead to a negotiation between conflicting principles when a text is interpreted. Meaning is to be found in the reading and not in the text: "the reader's activities are at the center of attention, where they are regarded not as leading to meaning but as having meaning" (Fish, 1980:158).

This notion of members from a certain society interpreting texts in similar ways, inevitably leads to the question of how those who are not part of the Christian community will interpret religious themes in a novel. Non-religious readers could perceive the notions of sin, the fall and redemption as foreign. However, Michael Edwards rightfully mentions that a proliferation of novels follow this pattern regardless of whether the novel is a Christian novel or written by a Christian writer. Edward (1984:12) says that literature is "drawn towards a Biblical reading of life". These are universal themes applicable to life in general and even a non-Christian will have an intuitive understanding of such themes without connecting these to the Bible and subsequent doctrines. This is because these themes constitute a pattern in our lives. The comprehension of Biblical themes in contemporary novels is closely related to an individual's world view. Veith (2002:123) aptly shows that Nancy Pearcy and Chuck Colson (authors of *How now shall we live?*) apply a distinctly Christian paradigm to a world view: "Creation ('Where did we come from and who are we?'); the Fall ('What has gone wrong with the world?'); Redemption ('What can we do to fix it?'); Restoration ('How now shall we live?')." They maintain that Christianity has answers to these questions, but so do non-Christian and non-religious ways of thinking. Christians may object to the fact that non-Christian writers utilize what they regard as exclusive Christian themes. Eliot in his essay entitled "Religion and Literature" proposes a solution to the Christian reader in that he has to be conscious of the gulf between himself and the greater part of contemporary literature. He warns that "the greater part of our reading matter is written for us by people who have no real belief in a supernatural order, though some of it may be written by people with individual notions of a supernatural order which are not ours" (Eliot, 2002:207).

What is of importance though concerning both Fish's and Iser's concepts is that the reader does not enter the text as a *tabula rasa.* The reader enters the text with many presuppositions and preconceived ideas and has to construe meaning from what the writer offers to him/her. This emphasis on the individual as part of a community has an influence on the way truth is perceived. Every individual is a member of a certain community and because there is a diversity of communities, there are many truths. Thus, the postmodern concept that truth is a subjective feeling or notion can be seen in the way readers respond to texts. Roger Pooley (1995:20) in *The discerning reader: a Christian perspective on literature and theory* makes a valid statement when he says that the postmodern denouncing of grand narratives and thus ultimate truths which explain everything has not "blunted the desire to find contingent narratives which will explain something". This sentiment is echoed by Cunningham (1995:51-52) when he discusses canons and asserts that while it is proper for Christians to hope for the truth of a text, the whole truth "is necessarily going to evade the interpretive grasp".

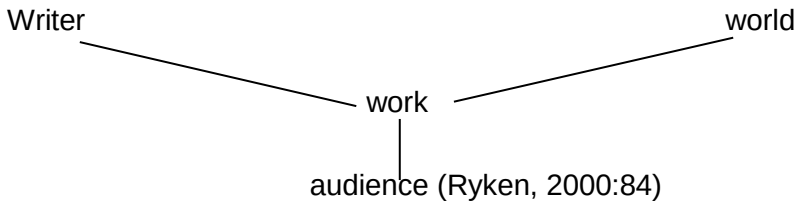
What is interesting is the fact that Stanley Fish recognizes that the interpretation of a text, or rather a reader's response to it, is self-revealing. Our responses serve as an indicator of what we believe and have experienced. In other words, we discover things about ourselves like the

types of characters with whom we identify as opposed to those who repel us (Ryken, 2000:120). This self-revelatory aspect of literature serves as a barometer to self-criticism and a subsequent correction of our ways if necessary.

2.3.4 Leland Ryken

Leland Ryken's notions of the writer-reader-text relationship may be useful to those looking at this relationship from a Christian point of view. He has a balanced view of who plays what role in the reader-response theory and I agree that one cannot emphasize any one aspect more than the other. Text, writer and reader are equally important in the process of interpretation. Although some reader-centered criticism has endeavoured to disregard the writer completely, he maintains: "we can profitably view the writer as our travelling companion through a work. As readers we are not obliged to see only what our tour guide points to, but it would be foolish to ignore a writer's presence in the work" (Ryken, 2000;88).

Ryken devised a diagram to show how readers approach literature. At the centre is the work itself – the creation of the writer. The writer gathers material from the world, including the words, images, settings, characters, events, and experiences that make up the work. Lastly, the audience or reader absorbs the work. Although he believes that there is no single correct way of approaching literature, he acknowledges the importance of reader-centred criticism (Ryken, 2000:84).



Ryken elaborates on the influence that writers have on their audience and concurs that the world view of writers play a decisive role in the portrayal of the human experience. Writers choose their subject matter and their beliefs are woven into a work of literature. The study briefly referred to the persuasive quality of literature earlier on and the fact that the novelists discussed in this dissertation do not have as objective to persuade readers of a certain view, but rather the explication of differing viewpoints. Ryken (2000:105) warns that Christian readers should not avoid literature when taking into account the persuasive element of literature. He proposes that Christian readers should remain alert at all times even when reading for recreation. What is, however, of importance in this section is how readers respond to subject matter. Ryken (2000:114-117) mentions the types of activities required from a reader while reading: reading with imagination, reading as encounter, reading as discovery and reading as recognition. By reading with imagination, he means that the reader must create a picture in his own mind; reading as encounter points to characters, the narrator, human experience, the

physical world and ideas; reading as discovery refers to how the work is made, how the parts fit together and how the themes unify the work; reading as recognition shows how we recognize our own impulses and fears.

2.3.5 The search for truth

Postmodernism implies that there is no truth and therefore much of contemporary literature is charged with nihilism. From a Christian point of view, to deny that there is any truth is to deny that there is a God. Jeffrey and Maillet (2011:38) in their book, *Christianity and literature: philosophical foundations and critical practice,* mention this modern tendency to see literary works as "merely diversionary entertainment rather than as a source of cultural wisdom". They refer to Flannery O'Connor's very cynical observation that wherever one lives in the West, "nihilism has become the gas you breathe" (cited in Jeffrey & Maillet*,* 2011:38*).* These writers continue to explore the question of finding truth in literature. According to them there are three academic theories of truth: correspondence theory – a verbal claim can only be true if it corresponds to definitive fact or external reality. This theory can be seen as having far-reaching implications for Christianity in that it means in effect that what one does not see, does not exist. In other words, how does one account for the truth value of religion when there is no scientific basis apart from the perceptions of the individual. In contrast, Jeffrey and Maillet (2011:50) argue that Christians have to accept the knowledge tradition of the church: "it is a matter of conviction placed in a body of knowledge derived from credible testimony and tested by personal experience, both our own and that of others, against and across time". The second theory is that of coherence theory – a claim may be seen as true if it is logically consistent with the rest of the data. The third is called pragmatic theory – corresponding to common sense or what works in a particular community. This theory is based on "a consensus social construction." Jeffrey and Maillet (2011:51-57) maintain that although pragmatic theory dominates the contemporary scene, it invalidates and is incompatible with a Christian world view. This notion leads to truth becoming relative, which in fact implies plurality, and should in effect lead to tolerance. However, Jeffrey and Maillet believe that in time truth is forced by those who are powerful in a community. This reminds of Friedrich Nietzsche's "will to power". Nietzsche (cited in Young, 2010:538) says "life itself is essentially a process of appropriation, injuring, overpowering the alien and the weaker, oppressing, being harsh, imposing your own form, incorporating, and at least, at the very least, exploiting". He believed that humankind is fundamentally driven to dominate. This argument of Jeffrey and Maillet makes sense that what is perceived as truth in a community could become forced on weaker members and even lead to fundamentalism. However, Christians remain part of interpretive communities and should also therefore guard against becoming totalitarian or exclusive in their regard and search for truth. Ironic is the fact that certain philosophers like Descartes and Spinoza, actually made possible the nihilism and relativism prevalent in our times. They were seeking to fortify belief rather than

to discredit faith by proclaiming that reason builds a stronger foundation for faith than one provided by the Church or Scripture (Lundin, 1993:246-247).

Vattimo, according to my mind offers the solution and that is *caritas* (love for one's neighbour), and tolerance which ties in with his notion of weak thought. Postmodernism, in essence rejects an absolute truth, but in its sensitivity towards difference actually allows tolerance towards diversity. To be able to reach others, we must have an understanding of their feelings and world views. Vattimo identifies Christ only with love and not with truth.

Chapter 3: Providence, Sacrifice and the Miraculous

3

A Prayer for Owen Meany – John Irving

3.1 Introduction

Graham Ward (2003:vii), in the introduction to *True religion*, says: “Religion is once more haunting the imagination of the West”. This phenomenon is readily perceivable in John Irving’s novel *A prayer for Owen Meany.* The significance of the title and the epigraphs point towards a religious interpretation prior to the manifestation of three Biblical themes, namely: providence, sacrifice and the miraculous.

One of the aims of this dissertation is to indicate how Biblical themes are introduced, reshaped and revitalized and this is exactly what Irving does. He writes without an institutional agenda, as mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation. He is “not an avowedly ‘religious’ novelist” (Tate, 2008:86). In the introduction to *A prayer for Owen Meany,* Irving (1989:16) states that: “many of my readers assume I am religious. I go to church only occasionally – like a lot of people, I believe in God in times of crisis”. Even though *A prayer for Owen Meany* is permeated predominantly by secular space, the traditional Christian themes mentioned form an integral part of this space. The character of Owen Meany is effectively portrayed as a modern Christ-like figure – a fact that is elaborated on in the discussion of the theme of sacrifice. Irving highlights this feature in order to influence the reader of this viewpoint. Another strategy Irving uses is the way in which he contrasts Owen’s faith with the faith of the other characters. No reader can remain indifferent to the content after having read the novel. One is guided to have an opinion, whether one believes in the supernatural or whether one deems oneself a completely rational being. Ryken (2000:59-60) contends that we are as much symbolic creatures as rational ones and that we, as Christians, may “appropriate religious truth with our imagination as well as with our intellect”.

When examining only the title of this novel, one realises that there are theological concepts at play. Prayers are in essence associated with the religious, and are often mentioned and seem to be a recurrent motif throughout the novel. The title refers to the continuous prayers for Owen Meany, but of special significance is the prayer by Rev. Merrill Lewis during the school service after which Owen is expelled by Randy White, the despised schoolmaster. The novel concludes with Johnny Wheelwright saying the same prayer Owen said for Tabitha Wheelwright when she was accidentally killed by a foul baseball that was hit by Owen. Johnny knows that this was Owen's

favourite prayer: "INTO PARADISE MAY THE ANGELS LEAD YOU," (Irving, 1989:720).[2] Merrill Lewis is also praying at the moment Owen hits the baseball: "- at that moment, my father told me, he had prayed to God that my mother would drop dead!" (Irving, 1989:638). Pastor Merrill believes later on that through this experience God has taught him not to trifle with prayer. Indeed, when he prays to God the consequences are grave. Johnny, at first, remains oblivious to the reason Merrill requests a silent prayer for Owen Meany at the school service. The reason becomes clear to Johnny only later on: Merrill is certain that God answered his prayer when Tabitha was killed by the baseball and she literally drops dead. He is therefore reluctant to pray because of his fear for a repeat of this situation. This is rather comic, as it is almost certainly coincidental that Tabitha dies immediately after Merrill has prayed. He is consumed with guilt and moral cowardice when he realises that he is still attracted to Tabitha when she waves at him moments before her death. Debra Shostak (1995:62) contends that the pun in the title is not just a prayer for the dead soul of Owen, but it is also a prayer to "discover meaning that Owen Meany's name- and life- limn". At the end of the novel Johnny prays for Owen's resurrection here on earth and not in heaven. Tate (2008:89) sees this devotional ending in which hope for eternal salvation exists, in tension with the everyday joy and pain of life in a fallen world as indicative of a "quasi-theological quest that informs Irving's fiction in general".

There are three epigraphs prior to chapter one which invoke our sense of the spiritual and which confirm the reader's initial expectation of a religious reading after having read the title. The first of the epigraphs is from the letter of Paul to the Philippians: "Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Irving, 1989:21).

The novel starts with this epigraph about the power of prayer. Tate (2008:89) sees parallels between Johnny Wheelwright and the apostle Paul in that Paul wrote this prayer while imprisoned and suffering, and Johnny communicates his religious conviction that came about with great sorrow to a rather faithless United States. Johnny is disgusted at the moral degeneration of the American society after the Vietnam invasion. This disillusionment with the human situation and the ache for some sort of spirituality is one of the reasons Gianni Vattimo mentions for the return to religion in contemporary society. Johnny Wheelwright becomes a Christian because of Owen Meany, although his disenchantment with his world could also have contributed to his longing for spirituality, albeit in his case a very rigid, doctrinal religion.

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[2] It should be noted that Owen Meany's words feature in capitals in this dissertation, as they are capitalized in the novel.

The second epigraph is about Buechner's (1926 -) concept of belief in God. Buechner is mentioned in the acknowledgements of Irving's novel where Irving states that he owes much of his writing to his former teacher and mentor at Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire (Irving, 1989). Doubt is, according to Buechner, an essential element of faith. Irving took this epigraph from Buechner's *Alphabet:* "Not the least of my problems is that I can hardly even imagine what kind of an experience a genuine, self-authenticating religious experience would be. Without somehow destroying me in the process, how could God reveal himself in a way that would leave no room for doubt? If there were no room for doubt, there would be no room for me" (Irving, 1989:21). This extract emphasizes the struggle of postmodern society with the acceptance of religion. Haynes (1995:73) contends that, theologically, what this question from Buechner describes is "the problem of miracle". In other words, he asks the question of whether a miracle is acceptable to the modern mind. Irving seems to share Buechner's sentiments regarding doubt. In *A prayer for Owen Meany*, Irving invents the character of Pastor Lewis Merrill, who is the epitome of doubt. Johnny Wheelwright, however, finds Merrill the more theologically attractive of the two spiritual leaders, Rev. Lewis Merrill and Rev. Dudley Wiggin from the Congregational and Episcopalian Churches respectively:

> What made Pastor Merrill infinitely more attractive was that he was full of doubt; he expressed our doubt in the most eloquent and sympathetic ways. In his completely lucid and convincing view, the Bible is a book with a troubling plot, but a plot that can be understood […] Pastor Merrill was most appealing because he reassured us that doubt was the essence of faith, and not faith's opposite (Irving,1989:147).

Irving seems to communicate the idea that it is possible to find God in the midst of doubt. His perception of faith relies on the miraculous, according to Shostak. To prove this statement, she uses a line from Irving that says: "I've always asked myself what would be the magnitude of the miracle that could convince me of religious faith" (Shostak, 1995:63). One can agree with Shostak that a miracle seems to be a requirement for faith, but the element of doubt is always present. Irving (1989:16) says in his introduction to this novel that:

> I have had no religious 'experience'; I've never been a witness to a miracle. The reason *A prayer for Owen Meany* has a first-person narrator is that you can't have a religious experience or witness a miracle except through the eyes of a believer. And the believer I chose, Johnny Wheelwright, has been so tormented by what happens to his best friend that he is more than a little crazy – as I expect most witnesses to so-called miracles are.

Although Irving states that it would take a miracle to convince him of religious belief, we detect a certain scepticism in the above extract. There is a question mark regarding the sanity of those who claim to have witnessed miracles. Mystics and those claiming to have been privy to the supernatural have traditionally been regarded with suspicion. Irving both questions and affirms

faith at the same time. Page (1995:155) observes that Irving demonstrates the power of transcendent faith and readers "are led to doubt, yet they are moved". Readers may want to believe in the miraculous at times, but also doubt the supernatural at other times. The fact that doubt is acceptable is echoed in Martel's novel *Life of Pi.* Dr Kumar tells Picine that doubt is permitted because even Christ had His moments of doubt:

> Doubt is useful for a while. We must all pass through the garden of Gethsemane. If Christ played with doubt, so must we. If Christ spent an anguished night in prayer, if He burst out from the Cross, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me,' then surely we are also permitted doubt. But we must move on. To choose doubt as a means of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation (Martel, 2002:28).

Irving seems to reassure the readers hovering between unconditional, blind faith and belief that occasional doubt is acceptable and necessary. Martel seems to drive home the point that doubt is acceptable as long as one does not wallow in it. This reassurance is clear in Irving's novel when we see that Pastor Merrill, a man of God, doubts his faith and God's forgiveness of his sins. This is a quality that Johnny seems to admire in him. In fact, he is preferred to the Episcopalian minister precisely because of this human quality. The reader is given the assurance that doubt is acceptable and forms an intrinsic part of our lives. It is human to doubt and to question. Johnny Wheelwright is not a believer at the beginning of the novel, but he gradually moves towards a very structured faith after witnessing the miracle of Owen Meany's life. According to Peter Berger, the shift in attitudes towards dissenting thought is "one of the major cultural changes that signify the birth of modernity. For premodern man, heresy is a possibility – usually a rather remote one; for modern man, heresy typically becomes a necessity" (cited in Bradley *et al.* 2010:64).

The third epigraph to this novel is from the French novelist, essayist and poet, Léon Bloy (1876 – 1917): "Any Christian who is not a hero is a pig" (Irving, 1989:21).

Leon Bloy grew up as an agnostic and had a deep hatred towards the Catholic Church and its doctrines. After having met the Catholic author Barbey d'Aurevilly, who was his neighbour, he underwent a religious conversion. *A prayer for Owen Meany* can be read as a Damascene conversion narrative in which Johnny Wheelwright becomes a devout Anglican after a childhood of apparent doubt and no strong religious beliefs. Thus, there is a parallel between Bloy and Johnny. Owen Meany is the reason for Johnny's conversion. Owen believes in Divine Providence and that he is an instrument in God's hands:

> 'I DON'T WANT TO BE A HERO,' said Owen Meany. 'IT'S NOT THAT I WANT TO BE – IT'S THAT I AM A HERO. I KNOW THAT'S WHAT I'M SUPPOSED TO BE.' 'How do you know?' I asked him. 'IT'S NOT THAT I WANT TO GO TO VIETNAM – IT'S WHERE I HAVE TO GO.' 'IT'S WHERE I'M A HERO. I'VE GOT TO BE THERE,' he said. 'Tell him how you 'know' this, you asshole!'

> Hester screamed at him. 'THE WAY YOU KNOW SOME THINGS – YOUR OBLIGATIONS, YOUR DESTINY OR YOUR FATE,' he said. 'THE WAY YOU KNOW WHAT GOD WANTS YOU TO DO' (Irving, 1989:557).

Owen's election and recurrent dreams are all brought together in the closing scene when he emerges as the hero he believed he was all along. Owen is at the airport in Phoenix to deliver the dead body of an American serviceman killed in Vietnam. He is there in the capacity of casualty assistance officer. Dick Jarvits is the dead man's younger brother who is mentally disturbed and obsessed by all the tales he has heard about the war and the prospect of killing members of the Viet Cong. He plans to act out his revenge on Vietnamese children who happen to have just arrived to a group of nuns from the Catholic Relief Service. One of the nuns asks Owen to accompany the boys to a men's restroom inside the airport and Owen naturally agrees. Jarvits then throws a grenade into the bathroom. He is representative of a person with a totalitarian outlook, one without compassion and tolerance. He fails to recognize the actual enemy. Owen saves the group of Vietnamese children from the hand-grenade by trapping it on a high ledge inside the bathroom and thus completes his mission by sacrificing his life. Gianni Vattimo's concept of *caritas* is what constitutes Owen's willingness to give up his life for the salvation of others. Johnny assists Owen by lifting him up, and Owen dies a heroic death. Owen's obsession with armlessness during the novel finally makes sense to the reader. Both his arms are missing after the explosion of the grenade. We are reminded of his earlier words: "GOD HAS TAKEN MY HANDS" (Irving, 1989:121). It is important to Owen to be awarded a medal, which is slightly out of character. Owen never gives any indication of wanting any recognition as a hero. He is steadfast in his conviction of being a hero and this seems to be enough: "IT'S THAT I AM A HERO" (Irving, 1989:557). He, nevertheless, tells Johnny to ensure that he will get a medal for this sacrifice. Irving reminds us that Owen, despite his God-like qualities, is human just like all of us and aspires to some sort of recognition, albeit post-mortem. This human quality is what endears Owen to the reader. He is awarded the Soldier's Medal, rating above the Bronze Star but below the Legion Merit awarded for "heroism that involves the voluntary risk of life under conditions other than those of conflict with an opposing armed force" (Irving, 1989:719).

3.2 Providence

Owen Meany firmly believes in God's Providence and throughout the novel there is no question for him about the existence of coincidence or fate. Fate and Divine Providence are distinctly contrasted. Johnny Wheelwright narrates Owen's unshakeable belief in Providence instead of Owen giving direct evidence. Johnny is not always present at the scenes he describes and hence his narration is based on speculation. Thus, this second-person narration leaves room for doubt. Haynes (1995:78) says that the reader has an ambiguous image of Owen due to the fact that he does not narrate his own story. Other characters' opinions regarding this pure faith in Providence

are also expressed via Johnny. This creates a constant doubt within the reader whether to believe in the miraculous. The first encounter that we have with Owen's belief in Providence is after the incident with the foul ball. Owen calls it: "THAT FATED BASEBALL" (Irving, 1989:137). He does not see this as a random accident and Johnny only realises much later that Owen saw this incident as part of God's Divine plan. Irving's work often employs black humour and in this novel his approach to suffering is comical. As such this is a reshaping of traditional approaches to suffering. Henry Jansen (2001:103) remarks that Irving "ultimately affirms life" and that he shows that despite suffering life goes on. Jansen (2001:115) further states that the "humour serves to mitigate the potentially tragic situation, to place the suffering in another perspective that allows the reader to laugh while at the same time appreciating the 'seriousness' of the situation". This comic portrayal of suffering may be seen by some as a marginalization thereof and perhaps as frivolity. Jansen (2001:115-116), however, maintains that this relativization of suffering allows the reader to gain some distance and this consequently leads to an acceptance of the suffering, even if only to a certain degree. Such an approach is very true to real life in that there seems to be a constant variation of tragedy and comedy. Postmodern people have to see the humour in tragedy as a survival strategy in order to deal with life's many challenges. Paul Fiddes (1991:66-67) also sees the comic approach as positive in that it brings peace after having caused disorder. He concurs that "the surface of things has to be blown wide open by a joke in order to find the truth hidden deep beneath".

Owen's search for the sacred could be explained by his guilt after having killed his best friend's mother. On a psychological level he could feel that he deserves punishment. This might eliminate the possibility of Providence for the reader. Owen gives Johnny his prized baseball cards after the incident as a way to say sorry, while Johnny gives him an armadillo, a much cherished possession, given to him by Dan Needham. Eventually Owen sends the armadillo back, but with its claws removed. Years later Johnny interprets this gesture and this is what Owen (and the armadillo) said: "GOD HAS TAKEN YOUR MOTHER. MY HANDS WERE THE INSTRUMENTS. GOD HAS TAKEN MY HANDS. I AM GOD'S INSTRUMENT" (Irving, 1989:121).

This sounds syllogistic, but according to Dan, Owen feels as if he has lost a part of himself with Tabitha's death and by removing the armadillo's claws, Owen feels that he "might obliterate his own hands, the agents of that death" (Shostak, 1995:66). Owen feels that Johnny and he are both mutilated and maimed by what has happened to them. However, at this stage, Johnny is still a sceptic and his questions surrounding the possibility of Owen's certainty of being a Chosen One, are also indicative of the reader's scepticism. Johnny relates: "That Owen Meany was a Chosen One was the furthest thing from my mind; that Owen could even consider himself one of God's appointed would have been a surprise to me […] but Owen's idea – that God's reasoning was

somehow predetermining Owen's every move – came from much more than that one unlucky swing and crack of the bat" (Irving, 1989:121). Irving highlights the religious themes he employs by continuously contrasting those themes with their counterparts. In other words, when manifesting the belief in Providence in one character, he would let the belief in fate manifest in another character. It is never just a straightforward, rigid, one-sided advocation of religious themes. This is a strategy to keep the doubt that pervades the postmodern scene alive.

The first time Owen and Johnny experience *The Flying Yankee*, the express train, speeding over their heads, is during Christmas 1953. Although they have witnessed the train before, they have never been directly below it when it passes through Gravesend, their hometown. Johnny comments on the coincidence of their having been there at the precise time the train passed:

> 'What a coincidence!' I said, when The Flying Yankee had gone; I mean that it was a far-fetched piece of luck that had landed us under the trestle bridge precisely at noon, but Owen smiled at me with his especially irritating combination of mild pity and mild contempt. Of course, I know that Owen didn't believe in coincidences. Owen Meany believed that 'coincidence' was stupid, shallow refuge sought by stupid, shallow people who were unable to accept the fact that their lives were shaped by a terrifying and awesome design – more powerful and unstoppable than The Flying Yankee (Irving, 1989:234).

Owen's tirade here regarding those who do not believe in providence is ironically very totalitarian. Owen rebels against the strictures of the Catholic Church, but is also guilty of labelling those whose views differ from his in a derogatory way. Vattimo calls this strong thought that should be avoided in order to allow for pluralism. Interesting is the use of a paradox in describing this design. It is both "terrifying" and "awesome" at the same time. This could be indicative of the fear he has for God or/and his reverence for God. He sees God as both good and evil. Weaver (2011:616-617) in an article entitled "Owen Meany as atonement figure: how he saves" concurs that *A prayer for Owen Meany* addresses the fundamental and [postmodern] question of how to reconcile the idea of a good and omnipotent God with the existence of evil in the world. He examines atonement images in detail based on the entire range of traditional images of *Christus Victor,* where the devil is believed to have held the souls of humankind captive and God handed Jesus over as a ransom payment to Satan, up to where there was a cosmic battle between Satan and God. During this struggle, the devil killed God's son, but the resurrection is seen as God's victory over evil. Weaver also discusses the theory of satisfaction atonement imagery in detail. This ultimately comes down to the fact that God had Jesus killed in order to satisfy a divine need and to show love to the rest of God's children, namely us. Some critics believe that this satisfaction theory proves that God sanctions violence and the abuse of an innocent. Weaver (2011:623) comes to the conclusion that Owen Meany's death resembles the satisfaction atonement image. In other words, Owen's death is similar to the death of Jesus in that they both suffered for the benefit of others. However, of importance is the fact that Weaver mentions a new narrative

atonement image which is non-violent and in which the role of God is not to order death or to use it, but rather to overcome it. This immediately links up with Vattimo's emphasis on Heidegger's *Verwindung* (overcoming) of metaphysical violence. The end of Being marked the beginning of true religion. Through the resurrection evil is overcome. De Vries (1989:30) comments that "Irving invites the reader to consider the wonder of God's involvement in human affairs. Falling into the hands of God doesn't result in a life of pleasure and ease […] Instead, it means, as Bonhoeffer (cited in De Vries, 1989:30) claims, that when Christ calls people, he bids them to come die". The postmodern concept of both/and, rather than either/or is apparent here. Owen has both reverence for God, and at the same time fear. He is certain of his calling and has a 'tenacious faith' as Irving (1989:17) calls it, but he shows a human side when he also fears the unknown.

There are many incidents that cause the reader to speculate about the role of fate/Providence: Merrill's regaining of his faith, the misplaced body at Phoenix, the death of Lydia (Harriet Wheelwright's companion and Owen's vision of the date of his death on the tombstone). For example, Pastor Merrill's conversion is brought about by a joke played on him by Johnny. Johnny makes Merrill believe that he has seen the "ghost" of his former lover, Tabitha Wheelwright, when he has in fact seen the dressmaker's dummy which Johnny placed in the shadows of the church. Johnny throws the "fated baseball" through the window of the vestry office while Merrill is praying. This incident causes Merrill to regain his faith and as a result he loses his stutter. Page (1995:147) calls this lack of faith, a lack "manifested by his stutter". Before this incident, Merrill is unable to come to terms with his brief infidelity with Tabitha Wheelwright. Johnny is the product of this affair. As a result of this guilt, Merrill has lost his religious fervour and has many doubts. According to Johnny, Pastor Merrill cuts a rather pathetic character in contrast with his mother, Tabitha: "But the Rev. Mr Merrill was a man who took to wallowing in guilt; his remorse, after all, was all he had to cling to" (Irving, 1989:640). The scene is comic, but Merrill comes to see some truth, as Fiddes (1991:67) mentions, in that he overcomes his extreme guilt regarding his adulterous affair. In this sense, comedy brings healing.

Johnny believes that the closest Rev. Merrill can come to God, is through his remorse for his sin with Tabitha. Tate (2008:93) observes that explicit themes and motifs, from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) have been reworked into the novel, such as sin and guilt. Irving uses these themes from the *Ur-text* and revitalizes them by drawing parallels between certain characters. This proves Edward's theory that most novels follow the pattern of creation, fall and redemption (Edwards, 1984:2). Johnny Wheelwright has a fairly happy childhood even though he does not know his father. His friendship with Owen and their boyish adventures create a picture of an Eden. This bliss is shattered when his mother is killed in a freak accident. According to Owen Meany, he is the sinner who needs to redeem himself. This incident places Owen on his mission

towards redemption. Owen is redeemed when he atones for his sin by dying a sacrificial death. Johnny is gradually introduced to sin (the fall) when he finally learns of his mother and Rev. Merrill's adultery. He loses Owen and only then reconstructs his life around his religion. He is a soul who searches for the ineffable all his life. These very same motifs are apparent in *The scarlet letter,* but Irving employs them with a modern slant. The stuttering Merrill reminds of a guilt-ridden Arthur Dimmesdale who "sinned" with Hester Prynne. Both these remorseful priests conceived illegitimate children with their mistresses. There are quite obvious parallels between the two Congregational priests, but one can also detect a fundamental difference. Irving revitalizes the theme of guilt in that the erring human is portrayed in a humorous light instead of him being seen as a lost soul beyond redemption. The portrayal of Merrill is mostly comical, unlike that of Dimmesdale, who evokes the sympathy of the reader when he confesses his utter loathing of himself: "He had told his hearers that he was altogether vile, a viler companion of the vilest, the worst of sinners, an abomination, a thing of unimaginable iniquity; and that the only wonder was that they did not see his wretched body shriveled up before their eyes, by the burning wrath of the Almighty!" (Hawthorne, 1905:166). Merrill never mentions the wrath of God, whereas Dimmesdale fears God's vengeance. This is, of course, typical of the nineteenth-century thought where God was seen as a vengeful God. There was no means by which damnation and doom could be avoided: "'The judgement of God is on me,' answered the conscience-stricken priest. 'It is too mighty for me to struggle with!'" (Hawthorne, 1905:229).

Johnny and the reader are somewhat disgusted at this new-found faith brought about by a staged miracle. Ironically, the miracle of Owen's death could not move Merrill to believe in the supernatural, but a staged miracle could. One can concur with Tate (2008:99) that this revival of faith suggests that even rational beings, like Merrill, might become subject to the supernatural. The inevitable question arises: was his faith superficial to begin with? This conversion narrative renders the reader sceptical about Merrill's deep devotion to God as a clergyman: "I was thinking that my father was quite a fake; after all, he had met the miracle of Owen Meany, face to face, and still hadn't believed in him – and now he believed everything, not because of Owen Meany but because I had tricked him. I had fooled him with a dressmaker's dummy" (Irving, 1989:666). Could this be a subtle suggestion by Irving that a theological foundation is no guarantee for real faith?

The next incident that might be seen as either coincidental or as the result of Providence is Owen's sacrificial death, which he has imagined countless times in his dreams. This incident is rendered possible only when a body is misplaced and Owen is assigned the task to deliver it to Phoenix. Owen believed all along that he would die a hero in Vietnam, but his opportunity for ultimate sacrifice comes in circumstances that he has not imagined or foreseen. This is Irving's way of

reminding the reader that nothing is certain. Irving did not create an *Űbermensch* in Owen Meany. He is very human in his confusion to know the truth of his destiny. Not even Owen, with his unfaltering faith, could know for certain how and when he would fulfil his Divine Calling:

> THERE'S SO MUCH I KNOW, he wrote, BUT I DON'T KNOW EVERYTHING. ONLY GOD KNOWS EVERYTHING. THERE ISN'T TIME FOR ME TO GET TO VIETNAM. I THOUGHT I KNEW I WAS GOING THERE. I THOUGHT I KNEW THE DATE, TOO. BUT IF I'M RIGHT ABOUT THE DATE, THEN I'M WRONG ABOUT IT HAPPENING IN VIETNAM. AND IF I'M RIGHT ABOUT VIETNAM, THEN I'M WRONG ABOUT THE DATE. IT'S POSSIBLE THAT IT REALLY IS 'JUST A DREAM' – BUT IT SEEMS SO REAL! (Irving, 1989:684).

Owen's belief in the Will of God in everything is sharply contrasted with the comments of the other characters narrated through Johnny. Owen's commitment to this ultimate mandate frustrates his friends, who fall outside this certainty of the modern-day mystic. Johnny, himself a sceptic at first, is annoyed at and at times jealous of Owen's certainty about his destiny: "[…] he believed more than I did, I was always aware of this" (Irving, 1989:47). Johnny, like Jesus' disciples, reacts with perplexity at this knowledge that Owen has of his impending fate. This irritation is indicative of the misunderstanding of the mystic. Johnny only begins to understand that Owen was part of something much greater in the decades following Owen's death. Johnny eventually understands that God was the one who called Owen to substitute his life for the lives of the Vietnamese orphans. His conversion narrative and his search for "the other" is a sub-plot in the novel. Thus, Johnny is irritated at Owen's claim that all is part of God's Providence and that there is a certain pattern: "From what nonsense did Owen Meany discern what he would later call a PATTERN? From his feverish imagination? Years later, when he would refer to THAT FATED BASEBALL, I corrected him impatiently. 'That accident, you mean,' I said" (Irving, 1989:137).

Johnny's grandmother, Harriet Wheelwright, is always critical of Owen Meany. She comments that Owen is possessed and that he has "unlikeable powers" (Irving, 1989:305). However, she believes that Owen foresaw Lydia's death the night of the Christmas Pageant. Owen is cast as Scrooge in the Dickensian play, *A Christmas carol.* Although Scrooge was a mean and avaricious man and Owen Meany a benefactor in society, they both had to redeem themselves for sins during their lifetime. Scrooge in Dickens's novel was shown his final legacy by the Ghost of Christmas yet to come – a neglected and cheap grave. This upsets him and he begs for a second chance. Owen is aware of the sacrifice he has to make and is shown the exact date when this sacrifice will be fulfilled. Scrooge repents his ways and is granted a second chance to atone for his sins when he wakes up and finds that all was just a dream. Owen Meany needs to atone for the death of Tabitha Wheelwright and he believes that being God's instrument will provide the opportunity to sacrifice his life. Owen actually sees his own name on the tombstone instead of Scrooge's during the play, but he omits one small detail – the date. He does not tell Johnny that the date was on the

tombstone as well. Johnny wrestles with the question: “Are these the shadows of the things that will be or are they shadows of the things that May be, only?” (Irving, 1989:311). Owen deliberately keeps this detail from Johnny. This could be because he is aware of Johnny’s scepticism regarding this vision and sees no need to upset his friend any further or he is so shocked when confronted with the reality that there is a moment of doubt about the meaning of this vision. Irving reinforces the prescience that Owen has and his ominous warnings are emphasized. Dan places his arms around Owen and hugs him: “Owen, Owen – it’s part of the story! You’re sick, you have a *fever!”* (Irving, 1989:299). When Johnny has arrived home after the pageant, he finds that Lydia, his grandmother’s companion for years, has died. Dan Needham says: “‘Owen *forsaw* absolutely *nothing*,’[…] ‘He must have had a fever of a hundred and four! The only power he has is the *power* of his imagination’” (Irving, 1989:305). Dan Needham, although an open-minded character in the novel, refuses to entertain the possibility of the supernatural. This is a form of deconstruction, as the reader would have expected him of all people to believe in Owen Meany’s uncanny abilities.

Johnny actually begins to entertain the idea that there must be some truth in this vision of Owen: “‘If that gravestone actually *told* you anything; it told you that *someone* was going to die. That someone was Lydia’” […] “‘Look at it this way: you have got it half right,’” I told him” (Irving, 1989:310).

Johnny finds solace in this conclusion because he is unable to imagine a life without Owen. Hester, with whom Owen has an on-and-off relationship, becomes quite aggressive one evening when Owen relates his dream about saving Vietnamese children to her and Johnny. She regards his obsession to join the army as absurd: “She gripped the damp, pale-yellow towel and rolled it tightly into what we used to call a ‘rat’s tail.’ She snapped the towel very close to Owen Meany’s face, but Owen didn’t move. ‘That’s it, isn’t it? You asshole!’ she yelled at him […] ‘You think God wants you to go to Vietnam – don’t you?’” (Irving, 1989:561). Henry Jansen (2001:119) remarks that Hester is, like Johnny, unable to move on after the loss of Owen Meany as she wants to see the point in all the suffering. Jansen (2001:33-40) seems to believe that there is no point in suffering and that it is futile to search for the reasons. He mentions the three different approaches to suffering as: firstly, it is inexplicable because the world was created good and evil is an intrusion; secondly, that suffering is a consequence of sin according to the concept of original sin and thirdly, that there is hope beyond suffering.

The most compelling evidence to prove Owen’s belief in Divine Providence is a copy of St Thomas Aquinas’ (1225-1274) – *Demonstration of God’s existence from motion*, which Johnny finds in Owen’s duffel bag after his death. Owen has underlined the passage about the first mover: “Of course, if an infinite series of movers and things moved were possible, with no first mover, then the whole infinity of movers and things moved would be instruments. Now, it is ridiculous, even to

unlearned people, to suppose that instruments are moved but not by any principal agent" (Irving, 1989:628).

This passage must have been an inspiration to Owen, confirming his belief in a divine intelligence, a supreme Grand Designer to account for intelligent purpose or order. Aquinas believed that something caused the universe to exist – that something or someone is God. Similarly, Owen believes that without God, nothing can exist; God is the first mover.

Irving's concept of humankind's destiny as controlled by God, manifested through the beliefs of Owen Meany, has not escaped criticism. In an article, "God's Own Little Squirt", Kazin (1989:30) argues that the concept of freewill is denied and he calls this astrology. He continues to say that there "is something much too cute about Owen's conviction that since he can foretell so much he must be God's instrument. It never occurs to John Wheelwright, the devoted Anglican in Canada, that his prophet Owen is caricaturing Calvinist predestination in the role of fortune-teller". However, Eisenstein's view that Owen's sacrifice is "a genuinely *free* act motivated by faith, a passionate act that wills an end for its own sake" seems much more persuasive (Eisenstein, 2006:10). The fact that Owen Meany claims not to want to be a hero actually proves that it is a free act because wanting would imply that he is motivated by "something desirable, by the specter of compensation, and is thus *not* acting freely" (Eisenstein, 2006:10). As evidence, Eisenstein refers to Owen repudiating this very idea of doing good because a reward is expected. Mrs Walker, the Sunday school teacher, reads to them from *Matthew* 5:5: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Irving, 1989:186).

Owen argues that there is no evidence for this. Mrs Walker continues to remind of the fact that the pure at heart will see God. Owen calls this: "GOODNESS AS BRIBERY" (Irving, 1989:186). In other words, Owen does not believe that his sacrificing his life will be rewarded, but his faith in this divine mission is a leap based on inward vision and intuition. Page (1995:138), in an article entitled "Hero Worship and Hermeneutical Dialectics: John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*", discusses Paul Ricoeur's concept of explanation and understanding. The former consists of "external facts to observe, hypotheses to be submitted to empirical verification, general laws for covering such facts". The latter, in contrast, is "the non-methodic moment in which one holistically discovers meaning: in understanding we comprehend or grasp as a whole the chain of partial meaning in one act of synthesis; rather than focusing on external facts". Page (1995:143) continues by arguing that a question such as how Owen has foreknowledge of his coming death, "cannot be investigated through the methodical process of explanation, but require the other traditional way of discovering meaning – in Ricoeur's terminology, understanding, and in the novel's terms, faith". The conclusion Page reaches is that there is a blending of these two modes, explanation and understanding/faith. Johnny has an intuitive feeling that his mother waved to his

biological father just before she was struck by the baseball and Owen tells him that he must be on the right track because the idea gave him “THE SHIVERS.” Thus, one has knowledge because one believes and “experiences an uncontrollable, unshareable physiological response, such as the shivers, which is a recurrent indication of this blending of the two modes” (Page, 1995:145).

Irving seems to offer a play between these two modes of knowing and through this he urges the reader to be cautious of reliance on any single position. To conclude, the Janus face of fate/Providence is subtly played with or presented in this novel, but no final answer is offered. Whether it is coincidence or Providence at work in the life of Owen Meany remains an open question. There is no scientific proof, but this does not mean that Providence is not responsible for the miracle. Lyotard believes that the mind cannot always organize the world rationally. He believes that scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge, but has always existed in competition and conflict with other forms of knowledge, which he calls ‘narratives’ (Lyotard, 1984:7). As stated in the thesis statement of this dissertation, the reader creates his/her own space for interpretation and this interpretation is subject to the world view of the reader. This concept is not as uncomplicated as it sounds. This knowledge or world view is contextual and influenced by many factors such as culture, tradition, language, sex and environment. This corresponds to Fish’s idea that we are all part of interpretative communities. Fish (1980:133) furthermore argues that this does not mean that all members of a community will interpret texts in the same way because we are all members of many interpretive communities at the same time. This may lead to the convictions shared by each community of which an individual is a member coming into conflict, which in turn demands negotiation. Ryken (2000:87) contends that “the fact that writers have something to say results in a persuasive element in literature”. Irving, to my mind, does not try to influence the reader of the legitimacy of a grand narrative, nor does he refute the existence of a Providential Figure. One can conclude that Irving supports Lyotard’s view that there are no big stories but only small legitimate narratives of which the existence of a Providential Figure is but one.

3.3 Sacrifice

To understand the manifestation of Owen’s personal sacrifice in *A prayer for Owen Meany*, one has to recognise the parallels between Owen Meany and Christ. Like Jesus of Nazareth, Owen’s parents are of humble origin. Owen is the son of a craftsman and he learns from his father the trade of stonemasonry. All Owen’s words are capitalized in the novel. Irving responded to a question asking whether the capital letters mark Owen as a Christ figure, by saying that they sort of do and that the red-lettering of Christ’s spoken utterances in many printed editions of The New Testament has been too expensive for his publishers (Irving, 1989:17). The capital letters indicate that Owen’s words are noteworthy. Is he the voice of God? The reader is constantly reminded of

Owen's otherworldliness. The most memorable aspect about him is his voice. Johnny comments that: "I used to think his voice came from another planet. Now I'm convinced it was a voice not entirely of this world" (Irving, 1989:27). Owen seems to illuminate light and an uncanny supernatural aura: "He was the color of a gravestone; light was both absorbed and reflected by his skin, as with a pearl, so that he appeared translucent at times – especially at his temples, where his blue veins showed through his skin" (Irving, 1989:25). Johnny comments on Owen's otherworldliness as he reminisces about them practising the shot: "when I actually lifted him up, I always felt I was handling a creature that was not exactly human, or not quite real. I wouldn't have been surprised if he had twisted in the air, in my hands, and bitten me; or if – after I'd lifted him – he'd just kept on flying" (Irving, 1989:557). Irving employs humour again to emphasise the fact that Owen is different. He is not portrayed in a serious light, but this does not detract from him as a convincing character. Taylor's notion of the language describing the supernatural being reduced to parody can be a point of argument here (2010). After Owen's death, Mr Meany tries to explain Owen's Immaculate Conception to Johnny by telling him that Owen wasn't natural, that he wasn't born naturally, but like the Christ-Child born from a virginal birth. Johnny replies that Owen was indeed special. All these references to Owen's supernatural qualities prepare the reader for the final interpretation of Owen as a Christ-like figure which culminates in his sacrificing his life for others. Very explicit is Vattimo's concept of *caritas* here in that Owen gives up his life for the sake of others. Jansen (2001:221) comments on the fact that both Irving and Iris Murdoch emphasize "the need for looking beyond the individual, for putting one's individual suffering into some sort of wider context, for relativizing the self." This brings us to Vattimo's *kenosis* which can be seen in the character of Owen Meany when he sacrifices his life for others and by implication relativizes the self.

Owen's parents believe that he was conceived immaculately and this caused the Catholics to commit an "UNSPEAKABLE OUTRAGE". It is only revealed much later what that outrage was – the Catholics refused to believe this story of Owen never being conceived: "'[…] they made us feel if we was blasphemin' the Bible, like we was tryin' to make up our *own* religion, or something'" (Irving, 1989:630).

Johnny calls Owen's parents "monsters of superstition" and comments that they "were dupes of the kind of hocus-pocus that the television evangelists call 'miracles' (Irving, 1989:630). Irving uses characterization to cast doubt on the credibility of the Meanys' claim. Mrs Meany seems to be catatonic and Johnny's perception of her is less than flattering. He calls her crazy and believes that she might even be retarded or completely oblivious to the means by which she became pregnant. In complete contrast to Mrs Meany, Owen is a convincing character and he believes this story about his own virgin birth. The reader is baffled as to how Owen can possibly believe such

an outrageous story, but at the same time the reader might, inspired by Owen, entertain this possibility. This concept of a virgin birth has come in for criticism from John Sykes, who argues that the virgin birth of Jesus Christ has been understood by Nicene Christianity as an unrepeatable event. Logically a second virgin birth would imply a second saviour and this will refute the Christian Church's claim that Jesus Christ is adequate for our salvation (Sykes, 1996:64). Sykes's argument regarding Owen's redemption is thin. He contends that Owen's redemption is not universal in scope and that the salvation he brings has no effect beyond his small circle (Sykes, 1996:65). This might be true but it seems to be a counter-argument for Jesus' teaching that saving one lost sheep is worth the while. Why indeed must an act of salvation be universal in scope to be worthy? Owen is also referred to as the Chosen One, angel, devil, Antichrist, holy man, martyr, prophet, bird, water bug, mouse and fox. According to Page (1995:141), these metaphors suggest "the impossibility of any consistent explanation of Owen". This mystery surrounding Owen ties in with the postmodern concept of belief in the ineffable, the inability to find ultimate meaning and the concept of the open-endedness of interpretation, the making use of a surplus of meaning in postmodern texts. This inability to pin-point Owen, this sublime quality that he seems to have, may confirm his Christ-like qualities. We are reminded of Kant's belief that we can never form an adequate concept of God. "As Kant sees it, the most we can do, then, is speculate about that which is beyond experience" (Eisenstein, 2006:1). Lyotard's concept of the postmodern being "witness to the unpresentable" comes into play here in the inability to understand the character of Owen Meany or to pinpoint his exact significance.

Owen is cast as the Christ-Child in The Christmas Pageant of 1953. Johnny comments that his friend's performance left him with an unforgettable "vision of the little Lord Jesus as a born victim, born raw, born bandaged, born angry and accusing" (Irving, 1989:278). According to Tate (2008:97) this comic nativity play deconstructs the fantasy of sentimental accounts of Christ's birth and hence this Biblical story once again shocks the reader. "The miraculous is not sweet and reassuring but alienating and strange." Irving uses what is to some the old Biblical [meta]narrative and to some the truth in a revitalized form. The humour might be offensive to some, but the deconstruction has exactly the effect that Tate observes, namely to remind the reader that the miraculous is not always as we expect it to be – all joyful. Parallels also extend to Jesus' later life. Owen is loved by those close to him, just like Christ was worshipped by his disciples. Jesus preached against those who use their positions of power to oppress the masses and Owen rebels against the establishment. This reminds of Vattimo's criticism against totalitarian world views prevalent in institutions such as educational institutions, the state and Church. Owen attends Gravesend Academy together with Johnny and weekly publishes essays in *The Grave,* the school's newspaper. He becomes notorious for his scathing essays and articles which are published under the name, "The Voice." Owen also becomes unpopular with many as he

continuously questions decisions made by the headmaster, Mr White. At one stage, Owen supplies the boys at Gravesend Academy with false draft cards and because White vested all the power of decision making in the hands of The Executive Committee, a conviction is secured. Johnny comments on this: “But The Executive Committee crucified Owen Meany – they axed him; they gave him the boot; they threw him out” (Irving, 1989:474). Cupitt (1998:3) in his book, *Mysticism after Modernity,* comments on the struggle of the individual, and specifically the mystic, to be granted an opportunity to express him or herself. He maintains that faith and religion became institutionalized and everything was subjected to doctrine and no ideas contrary to that were accepted. According to Cupitt (1998:4) “the religious authorities control truth and see themselves as having a clear duty to put down error”. Vattimo also stresses the fact that postmodern religion has little to do with strict doctrine, but more with love for one’s neighbour. Owen Meany is expelled because of his anti-establishment ideas. His school is not a church, but an institution closely connected to the teachings of the Catholic Church. Randy White sees Owen as the anti-Christ spreading dangerous stories and subsequently sees it as his duty to silence Owen’s voice of dissent.

The word “crucified” is of particular significance and echoes Christ’s Crucifixion at the hands of the Jewish Council. Another striking parallel between Christ and Owen are recurrent references to the resurrection. Haynes (1995:79) mentions a few of these references to death: the name of the town, Gravesend; Gravesend High School; Owen’s pen name, The Voice from the Grave and The Grave, the name of the student paper. Owen serves as casualty assistance officer in the military and comments: ‘I’M IN THE DYING BUSINESS’ (Irving, 1989:707). The novel is also saturated with tomb imagery and Haynes mentions: “The Meany shop which is a monument shop; the underground quarry; the coffin-shaped airport window and also the setting of the final event which is in Phoenix, Arizona” (Haynes, 1995:80). This reference to Phoenix is particularly appropriate as it reminds one of the myths and the symbol of immortality and re-incarnation. Irving effectively employs words with religious connotations to strengthen religious themes. The implication is that through Owen’s death, life is given to the Vietnamese orphans and that Owen’s soul will remain immortal. Johnny also finds a pencil sketch of a phoenix in Owen’s diary, accompanied by a note about rebirth and immortality. Tate (2008:103) asserts that “this diary extends the motif of resurrection as it literally allows Owen to speak from the grave, to be revivified in words”. Just like Christ, Owen is aware of the time of his death. Johnny visits the Meany monument shop after Owen’s death and is at first outraged at the fact that Mr Meany wants him to see Owen’s gravestone. He then realises that Owen had finished his own gravestone more than half a year before he died. The date corresponded with the date Owen had seen on Scrooge’s gravestone – July 8, 1968. After Owen’s death, Johnny claims that Owen made two appearances to him. This may seem far-fetched to many readers, but these appearances had a profound impact on Johnny.

The comic element is once again brought in to remind the reader that the miraculous can be expected anywhere. These appearances invoke acceptance and a belief in the supernatural or the improbable. Dan Needham plays a prank on Johnny and locks him inside Harriet Wheelwright's eerie secret passageway. As Johnny is about to lose his balance and plunge down the stairway, he feels a strong hand guiding his hand to the light switch and he hears Owen's voice: "In less than a second, I imagined how Dan would discover my body on the dirt floor at the foot of the stairs – when a small, strong hand (or something like a small, strong hand) guided my own hand to the light switch […] And his voice – it was unmistakably Owen's voice – said: 'DON'T BE AFRAID'" (Irving, 1989:607). The other time when Johnny feels Owen's presence is when he has a conversation with Pastor Merrill about the late Owen Meany the day before his funeral. The atmosphere is rather uncanny with Merrill sitting in the dark vestry office and when he tries to speak, he stutters and finally speaks with the voice of Owen Meany: "It was Merrill's mouth that formed the words, but it was Owen Meany's voice that spoke to me: '"LOOK IN THE THIRD DRAWER, RIGHT-HAND SIDE'" (Irving, 1989:636).

Merrill, with a force not his own, rips the drawer too far open and Johnny sees the baseball rolling across the stone floor. At this moment, Johnny knows that Merrill is his father. Johnny's own prayers are answered when he finds out who his real father is. His own search, which forms a sub-plot in the novel, comes to an end. He is disappointed that it is Merrill, whom he regards as a wimp and to whom religion is only a career. Irving here may be reminding the reader that one should not place too much hope in earthly fathers who are fallible, but should trust in our heavenly Father, like Owen did. Maybe this serves as warning to the reader that the truth is not always pleasant or what we expect. Owen always told Johnny that God would reveal to him who his father was. The truth is revealed through the supernatural. Is Irving trying to convince the reader that the miraculous can happen in mundane circumstances? Sykes (1996:62) observes that "Irving seems to want to leave the hair standing up on our heads – to convince us that we have been in the presence of a spiritual reality beyond the ken of sense experience."

At Sunday school the children used to lift Owen up in the air. This was because of his diminutive size and of course the fact that he became highly agitated. This lifting up of Owen is symbolic of Christ's resurrection (Haynes, 1995:80). It was an act that humiliated Owen while at Sunday school, but it also culminates in Owen sacrificing his life for the Vietnamese children when he is lifted into the air by Johnny to prevent the hand-grenade from exploding close to the children by trapping it against the high window in the airport bathroom. This shot has been practised by Owen and Johnny numerous times before. Johnny has to lift Owen into the air in order for him to place the ball through the net. This slam dunk shot is practised over and over again and they endeavour to improve the time in which it is done every time:

> He had sunk the shot in under four seconds 'YOU SEE WHAT A LITTLE FAITH CAN DO?' said Owen Meany. The brain-damaged janitor was applauding. 'SET THE CLOCK TO THREE SECONDS!' Owen told him. 'Jesus Christ!' I said. 'IF WE CAN DO IT IN UNDER FOUR SECONDS, WE CAN DO IT IN UNDER THREE,' he said. 'IT JUST TAKES A LITTLE MORE FAITH.' 'It takes more practice,' I told him irritably. 'FAITH TAKES PRACTICE,' said Owen Meany (Irving, 1989:408).

Irving perhaps simultaneously reveals his own position here as well as that of postmodern people to whom faith does not come easily, but "takes practice".

The importance of this slam dunk shot only becomes apparent later on in the novel. It is always practised in very ordinary circumstances with mostly the brain-damaged janitor as witness. Irving suggests to the reader that the miraculous does not occur in otherworldly circumstances where everything is perfect. Shostak (1995:61), in an article entitled "Plot as narrative: John Irving's narrative experiments", maintains that this novel offers patterns of repetition that serve as elements in a providential plan. This repetition of elements such as the shot builds the case for foreknowledge gradually so that the reader can assimilate the material, and find the miracle at the end and for everything to make sense eventually. Thus, Irving subtly plays with the reader's awareness. This repetition which culminates into an explanation later on, seems to confirm Owen's foreknowledge and renders it credible.

Easter is the event on which Christianity bases its belief in the resurrection of Christ. According to Owen, Easter is of great importance and the main event for a Christian: "'IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE IN EASTER,' Owen Meany Said, 'DON'T KID YOURSELF – DON'T CALL YOURSELF A CHRISTIAN' " (Irving, 1989:338).

Owen finds great comfort in the fact that he will live again. In his last diary entry he writes: "'TODAY'S THE DAY!' […] HE THAT BELIEVETH IN ME, THOUGH HE WERE DEAD, YET SHALL HE LIVE AND WHOEVER LIVETH AND BELIEVETH IN ME SHALL NEVER DIE'" (Irving, 1989:654). Owen believes that his death is not futile; there is meaning in his suffering. He saves the children, thus giving life to them and at the same time he believes in life after death, seen in his words "SHALL NEVER DIE" (Irving, 1989:654).

Owen sacrificing his life for the few Vietnamese children is indicative of Gianni Vattimo's act of *kenosis* – a self-emptying. Jesus took on a public image that was entirely human. He became flesh and died an aggravated death on the cross in order to redeem others from their sins. Just like Jesus had to die in order to save others from sin, Owen dies violently in order to save the Vietnamese orphans. He does this voluntarily and according to him at the request of God. He becomes entirely receptive to God's Divine will. Vattimo regards this *kenosis* of God as the only way to speak of God in a postmodern society. This self-emptying act is linked to his ideas on weak

thought, which in turn lead to the dissolution of metaphysical absolutes and the reduction of metaphysical violence. He regards *caritas* as the only way to live life in an exemplary, Christian manner. Owen Meany loves his fellow human beings enough to give up his life for them. Through this act he is redeemed. Irving makes this setting a secular one and the theme of sacrifice is reshaped in that the sinner is all too human. Through his death, Owen atones for his sin of involuntarily killing Tabitha Wheelwright.

As mentioned in the introduction, Edwards says that most novels follow a pattern of the fall, sin, guilt and redemption. Although he is aware of the fact that most writers are indifferent or hostile to Christianity, he suggests that "if the Biblical reading of life is in any way true, literature will be drawn strongly towards it. Eden, Fall, Transformation, in whatever guise, will emerge in literature as everywhere else" (Edwards, 1984:12). This is apparent in *A prayer for Owen Meany.* Owen is not the only character to whom this pattern may be applied. He might feel that he has sinned by indirectly killing his best friend's mother. This caused feelings of guilt and it might be the reason why he insists on sacrificing his life in order to atone and to be redeemed. Pastor Merrill Lewis's life follows much the same pattern, for he is a fallen man who has sinned by having an illicit relationship with Tabitha Wheelwright. Merrill is tormented by guilt, but lacks the moral backbone to own up to his responsibility. He searches for his lost faith in vain and embraces a life of doubt. Ironically, his faith is restored by witnessing a staged "miracle" involving the dressmaker's dummy and the murderous baseball. He cries out after his sermon: "I believe; help my unbelief" (Irving, 1989:663). It remains questionable whether Merrill will ever reach the rare, firm, unalterable faith that Owen Meany possessed although he does redeem himself by asking God's forgiveness.

This section offered a discussion of Owen Meany as a Christ-like character and mentioned his steadfast faith which is contrasted with the religious beliefs of the other characters. Only a person with such a faith would be willing to be God's instrument and to sacrifice his life for others. At this point, it is perhaps helpful to elaborate on exactly what kind of faith guides Owen towards the ultimate sacrifice. Owen believes without proof. Owen and Johnny used to practise the shot in St Michael's playground until it became dark and they could not see the statue of Mary Magdalene any longer. Owen played a mind game with Johnny about not seeing Mary Magdalene, but still knowing she was there. This argument he used to prove to Johnny that physical evidence is not necessary to have faith:

> 'YOU HAVE NO DOUBT SHE'S THERE?' he nagged at me. 'Of course I have no doubt!' I said. 'BUT YOU CAN'T SEE HER – YOU COULD BE WRONG,' he said. 'No I'm not wrong – she's there, I know she's there!' I yelled at him. 'YOU ABSOLUTELY KNOW SHE'S THERE – EVEN THOUGH YOU CAN'T SEE HER?' he asked me. 'Yes!' I screamed 'WELL, NOW YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL ABOUT GOD,' said Owen Meany. 'I CAN'T SEE HIM – BUT I ABSOLUTELY KNOW HE IS THERE!' (Irving, 1989:533).

This absolute certainty or unshaking belief in things unseen is touched upon by Lyotard when he argues that communities accept narratives as they are without legitimation by science because these narratives have been handed down from generation to generation. Narrative knowledge is enough to legitimate these *petit recits* (small narratives).

However, Owen Meany's faith is indicative of a postmodern position that regards religion more as a spiritual experience than a faith based on Church dogmatics. As Sykes (1996:63) rightfully observes, the story of Owen Meany seems to "support a free floating religiousness that makes use of Christian elements but needs not take a definitively Christian shape". Sykes calls it a "dogmatic vagueness". Vattimo seems to promote a religion without being too dogmatic, as dogmatism may lead to totalizing world views. Owen is born a Catholic, but after the "unspeakable outrage" against his parents, he becomes a Congregationalist and also an Episcopalian. Owen seems to be searching, but not finding what he is looking for within the different Christian denominations. However, this willingness to embrace whatever he finds useful is indicative of postmodern people. He is very critical of the Catholic Church as institution and continuously attacks the clergy and their hypocrisy. His unconventional spirituality is not compatible with institutionalized religion. This is what makes Owen Meany a modern-day believer. Owen complains that the rituals in the Catholic Church interfere with his desire to speak to God directly. He also comments on the absurdity of confession: "Owen said the pressure to confess – as a Catholic was so great that he'd often made things up in order to be forgiven for them" (Irving, 1989:47). As mentioned in the previous chapter of this dissertation, Vattimo makes it clear in his book *After Christianity* that what he proposes as a model for religion today is far removed from doctrinal influences. He maintains that the church is "certainly an important vehicle for revelation, but it is above all the community of believers who, in charity, hear and interpret freely the meaning of the Christian message, mutually helping and correcting one another" (Vattimo, 2002:9). He also refers to Lyotard's metanarratives when he observes that: "Now, all the metanarratives – to use Lyotard's well-taken expression – that claimed to mirror the objective structure of being have been discredited" (Vattimo, 2002:15).

We read Owen through Johnny's eyes, who realises at a young age that there is a fundamental difference between their belief systems: "[…] it wasn't until we found ourselves attending the same Sunday school, and the same church, that I was forced to accept that my best friend's religious faith was more certain (if not always more dogmatic) than anything I heard in either the Congregational or the Episcopal Church" (1989:48). Owen has a precocious insight from a very young age, thus effectively setting him apart from his peers. The reader is, once again, made aware of Owen being unlike others. Johnny relates that when other children his age complained about claustrophobia and boredom, Owen complained about the insignificance of the ritual:

> ‘THE TROUBLE WITH CHURCH IS THE SERVICE. A SERVICE IS CONDUCTED FOR A MASS AUDIENCE. JUST WHEN I START TO LIKE A HYMN, EVERYONE PLOPS DOWN TO PRAY. JUST WHEN I START TO HEAR THE PRAYER, EVERYONE POPS UP TO SING AND WHAT DOES THE STUPID SERMON HAVE TO DO WITH GOD? WHO KNOWS WHAT GOD THINKS OF CURRENT EVENTS? WHO CARES?’ (Irving, 1989:48).

While at Gravesend Academy, Owen often publishes anti-establishment articles in the student newspaper. He mentions the fact that these rituals are forced onto the boys, resulting in their becoming prejudiced and negative:

> ‘IT RUINS THE PROPER ATMOSPHERE FOR PRAYER AND WORSHIP TO HAVE THE CHURCH – ANY CHURCH – FULL OF RESTLESS ADOLESCENTS WHO WOULD RATHER BE SLEEPING LATE OR INDULGING IN SEXUAL FANTASIES OR PLAYING SQUASH. FURTHERMORE, REQUIRING ATTENDANCE AT CHURCH – FORCING YOUNG PEOPLE TO PARTICIPATE IN RITUALS OF A BELIEF THEY DON’T SHARE – SERVES MERELY TO PREJUDICE THOSE SAME YOUNG PEOPLE AGAINST ALL RELIGIONS’ (Irving, 1989:351).

A religious reader might feel that religious experience is being marginalized. Kourie and Ruthenberg (2010:111) mention that Sunday-worship stalwarts may find this new-look Christian spirituality scary. They maintain that there is a discontent with dogmatism (if not with dogma) and a pre-chewed religion in the postmodern era. Owen Meany voices this discontent and embodies this spiritual quest, this mystery of “the other”. Belief, for Owen Meany is not an intellectual matter – his stance echoes what William James said of Martin Luther’s faith: “something not intellectual but immediate and intuitive” (cited in Thomson *et al*, 1985:200). According to James (cited in Thomson *et al*, 2008:366), religion is a choice and we must use our non-intellectual or passional nature when exercising this choice. This is precisely what Owen does: “‘NEVER CONFUSE FAITH, OR BELIEF – OF ANY KIND WITH SOMETHING EVEN REMOTELY INTELLECTUAL’” (Irving, 1989:609).

Johnny is of the opinion that Pastor Merrill’s beliefs are contradictory. Merrill regards Owen’s parents as superstitious, but believes God listened to his prayer at the Little League game when Tabitha dropped dead. Johnny is vehement in his attack on Merrill, but generalizes about evangelicals and politicians when he fulminates: “‘It’s not God who’s fucked up, it’s the screamers who say they believe in Him and claim to pursue their ends in His holy name’” (Irving, 1989:639). Irving satirizes the New Age religious fanatics who feel the need to publicly proclaim their religion, but actually lack real faith. Those pursuing “their ends in His holy name” may refer to fundamentalists exploiting religion for selfish purposes.

Irving contrasts the kind of intuitive faith that Owen has with Johnny’s new-found faith after Owen’s death. For the greater part of the novel, Johnny Wheelwright is a sceptic and lacks religious

commitment. As mentioned previously, he undergoes a Damascene conversion after witnessing Owen's death. However, his faith reads by rote and he seems to be attached to rituals. His religion is structured and conventional and his life is organized around the church calendar. He admits: "Rituals are comforting, rituals combat loneliness." We can conclude that Johnny's faith will always be luke-warm, melancholic, uncertain; the kind of faith that is often criticized today as simply a routine: "'As for my faith; I've become my father's son – that is, I've become the kind of believer that Pastor Merrill *used* to be. Doubt one minute, faith the next'" (Irving, 1989:669).

Owen's divine mandate culminates in his sacrifice. The reader is gradually introduced to fragments of information regarding his pre-cognition of this event. Finally, all the repetitions of patterns come together and the reader might actually believe in this miracle. Paul Eisenstein (2006:10) asks the question whether Johnny and Irving end up fully identifying with Owen's sacrifice and whether Irving asks his readers to do the same. Maybe Merrill's words sum up the postmodern dilemma: "'As often as I feel certain God exists, I feel often at a loss to say what difference it makes – that He exists – or even: that to believe in God, which I do, raises more questions than it presents answers'" (Irving, 1989:663). The postmodern search for answers is highlighted here and in many ways Pastor Merrill's hovering in a liminal space between belief and disbelief is indicative of society today.

3.4 The Miraculous

The term miracle has never been an easy term to define. *The Watson's dictionary of religions and secular faiths* defines it as follows: "any effect caused by an interruption or a suspension of, natural law, which is therefore ascribed to a supernatural power, but the usefulness of this is relative to time and culture" (Benedict, 2008:368).

We live in a time where proof is for many a requirement before they will believe in anything remotely miraculous. The philosopher David Hume (1711-1760) called miracles highly improbable events. He regards the miracles performed by God in the Bible as no more probable than any other. His ideas had a profound effect on religious believers. The reason for this is the fact that so many religions in the world base their beliefs on the miraculous. In the Christian religion, the parting of the Red Sea to give the Israelites safe passage or Jesus' feeding 5,000 people with two loaves of bread and five fish are but two examples. People readily believe or believed these miracles without having any proof except the Bible, which is a written report. It is not a visible report which is corroborated by scientific proof, (scientific versus narrative knowledge), but today people are generally sceptical about modern miracles. David Hume gives four reasons why the testimony on which a miracle is founded has never amounted to full proof: there has never been a miracle that has been confirmed by a number of intelligent and trusted men of integrity to prove the

legitimacy of such claims; surprise and wonder as agreeable emotions influence humankind to believe these events, even though we know there is no reality to prove them; supernatural and miraculous relations are found among barbarous and ignorant nations, or if civilized people have given any heed to them, it is because they were received from such people; there has never been a testimony that has not been contradicted by many witnesses, which renders it unreliable (cited in Thomson *et al,* 2008:401-404). Hume seems to demand scientific evidence when claims are made about the probability of miracles. Lyotard, however, seems to refute the legitimacy of scientific evidence or knowledge.

In *The postmodern condition,* Lyotard makes the observation that scientific knowledge also fails to legitimate itself, because scientific knowledge relies on narrative to structure its discourse. In other words, scientific knowledge becomes similar to narrative knowledge and therefore loses its legitimacy. Lyotard (1984:27) argues that narrative knowledge is tolerant of scientific knowledge because of its incomprehension of the problems of scientific discourse. He continues to say that the opposite, however, is not true: "the scientist questions the validity of narrative statements and concludes that they are never subject to argumentation or proof. He classifies them as belonging to a different mentality: savage, primitive, underdeveloped, backward, alienated, composed of opinions, authority, prejudice, ignorance, ideology" (Lyotard, 1984:26). He concludes by saying that scientists see narratives as "fables, myths, legends, fit only for women and children" (Lyotard, 1984:26). Tate (2008:59) mentions that although Hume's argument has been "exceptionally persuasive in the progressive, post-Enlightenment west, rival accounts of the miraculous continue to proliferate". This brings attention back to the phenomenon that many non-believing novelists still relate miraculous stories.

There are always two sides to a coin and William Paley's "watch" argument may seem to refute Hume's argument. In Paley's *natural theology* (1802), he states the argument of the watch in order to prove that there must be an intelligent designer to account for the world:

> In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a stone, and were asked how the stone came to be there, I might possibly answer, that for anything I knew to the contrary, it had lain there forever; nor would it, perhaps, be very easy to show the absurdity of this answer. But suppose I found a watch upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place, I should hardly think of the answer which I had given before- that, for anything I knew, the watch might have always been there. Yet why should not this answer serve for the watch as well as for the stone? Why is it not as admissible in the second case as the first? (cited in Thomson et al, 2008:52).

The argument here is then that human artefacts are products of intelligible design and the works of nature resemble these designs, therefore the works of nature are also products of intelligible design. The ultimate conclusion is then that there is an ultimate designer, a supreme being who

has designed the works of nature. This argument is similar to that of Aquinas discussed earlier – the argument of the first mover. This argument made a profound impression on Owen Meany because he underlined the relevant lines in Aquinas's book – *Demonstration of God's existence from motion.*

Owen Meany needs no proof to believe in the miraculous. He also insists that a miracle cannot be represented. This is proved by his vexation at Cecil B. Demille's screening of *The Ten Commandments* just before Easter 1957. The parting of the Red Sea especially offended him: "'YOU CAN'T TAKE A MIRACLE AND JUST SHOW IT!' he said indignantly. 'YOU CAN'T PROVE A MIRACLE - YOU JUST HAVE TO BELIEVE IT! IF THE RED SEA ACTUALLY PARTED, IT DIDN'T LOOK LIKE THAT,' he said. 'IT DIDN'T LOOK LIKE ANYTHING – IT'S NOT A PICTURE ANYONE CAN IMAGINE!'" (Irving, 1989:331). Owen's refusal to contain the miraculous can be linked to his own sacrificial death in that, despite his recurring visions, the scene of his sacrifice results in something unimaginable (Eisenstein, 2006:12). Lyotard (1984:82) calls it "the unpresentable". In other words, the supernatural cannot be represented. Tate (2008:98) states that although this is a piece of cinematic narrative, this iconoclastic approach to a fictional nature defying event, raises questions regarding the propriety of representations of the miraculous. Tate reminds of the second commandment and the prohibition on representations. It is doubtful that Owen Meany referred to the second commandment, seen in the light of his anti-dogmatic stance in the novel. Owen is also highly critical of television evangelists who perform miracles on screen: "'LOOK AT THOSE WEIRDO TV MIRACLE WORKERS – THEY'RE TRYING TO GET PEOPLE TO BELIEVE IN MAGIC! BUT THE REAL MIRACLES AREN'T ANYTHING YOU CAN SEE – THEY'RE THINGS YOU HAVE TO BELIEVE WITHOUT SEEING" (Irving, 1989:374). This may be seen as Irving's questioning the commercialization of God. In a postmodern society such displays of the "miraculous" are rife and the reader is made aware of the possible deceit behind such phenomena through Owen's scepticism. The theme of the miraculous is also effectively explored through the character of Merrill. Irving seems to poke fun at the idea that this doubting pastor could be convinced of the miraculous by a bogus prank, which is rationally explicable, while rejecting the miracle of Owen Meany in which the supernatural plays a role. Faith is a requirement for Merrill to believe in miracles. Irving portrays the modern dilemma of believing in the miraculous. Postmodern people do not find it easy to believe in the miraculous because they require proof for the explanation of supernatural events. Owen has recurrent dreams and visions and an unyielding belief in his divine purpose. This sets him apart from the other characters in the novel that do not have this stable, spontaneous non-dogmatic belief. Readers are presented with fragments of the miracle that is to come. The first encounter with Owen's preconceived knowledge is after Tabitha's death when he relates how he is God's instrument. To the sceptical and believing reader this may very well sound like a deranged person or a traumatised youngster. However, other patterns soon

follow, which may cause the sceptic to entertain a small possibility of truth in the miraculous. Tate (2008:105) maintains that this realization of Owen's divination which turns out to be accurate, allows Irving to confront a sceptical, postmodern society with a miracle. Owen has a vision of an angel one night; he sees his name on Scrooge's grave, as well as his date of death; he has an obsession with perfecting the shot and has dreams about his sacrificial death. There is progression in his knowledge:

> 'LAST NIGHT I HAD A DREAM. NOW I KNOW FOUR THINGS. I KNOW THAT MY VOICE DOESN'T CHANGE – BUT I STILL DON'T KNOW WHY. I KNOW THAT I'M GOD'S INSTRUMENT. I KNOW WHEN I'M GOING TO DIE – AND NOW A DREAM HAS SHOWN ME HOW I'M GOING TO DIE. I'M GOING TO BE A HERO! I TRUST THAT GOD WILL HELP ME, BECAUSE WHAT I'M SUPPOSED TO DO LOOKS VERY HARD' (Irving, 1989:493).

An attentive reader is able to start constructing a possible scenario of Owen's vision. Irving gains sympathy for the character of Owen Meany in that he, despite his Christ-like characteristics, remains human as well. He is single-minded about his divine purpose, although he has a fear of what is to come and wonders whether he will be able to fulfil the task.

The details of that tragic day are gradually revealed through dreams Owen has. He is certain that he saves Vietnamese children and reads to Johnny from his diary one night in which he relates pieces of that day – the explosion, the nuns and his ascension to heaven. Eventually, Owen understands why his voice never changes. When Dick Jarvits, the disturbed brother of the deceased, throws the grenade at Johnny in the airport bathroom, all the Vietnamese children listen to Owen when he urges them to lie down: "…it was his *voice* that compelled the children to listen to him – it was a voice like *their* voices. That was why they trusted him, why they listened. 'DOONGSA,' he said, and they stopped crying" (Irving, 1989:715).

Owen's voice always sounded like a permanent scream because of the position of his Adam's apple. Although he had consulted doctors about this condition, they remained baffled as to why this was the case. Owen realises that there is a very good reason for his voice being high-pitched and rather different, a voice that demands attention. This voice is instrumental in the rescue of the Vietnamese children. The whole concept that human beings only have partial knowledge is emphasized here. Truth is always only partly revealed.

Johnny, after having caught the grenade in his hands, opens his arms for Owen to jump into. He is lifted for the last time and successfully traps the grenade on the top ledge of the window. Finally, all the practising for the shot makes sense and Owen dies a heroic death. This event takes place on 8 July 1968, the date that Owen saw on Scrooge's tombstone. Owen's arms are blown away and the reader is reminded of all the different manifestations of armlessness in the novel: the armadillo whose claws Owen removed, Watahantowet's totem that is armless and the statue of

Mary Magdalene that Owen desecrates when he removes her arms. Owen Meany willingly gives up his hands to his God, figuratively as well as literally. All these serve as prescience of what is to come for Owen at the end. Ironic is the fact that Owen dies in the arms of a Catholic nun, even though he feared them during his years at school. He always referred to them as "PENQUINS." While dying, Owen confirms his belief in the immortality of the soul: "'[…] WHOSOEVER LIVETH AND BELIEVETH IN ME SHALL NEVER DIE'" (Irving, 1989:719).

Johnny Wheelwright says a prayer for Owen at the end of the novel and he comes to a deeper understanding of the forces that were at play when Owen was lifted up by the children at Sunday school. Irving, in the introduction to the novel, says that this seeming weightlessness is interpreted to mean "that he was always in God's hands" (Irving, 1989:14). Johnny reflects how the children believed Owen to be weightless because they did not understand that other forces were involved. His tone is regretful: "'Now I know they were the forces that contributed to our illusion of Owen's weightlessness; they were forces we didn't have the faith to feel, they were the forces we failed to believe in – and they were also lifting up Owen Meany, taking him out of our hands'" (Irving, 1989:720). Irving does not answer the question whether the supernatural is at work here or whether everything is just coincidence. The reader might be convinced, unconvinced or in the liminal space mentioned before. Johnny believes that Owen Meany is a miracle because of what he accomplishes and what his foreknowledge cannot logically explain. Johnny is moved to a fickle faith at the end of the novel, a faith that is not unshakeable, but often characterized by doubt. This is a faith completely different from the intuitive, non-dogmatic faith of Owen Meany. Johnny's faith is bound in rituals and doctrines. He, at one point, questions the fact that God knew what was in store for Owen and He, nevertheless, allowed it.

Wood (1999:276) observes that the problem of evil and its existence in the world is, for many people, the real affront to belief in God. He says that "the existence of pain is an obstacle to belief because it seems either to limit God's power or to qualify his goodness". For many the theological explanations are unsatisfactory or unacceptable. Wood refers to a few: the fact that God's ways may not be understood by us; we will eventually be rewarded in heaven for all our suffering on earth and the fact that suffering must precede happiness. Hume, the father of scepticism, uses this argument when he states through his persona Philo that not merely the fact of evil, but the enormous amount of evil makes it doubtful that a deity actually exists (cited in Thomson *et al,* 2008:147). Johnny, however, understands that faith does not bring all the answers. He says that "For although I believe I know what the real miracles are, my belief in God disturbs and unsettles me much more than not believing ever did; unbelief seems vastly harder to me now than belief does – but belief poses so many unanswerable questions" (Irving,1989:669). Johnny prays to God at the end to resurrect his friend. This may be interpreted as a sign of immaturity, an inability to

come to terms with his friend's death, but at the same time it could be a confirmation of hope. Jansen (2001:119) sees Johnny's inability to deal with losing Owen as an inability to maintain distance. As mentioned earlier, Jansen sees this distance as a way of coping with suffering, even if it is just partly. Hope is what postmodern individuals are desperate for in our day; hope that upholds faith. The Apostle Paul reminds his readers in Hebrews 11:1 that "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Bible, 2001).

Whether the reader is convinced of the miracle of Owen Meany or not, is beside the point. Irving is successful in portraying the search for the spiritual. Kourie and Ruthenberg (2010:103) call it the inevitable "ache of absence common to Christian devotion and postmodern spiritual fragmentation". Irving confronts the reader with the complexity of spirituality in our postmodern era. The spiritual cannot be contained, as Owen Meany rightfully says. Owen's words remind of Lyotard's notion of "the unpresentable" – that which cannot be presented.

The introduction refers to Salman Rushdie's plea for a co-existence of the miraculous and the mundane in the novel in order to balance reason with the numinous (Rushdie, 1991:376). Irving balances these two levels without openly propagating any one level. Traditional religious themes are recurrent without being offensive to the non-believer. These themes are reinterpreted in light of contemporary concerns. Belief and disbelief co-exist as two sides of the same coin. He creates a privileged space for the supernatural even if such phenomena cannot be explained. Tate (2008:87) describes Irving's spiritual position as a space between the serious reservations of doubt and the wistful glance of faith over our shoulders. Irving does this because it is a true reflection of postmodern society in which a reader asks him/herself: of which stories do I find myself a part? The reader does not have to believe in Owen's miracle – it could simply be seen as a praiseworthy act by an exceptional being. Edwards (1984:73) writes: "We tell stories in a fallen world. By their matter they may lament and counter that fall […] The strange power of story, however, is also to achieve those ends simply by being itself […] it opens a story-world, where everything coheres infrangibly and is impeccably."

Irving, a novelist who is not particularly religious, employs Biblical themes such as providence, sacrifice and the miraculous in such an innovative way that the reader is enticed to confront the religious again, enticed to pose questions concerning the relevance of such themes and enticed to consider the possibility of the supernatural. Vattimo (2002:17) argues that philosophers nowadays speak more frequently about angels and redemption without providing an explicit justification for the use of such terms. Precisely because the postmodern is characterized by the end of metanarratives can the religious be considered again. Irving seems to have understood this in his novel *A prayer for Owen Meany.* He satisfies the postmodern audience's longing and disdain for

the religious. In true postmodern style the novel does not offer final answers, but provide a plurality of interpretations.

Chapter 4: Sin, Guilt and Redemption

Atonement – Ian McEwan

4

4.1 Introduction

Ian McEwan is a confessed atheist who once remarked that: "I don't believe in God. But the world is just as warm, as rich, if not warmer and richer, when seen without a religious point of view. And just as menacing," (Lacayo, 2005:70). Despite this position, his work contains many Judeo-Christian themes and for purposes of this dissertation the manifestation of sin, guilt and redemption in *Atonement* will be examined as themes that show the profound theological engagement contained within the contemporary novel, even when written by non-believers.

There are of course many Biblical themes in contemporary novelistic discourse, and the reason – or at least part of the reason – for these is that they enable writers to give readers a glimpse of life as it is through their stories, which often tend to follow the pattern of sin, guilt and redemption. Michael Edwards believes, as mentioned earlier, that we invent stories because we live in a world marred by original sin and through stories we reach towards a better and redeemed life. Ferretter (2003:166) concurs that even though the world of a story is only temporary and "does not actually constitute the redemption of the world promised by the Christian gospel, it nevertheless can be understood as an expression of the desire for that redemption which St Paul attributes both to fallen human beings and to the created world itself". An immediate question a Christian reader might ask – as perhaps any other reader – is whether the fact that McEwan is a non-believer detracts from the novel as such. According to Bradley and Tate (2010:16) McEwan fills this space of belief in God with belief in family, love, progress in science and also art. He furthermore believes that the novel is "the only utopian space where believers of every persuasion – Christians, scientists, communists, poets, even the pathologically deluded – can exist together without violence" (Bradley and Tate, 2010:16). There is a definitive link here with Vattimo's advocation of weak thought which prevents violence. As such, the novel provides an ideal space of convergence and an opportunity for interaction between different ideologies. The content of *Atonement* is predominantly secular, but provides enough religious symbolism to satisfy the reader interested in the sacred.

Humans are corrupt beings and through story we endeavour to return to our former state of innocence. One can argue that most stories then have this longing for redemption. The title *Atonement* is a theological term and creates an expectation within the reader of something

theological to follow. Atonement implies, in a Christian sense, a God-figure who is capable of forgiveness. This theological concern is indeed all-pervasive in the novel: can we atone for our sins?

The search for atonement in the novel comes from Briony Tallis, who seeks penance through fiction. She is a thirteen-year-old child and lives in a large country house with her family. The novel starts out with the portrayal of a stifling hot day in 1935. The father of the house, Jack Tallis, is in London and works as a civil servant. He is immersed in plans dealing with the millions of casualties that a German air strike could cause. Emily, the mother of the family, mostly keeps to her room as a result of migraines. Cecilia is Briony's twenty-three-year-old sister who has recently graduated from Cambridge. They are all awaiting the arrival of Leon, the sisters' brother, and his entrepreneur friend, Paul Marshall. Briony's twin nine-year-old cousins and their fifteen-year-old sister Lola are also at the house. Robbie Turner, the son of the Tallis family's charlady, is also back after having graduated from Cambridge.

It is a long and eventful day and by the end of the day, the twins disappear, Lola is raped and Briony falsely accuses Robbie of the crime. Everyone turns against him except Cecilia, who is in love with him and with whom he had a sexual encounter earlier on that same evening. Briony misreads this encounter as sexual assault, when in fact it is an act of mutual passion between the two lovers. Robbie spends five years in prison and we meet him when he is wounded and making his way through the French countryside to Dunkirk during the war. In this middle section of the novel, we become acquainted with the brutal atrocities of war. We learn that Briony has given up an education at Cambridge and is now a trainee nurse in London. She realises how wrong she was in 1935 and taking up this vocation is a gesture of atonement, of seeking penance for this deed. Cecilia is also a nurse and has had no contact with her family ever since that fateful day. Robbie has returned from war for a brief period and is living with Cecilia. Briony has also indicated that she wants to set the record straight and that she wants to retract her previous statement in which Robbie is implicated as the one who raped Lola. The novel ends on a surprising twist – small details alter everything we have read so far. We learn that Briony has written the three sections and that the two lovers were never together, but that Robbie died in France in 1940 and that Cecilia was killed in the German bombing of the subway in London. Briony conjured this neat ending as part of her search for redemption. An epilogue is supposed to tie the ends together in order to ensure some form of coherence and to achieve a resolution, but this is not the case in this novel. The novel follows a conventional, realist, narrative structure, although there are a number of elements reminiscent of the modernist approach to fiction. The end of the novel is definitively postmodern in that it denies order and the unity becomes fragmented. Claudia Schemberg (2004:25) observes that the paradox between a desire for and a suspicion of master narratives

"manifests itself in the merging of a basic narrative realism with metafictional elements". It seems as if the novel is just another example of realist fiction, but at the end we realise that the novel is not an unbiased account of realism, but has in fact been written by a character. *Atonement* is concerned with storytelling and a metafictional self-consciousness right from the onset. Briony indicates at the end of the novel that there has been numerous drafts each constituting a different version of events. The truth remains elusive when there is a plurality of *petit recits.* There is no neat resolution in the end that offers the reader a master version of the truth, but as Schemberg (2004:88) says, the reader is invited to take part in contrasting stories. This encounter with pluralism encourages a tolerance and guides the reader towards changing the "my" intentions to "our" intentions.

Structurally, McEwan's novel follows the Biblical pattern of sin, guilt and redemption. These theological themes are at the heart of this novel and provide an opportunity for the sacred and secular to converge. This novel explores the possibility of how life on earth may be redeemed and to which extent humans can arbitrate their own redemption. Sin is, however, necessary before redemption can take place.

4.2 Sin

John Updike, in an interview with the *Paris Review* (1968) said that "unfallen Adam is an ape" (cited in Samuels, 1994:34). What he meant was that humankind becomes unimportant if there is no sin, guilt and deserving blame. These are the things that set us apart from animals. As soon as a person is content and has what he wants, he is in effect dead.

What exactly is meant by sin? The argument here concentrates on sin from a theological point of view. Broadly speaking, sin is that which is unacceptable in the eyes of God. The Greek word *αμαρτία* means sin (archaic Greek ύϐρις), used as a noun and *αμαρτάνω* literally means to miss the mark or target. In other words, we as humans fall short of God's will. Sin alienates humankind from God and the relationship between God and humankind can only be restored through redemption and the acceptance of God's forgiveness. According to many Christian denominations, the Fall corrupted everything and therefore we have the concept of original sin. Humankind was also corrupted through Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, resulting in humankind living with those consequences. Seen in fictional terms, Walters (2010:116) argues that the "Old Testament story of original sin serves as paradigm of fictional plotting" and that "all stories begin in innocence and end in knowledge", or awareness of sin echoing T.S. Eliot's famous line in "Gerontion", "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" (Eliot, 1966:350).

The introductory chapter states the question whether a fictive atonement is indeed possible. This is an important question seen in light of the fact that McEwan, as an atheist, will necessarily reject

the Christian understanding of original sin. Shah (2009:47), in an article entitled: "The sin of Ian McEwan's fictive atonement: reading his later novels" comments on the fact that "the fall" is not an historical event at the beginning of time for McEwan, but "an irrational and absurd event that disruptively breaks into the otherwise innocent privacy of life". Shah feels that McEwan's novels ultimately disappoint when viewed from the point that there is no catharsis and our postmodern discontent is without effect and not complete. One can disagree with Shah in that the catharsis frustrates simply because McEwan does not see sin as rebellion against the Christian Creator. Briony says towards the end of the novel that: "The attempt was all" (McEwan, 2007:371). Catharsis lies in that attempt to atone, even if the attempt is aimed at humanity in the absence of any deity.

There are many sinners in the novel, but the one who longs for forgiveness and a means of penance is Briony Tallis. She wrongfully accuses Robbie Turner of having raped her cousin Lola. This has a profound effect on the lives of Robbie and Briony's sister Cecilia, who are in love. The question of how culpable Briony is as a thirteen-year-old, is less important than how flawed her character is and why this is the case.

4.2.1 Briony's inability to see other people as real as she is

Briony Tallis is a precocious child whose imagination has a tendency to run wild. She is rather lonely and oftentimes left to her own devices. Such circumstances create the perfect breeding ground for an untamed imagination. Her brother Leon and sister Cecilia are both much older than she is and do not live at the house permanently any longer. She fills her long and empty hours with writing plays. Her latest play called *The trials of Arabella* is to be performed for the family after dinner. She wrote this play especially for her brother, Leon, and her ultimate goal is to alter his ways so that he would settle down with a suitable wife instead of having many relationships, and added to that, one who is willing to ask Briony to be her bridesmaid. She wants Leon to elect a wife by using reason rather than passion. She has set ideas about the world and intends to mould it to her liking. She is, furthermore, obsessed with order and control. McEwan (2007:4-5) writes: "She was one of those children possessed by a desire to have the world just so. Whereas her big sister's room was a stew of unclosed books, unfolded clothes, unmade bed, unemptied ashtrays, Briony's was a shrine to her controlling demon." It is apparent that she wants to use fiction to influence her brother to conform to what she regards as appropriate behaviour. Briony's world constitutes a world of either/or and she has rigid systems of right and wrong.

The trials of Arabella is a love story and foreshadows what will become of the characters in *Atonement*, especially Robbie and Cecilia. Briony constructs characters for her plays and thus has power over them. The problem comes in when she wants to extend that power over the real

people around her. Briony does not make a clear distinction between her creations and real life. She fails to feel compassion for her cousins, who are at her house because of their parents getting divorced: "she vaguely knew that divorce was an affliction, but she did not regard it as a proper subject, and gave it no thought. It was a mundane unravelling that could not be reversed, and therefore offered no opportunities to the storyteller: it belonged to the realm of disorder" (McEwan, 2007:8-9). She is selfish and fails to see that other people are as real as she is and this is what Vattimo sees as the problem with postmodern society – the failure to extend neighbourly love. He propagates *caritas* (charity) as perhaps the only solution to avoid violence and as a way to heed "the other." *Caritas* implies a tolerance towards others. This is related to Vattimo's weak thought theory, which implies provision for a plurality of interpretations as opposed to strong thought that results in totalitarianism and leads to violence. It is essentially this failure to see others as significant which results in violence and totalitarianism. Mathews (2006:155) observes that Briony's sense of symmetry is shattered when she realises that her cousins' representations of the characters in her play is different from hers. He says that: "This realization creates a break in Briony's personality, shattering the aesthetic symmetry that constitutes the foundation of her narcissistic, totalitarian outlook." This indifference to "the other" is part of Briony's sin. She calls the idea of other minds "unbearable."

This individual liability for sin is eclipsed by the enormity of the collective guilt during World War Two. Ian McEwan gives us a glimpse of such total disregard for "the other" when he discusses the war in the second part of the novel. These atrocities reflect on the idea of not seeing "the other" as a separate, valuable human being. The portrayal of World War Two will be discussed later on in this dissertation.

The play, *The trials of Arabella*, does not turn out as Briony wants it to, simply because the other characters fail to rise to her expectations: "…for it had never occurred to her that her cousins would not want to play their parts" (McEwan, 2007:12). Lola takes Briony's role as Arabella and for the first time in her life she has to deal with a confrontation with "the other". She subsides when she realises that one simply has to do it [deal with the confrontation]. Briony chooses to be the stage director if denied the role of Arabella. This way she remains in control of the characters and in effect of the actors in her play. Briony is happy as long as she stays in control of those around her. As long as they conform to her wishes and act within the boundaries she sets for them, she feels whole and in command.

Very early in the novel, Briony wrestles with the question of whether other people are as real as she is:

> […] was everyone else really as alive as she was? For example, did her sister really matter to herself; was she as valuable to herself as Briony was? Was

> being Cecilia just as vivid an affair as being Briony? Did her sister also have a real self concealed behind a breaking wave, and did she spend time thinking about it, with a finger held up to her face […] If the answer was yes, then the world, the social world, was unbearably complicated, with two billion voices, and everyone's thoughts striving in equal importance, and everyone's claim on life as intense, and everyone thinking they were unique, when no one was. One could drown in irrelevance (McEwan, 2007:36).

It is a rather shocking realisation that other people are just as important, at least to themselves, for one as self-absorbed as Briony. She comes to this realisation with a sort of reluctance as the enormity of such an endeavour strikes her. The difficulty of considering "the other" and the immense scope of such plurality is daunting and the danger of drowning in "irrelevance" does not seem to be such an attractive option. After this reverie, Briony states that it is entirely possible that everyone else has thoughts like hers, but this offends her sense of order and she does not really feel it. Schemberg (2004:43) concurs that Briony's despondent thoughts about the "irrelevance" of individuality reflects the confusion and disorientation which are typical of post-Enlightenment ideas. Briony seems to realise that there are a plurality of voices, but no accepted master narratives. This stance of Briony's, or for that matter McEwan's, touches on the relativity theme. If there is a plurality of viewpoints and no single one is more important than the next one, the situation becomes one of irrelevance. Does this necessarily detract from one's truth? At this point, there is a faint glimmer that others are as important as Briony is, but it is an annoying thought and is easily dismissed. This whole concept of McEwan's concerning the voice of the individual in competition with so many other voices ties in with Lyotard's notion of "incredulity of master narratives". There are many world views and truth is contingent. What McEwan wants to show the reader is that if the individual self is ever to achieve "at-one-ment", it will be achieved "via a pragmatic, critical pluralism with limits" (Schemberg, 2004:24). Briony needs not only to strive towards atonement, but also to achieve at-one-ment with herself. She needs to forgive herself for her inability to imagine herself in the lives of others and to see others as equally valuable even if they believe in other master narratives.

It may be significant to explore where this concept of compassion in McEwan's writing comes from. After the events of September 11, 2001, McEwan was asked to write about the post-September 11 world because he had in effect already written about it in his novels. In an article that was published four days after the attack, McEwan wrote: "Imagining what it's like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality" (cited in Bradley & Tate, 2010:22). What McEwan implies is that the hijackers of the September 11 bombings would not have done what they had if they had been able to imagine themselves in the position of the other victims. This idea of compassion is also, like Vattimo's concept of charity, directly advocated by the Bible. It manifests as one of the commandments that one should love one's neighbour. To expect compassion from the hijackers

may seem a rather naïve way of arguing about compassion because it is possible that the hijackers are simply incapable of feeling any compassion. What is true though is that the novel form provides an opportunity for us to imagine what it feels like to be someone else. Briony Tallis fails to do just that and this is a sin which has dire consequences for the lovers, Robbie and Cecilia.

4.3 Misinterpretation

An informed reader should understand why McEwan includes an epigraph from Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* before the beginning of the novel. There are clear similarities between the characters of Catherine Morland and Briony Tallis. The passage entails a conversation between Henry Tilney and Catherine Morland with Tilney informing Morland how incorrect her interpretation of General Tilney is. Briony Tallis too, uses fiction and her imagination to form a twisted, unfounded perception of Robbie. This subtle hint serves as warning to the reader that what seems to be true is not always the case. The structure of the novel endorses this deception. According to McEwan (cited in Childs, 2006:131) Catherine Morland "was a girl so full of the delights of Gothic fiction that she causes havoc around her when she imagines a perfectly innocent man capable of the most terrible things. For many, many years I've been thinking how I might devise a hero or heroine who would echo that process in Catherine Morland, but then go a step further and look at, not the crime, but the process of atonement, and do it in writing – do it through storytelling." McEwan's Briony is indeed just such a character whose obsession with fiction and storytelling destroys the lives of those around her.

Briony's inability to interpret scenes indirectly contributes to her making the false accusation against Robbie. One can argue that everyone makes mistakes, but in this case the repeated misinterpretation of incidents ultimately leads to Briony lying about her cousin's molestation. Robbie reflects that there are mitigating circumstances "the flash of malice, the infantile destructiveness he could understand" but there was more than just a child making a mistake: "the depth of the girl's rancour, her persistence with a story that saw him all the way to Wandsworth prison" (McEwan, 2007:233). This blatant lie is her real sin. Her lively imagination and her confusing fiction with real life contribute to these constant misinterpretations of scenes.

One such crucial misinterpretation is the scene at the fountain comprising Robbie and Cecilia. Briony watches them from the window upstairs and interprets the scene wrongly. Cecilia has to put flowers in a vase for their prospective guest, Leon's friend, Paul Marshall. She decides to get the water from the fountain, where she encounters Robbie. They have been rather awkward with each other at College and this continues on their return after graduating. Typical British class divisions are responsible for their awkwardness with each other. This is because they are in love,

which they have not admitted to each other. Cecilia is irritated with Robbie for behaving like the typical servant's son when he removes his shoes before entering the house. He offers to help with the vase and the lip unfortunately breaks off. This Meissen vase is symbolic of the fragility of the situation between them and points perhaps to a loss of innocence. Hermione Lee concurs that the broken vase serves as "a Jamesian symbol of all that cannot be made whole again, except by artifice" (cited in Childs, 2006:136). The vase is mended, but the cracks remain. Perhaps this points to the fact that even atonement is not enough and that the scar or crack will always remain. This is a typical secular interpretation and one that is endorsed by a non-believer who does not care about the certainty of forgiveness and ultimate healing from a God figure. The vase is finally broken by Betty later on in the novel. Cecilia removes her blouse and skirt and dives into the water with her underwear to retrieve the broken pieces. She does not accept his offer of help in order to punish him. Briony interprets the scene as a marriage proposal, but it does not make sense. She immediately recalls a tale she has written about a humble woodcutter saving a princess from drowning. What does not make sense, however, is Robbie raising his hand as if issuing a command that Cecilia cannot disobey. Briony is baffled by the sequence of the drowning scene: "The sequence was illogical – the drowning scene, followed by a rescue, should have preceded the marriage proposal" (McEwan, 2007:39). She gradually forms her own twisted opinion about Robbie based on fatal misinterpretations.

The next incident that strengthens Briony's slow-forming negative perception of Robbie is when he asks her to deliver a note to Cecilia. He unknowingly gives Briony an obscene note instead of a love confession. On her way to delivering the note, Briony opens the letter and is shocked by an obscene word. She is plunged into an adult world that is completely foreign to her and she finds it difficult to interpret the meaning of this: "She had read the note standing shamelessly in the centre of the entrance hall, immediately sensing the danger contained in such crudity. Something irreducibly human, or male, threatened the order of their household" (McEwan, 2007:114). Briony immediately starts constructing a story in her mind based on what she thinks she knows and what previous knowledge she has of fairy tales: "[…] this was the story of a man whom everybody liked, but about whom the heroine always had her doubts, and finally she was able to reveal that he was the incarnation of evil" (McEwan, 2007:115). Briony constructs her own drama based on what she has seen – a drama which requires a heroic rescue and retribution for the evil perpetrator. She still harbours romantic notions of heroes and heroines in her overactive imagination. She has the ability to imagine, but on her own terms and definitely not taking into account the thoughts and feelings of others. Her interpretive ability is totalitarian and she is oblivious to the fact that interpretation is pluralistic. This is Briony's story and only hers. She does not give a second thought to this feeling that things do not add up. She has known Robbie as a friend all her life, yet her over-imaginative mind forces her to construct her own story.

What further strengthens this perception of Robbie being evil is the encounter in the library between Robbie and Cecilia. Robbie comes to apologize for the obscene letter he has written to Cecilia. Their repressed passion for each other reaches a climax when they have hurried sex in the library. Unfortunately, Briony walks in and witnesses this scene. She is too young to interpret the scene for what it is – a consensual sexual encounter. She misinterprets the scene: "Though they were immobile, her immediate understanding was that she interrupted an attack, a hand-to-hand fight" (McEwan, 2007:123). She sees Robbie as a sexual predator and her sister as the helpless victim: "He looked so huge and wild, and Cecilia with her bare shoulders and thin arms so frail […]" (McEwan, 2007:123).

It should not come then as a surprise that Briony accuses Robbie of the molestation of Lola later that same evening. She has built a case against him even before the scene with Lola. McEwan subtly warns the reader against the pitfalls of misinterpretation and its dire consequences.

The twins (Lola's brothers) have disappeared because they feel unwanted. Everybody, except Emily Tallis, is out searching for them in the dark. Briony joins the search party, brooding on her ill feelings for Robbie: "but there was a maniac treading through the night with a dark, unfulfilled heart – she had frustrated him once already – and she needed to be earthbound to describe him too. She must first protect her sister against him, and then find ways of conjuring him safely on paper" (McEwan, 2007:157). The word "conjuring" is significant as it points to her evoking that which does not exist – in this case an image of Robbie. It is clear that her perception of reality and fiction are very much still intertwined. While she is out searching for the twins, she ponders on her own loss of innocence. This is the beginning of Michael Edward's pattern in a story – the loss of innocence or the Fall, which is the result of sin. She contemplates:

> Her childhood had ended, she decided now as she came away from the swimming pool, the moment she tore down her poster. The fairy stories were behind her, and in the space of a few hours she had witnessed mysteries, seen an unspeakable word, interrupted brutal behavior, and by incurring the hatred of an adult whom everyone had trusted, she had become a participant in the drama of life beyond the nursery (McEwan, 2007:160).

Briony is losing her innocence and although the fairy stories should be a thing of the past, she still clings to made-up fantasies of her own. In the darkness, Briony mistakes the figure of the rapist for a bush. On closer inspection, she finds Lola all shaken up after the incident. She sees a larger figure disappearing in the distance and immediately assumes it was Robbie, whom she has seen, and she forces Lola into confirming this. Lynne Schwartz (2002:24) says that her thinking is "a blend of inference, conjecture, envy, and self-dramatizing – all the elements of an overheated adolescent imagination". Briony connects all she has witnessed during the evening, or thought she has witnessed. Her obsession with order and symmetry contributes to this knowledge: "The truth

was in the symmetry, which was to say, it was founded in common sense. The truth instructed her eyes" (McEwan, 2007:169). She admits that it was not simply her eyes that told her the truth, because it was too dark for that, but rather her construction of a story in her mind: "She trapped herself, she marched into the labyrinth of her own construction" (McEwan, 2007:170). McEwan uses the word "labyrinth" here to emphasise the confusion, the uncertainty of her accusation, as it was based solely on her self-delusion rather than on verifiable facts. She is indeed in a labyrinth after this accusation, one in which she becomes trapped in her own feelings of guilt for the rest of her life. Robbie fulfils the role of rapist for her in the tidy narrative of her imagination. Briony never really liked her cousin before, but at that moment she genuinely feels sympathy for her. She also fails to see subtle indications that Lola is not to be trusted. When she reaches out to touch her cousin's cheek, it is dry and Briony makes nothing of it. Lola takes on the role of passive victim and by remaining silent over what really happened she becomes even more liable in Robbie's destruction. Briony fails to realise that Lola does not corroborate her story.

Briony is not the only one who fails to see the indicators that point to Paul Marshall as the perpetrator. Cecilia refers to Marshall as having "something comically brooding about his face" (McEwan, 2007:47). When introduced to the twins he does not even smile at Pierrot's joke, who comments by saying that he is generally considered the more pleasant one of the twins. Lola describes his face as cruel, but she still finds him attractive. He takes a perverse interest in Lola and after an afternoon nap finds himself "hot across the chest and throat, uncomfortably aroused, and confused about his surroundings" (McEwan, 2007:60). It is when he gives Lola an Amo chocolate bar that one realises the extent of his perversity when he watches her eating it, and insisting on her biting it. The other characters also remain oblivious to the fact that both Lola and Marshall have scratch marks on them at dinner. The novel serves as warning to readers to be more perceptive. A perceptive reader might have seen that the name 'Lola' could have been a reference to Nabokov's *Lolita*. In this novel, Humbert Humbert, a scholar, rents a room from Charlotte Haze, a widow, and falls in love with her twelve-year-old daughter Dolores. She is also known as Lo or Lola. He affectionately calls her Lolita and later exploits her for sexual favours.

A brief look at the other characters indicates how they are also culpable in the ruination of Robbie and Cecilia's lives. Barbara Davis in a review of McEwan's novel mentions the fact that the sin of class privilege actually demands atonement. Seeing "the other" as inferior is here seen as a sin in a theological sense. There are numerous verses in the Bible supporting this e.g. Galatians 3:28: "So there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women; you are all one in union with Jesus Christ" (Bible, 2001). Everyone readily believes that Robbie, who is the son of the Tallis family's charlady, is the rapist. The real culprit, Paul Marshall, is not even considered a suspect, despite the fact that he never mentions the fact

that Lola has been scratched by her brothers before Briony brings it up at the table. Class discrimination makes them believe that Robbie, a penny-less protégé of Jack Tallis, is capable of such a crime, whereas Marshall, the rich entrepreneur, is not. Robbie and Cecilia are also guilty because they assume that Danny Hardman, the son of Old Hardman, is guilty. They too eagerly blame the one from a socially inferior class. Emily Tallis has never been keen on Jack Tallis insisting to sponsor Robbie's education. She always said that nothing good would come of it and Jack always replied that plenty already did. He was obviously referring to Robbie graduating with a first from Cambridge. The Marshalls are guilty by concealing the true facts of the rape incident: Paul by actually raping Lola and her by keeping quiet for years. He even marries Lola in order to ensure that she will never testify against him. These characters are all guilty, but Briony is the one longing for forgiveness after suffering from haunting feelings of guilt. Ian McEwan revitalizes the theme of sin here by focusing on social sin. How is society with all its social hierarchies responsible for sinning against the individual? Sin takes on the form of social discrimination – the need to find a scapegoat. This scapegoat is Robbie, who is seen as socially inferior to Paul Marshall.

Eagleton (2001:2177) comments on these misreadings in this novel in an article entitled "A beautiful and elusive tale*"* when he concurs that "all seeing is partial seeing" and that interpretation takes place within "the monomania of the imagination". This monomania of Briony is indirectly responsible for this tragedy. Interpretation is always fragile as there is a plurality of interpretations and the possibility of misinterpretation is great.

4.3.1 World War Two as macrocosm

At this stage, I deem it necessary to comment briefly on McEwan's portrayal of World War Two and how this ties in with Vattimo's concept of the consequences of humanity's failure to heed "the other." Vattimo believes that violence is the result of strong thought; he distinguishes between *pensiero forte* (strong thought) and *pensiero debole* (weak thought). Strong thought entails holding one's beliefs and culture as absolute and in the process reducing all other cultures, beliefs and customs to one's own will. This inevitably leads to violence towards "the other." In other words, one believes only in one's own ideology without considering another's point of view. This concept is based on Nietzsche's "will to power" (discussed earlier on). In other words, humans have the tendency to want to dominate the weaker ones. McEwan relates these atrocities committed against "the other" through the eyes of Robbie Turner when he is on his way to Dunkirk accompanied by his two corporals, Mace and Nettle. At one stage, they see a leg in the fork of a tree: "It was a perfect leg, pale, smooth, small enough to be a child's. The way it was angled in the fork, it seemed to be on display, for their benefit: this is a leg" (McEwan, 2007: 192). McEwan writes about this in a flat, unemotional way as if to emphasise this cold, calculated annihilation of

"the other." There is nothing sentimental about this description, yet it is portraying just what it is supposed to – this total disregard for "the other". Ian McEwan said in an interview (cited in Plath, 2006:130) that "you've got to make your reader see. So when people accuse me of being too graphic in my depictions of violence, my response is, 'Well, either you do violence, or you sentimentalise it".

The encounter with the RAF pilot is perhaps the most unsettling example of the disregard for "the other." The soldiers are all exhausted and feel betrayed because of the RAF's failure to support the army by not providing air cover. They are frustrated and want to take it out on the RAF man, who is totally helpless against this angry mob. O'Hara (2011:81) concurs that the RAF man "is stereotyped, scapegoated into being the cause of all that has been suffered. At the expense of his identity, a role has been imposed upon him. He is not another mind, he is not a face, he is a straw man, an 'it' with a preconceived role". When violence is inflicted by a group it diminishes individual responsibility. In other words, sin is placed on the shoulders of society and the individual is regarded as innocent. McEwan reshapes the theme of sin into a form of national sin in that personal sin is abolished and an obscure entity is blamed. Through this portrayal of national or collective sin, McEwan subtly hints towards the dangers of anonymous entities carrying blame instead of individuals. He seems to say that it is easy to hide behind the collective group and in this way the individual sinners are never brought to justice.

Briony tries to avoid the fact that "the other" is different and therefore forces this "other" into roles she chooses. Briony's world is a microcosm of the larger world (macrocosm). The soldiers try to outdo one another in their efforts to do violence unto the man: "Everyone had suffered, and now someone was going to pay" (McEwan, 2007:251). Robbie knows that it will be no good to go to the man's defence. What aggravates the situation for the RAF man is the fact that he does not deny responsibility: "It may have been a protective stance, but it was also a gesture of weakness and submission which was bound to provoke greater violence" (McEwan, 2007:252). Robbie does, however, contemplate the possibility of reminding this mob that "he was a man, not a rabbit to be skinned" (McEwan, 2007:252). Robbie exhibits *caritas* (charity) in that he considers the dilemma the man is in. Mace comes to the man's rescue just before Robbie acts, which may not have been a good idea considering the physical condition he was in. Mace understands the plea of "the other" and shows compassion as an individual against the hysteria of the masses.

Vattimo agrees that there should be a theological concept of *pieta* – of charity in order to counteract violence. What the incidence with the RAF man shows us is that, as Luca D'Isanto (1993:11) in his translation of Gianni Vattimo's work says: "The violence of metaphysics pervades all political institutions, all systems of knowledge or of all individual actions as the imposition of one's own system or one's own interpretation of reality upon the other, or even as the literal

destruction and murder of the other because s/he is a danger to the order of the community, or because s/he is different." Briony Tallis commits a terrible sin by lying and subsequently destroys the lives of Robbie and Cecilia. Her crime is probably not so significant in scope compared to the horrors of the war, but McEwan makes her sin and guilt the central issues of his novel. Without sin, guilt and remorse, Briony would be an ape, in the words of John Updike. The next theme, closely linked to that of sin, is guilt. This is another quality that sets us apart from animals. Humankind without guilt becomes an animal without remorse.

4.4 Guilt

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The rime of the ancient mariner* echoes the same notion of guilt and the confession of sin as McEwan's *Atonement.* The mariner kills an albatross and for his punishment the rotting bird is hung around his neck. The sailor then relates his story to every third person he encounters. This he does as an attempt to atone for his sin of having killed the bird. Briony Tallis also spends a whole lifetime writing and re-writing her crime. The constant memory of her crime is her symbolic albatross. The sailor restores his peace by retelling his story, but mostly through prayer. Briony's method to restore peace is secular and occurs through repeated versions of her story.

Guilt is a lens through which humankind can observe its thoughts and actions. It occurs when there is disharmony between a person and his God or gods, but could also result from conflict between a person and those around him or her. Guilt is necessary for a person to become morally aware of his or her shortcomings and estrangement from either God or society. Briony is not religious and therefore cannot feel remorse before God. She is, however, connected to an external entity, which is society. She feels that she has fallen short of the expectations of society and endeavours to rectify that. She is sharply contrasted with those who feel or show no remorse or sense of guilt. Paul Marshall and Lola Quincey are typical examples of characters who show no sensitivity or guilt, at least not to the extent that they admit publicly to their conspiracy. They are involved in charity and this might be seen as their pathetic way to atone for their sins, although it might also be just another ploy to be seen and admired in public.

Mathews (2006:153) observes in his article entitled "The impression of a deeper darkness: Ian McEwan's Atonement", that McEwan echoes Friedrich Nietzsche's argument of creditor and debtor. What this means is that sin is not "just an offence against God; it is a debt that, under the old law of Moses, must be repaid". The question remains how Briony will repay this debt, if at all. Mathews (2006:153) quotes Nietzsche's words: "Indebtedness towards God: this thought becomes for him [the guilty person] an instrument of torture […] this represents a kind of madness of the will in psychic cruelty which simply knows no equal: the will of man to find himself guilty and

reprehensible to a point beyond the possibility of atonement". This is a point Briony touches on when she says that there is no atonement from God because she is an atheist. I shall return to this point again later on, but suffice to say for now that Briony can at best achieve a secular atonement.

This torment of guilt starts almost immediately after her damning evidence against Robbie: "[…] she could not sleep. Voices and images were ranged around her bedside, agitated, nagging presences, jostling and merging, resisting her attempts to set them in order" (McEwan, 2007:183). She recalls how "guilt refined the methods of self-torture, threading the beads of detail into an eternal loop, a rosary to be fingered for a lifetime" (McEwan, 2007:173). Interesting is the image of a rosary that McEwan uses to describe Briony's persistent guilt. A rosary is a typical Roman Catholic sacramental which entails a string of beads used to count one's prayers. This loop ensures that it is a never-ending circle – a different prayer is said at each fingering of every bead. Briony feels that the details of that fateful evening are like beads on a string that could be fingered for an eternity, reminding her of the lie she told. This image is linked to the fact that praying the rosary is sometimes given by priests as a way of showing penance or reflection on sins. Père Marriott, the convent priest in *Mariëtte in ecstasy* assigns the neophyte the Litany of Saints as a penance. Unfortunately for Briony, it is not that simple. She will figuratively be clutching a rosary for an entire lifetime.

When the police arrive to arrest Robbie, Briony is once again watching from a vantage point – her bedroom window. She is resolved in her decision regarding his guilt. McEwan uses another typical Christian concept to describe the way Briony sees Robbie: "It had the look of eternal damnation" (McEwan, 2007:184). This is a powerful concept and points to her playing God here, deciding on the fate of another human being. Briony has striking similarities to Arthur Miller's Abigail Williams. Abigail is described as a girl "with an endless capacity for dissembling" (Miller, 1952:23). It is through her self-serving accusations of witchcraft that the lives of many inhabitants of Salem are ruined. The puritan society of Salem, Massachusetts in 1694 is largely to blame for the hangings of innocent people and for failing to see Abigail for what she really is. John Proctor's wife, Elizabeth, is accused of being a witch through Abigail's cunning ways. Proctor cries out in court: "You are pulling Heaven down and raising up a whore" (Miller, 1952:93). These words may very well have been the words of Robbie or Cecilia, although not seeing Briony as a whore, but a deceitful liar. Briony is also protected by society and her version of events is believed without proper investigation. Jacobi (2011:60) calls it "pathetic appeal" – she [Briony] would have no reason to lie, especially about a person she has known for so long.

Guilt without an effort to rectify is of no value. Briony is consumed by guilt over this treacherous act which results in the ruination of two people's lives. She does, however, make an effort to

redeem herself; if not before a God then at least in the eyes of society. This redemption is evident in her *kenosis* or her self-emptying.

4.4.1 The concept of *kenosis* manifested through Briony

Briony's guilt about her lie leads to her giving up a place at Cambridge and becoming a nurse instead. Cecilia writes to Robbie about Briony while he is a soldier: "She's saying that she wants to be useful in a practical way. But I get the impression she's taken on nursing as a sort of penance" (McEwan, 2007:212). This is indeed the case and seems totally out of character to those who know Briony well.

Kenosis is a key concept in the work of Gianni Vattimo and refers to the self-emptying of Christ when He became a man on earth. Briony is a very egocentric young girl incapable of imagining what it feels like to be someone else. Her signing up as a trainee nurse shows her willingness to relinquish herself and see "the other" as equally important as she is. Kourie and Ruthenberg (2010:116) concur that "this incarnational self-relinquishment meets with conceptual sympathies in postmodern thought". This manifests in postmodernism as "a wariness about the self, a dispossession, an emptying, together with a new openness to the 'other'". To serve others seems a far cry from her self-absorbed life in which she manipulates those around her in her fictional dramas.

Briony and her fellow trainee nurses are under the Gestapo-like regime of Sister Drummond, who tolerates no mistakes. Briony is addressed only as nurse Tallis and this links up with the fact that individual identities are discouraged. She is embarrassed when she makes Sister Drummond aware of the fact that her name tag reads N. Tallis instead of B. Tallis. She fails to realise that she will simply be nurse Tallis from now on. The emphasis is no longer on individuals, but on a collective force. During her training as nurse, she suffers many physical discomforts: "The high starched collars rubbed her neck raw. Washing her hands a dozen times a day under stinging cold water with a block of soda brought on her first chilblains. The shoes she had to buy with her own money fiercely pinched her toes" (McEwan, 2007:276). These expectations of neatness and hygiene are normal features of the nursing profession. However, Briony seems to self-impose or overdo and this is similar to the Catholic concept of mortification. This is a term associated with religion and spiritualism. This self-mortification is Briony's attempt to atone for sins. This is her *kenosis* – her self-emptying and coming to terms with the harsh reality of war. This is where Briony learns to see "the other" as important as herself and to show real compassion. She continues to write during her stay as trainee nurse, but her writing is different: "The age of clear answers was over. So was the age of characters and plots. Despite her journal sketches, she no longer really

believed in characters" (McEwan, 2007:281). All the conjuring of magical lives into a controllable pattern has come to an end.

Briony writes to Cecilia and communicates the fact that she wants to retract her statement and set the record straight about what really happened on that fateful day in 1935. As part of this process, Robbie's name will be cleared and her parents will be informed about the lie she told at the time. Her father writes to her that Paul Marshall and Lola Quincey are to be married in a week's time on the coming Saturday in the Church of the Holy Trinity, Clapham Common. This small piece of information brings on increased feelings of guilt, which she tries to push aside by working harder. She realises that this is futile: "All she wanted to do was work, then bathe and sleep until it was time to work again. But it was all useless, she knew. Whatever skivvying or humble nursing she did, and however well or hard she did it […] she would never undo the damage. She was unforgiveable" (McEwan, 2007:285). Briony seeks to find solace in her work when she is haunted by feelings of guilt. This is indicative of the Calvinistic work ethic. When caring for some of the soldiers, she often imagines doing the same to Robbie: "She thought too how one of these men might be Robbie, how she would dress his wounds without knowing who he was, and with cotton-wool tenderly rub his face until his familiar features emerged, and how he would turn to her with gratitude, realise who she was, and take her hand, and in silently squeezing it, forgive her" (McEwan, 2007:298). Even when experiencing haunting feelings of guilt, Briony resorts to her lively imagination to construct a possible scenario. It seems as if reconciliation will occur on her own terms, as imagined by her.

It is through caring for the wounded and the maimed that Briony finally realises that other people are as real as she is. This experience is her *kenosis*, her way of stripping herself of her egotism and becoming a servant. O'Hara (2010:83) calls it an "asceticism, a relinquishing of ego for an existence 'lived in one room, without a door'". Briony is assigned the task of changing the dressing on the wound of a particular soldier, Private Latimer, whose cheek has been blown away. It is only then that Briony realises that "a person is, among all else, a material thing, easily torn, not easily mended" (McEwan, 2007:304). She gains an intimate perspective of the human body when "every secret of the body [is] rendered up – bone risen through flesh, sacrilegious glimpses of an intestine or an optic nerve" (McEwan, 2007:304). McEwan gives a graphic description of the Private's injuries: "The cavity is all ruin, crimson and raw. She could see through his missing cheek to his upper and lower molars, and the tongue glistening, and hideously long. Further up, where she hardly dared look, were the exposed muscles around his eye socket. So intimate and never intended to be seen" (McEwan, 2007:302). This description of the soldier's injuries is not sentimental, but brutal and to the point. Laura Salisbury (2010:884) mentions the fact that McEwan links the "curiosity of science and the morality of imagination with the possibilities of

literature, and with the novel in particular". McEwan (cited in Salisbury, 2010:884) said in an interview with Random House Readers' Group – Reading Guide that a novel is not necessarily good or interesting if it is moralistic, but if it gives us an intimate glimpse of other people, it certainly increases our capacity to feel.

On another occasion, Sister Drummond orders Briony to sit and talk with a young French soldier called Luc Cornet. This encounter makes her aware of the fact that rules and regulations and order do not always have to be heeded. She finds that all these endless procedures that she has been taught are actually useless when one is faced with a life and death situation. Luc is dying and speaks incoherently at times. He seems to believe that Briony is a girl with whom he is in love. She is reluctant at first to play along, as it has been drummed into her never to reveal her Christian name to any patient. Luc asks Briony to loosen his bandages and only after witnessing his obscene wound does she play along and pretend to be the girl that he loves. Briony finds that the side of Luc's head is missing: "The hair was shaved well back from the missing portion of skull. Below the jagged line of bone was a spongy crimson mess of brain, several inches across, reaching from the crown almost to the tip of his ear" (McEwan, 2007:308). It dawns on her that he is indeed dying and that sister Drummond wants her to be with him in his last moments. O'Hara (2011:83) comments on the fact that Briony "wilfully imagines herself into the foreign and uncertain terrain of an Other's narrative world" whereas before she was "so apt to hijack the narratives of others, reconstructing them to fit her own vision". Briony becomes part of Luc's narrative and finally reveals her first name to him, as well as admits that she loves him. She discards this obsessive sense of order for a higher course – the acceptance of "the other" as being as important as she is. Briony stays with Luc until he dies and fulfils the requirement of not letting the other die alone as stated by Lèvinas: "[…] it is the fact that I cannot let the other die alone, it is like a calling out to me […] For me, [the other] is above all the one I am responsible for" (cited in O'Hara, 2011:82). Lèvinas believed that we all have an infinite obligation towards other human beings. His work is based on the ethics surrounding "the other." Lèvinas (1982b:157-158) stated that "the Human consists precisely in opening oneself to the death of the other, in being pre-occupied with his or her death [...] I am persuaded that around the death of my neighbor what I have been calling the humanity of man is manifested". Briony heeds her responsibility towards "the other", and provides consolation to Luc in his dying moments.

Briony decides to go and see Cecilia and inform her of her desire to retract the statement which led to Robbie's conviction. According to Williams (cited in Jacobi, 2011:63) Briony feels both guilty and ashamed: She feels guilt, which as Williams says, "comes from an act or an omission of a sort that typically elicits from other people anger, resentment, or indignation". Briony also feels ashamed of herself and diminished. She attempts to improve herself by revoking her statement

and writing to her parents in order to clear Robbie's name. Jacobi (2011:63) concurs that Briony's "repeated drafts can be seen as attempts to work through her difficulties and to find some emotional and psychological relief". On her way to Cecilia she reflects on the critique of Cecil Connolly from Horizon on her manuscript *Two figures by a fountain.* Connolly suggests that she needs development, backbone and some tension. Kathleen D'Angelo (2009:99) observes that Briony's rejection of character is an omission of what Woolf believed is essential – the human element. She continues to say that Briony "has used these narrative techniques to bury her crime within the text". Briony is fully aware of what is lacking: "The evasions of her little novel were exactly those of her life. Everything she did not wish to confront was also missing from the novella – and was necessary to it. What was she to do now? It was not the backbone of a story that she lacked. It was backbone" (McEwan, 2007:320). Briony needs to confront the truth and include it in her drafts. She admits later on that these techniques are not enough and ineffectual to conceal her cowardice: "Did she really think she could hide behind some borrowed notions of modern writing, and drown her guilt in a stream – three streams of consciousness?" (McEwan, 2007:320). At this point, her characters are still pawns in her narratives without being fully developed. It is at this point that Briony realises that her writing has to change. Laura Salisbury (2010:888) observes that it is a "turning away from high modernist perspectivism to the putative reality of the movement of things". What Salisbury means is that Briony starts realising that there is a moral sense to be found within the creation of a story or narrative. This maturation in her writing also reflects her moral development, her sense of awareness and sensitivity towards others.

Briony stops at the church on Clapham Common where Lola and Marshall are getting married. Ironically, Lola is wearing white and to anyone unaware of their deceit, she looks like an innocent bride. Briony contemplates getting up at the request of the vicar to voice any impediments as to why they should not get married. She decides against this: "But the scratches and bruises were long healed, and all her own statements at the time were to the contrary. Nor did the bride appear to be a victim, and she had her parents' consent" (McEwan, 2007:325). She realises that "the debt was paid and that the verdict stood". This inability to speak up must have contributed greatly to her feelings of inadequacy and perhaps cowardice. The debt was paid by the innocent Robbie. Briony still has to pay her debt. The scratches and bruises Laura sustained were healed, but Briony's metaphorical scratches and bruises may never heal.

Briony finally reaches the place where Cecilia lives. The conversation between them is strained and Briony realises that nobody would believe that she did not act out of malice. Cecilia's words: "Don't worry. I won't ever forgive you" (McEwan, 2007:337) are particularly damning to Briony. Robbie appears and is hostile towards Briony and insists that she write to her and Cecilia's parents and also make a formal statement at a solicitor's office stating that she did wrong and to express

her desire to retract her evidence. The two lovers find out that they have wrongfully believed that Danny Hardman was responsible for the rape of Lola when Briony informs them that the rapist was in fact Paul Marshall. They too have misread the situation. Briony leaves despondent as she reminisces about the tender way Cecilia used to speak to her whenever she had nightmares as a child. She is aware of the fact that neither she nor the war has destroyed Cecilia and Robbie's love for each other. This brings some sort of consolation to her. This enduring love reminds of McEwan's words: "only love then oblivion". That is if one believes the version of the lovers not surviving the war and never being united. Briony leaves with a certainty of what to do: "she knew what was required of her. Not simply a letter, but a new draft, an atonement, and she was ready to begin" (McEwan, 2007:349).

4.5 Redemption

The terms redemption and atonement are both theological terms and are also closely related. Redemption entails liberation from sin and its dire results or effects. Atonement is the principal dogma of Christianity and it entails a restoration of harmony with God.

How can such redemption be possible for Briony, who does not believe in a deity? As mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, Boscaljon maintains that an all-powerful creator is not necessary to redeem and that humans can decide on their own redemption. Ian McEwan's *Atonement* follows the pattern of the individual's fall into sin (Briony's lie and subsequent inability to see others as she sees herself) followed by feelings of guilt and a longing to be forgiven. What is missing is the reconciliation with God. This is replaced by a secular redemption in the form of writing her final draft.

Boscaljon (2007:762) discusses three alternatives that allow redemption to be guaranteed despite the absence of a deity: suffering, death and time. McEwan employs two of these alternatives, namely suffering (Briony's haunting feelings of guilt) and time. It took Briony five years to make the decision to retract her previous damning statement, and a lifetime of writing and re-writing her final draft. Although her death is not necessary for her to be redeemed, we know that her death is imminent as she is suffering from vascular dementia. Another possibility discussed by Boscaljon is storytelling as a way of finding redemption. As example, Shelley's *Frankenstein* is mentioned in which the traditional possibilities of death and suffering are redundant because Victor Frankenstein dies before the monster's downfall and the monster does not find relief in Victor's death. Boscaljon (2007:766-767) seems to suggest that death limits the scope of redemption to the person who dies, whereas storytelling has a wider scope, redeeming others as well. Frankenstein feels that if he is able to dissuade another from a life of sin, his life will actually have some meaning. Briony's draft will serve not only as an atonement for her sins, but also as an atonement to the other guilty parties and their future generations.

4.5.1 Religious versus secular confession

D'Hoker in an article entitled "Confession and Atonement in contemporary Fiction: J. M. Coetzee, John Banville, and Ian McEwan" points to the differences between religious and literary (secular) confession (2006:31-32). D'Hoker refers to Foster's distinction in his book *Confession and complicity in narrative.* Foster (1987:2) maintains that in religious confession "the forms are purely conventional, an acknowledgement of the predictable, almost ritualistic nature of sin". Sins need not be specified, but the sinful nature of the confessor needs to be acknowledged. Submission to the sacrament is all that is needed to be absolved (1987:3). D'Hoker sees secular confession as subordinate to religious confession, because despite the presence of a reader or listener there are no authorities invested with the power to redeem. How valid is such atonement when considered from a Christian point of view?

Jacobi (2011:64) in an article entitled, "Who killed Robbie and Cecilia*?* Reading and Misreading Ian McEwan's *Atonement*" mentions that the Catholic sacrament previously called Penance and now called Reconciliation is thought to restore the penitent's soul to its former condition. He also says that there is no indication that this purging will undo the wrong done in the secular world. He uses the example of a child murderer who receives a death penalty, but this will never bring back the child. The murderer may believe that after his execution, God may redeem his sins. However, Briony is an atheist and therefore cannot appeal to any deity for reconciliation: "No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all" (McEwan, 2007:371). What Briony is acknowledging here is that what has been done cannot be undone on earth. In other words, whether one believes in the existence of a higher authority that may redeem or not, a wrong cannot be undone. Jacobi also mentions the fact that Catholic priests usually lay certain tasks to the penitent, which upon completion would result in reconciliation with God. This is not the case with Briony, as Cecilia tells her that she will never forgive her. All Briony can in fact do is to repent through her writing. The lovers will not forgive her, but she may forgive herself. Schemberg (2004:81) notes that if Briony understood from the outset that there could be no possibility of atonement for her, the attempt to achieve atonement would be sufficient.

D'Hoker maintains that this absence of ritual in secular confession makes truth all the more important. This truth refers to the revelation of the inner self. D'Hoker discusses the confessional fictions of a few contemporary authors. John Banville's narrator, Victor Maskell in *The untouchable*, uses the metaphor of self-restoration when he exposes himself in the following passage: " I shall strip away layer after layer of grime – the toffee-coloured varnish and caked soot left by a life-time of dissembling – until I come to the very thing itself and know it for what it is. My soul. My self" (cited in D'Hoker:2006:34). In this confession, Maskell grants authority to Miss

Vandeleur to dispose of his confession. In McEwan's *Atonement* it is up to the reader to grant Briony absolution or not. The reader is invested with power to judge whether the confessor is sincere and to subsequently grant absolution to the confessor. Here, many factors such as pre-conceived ideas, experience, education and culture come into play that will determine a reader's response. An interesting observation comes from Kathleen D'Angelo (2009:102), strengthening the notion that the reader holds the final say. She observes that Briony's dementia will eventually result in her losing her memory, which is equivalent to a literal 'death of the author' after which only the text will remain. The reader is then ultimately responsible for interpreting the text.

Briony's writing or final draft of *Atonement* is her way of redeeming herself in the eyes of those she betrayed, namely Robbie and Cecilia. The last section of the novel is entitled *London, 1999* and this is where we learn that Briony is the author of the three sections. Some critics severely criticize this sudden slip into the realms of postmodern writing and even call it "postmodern gimmickry" (Finney, 2004:70). Finney (2004:73) maintains that the many allusions to other texts serve as a warning not to see *Atonement* as a classic realist text. Austen's *Northanger Abbey* received some mention earlier on. The parallels between Catherine Morland and Briony should also serve as indicators to an educated reader that deception is part of this novel. There are also many conflicting opinions regarding whether the two lovers actually survive or not. It remains uncertain and doubtful, which makes the novel a perfect example of a postmodern product. There are no clear answers and neat endings, but the end remains open-ended with many questions still looming.

The last section starts with Briony going to the War Imperial Museum before attending her seventy-seventh birthday to return material she has been using to write her final novel. Briony used material given to her by lieutenants Mace and Nettle, who served with Robbie in the British Expeditionary Forces in France. It is apparent that she took meticulous care to give an accurate (though fictional) account of Robbie's suffering during the retreat to Dunkirk. If she deprived him of his reputation during his life-time, she was going to grant him hero status in her novel. Briony attends a performance at the place where she grew up – the Tallis estate that has been changed into a hotel called Tilney Hotel (another reference to *Northanger Abbey's* Tilney). The family members are gathered here to celebrate Briony's birthday and as a special treat to her, *The trials of Arabella* will be performed by the grand-children of those present. They will finally do what Briony could not complete so many years before.

Briony's atonement comes through repeated drafts of her novel. It literally took her a life-time to complete. She comments: "The earliest version, January 1940, the latest, March 1999, and in between, half a dozen different drafts […] My fifty-nine-year assignment is over" (McEwan, 2007:369). The reader is informed that the lovers were never reunited, that Robbie died of

septicaemia resulting from his wounds, Cecilia was killed in the bombing of London in Balham Underground Station and that Briony never saw them in that year. She mentions earlier that: "I've regarded it as my duty to disguise nothing – the names, the places, the exact circumstances – I put it all there as a matter of historical record" (McEwan, 2007:369). Briony presented these characters previously through the clouded lens of her imagination. Now she attempts to portray them with the necessary compassion and truth that she denied them at first. Finney (2004:81) concurs that she is "abandoning the imaginary for the symbolic order". He continues to say that her final draft, in which the lovers are united, is "her fictional and imaginative attempt to do what she failed to do at the time – project herself into the feelings and thoughts of these others, to grant them an authentic existence outside of her own life's experiences" (Finney, 2004:81).

From beginning to end this novel is concerned with fiction and the making of fiction. This necessarily also involves the reader and Briony also caters for the reader who still harbours romantic notions about fiction or by implication, life. She writes: "I know there's always a certain kind of reader who will be compelled to ask, But what really happened? The answer is simple: the lovers survive and flourish. As long as there is a single copy, a solitary typescript of my final draft, then my spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love" (McEwan, 2007:371). This is the only way in which Briony can pay her debt. She robbed the lovers of happiness during their life-time, but in fiction she can rekindle that hope they once had. They may have died, but in her novel they will live forever.

On the last page, Briony reflects on her motives and she informs the reader that she likes to think that she is not being evasive or weak when constructing such a happy ending. She never granted herself forgiveness from the lovers though, and Finney (2004:82) sees this as proof of her finally being able to imagine what it feels like to be another. Briony shows *caritas* (love for thy neighbour) in her attempt to atone for her sin. She is at last able to heed "the other" as equal. She says at the beginning of the novel: "It wasn't only wickedness and scheming that made people unhappy, it was confusion and misunderstanding; above all, it was the failure to grasp the simple truth that other people are as real as you" (McEwan, 2007:40). McEwan shows us that moral awareness is indeed at the core of our humanity, whether portrayed through the microcosm of Briony's world or the larger macrocosm of a world war.

It indeed remains the task of the reader to grant absolution to Briony or not. Shah (2009:43) insists that Briony "is irredeemable: A human story cannot save a human story". Briony herself admits that atonement is impossible because of the absence of a deity. What is important though, is the attempt (McEwan, 2007:371). Briony's atonement can be seen in the sense of "reconciliation with self, being at one with oneself" (McEwan cited in D'Hoker, 2006:42). Whether one grants Briony absolution or not, one may at least admire the longing for redemption and the attempt to atone,

albeit on a secular level. Some readers may call into question the sincerity of Briony's desire for forgiveness when taking into consideration that she is writing for an audience at the end. Is she being sincere, or is she attempting to please the audience? Christians may have a belief in the possibility of atonement and may long for a reassurance that forgiveness is possible, whereas for a non-believer the attempt may be enough. This tolerance for and acceptance of differences link to Vattimo's weak thought, in which he advocates tolerance in contrast to strong thought that is totalizing.

Chapter 5: Visions, Faith Healing and Stigmata

Mariëtte in Ecstasy – Ron Hansen

Keeping Faith – Jodi Picoult

5

5.1 Introduction

This chapter deviates somewhat from the strategy thus far by comparing the work of two very different novelists who deal with the same phenomena. Ron Hansen, unlike the novelists discussed previously, is a devout Catholic and the "contemporary culture" of disbelief has motivated him to make religion the central theme of his work (Gandolfo, 2007:144). Hansen, in an interview with Bob Faw (PBS, 2012), said that writing is a witness to what God is doing in the world and there is no better way to worship and praise. He believes that fiction and religion have the same goals and one of these goals is to show how to live a moral life and how to avoid an immoral one, but without the didacticism.

Jodi Picoult, on the other hand, is a non-believer. She hails from a non-observant Jewish background and she is married to a non-practising Protestant. According to Picoult, she got the impetus for *Keeping Faith* when her own son enquired about God. Kyle was five at the time and asked the question: "What's God?" Her response was quite a secular one of God living in heaven and watching over us, the clichéd answer many modern parents give when suddenly confronted with such a theological question. Kyle observed that that is kind of like a baby-sitter and Picoult agreed. His next observation triggered another idea when he said that most baby-sitters are female. In her novel, Faith White also sees her "guard" as female. This is of course ample reason for controversy and the idea of a female God is something unheard of for the Church. Picoult mentions the fact that she wants to look at belief rather than religion. As mentioned before, this emphasis on belief rather than religion is at the heart of the postmodern concept of spirituality. She very aptly touches on the notion of tolerance within plurality when she poses the question of what if we were able to entertain someone else's point of view about God. Multiple perspectives are integrated in the novel and thus a platform is created for competing voices (Picoult, 2008).

Both these novels deal with manifestations of the supernatural, but they belong to very different categories of fiction. Jodi Picoult is regarded as a novelist of popular fiction and Ron Hansen is a literary novelist. There is no clear-cut definition that can separate popular from literary fiction because there are many grey areas in which characteristics overlap. Keeping the two novels,

Mariëtte in ecstasy and *Keeping Faith* in mind, a few differences will be highlighted. Literary fiction endeavours to find some truth regarding the human condition and emphasis is more on the process rather than on the story. Popular fiction seeks escapism rather than complicated ambiguity and abstract concepts embedded in prosaic language. In other words, technique is more important than story for the literary novelist. Anita Gandolfo (2007:144) comments on the distinction by saying that although Picoult's novels are engaging, they are "relatively weak from an aesthetic perspective", whereas Hansen's prose is "exquisite and the novel is expertly crafted". Hansen's use of language evokes reflection and probes the reader to find the substance of a character, in contrast to Picoult's language, which tends to be simply utilitarian in order to convey facts.

When comparing two descriptive passages from the novels, one notices the difference in the power of the words to convey images. The reader finds the description of Ian Fletcher, the atheist in *Keeping Faith,* revealing, but it does not entice the reader to get to know the character, as he remains a brief summary:

> He developed a large following and cultivated a reputation as Spokesman of the Millennium Generation – those cynical Americans who had neither the time nor the inclination to trust in God for their future. He was opinionated, brash, and bull-headed […] But clearly Ian Fletcher's greatest attribute – the one that endeared him to women of all ages and made him a natural for the small screen – was the fact that he was handsome as sin (Picoult, 2008:30).

What lacks here is language that effectively describes the atmosphere. Ian Fletcher's main qualities are mentioned, but the reader is not transported to a deeper understanding. It remains a rather flat description of a typical anti-Christ figure with only slight references to his arrogant character and his physical attractiveness. Richard Terrell (2002:254) mentions the fact that literary fiction has a presence in the words that impels the reader to take a closer look and that goes beyond "mere temporary encounter". He maintains that a description of Mother Saint-Raphaël in *Mariëtte in ecstasy* does not just capture the essence of the character, but also conveys information about the cloistered life:

> Mother Saint-Raphaël tugs her plain white nightgown up over her head. She is hugely overweight but her legs are slight as a goat's. Tightly sashed around her stomach just below the great green-veined bowls of her breasts are cuttings from the French garden's rosebushes, the dark thorns sticking into skin that is scarlet with infection. She gets into a gray habit, tying it with a sudden jerk. She winces and shuts her eyes (Hansen, 1995:5-6).

This physical description emphasizes her age with its harsh realities and almost repels the reader, something that is connected to her sometimes unpleasant character later on. The passage reveals mortification practices of the convent and the longing to feel pain for Christ. Terrell (2002:254) comments on the presence of "irony of humble and worn flesh doggedly pursuing a spiritual

vocation". The impressions Hansen leaves are lasting, whereas Picoult provides the reader with a temporary escape. This does not mean that the one novel is preferable to the other. It entirely depends on the type of reader and his or her tastes. These two novels indeed attract two very different types of readers. Both novels deal with the same inexplicable phenomena, but Picoult's reader is still someone more interested in light-hearted reading rather than Hansen's more academic, serious reader. This, however, is a distinction that cannot be generalized. Hansen, in an interview with Dale Brown, mentioned the fact that it is impossible to predict an audience and he spoke about a Jewish book group that attended a reading of *Mariëtte in Ecstasy* (Brown, 2008:150). Some may find this rather unusual considering the all-pervasive Catholic content of the novel. However, if one considers the audience of, for example, *The satanic verses*, it may not be unusual at all. Hansen's novel does attract the more academic, serious reader, although paradoxically Hansen was concerned at first whether he would not be ridiculed for his inclusion of the supernatural in academic circles. He reveals this doubt in an interview with Shirley Nelson (1995:82). The reason for this concern is the fact that the supernatural remains suspect to some in a secular art form. Dennis Taylor (2010) mentions the fact that "no language is more subject to parody" than religious language. This is a point on which Sara Maitland (2000:77) also touches on when she refers to the comic portrayal of religious characters in general. Her views and the reasons she gives for believing that the novel is not the best vehicle for conveying religious content feature later on in the discussion.

The settings and fictional historical periods for the two novels also differ significantly. Picoult's novel is set in an American secular household in New Canaan in 1999, whereas Hansen's novel is set in a sacred, French convent in upstate New York where an almost exclusive female cast speaks Latin. The historical period of Hansen's novel is 1906. Interesting is that 90 years separate these novels fictionally, yet they address the same inexplicable phenomena. Faith and reason clash and the novels include many characters that represent the two opposing viewpoints. In both novels the reader is reminded that the extraordinary co-exists alongside the mundane. Both novels portray a nostalgia for the miraculous and the desire to give space to the miraculous without being guided to believe in it. As stated in the introduction to this dissertation, these novelists do not intend to spread superstition. If anything, they present a very sceptical, heedful perspective on phenomena such as visions, faith healing and stigmata. Tate (2008:68) concurs that if "disruptive miraculous events in realist contemporary fiction represent what Brian McHale has named 'the ontological dominant' of postmodern poetics, they also engender a slight return to the modernist emphasis on epistemology". As a result the novels culminate in a sort of blurred religion with elements of piety, traditional belief, scepticism and outright disbelief. What is interesting in both novels is that scepticism does not come exclusively from the unbelieving camp, but from the Roman Catholic hierarchy itself. This seems like a strategy to prove once again the

immense difficulty in presenting such supernatural phenomena and subsequently defending their authenticity.

5.2 Contextualization

Ron Hansen got his inspiration for his novel *Mariëtte in ecstasy* from reading the autobiography of Therese of Lisieux called *The Story of a Soul.* In an interview with Shirley Nelson Hansen calls it a "portrayal of a young woman's ardent love for God" (cited in Nelson, 1995:82). Parallels between Therese and Mariëtte are that they were born more or less during the same time, they both lost their mothers to cancer at a young age, they both had sisters who joined a religious order before them and they both were prone to emotional outbursts before their respective entries into the convents. Hansen said that he found it a page-turner even though nothing much happened. He considered the fact that there are so few of these [religious] novels and thought of himself as a good candidate for writing such a novel (cited in Nelson, 1995:82). Therese of Lisieux entered the cloistered life as a nun at the tender age of 15. What must have impressed Hansen was her complete devotion to God, her longing to understand His passion and her insistence on simplicity.

Mariëtte Baptiste, a 17-year-old postulant enters the priory of the Sisters of the Crucifixion in 1906. Prior to her admission, she lives with her father, Dr Baptiste. Her mother died of cancer when she was very young and she has one other sibling who is twenty years her senior. Her sister Celine is Mother Superior, the current prioress of the convent called Our Lady of Sorrows. Mariëtte has always been a rather strange child and her otherness is constantly mentioned. Her father, who is a physician and against her also entering the convent, tells the nuns facts about her that may make them believe that she is not a perfect candidate for a religious life: "I have a letter from Father that accuses you of being too high-strung for our convent. And he is troubled by gossip from friends and patients about trances, hallucinations, unnatural piety, great extremes of temperament, and, as he put it, inner wrenchings" (Hansen, 1995:31). Dr Baptiste refers to Mariëtte having a reputation for acting hysterically and being overtly devout.

These reservations her father has can be a warning to the reader that her supernatural experiences could be the result of hysteria or pretence. The seed of doubt is introduced by a sceptic, and in this case her father, who is a man of science. Mariëtte relates her longing to understand Christ's passion to Père Marriott, the priest of the convent, by telling him that she has been praying to understand His passion since she was 13. She also communicates her underlying desire to have God's gifts (stigmata) to Marriott: "To have a horrible illness so I could feel the horrors and terrors of death just as Christ did" (Hansen, 1995:40). Carla A. Arnell (2007, 183) in an article entitled "Wild writing: Holy stigmata and the aesthetics of "sacred pain" in Ron Hansen's *Mariëtte in ecstasy"* refers to the words of Burton where he mentions the urgent desire of many

French, Catholic women during 1840 to 1970 to experience the suffering of Christ not just for their "own individual experience", but more pertinently for their "non-believing fellow countrymen and women" in order to "redeem them – literally, buy them back – from the clutches of the enemy". As mentioned in chapter 4 of this dissertation, suffering is a traditional form of redemption. This pain or suffering is of course different in that it is entirely wished for.

There are 36 women in the priory and Hansen dedicates a page to the name, responsibility and age of each one. In doing so he introduces the very structured hierarchy of the convent. Hansen also gives an exact account of the rigorous daily schedule the nuns follow. It is understandable that any disruption, whether sacred or not, will not be tolerated easily, as the convent is a place of placidity and reverence. The ages of the nuns vary from 17 to 81 and in a way age seems to be a factor dividing the opinions regarding the authenticity of Mariëtte's stigmata later on. The older nuns see her as a charlatan or fraud, whereas the younger ones see her as a saint. What is important though is that she makes an impression on everyone as she is decisively otherworldly, whether a fraud or a saint. Her sister, Mother Celine, dies within months of her entry into the priory and Mariëtte starts experiencing the stigmata immediately after this event on Christmas Day. This phenomenon is seen as a disruption to the mundane, orderly lives of the nuns and she is expelled soon after in February 1907.

Whereas Hansen found inspiration for his novel in decidedly scared content, namely the autobiography of Therese Lisieux, Picoult found her inspiration in a very secular moment, namely her own son's questioning about God. This prompted her to write the story of Faith White, a seven-year-old girl who claims to have seen God, has healing powers and exhibits stigmata. As mentioned before, the cloistered confines of a convent is an environment where the supernatural is more expected than in a secular household.

The title of the novel is ambiguous in the sense that it could either refer to Mariah White literally keeping her daughter Faith after a very nasty custody battle, or it could be interpreted in a more figurative sense as asking whether it is possible to believe (keep faith) in the manifestation of supernatural phenomena. The Whites live in New Canaan and are in many respects an ordinary family. Mariah is from Jewish offspring and is married to Colin White, a Protestant. Neither of them is involved in religion and like many contemporary parents they do not instruct their child in religion in any way. Faith has no knowledge of God, the Bible or any doctrines. The family falls apart after Mariah discovers that Colin is once again having an affair. The parents separate and shortly afterwards Faith claims to have an imaginary friend whom she calls her "guard." The guard is described as "a person wearing a long white nightgown who is sitting across from her" (Picoult, 2008:37). A psychiatrist points out that she may in fact be seeing God and she bases her observation on the fact that these two words "guard" and God are phonetically similar. Another

shocking revelation is that her God is female. Father Rampini is tasked to investigate Faith White's claims. He is especially upset about the claim that God is female: "The idea of a female God does not sit well with Father Rampini […] but to say that God is visiting her in a clearly female form […] certainly it is heresy" (Picoult, 2008:224). Tate (2008:75) observes that "Picoult is not just concerned with testing the secular limits of modern fiction but also with questioning the linguistic conventions that govern the representation of God". In other words, Picoult is posing the possibility that God may be female, and should therefore be referred to in linguistically correct terms as she/her. Cupitt (1998:82) refers to this all male dominance by saying the "dominant, ruling-class ethos is institutional, priestly, and patriarchal [...] This tradition, the tradition of 'the Fathers,' is highly masculinist". It could be that Faith's vision of God is simply a feminine image of Christ, but Picoult provides opportunity for questions that have been probed in postmodern society regarding the gender of God. One such novel that portrays a definite female God is William P. Young's *The shack.* Mack is confronted with this female God: "As she stepped back, Mack found himself involuntarily squinting in her direction, as if doing so would allow his eyes to see her better" (Young, 2007:84).

The fact that Faith mentions Catholic saints to a psychiatrist further strengthens the authenticity of her claims: "Faith mentioned some names to me today: Herman Joseph, from Steinfeld. Elizabeth from Schonau. Juliana Falconieri," (Picoult, 2008:55). As stated in the novel, there is no way she could have heard of them at home, or for that matter at school as schools in America do not instruct learners religiously. Another uncanny, disconcerting detail concerning Faith's claims is that her "guard" tells her to read *I.I. Swerbeh* because the book is about her. A librarian with knowledge of children reversing letters points out that Faith actually means Hebrews 11:1 which reads: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Bible, 2001). The emphasis here is on things not seen, the supernatural or in Lyotard's words "the incommensurable."

Faith not only has visions of a female God, but also seems to have the ability to heal. There are a few occasions mentioned in the novel such as her healing her grandmother, Millie Epstein, after suffering a heart attack and having been declared dead. She is also credited with healing an Aids baby and being responsible for Ian Fletcher, the tele-atheist's autistic brother, to have a lucid moment and coherent conversation with Ian. Faith also experiences stigmata and eventually becomes very sick. After a long, drawn-out court case between her parents in which they both want custody of Faith, an agreement is reached. Mariah is at one point accused of suffering from Munchausen Syndrome, which means that she deliberately harms her own child to draw attention to herself. This is refuted after Faith miraculously recovers while she has been in contact with her mother. A truce is reached between Faith's parents and she stops seeing God. A typical Freudian

interpretation could be that she used her “guard” as a crutch and this father figure (God) is not needed anymore after the resolve of the family crisis.

5.3 Belief versus unbelief

Mariëtte in ecstasy

Both novels have an array of people with varying beliefs or disbeliefs. The spectrum is not always so clear-cut or binary and some characters hover in a kind of liminal space that is representative of postmodern society. Mark Taylor (1984:5) remarks that many people are suspended “between the loss of old certainties and the discovery of new beliefs, these people constantly live on the border that joins and separates belief and unbelief”. These differing belief systems create tension and cause the reader to ask many questions. Interesting is that these binary viewpoints are portrayed in such a way that the reader does not feel compelled to believe in any one. In both novels, the supernatural invades everyday, routine life. This reminds of Salman Rushdie’s conviction that realism is inadequate to explain the miraculous and that a form should be created to accommodate the miraculous alongside the mundane (Rushdie, 1991:376). This is the case in both novels as Hansen and Picoult create a platform for the miraculous within the secular. Updike echoes and confirms Rushdie’s ideas in that literature should incorporate the supernatural even if it is produced by an unbelieving mind: “[…] it remains curiously true that the literary artist, to achieve full effectiveness, must assume a religious state of mind – a state that looks beyond worldly standards of success and failure. A mood of exultation should possess the language, a vatic tension and rapture” (cited in Tate, 2008:7).

Contrary to the belief that the inexplicable, and by implication then religion, should be incorporated into the modern novel, are those who believe that the novel as secular form is inadequate for such an enterprise. One such sceptic is Sara Maitland (2000:78) who asks the question why the novel is so “singularly bad at recording, exploring and testing religious experience, theological ideologies or faith-based motivations”. She gives a few reasons for her point of view: the postmodern novel places too much emphasis on the self that is self-sufficient; a desire for closure that is in contrast to religion, which is infinite and does not have endings but just openings; the belief that there is no grand narrative and that all texts are equal and finally her belief that postmodern society is incapable of using symbols in order to talk about transcendence. She believes that if our current society fails to interpret symbols no experiences of the divine Other can be inserted into the contemporary novel (Maitland, 2000: 79-92). Although Maitland gives valid reasons for her dismissal of the novel form as a vehicle for spirituality, some novelists, as indicated in this dissertation, are successful in giving space to spirituality in the form of religious themes and more specifically in this chapter, the inclusion of the miraculous. The success lies in the way these

phenomena are introduced – subtly and in a secular context, which renders them more credibility than if they were introduced in a wholly otherworldly environment. This co-existence of the miraculous and the mundane can be traced back to the Bible. There are many examples of ordinary people who encounter the supernatural. Noah heard the voice of God urging him to build the ark; Jacob wrestled with an angel and also said that he had seen God and Moses heard the voice of God in the burning bush. Ancient Biblical miracles are somehow more acceptable to contemporary people than those ostensibly happening today. This matter is addressed in these novels in that both pay attention to the spectrum of belief and unbelief.

Mariëtte Baptiste enters the priory of The Sisters of the Crucifixion as a postulant and is ecstatically happy for the opportunity to be in the service of God. Her father, Claude Baptiste, is not happy about her joining the convent. Hansen describes the disdain he feels while Mariëtte is preparing to leave for her vocation: “Dr. Claude Baptiste stands at a kitchen window in red silk pyjamas, drinking chicory in the sunrise, looking outside as if his hate were there, hearing Mariëtte just above him” (Hansen, 1995:9). His disdain is not for his daughter, but for the fact that religion is claiming his second daughter. Arnell (2007:185) says that Hansen describes “his accoutrements as reflecting his taste for civilized niceties [silk pyjamas] and his complacent contentment with fine things”. This is in stark contrast to the prevailing status quo at the convent where there are no worldly indulgences and emphasis is on austerity. Dr Baptiste is also conspicuously absent at the solemn procession taking the bride towards her bridegroom for the spiritual wedding between Jesus and Mariëtte Baptiste. At another stage he visits his daughters on All Soul’s Day and is described as “hulking behind the iron grille in a handsome Kashmir overcoat, an inch of Murad cigarette held inside his hand and grayly hazing the room with its reek” (Hansen, 1995:77). Hansen’s language in this regard makes it seems almost as if Baptiste is an intrusion into the sacred confines of the convent. His Kashmir coat points again to his indulgence of secular luxuries and the smell of his cigarette is described as a “reek”, which refers to an unpleasant stench. He is contaminating the purity of this religious order. The “iron grille” creates a definite separation, which can be seen as the separation between sacred and secular. Mariëtte is elusive when he asks her questions about her stay at the convent because she knows it will hurt him to hear that she is happy. She sees his presence as an obstruction, maybe a hindrance to her spiritual life in the sense that she feels guilty of having deserted him and her only concern is her passionate love for Christ. He is seen as “frontally there, so forceful and huge and masculine” (Hansen, 1995:78).

The new prioress, Mother Saint-Raphaël, calls Claude Baptiste to examine a very sick Mother Celine. Although he is dressed very elegantly and smells of musk and civet, the odour of illness from his patients still clings to him. The stench is so overwhelming that “Sister Aimèe has cupped a palm over her nose and Sister Philomène inches back her chair half a foot” (Hansen, 1995:95).

He seems out of place here, and bringing with him the evils (diseases) of the secular world. Baptiste gives the sisters a look of “haughty shock and disdain” when told that Mother Celine has been vomiting for six days. Their inaction simply baffles him and he cannot comprehend it. It is not explicitly stated, but he is disgusted by the nuns’ belief that God will cure her when clearly she is in need of medical science.

After Mariëtte experiences the stigmata, her father comes to examine her. She refuses on the grounds that “Christ has forbidden them [stigmata] to science” (Hansen, 1995:140). His answer to this is that she is talking idiotically. The existence of stigmata is to his scientific mind preposterous, and he dismisses such an idea completely. Allowing him to examine the stigmata could have strengthened her case immensely, but one has to keep in mind that proving herself to anyone is never her objective. At the request of the prioress her father eventually examines her. At that stage the stigmata have miraculously healed without leaving any scars. This is a regular occurrence, which will be discussed in another section on the stigmata. Her explanation to that was that Christ has taken back his wounds. Baptiste replies replied with “you have all been duped” (Hansen, 1995:173). Claude Baptiste represents the man of science who adheres to the correspondence theory mentioned earlier in this dissertation, namely what one does not see, does not exist. He is the arbitrator of her dismissal in that the voice of science seems to triumph over that of the supernatural.

Throughout the novel, there are fragments of conversations with Mariëtte and other nuns in order to ascertain the validity of her claims or to establish what type of character she is. During one such session she is asked whether she was happy to have received so much attention at the ceremony and she comments that she wasn’t and that she really hoped for humility and plainness. This comment points to her being different and not fitting into the form that most want to place her in. She is not after fame or recognition. She also comments on the fact that the sisters were passing harsh judgements even then. It is clear that right from the start that there are tensions, doubts and jealousies. Mother Saint-Raphaël is the Mistress of Novices and thus in charge of them and Mariëtte as postulant. She is suspicious of the postulant, but towards the end it seems that she believes in the authenticity of Mariëtte’s claims. Anita Gandolfo (2007:145) mentions the fact that the “strongest dissent is voiced by representatives of institutional religion”. This is apparent in both novels and raises the question to which extent anyone can still believe in the supernatural phenomena if those deeply embedded in the church are suspicious. Mother Saint-Raphaël has mixed feelings about Mariëtte. At the postulant’s first mass, it is said that “she stares at the too-pretty postulant and is surprised that she’s weeping with happiness” (Hansen, 1995:13). She sees Mariëtte’s beauty as a possible obstacle to religious piety, but is surprised at her genuine devotion. This is perhaps a vague echo of the patriarchal concept of the fact that beauty is not reconcilable

with piety and associated with sin. Mother Saint-Raphaël scolds Mariëtte for having written a too decorative essay about her yearning for a spiritual life. She warns her "that we teach a plain style of writing" (Hansen, 1995:49). She repeatedly reminds the postulant that the emphasis is on simplicity: "Let us therefore be wary of hallucinations and tricks and whatever seems wonderful and surprising. And let us remember that sainthood has little to do with the preternatural but a great deal to do with the simple day-to-day practice of Christian virtues" (Hansen, 1995:134). This stance is in a way understandable as she has to preserve the sanctity of the priory against excesses that could be motivated by psychological disorders, hysteria or attention seeking. Her own confusion regarding the alleged wounds of Christ is expressed in the following words:

> 'I see no possible reason for it. Is it so that Mariëtte Baptiste will be praised and esteemed by the pious? Or is it she will be humiliated and jeered at by sceptics. Is it to honor religion or to humble science? And what are these horrible wounds really? A trick of anatomy, a bleeding challenge to medical diagnosis, a brief and baffling injury that hasn't yet in six hundred years, changed our theology or religious practices. Have you any idea how disruptive you've been? You are awakening hollow talk and half-formed opinions that have no place in our priory and I have no idea why God would be doing this to us. To you' (Hansen, 1995: 160).

Wendorf (2004:51) makes the observation that "the voices of science, psychology, and religion are not opposed here in their different perspectives – they are all equally confounded". Mother Saint Raphaël's actions are, however, motivated towards the common good and society takes precedence over the individual.

She is guilty of limiting God because He acts in ways contrary to what she expects. Peter Prescott (1991:66) says that the neophyte is a "threat to the community: to order, discipline, authority, enclosure and poverty (the town's people bring gifts)". Mother Saint-Raphaël ironically concurs with Dr Baptiste that there is no medical explanation for the stigmata, even though she and most other nuns were witness to their manifestation. This results in Mariëtte's expulsion. She does, however, in private admit to Mariëtte that she believes in her: "I personally believe that what you say happened did indeed happen. We could never prove it, of course. Sceptics will always prevail. God gives us just enough to seek Him, and never enough to fully find Him" (Hansen, 1995:174). Her words remind of Lyotard's notion of the sublime:

> The postmodern would be that which […] puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable (Lyotard, 1984:81).

Fiction as such cannot prove the validity of the supernatural, but that is not reason enough for its exclusion in the contemporary novel. Novelists aspire to present the unpresentable in order to

satisfy a very real desire in postmodern society – an ache for the spiritual. Père Marriott gives voice to that desire: “We mortals have such a great hunger for supernatural things” (Hansen, 1995:148). One has to also acknowledge that at the same time there is a hunger for spirituality as well as sensationalism.

Père Marriott is Mariëtte’s spiritual father here on earth and she confides in him through letters. Unfortunately her sister, the prioress, intercepts them and they never reach him. He feels sympathetic towards her, but also takes the easy way out in that he agrees with Mother Saint-Raphaël and Dr Baptiste in the end. In a conversation with Mariëtte he hints at the possibility of stigmata being the result of a psychological condition: “And it is often hard to tell whether these things are not just illusions brought on by abnormal sensibilities and neurosis” (Hansen, 1995:127). These “abnormal sensibilities and neurosis” are probably what her father referred to earlier on. Ariel Glucklich (2001:84) affirms that during the “late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there was a strong tendency to link some phenomena of mystical ecstasies with psychological pathology, particularly hysteria. The church itself had struggled for centuries to distinguish between mystical experience and various forms of insanity, such as epilepsy, possession, humoral imbalance, and others.” Father Marriott has many baffling questions that he asks her: “Is the human personality one component of the mystery? We don’t know. And why are there so many women and so few men? And how is it that the great contemplative orders, the Carthusians, the Trappists, the Benedictines, have practically no examples of the phenomena?” (Hansen, 1995:127).

Hansen seems to emphasize that there are no answers to these questions. The rhetorical questions force the reader to contemplate the validity of such questions and they perhaps sow doubt. Père Marriott admits that he is unable to provide satisfactory answers and he tries to find them by making comparisons. He seems to understand that Mariëtte is an inexplicable enigma. Arnell (2007:190) observes that she “springs up among her convent sisters like a wildflower trespassing in a cultivated garden”. During a conversation with Père Marriot dramatic irony is evident as the reader realises what he does not: “that Mariëtte is a kind of wildflower – beautiful to behold, but difficult to understand” (Arnell, 2007:191). Mother Saint-Raphaël tells her: “There’s a great deal about you that troubles me” (Hansen, 1995:65). The reader does not get to know Mariëtte and Hansen keeps her elusive to both the other characters and the reader. Prescott (1991:66) mentions that “although Mariëtte is the pivot on which the story turns, Hansen doesn’t want us to know her very well. He’s interested in her only as an agent dropped into a culture, and her effect on it.” Her evasive character is reflected in the inexplicability and mysterious nature of her wounds. Marië tte remains an enigma to her sister.

Her sister intercepts yet another letter Mariëtte has written to Père Marriott and she thinks: “She’s impossible. She’s too many people. She’s too many shades and meanings. She’ll only do herself harm” (Hansen, 1995:76). Even to her sister, the neophyte remains opaque and unsettling. It is never clear what exactly the prioress believes concerning the stigmata and ecstasies. However, one can guess that she knows that such phenomena and claims would be detrimental to Mariëtte’s desire to become a nun. She is protective of her sister and acts in Mariëtte’s best interest, which is probably not to be known as eccentric, a charlatan or worse as a hysteric. At one point she playfully admits that Mariëtte might be a saint: “You’re my sister, but I don’t understand you. You aren’t understandable […] You may be a saint. Saints are like that, I think. Elusive. Other. Upsetting” (Hansen, 1995:92). Another nun comments: “In her I seem to behold someone not of this world” (Hansen, 1995:142). Père Marriott, after having seen the stigmata and Mariëtte in a trance, utters the words: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord” (Hansen, 1995:117). These words appear in Luke 1:38 when Mary accepts to be Christ’s servant. This is proof of his belief in her devotion, but this also hints at divine *eros,* a concept the study will discuss in due time. Père Marriott is convinced that these supernatural phenomena are mystical in their origin. His final opinion is ambiguous when he says: “I don’t believe it’s possible. I do believe it happened” (Hansen, 1995:130). In other words, he does not believe in the possibility of such phenomena, but he admits that Mariëtte is wholly other and through her as vehicle these supernatural phenomena are possible.

The nuns are divided in their opinions regarding Mariëtte. Some are completely infatuated with her, admiring her extreme piety, while others believe her to be a fraud. She radiates an extraordinary beauty and purity, which is reason enough to breed resentment where women are present. Some are motivated by jealousy, while others seem to have unnatural affections for her. Some of these women have spent a life-time in the service of God and feel resentment that a neophyte seems to be more pious and favoured by Christ. One of Mariëtte’s staunchest supporters is Sister Hermance. While they are planting vegetables, Hermance thinks: “We will have a bounty. Everything she touches will grow” (Hansen, 1995:52). Sister Emmanuelle admires the postulant’s beauty: “she’s as pretty as affection” but with a tinge of jealousy “She is who I was meant to be” (Hansen, 1995:57). Sister Philomène is positive that Mariëtte is a saint during an interrogation session. Sister Saint-Denis comments on her Christian radiance: “Christ shines from her. She is Christian perfection. She is lovely in every way” (Hansen, 1995:68). Interestingly enough these observations regarding Mariëtte are made before the appearance of the stigmata. A very effective technique Hansen uses is the interrogation of the other nuns in order to shed light on the postulant. We are given fragments of her through their answers.

On the other side of the spectrum are Sister Fèlicité, who comments: “While I have enjoyed our sister’s humor, she is at times distracting”; Sister Saint-Pierre: “She is a daily temptation to intimacies and particular attachments”; Sister Saint-Raphaël: “…she has been a snare and a terrible impediment to the peace and interests of the Holy Spirit”; Sister Anne: “She’s lied about a hundred things, not just this. She gets up close to windows at night so she can admire her pretty self like in mirrors. And I smelt perfume on her too” (Hansen, 1995:87,142). A very insidious attack on Mariëtte’s reputation is made by a nun who comes to confession to Père Marriott and disguises her voice: “Every sentence slightly changes in tone, as if she were trying to disguise her sultry voice […] She stole things from the infirmary. Chemicals and instruments. When she was taking care of Mother Celine. And she’s good at science. She got it from her father. Everything else is from the Devil” (Hansen, 1995:153). This deep hatred is upsetting to Père Marriott and the reader alike. Such malice is not expected in such a place of devotion. However, one has to keep in mind that many of these women are unenlightened and unsophisticated and the inexplicable is in many cases seen as the work of the Devil. Mariëtte, as the daughter of a scientist, could have had some legerdemain here. The many different voices may very well confuse the reader and that is perhaps the motive.

It is important to look at the time in which the novel is set and the accompanying ideas regarding science and religion. Sofie Lachapelle (2004:87) in an article entitled, “Between miracle and sickness: Louise Lateau and the experience of stigmata and ecstasy”, maintains that the said experiences occurred when the medical establishment was more and more placing itself into an intellectual sphere previously dominated by the Catholic Church. The Church welcomed the interest by medical science and physicians were interested in the physiological aspects embedded in the supernatural. Lachapelle (2004:88) concurs that “the rising popularity of scientific explanations stimulated both the Church’s openness toward scientific collaboration and the medical establishment’s need to prove the superiority of the scientific method in all spheres of human activity, including matters of faith”. To my mind, there are more similarities between Louise Lateau and Mariëtte than between Therese of Lisieux and Mariëtte. Mother Saint-Raphaël also mentions that Liseaux was famous for her bleeding and ecstasies. Ironic is the fact that Lateau was subjected to rigorous scrutiny by science and the Church and she never aspired to sainthood, although she was given the title of Servant of God in 1991. The same courtesy is not granted to Mariëtte though. Glenn Dallaire (2009) mentions the words of Pope Leo xii in a statement on April 23, 1873: “The Bois D’ Haine [Lateau’s place of birth] event is an extraordinary one. You can affirm, on my behalf, that medical science will never be able to explain such a fact.”

A very important distinction is that neither science nor religion gains the upper hand in the end. The outcome remains undecided, even though Mariëtte is banished from the convent. Consensus

is reached that it is in the best interest that the postulant be dismissed as there is no concrete evidence to prove her claims. Lyotard (1984:24) agrees that not "every consensus is a sign of truth, but it is presumed that the truth of a statement necessarily draws a consensus". Science also needs to legitimate itself and it is clear that it is not possible here.

Keeping Faith

Both *Keeping Faith* and *Mariëtte in ecstasy* include camps of believers in the masses following and sometimes stalking the two "saints", although this fact is more pronounced in the latter. Hume called them "the gazing populace who receive greedily, without examination, whatever soothes superstition, and promotes wonder" (cited in Tate, 2008:78). The two novels do, however, differ as far as the other opposing camps are concerned. The dissent is mostly within the convent in the former and more diverse and on a secular level in the latter. The array includes the Catholic Church, the Jewish Rabbis, the Mother God Society, psychiatrists, legal representatives and a tele-atheist.

Tate (2008:69) sees Picoult as using the domestic trauma in this novel to pose larger questions of "religious identity and the possibility of faith in a sceptical era". Faith White starts having visions of an imaginary friend immediately after her parents' separation. Her mother is the first to be confronted with her daughter's utterly unbelievable claim. Faith has no religious foundation and is not even Catholic. She is thus not a very likely candidate. Mariah White calls in the help of Dr Keller to examine Faith and she duly informs Mariah that her daughter is seeing God. Mariah is sceptical, but never exclusive about the possibility of it being true or false: "And I'm not saying you made her up, Faith. I'm not. It's just that I was so sad once that my mind made me believe something was true – that's all I'm saying" (Picoult, 2008:59). Dr Keller's first diagnosis is that Faith "is having psychotic hallucinations about God" (Picoult, 2008:65). Mariah finds this explanation preferable to the possibility that she is in fact seeing God. For many in contemporary society, it is better to put a name to a "disease" than wondering about inexplicable, mystical experiences. Mariah's words later on remind of the words of Père Marriott "I don't believe it's possible, I do believe it happened" when she says: "I don't know what Faith's seeing, I don't know why she's seeing it – but I do believe that she's telling the truth" (Picoult, 2008:126). Faith's grandmother Millie Epstein is completely sceptical and outraged about Mariah's suggestion that they see a priest: "'You aren't taking her to a priest.' 'Why not? They're the ones who have experience with apparitions.' 'They'll want proof. A statue crying tears or some paraplegic getting up and walking'" (Picoult, 2008:67). These examples show what a hindrance these hoaxes have been to belief in the miraculous. Millie is aware of this postmodern yearning for proof, just as the Catholic clergy want proof from Mariëtte in order to believe that she is indeed a stigmatic showing

the wounds of Christ. Evidence equals belief, and the notion of a leap of faith, or as Kierkegaard called it a leap to faith, is not an option.

When Mariah insists, Millie refers her to a Rabbi as Faith is half Jewish. This is the first of many clergymen who gets involved in Faith's life – both Jewish and Christian. Rabbi Weissman calls Rabbi Solomon after a couple, who was having marital problems, reconciled after Faith's visit to the synagogue. Gandolfo (2007:142) maintains that Rabbi Solomon, like Sister Saint-Raphaël, "represents those who would limit God, who would insist that God meet their expectations, and who cannot credit any expression of spirituality without religious observance". He has set ideas about how the Deity should behave and because He does not adhere to these expectations, Faith cannot be seeing him: "I don't see God telling her that the Israelites are going to cream the PLO. I don't see God telling her to keep kosher […] And I have a hard time believing that if God did choose to manifest Himself in human form to a Jew, He would choose one who hadn't followed a code of Jewish living" (Picoult, 2008:315). As mentioned before, the strongest dissent comes from those involved in institutionalized religion and specifically from the Catholic hierarchy. Father Rourke from St John's Seminary in Boston is outraged at Faith's claims that God is female: "Faith rolls her eyes. 'God's a mother.' 'I beg your pardon?' 'A lady. God's a lady.' Rourke's face reddens. A female God? Absolutely not" (Picoult, 2008:154). Sister Saint-Raphaël is guilty of the same excessive pride when she says: "I have been troubled by God's motives for this […] I see no possible reasons for it" (Hansen, 1995:160). These characters represent those who fail to see that God works in mysterious ways, ways that are incomprehensible to humans. Another sceptic is Father Rampini whose "responsibility is to find holes in each proposed case of sainthood. He examines every action and writing and word spoken by the allegedly virtuous person in an effort to find one slip, one swear, one lapse from the faith that might prevent canonization" (Picoult, 2008:223). It seems that his aim is to disprove rather than prove: "If Faith White is seeing God, there's no way He would appear in the form of a woman. Either an apparition is Jesus Christ or it is not […] I'm more likely to consider the visions satanic than divine" (Picoult, 2008:233). To say that Jesus is a woman contradicts what the Church doctrines say and therefore cannot be true. Through the ages the Catholic Church examined each alleged miracle meticulously because there were many hoaxes.

Nickell (1993:133) reports that "to Calvin and Luther the age of faith healings ended with the death of the apostles and that view has prevailed in churches associated with those reformers". He also says that faith healing is still practised in the Catholic and Orthodox faiths and there is some revival among certain charismatic protestant denominations. Interesting is the observation Rev. Smith (cited in Nickell, 1993:219) makes that as far as stigmata are concerned, the non-Christian religions (Buddha, Confucius, Mohammed etc.) do not report such cases because their founders

did not die violent deaths. The implication is that only Christians experience stigmata because Christ died a violent death on the cross.

A foil to Father Rampini is Father Joseph MacReady from the Catholic Church. He seems to be more enlightened in his views and promotes a private spirituality rather than a strict adherence to doctrine and dogma. Thus his thoughts are in line with current postmodern trends and Vattimo's notions that religion can no longer rely on any strong doctrine. He explains to Mariah: "I've never believed that spirit comes from religion. It comes from deep inside each of us; it draws people to us" (Picoult, 2008:139). Gandolfo (2007:141) says that Father MacReady argues for an "indwelling God". He touches on plurality and what Vattimo sees as *caritas* (charity) when he argues that: "Maybe this is God's idea of a winning ticket – a way to get many different personalities to worship him at once. To worship Him at all" (Picoult, 2008:139).

Father MacReady, in a conversation with Kenzie van der Hoven, the court appointed guardian *ad litem* reveals his views that we don't need proof to have faith: '"[…] have you ever seen the sun set in Nepal?' 'No, I haven't.' Neither have I,' Father MacReady admits.' But that doesn't mean it doesn't happen'" (Picoult, 2008:317). He does not see religion in terms of denominations, but advocates tolerance within the larger concept of spirituality. Picoult introduces forms of conversion narratives in more than one character. Father Rampini changes his views later on and submits two completely contradictory reports on his findings regarding Faith to Bishop Andrews. He requests that the one endorsing Faith's claims be used, but Bishop Andrews files them both in case "the tide turns and he needs it" (Picoult, 2008:296). Doubt is the motivation behind his action and the Church should be ready for "either contingency". The fact that Bishop Andrews keeps two reports, one endorsing Faith White's claims, and one refuting her claims, emphasizes this uncertainty, this inability to report with conviction that the supernatural is at work here. One is also reminded of the inability of science to provide absolute certainty of its claims that everything can be proved scientifically.

Ian Fletcher is a tele-atheist and the owner of Pagan Productions. The name of his company is tritely obvious in pointing to his heathen stance. His aim is to expose and discredit those who claim to be miracle workers. He is educated and has a PhD in Theology from Harvard, which is ironic seen in the light of his anti-religious fervour. Tate (2008:79) says that Picoult has "created a compellingly unholy hybrid: he preaches with a revivalist charisma, offering his congregation not eternal salvation but a Richard Dawkins-style empirical unbelief schooled in Humean scepticism". Fletcher gives his explanation about God when he says: "People believe in God because they don't have any other explanation for things that happen" (Picoult, 2008:31). One such supposedly miraculous event that he discusses on TV is about William and Bootsie McKinnon who claim that on the morning of August twentieth, after a severe thunderstorm, Jesus appeared to them in the

split branch of a Macintosh tree. He calls Professor Irwin Nigel to explain that the face that they have seen is "actually just a conglomeration of deposits in the tree's hardwood" (Picoult, 2008:49). Fletcher reminds of Nietzsche's "everything is interpretation" with his words: "Perception is a very powerful thing" (Picoult, 2008:50). Ironically, the words "The Search for truth" are painted on his Winnebago. These words are definitely for the edification of those who believe in miracles and finding the truth and definitively not applicable to him, as there is no truth for Ian Fletcher. Fletcher challenges readers with the question of what else they believe in with blind faith and maintains that God is a myth. It is said in the novel that the more outspoken he became, the more popular he became and the more people were intrigued with him. Tate (2008:79) argues that his charisma and eloquence are reminders of David Johnson's belief that Hume's success with his argument against miracles is because of his oratory ability: "The mostly willing hearers who have been swayed by Hume on this matter have been held captive by nothing more than Hume's great eloquence." Picoult touches on the critique against the tele-atheists and maybe even the sensationalist reality TV. Religion and the supernatural are often exploited for the sake of sensation.

Fletcher's strongest argument against God is the existence of evil in the world – an argument most often used by atheists: "It's the thought that any parent – including God – would make his child suffer intentionally […] I can't worship someone who lets that happen" (Picoult, 2008:127). As with so many non-believers, doubt starts creeping in to disturb their absolute certainties. Ian's disbelief in God is not just based on reason, but partly has to do with his childhood experiences. Picoult, once again, brings in the conversion narrative with the character of Fletcher. This is, however, not a full conversion, but he does move from absolutism to at least a degree of accommodating the possibility of the miraculous. Tate (2008:87) concurs that this is reflection "that reason itself has boundaries and limits". Fletcher addresses a press conference after the court case to determine custody of Faith. He refuses to say what happened in Kansas City when he had a normal conversation with his autistic brother after Faith's intervention. He does, however, say that religious belief is a private affair. He also touches on Vattimo's belief in tolerance when he says: "We don't have to accept each other's beliefs […] but we do have to accept each other's right to believe them" (Picoult, 2008:462).

Picoult effectively shows the inability of science to explain certain miraculous phenomena through the findings of the medical staff who examine Faith. Dr Blumberg is unable to explain the cause of the wounds on Faith's hands. He tells Mariah: "It's an inexplicable thing" (Picoult, 2008:131). Being a man of science, he is reluctant and maybe embarrassed to admit the possibility of stigmata. Dr Herbert, a psychiatrist, says that such phenomena "are beyond the range of both logic and science" (Picoult, 2008:141). The idea that science must triumph over religion is still

prevalent. Dr Blumberg is forced to accept that science is limited in its explanations and as Lyotard contends, also subject to legitimation in order to be a true science. He concurs that "scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in addition to, and in competition and conflict with, another kind of knowledge, which I will call narrative" (Lyotard, 1984:7). Faith's story is not ultimately about the victory of science over religion. The outcome remains open-ended and it is up to the reader to decide what evidence would be enough to convince a believer of the hand of God in this, and what evidence would convince an unbeliever that the hand of God is not evident here.

5.4 The introduction of supernatural phenomena – visions, faith healing and stigmata

Contemporary society does not easily tolerate the appearance of the transcendent in the world today. Literary critic Dennis Taylor voices the challenges of theological implications in a novel: "The subject of religious experience, and of course, religion itself, is a profoundly divisive and disturbing subject, and for that reason famously avoided in polite conversation" (cited in Wendorf, 2004:37). The divisive nature of the different religious views in the two novels received some attention and the chapter will endeavour to show how these phenomena are introduced in both novels without them being disturbing.

Visions are present in both novels, but they receive scant attention. The discussion below presents the visions in the order in which they appear in the novels. There seems to be an escalation in the intensity of the phenomena as they appear throughout the novels, and in both novels they ultimately culminate in the appearance of stigmata. The lack of detail regarding the visions could be a technique to emphasize their fleeting quality. Picoult describes Faith's vision as: "She's never seen anything like it. It seems so soft you might fall into it and never find your way out" (Picoult, 2008:38). There is simultaneously a suggestion of an otherworldly and infinite quality present in the description, but the language remains flat. No gender is at first attached to the vision. Any additional information about this vision is gathered through conversations with Faith. Father Rampini elicits the following description: "She wears the same thing over and over. It's a brown skirt and top, but it's all together in one piece, and it looks like the things people from the olden times wear on TV." (Picoult, 2008:255-256). There are no further descriptions and this might be intentional seen in the light of the difficulty surrounding such an enterprise. As mentioned in the thesis statement, fiction cannot prove the reality of supernatural phenomena, although a space is created for these to feature. An explicit confrontation could lead to a mistrust and suspicion of the supernatural. Humankind's insistence on proof, mentioned earlier on, is another stumbling block to belief. This vagueness is also a way of keeping the vision a mystery and indefinable. More information appears in fragments and there is never a full picture.

It is uncertain whether Mariëtte sees anything when she hears Christ's voice. The first introduction is when she tells Père Marriott that she has had an experience: "Jesus spoke to me" (Hansen, 1995:40). He is not surprised, as he has heard this from many young nuns before. He warns her though to be wary of Satan's temptations: "When you see Christ or hear Him, you must be mistrusting and wary, for Christ is a word that does not give voice to the ear but goes directly into the mind" (Hansen, 1995:41). Suspicion seems to be the first reaction of most characters. Mariëtte herself is baffled about these strange experiences and in a letter to Marriott goes so far as to tell him not to believe anything she says. She does not regard herself as worthy of such attention: "I have seen and heard impossible things, and whenever before has Christ appeared to souls as sinful as mine?" (Hansen, 1995:58). The visions are not described and it is up to the reader to form an image in his or her mind. More detail is given to the environment in which these visions and voices appear than the actual image. These phenomena are introduced in mundane situations as if they are natural manifestations: "Her wet blue eyes are overawed as she stares ahead at a wall and she seems to be listening to something just above her, as a girl might listen to the cooing of pigeons. Shutting her eyes, she talks voicelessly, with great passion, and opens her hands as priests do at the par vobiscum. And then she swoons as though she's lost herself and has become only her clothes" (Hansen, 1995:62). These manifestations seem more credible because they seem to be part of the natural environment.

Faith healing appears only in *Keeping Faith* and once again it appears so naturally without any theatrical or spectacular fanfare that it is rendered credible. Faith is able to accomplish miraculous cures. The first is when she brings her grandmother back from the dead. This as such is a preposterous feat, but the reader never feels as if he or she is in the presence of a charlatan. If one reads the specific extract without having knowledge of the context, one might think it is a simple act of love: "But her gaze [Mariah's] never wavers from Faith – not when Faith lifts herself up on her elbows, not when Faith places her hands on either side of Millie's face and kisses her full on the mouth, not when Millie's arms rise stiff and slow and cling to her granddaughter for dear life" (Picoult, 2008:90). The next incident is when she ostensibly heals a baby who has Aids. This description is as natural as the previous: "Faith carefully lifts the baby and presses her lips against the sore on his forehead. She walks to the ash tree and gives the infant to his sobbing mother" (Picoult, 2008:105). Picoult provides more detail regarding these incidents by using the media to discuss them. Petra Saganoff, an anchorwoman, talks to the mother afterwards and the reader is given all the details. A different source reveals the details of the healing and thus makes them more believable. One can call these moments anti-epiphany moments, moments that Rushdie sees as the miraculous existing in the mundane.

The supernatural seems to reach its highest point in both novels with the manifestation of stigmata. It is perhaps here that the differences between the two novels are most pronounced. Whereas Picoult introduces the stigmata in the same unspectacular way as the previous phenomena, Hansen uses sensuous language and decorative metaphors to introduce them.

The word Stigmata comes from the Greek word στίγμα which could be translated as spot, brand, disgrace etc. It dates back to 1580-90 and in ancient Greece meant physical marks inflicted by sharp instruments or fire on those considered as outsiders, slaves, criminals or lechers. The plural stigmata refer to the bodily marks that were evident on the body of Christ during the Crucifixion. These wounds appear in the palms of the hands, the feet, the side and the forehead. St Francis of Assisi was the first recorded stigmatic in history. He exhibited the wounds of Christ in 1224 and his successor Brother Leo gave this account after the death of St Francis:

> I announce to you great joy, even a new miracle. From the beginning of ages there has not been heard so great a wonder, save only in the Son of God […] For, a long while before his death, our Father and Brother [Francis] appeared crucified, bearing in his body the five wounds which are verily the stigmata of the Christ. For his hands and feet had piercings made by nails fixed in from above and below, which laid open the scars and had the black appearance of nails; while his side appeared to have been lanced, and blood often trickled therefrom (Nickell, 1993:219).

Not all stigmatics necessarily exhibit all the wounds. There are certain criteria that seem to be common for most stigmatics. They are usually female, from a poor background, with a reserved and humble behaviour, an extreme devotion to Christ and an obsession with Christ's passion (Lachapelle, 2004:80). Many also show signs of inedia, which is present only in *Mariëtte in ecstasy.* Inedia accompanies stigmata and is a condition where the stigmatic suspends the taking in of any food and sometimes water and generally believes that the daily communion is enough to sustain him or her.

Early on in the novel *Mariëtte in ecstasy* reference is made to Dame Julian of Norwich when Sister Saint-Michel reads from the *Lectio Divina* chapter two the *Revelations of Divine Love.* Hansen subtly introduces the reader to the possibility of stigmata: "Some time earlier she had asked three gifts from God: one, to understand his passion; two, to suffer physically while still a young woman of thirty; and, finally, to have as God's gift three wounds" (Hansen, 1995:25). The reader makes a mental connection between Mariëtte and Dame Julian, and the reader seems to be an implied reader – one who has knowledge of Dame Julian. Mariëtte writes to Père Marriott that Christ has promised that she will suffer great pain, but also that no one will believe her. The stigmata are preceded by a number of trances and fainting spells. While scrubbing the kitchen floor with Sister Zèlie, Mariëtte suddenly shuts her eyes, kneels upright on her fingertips and prays, only to resume her work a few minutes later. There is a gradual build-up to the first appearance of the stigmata on

Christmas Day after the death of the prioress. Mariëtte feels a sudden sharp pain in her hands one day when she's working in the priest's sacristy after Terce. Sister Catherine enquires after the pain and she answers: "What a great favor Christ shall be giving me!" (Hansen, 1995:73). Her religious fervour intensifies the closer she gets to receiving the wounds. The description of the sacristy is so vivid and the reader feels the sacred atmosphere among the religious paraphernalia: "[…] washing a great wall of leaded window glass with vinegar as Sister Catherine polishes a golden ciborium and paten and pyx and Père Marriott's own chalice, with its agates and emeralds and sapphires" (Hansen, 1995:73). Hansen shows a reverence for language and his descriptions involve the reader actively in what is portrayed. Pico Iyer (1993:495) in a review entitled "Sacred and profane" comments on the suitability of the environment of the cloistered confines of the convent as "famously fertile grounds for loose imaginations" and maintains that it is not difficult to "evoke a sense of ardor and passion play amidst candlelit cloisters, young girls in white and a world of whispers". Hansen uses the metaphor of sacred writing to introduce the stigmata. This is in line with the ancient meaning of stigmata as a mark or tattoo on the human body, thus signifying sin. Arnell (2007:198) maintains that "if the stigmata are metaphorically linked to writing, and if Hansen views writing as potentially sacramental, then it follows that the stigmata have a sacramental quality, serving as a vehicle for God to speak to and through the human body. Another pang of pain in the hands serves as indicator that the postulant will be granted the gifts of Christ: "And then she flinches and looks down at her hands. She tries to rub the hot sting from one palm with her thumb but the hurt persists like hate inked on a page" (Hansen, 1995:99). Mariëtte's reaction seems ambiguous and the word hate is definitively linked to the immense pain, but just one line later she is said to be "hoarding" the pain. Even though the pain is excruciating, she still wants to accumulate and store it. This hoarding is put into action by acts of mortification. The metaphor of writing is continued in the tangled wire that is seen as a signature that ingrains itself into her skin underneath her breasts. She also sinks her hands into hot water until she scalds her palms and offers as explanation the fact that she just wanted to hurt. Her desire to feel pain and to experience Christ's own suffering becomes almost like an obsession. The stigmata appear eventually and significantly on Christmas Day: "Blood scribbles down her wrists and ankles and scrawls like handwriting on the floor" (Hansen, 1995:107). This simile describes the trickling of the blood as ink would flow on paper. Whereas the previous simile was static in nature, the blood is flowing here as a sign of her unstoppable passion or abandon. Mariëtte is ecstatic when she tells Père Marriott: "Oh, look at what Jesus has done to me!" (Hansen, 1995:112).

Vattimo's concept of *kenosis* or Christ's self-emptying is explicit in the novel. In a conversation with Father Marriott, when asked about the appearance of the stigmata on Christmas Day, she says: "We celebrate the Word being made incarnate then" (Hansen, 1995:126). Wendorf (2004:51) observes that she sees her experience as the conviction that "the divine has taken on flesh and blood in Jesus". Mariëtte feels that the wounds are "His", "embodied by me, but not mine"

(Hansen, 1995:115). She is a vehicle for sharing the suffering of Christ and this provides her with immense joy. Just like Christ lowered Himself and became a servant, Mariëtte empties herself and becomes God's servant. A common characteristic of stigmatics is the fact that they experience a sort of out-of-body experience during their ecstasies. Mariëtte relates such an experience: "In prayer I float out of myself. I seek God with a great yearning, like an orphan child pursuing her true mother. I have lost my body; I don't know where I am or even if I am now human or spirit" (Hansen, 1995:128). Jasper in an article entitled "The Erotic and the Mystical in Postmodernity" touches on the *theios eros* or passionate love for God. He quotes the words of Dame Julian in her second revelation: "So I saw him and sought him: I had him and wanted him" (Jasper, 2005:72). There is a similar eroticism present in *Mariëtte in ecstasy* and the first link with this could be the cover of the novel. Hansen suggested that the publishers base it on the statue of St Theresa of Avila. Jasper comments on St Theresa's parted lips and closed eyes and the fact that many interpret Bernini's statue as an "either/or, either fleshy or spiritual, and finally conclude that her ecstasy is indeed a physical orgasm with the angel who stands over her debased to a smirking Cupid" (Jasper, 1995:74). Mariëtte is dismissed as a result of her ecstasies and stigmata, as her desire cannot be accepted as sacred and secular at the same time. This relates to the Church as institution's either/or position instead of a more accommodating both/and. Hansen paints an ambiguous picture of Mariëtte throughout the novel and this strengthens this notion of the *theios eros* even more. The reader might be confused whether this experience is religious ecstasy or sexual rapture. Elizabeth Beverly (1992:27) asks the challenging question of how one can draw a clear division between *agape* and *eros when* the body is an instrument of devotion. Mariëtte's body is indeed an instrument of devotion as she passionately longs to experience the wounds of Christ.

Hansen provides an image of a sensuous, erotic young woman that is at odds with the picture of the pious, sombre postulant in her starched habit. The reader might feel the same binary feelings when trying to determine whether she is genuine or just a fake. At the beginning of the novel, Mariëtte is getting ready to join the Sisters of the Crucifixion in her upstairs bedroom:

> She then stands and unties the strings at her neck so that the pink satin seeps onto a green Chinese carpet that is as plush as grass. And she is held inside an upright floor mirror, pretty and naked and seventeen. She skeins her chocolate-brown hair. She pouts her mouth. She esteems her full breasts as she has seen men esteem them. She haunts her milk-white skin with her hands (Hansen, 1995:9).

The verbs "skeins', "pouts", "esteems" and "haunts" do not fit the description of a reserved, chaste postulant but rather a voluptuous, sexual being. The words: "Even this I give You" (Hansen, 1995) point to her enormous sacrifice, her giving up worldly indulgence in order to serve God. Every word is charged with sensuousness and suggestion. The long hair of a woman is a traditional symbol of sensuality and this image is recurrent in the novel. Unlike the other novices, she is

allowed to keep her hair long until she is accepted as a novice. Physically she is different in that she is beautiful. This sensuousness is emphasized by Hansen when Mariëtte takes on the role of the bride in the nuns' dramatic enactment of the *Song of Songs*. The frankly erotic interpretation of the poetry is evident here. Mariëtte's physical beauty is depicted in the lines: "Mariëtte is glamorously there, her great dark mane of hair in massacre like the siren pictures of Sheba. She's taken her sandals off and shockingly dressed her soft nakedness in a string necklace of white buttons that are meant to seem pearls and red taffeta robe that is like a bloodstain on linen" (Hansen, 1995:83). Arnell (2007:192) reflects that this simile emphasizes her wild and primal quality and the red colour of the robe identifies her as one that transgresses by taking on this sinful role. Sister Philomène confirms this sinfulness of enacting something so erotic: "We shouldn't be doing this" (Hansen, 1995:83). One is reminded that eroticism is not to be reconciled with the sacred. Sister Philomène feels guilty and she has this inherent belief that anything that is erotic must be sinful. The relationship between Christ and His church is seen as symbolic of a relationship between a husband and wife. Mariëtte utters the words of the Song of Solomon when she says: "Let my Beloved come into his garden, let him taste its precious fruit" (Hansen, 1995:83). She is sinful in the sense that her beauty is tempting.

Mariëtte's trances and ecstasies become more frequent and result in her being on the receiving end of Mother Saint-Raphaël's wrath. During one of her ecstasies, Sister Philomène asks her to relate what she sees. She tells in detail of her encounter with Jesus: "He holds my hand in his and we two walk down the hallway to his house inside ours […] We are alone. We touch each other, but he withdraws. 'You are unclean,' he says, and I am ashamed because I see that it's true. Every sin I have committed is written in ink on my skin" (Hansen, 1995:167). The stigmata are signs of her sins, as well as gifts from Christ. Mother Raphaël slaps her as she is unable to handle such fervour. Another ecstasy results in Mother Raphaël placing a fork violently against her left breast in order to wake her. She seems jealous of the support Mariëtte receives from the other nuns after they have viewed the stigmata themselves. She is aware of her reactions being sinful because she asks for God's forgiveness. Mother Raphaël is uncomfortable with such wildness and disruption and ultimately chooses to call in science to refute the supernatural. This decision does not do justice to Mariëtte's episodes with Christ, but "stills the tumult of conflicting voices threatening life in the convent" (Wendorf, 2004:55). Balance has to be maintained between a very structured institution and a young woman claiming divine possession.

Hansen uses colours to create an image of wildness in contrast to the starkness of the convent: "Sister Saint-Denis has undone Mariëtte's dark brown hair so that it is troublingly disordered against the white pillowcase, but her skin is as radiant and pink with health" (Hansen, 1995:113). At another time, Hansen writes: "Mariëtte is still in her nightgown and her chocolate-brown hair is wild as she gets a black habit from her great pine armoire" (Hansen, 1995:101). The colours black

and white are suggestive of rigidity, thus indicative of the strictures and harsh discipline of the convent. Mariëtte, in contrast, conveys warmth through the colours chocolate-brown, pink and the recurrent mention of red signifying blood. She is in the infirmary after another fainting spell and is in a trance. Sister Aimée is asked to give a scientific description of the stigmata and she calls them hideous. What mystifies medical personnel in both novels is the apparent miraculous healing of the stigmata without leaving any reddening or inflammation around the affected area. Sister Aimée "touches the hardening scab where only hours ago the nail hole was […] until she's sure she's seen the healing of weeks in just one day" (Hansen, 1995:123). Dr Blumberg explains Faith's wounds: "showed these perfectly round wounds, with perfectly round little gaps in the tissue and bones […] but no actual trauma" (Picoult, 2008:131). Both Faith and Mariëtte are reluctant to show their wounds to the world and this desire to keep them hidden can be indicative of them being authentic. Father Rampini thinks: "the visionary who chatters away about what she's seen is usually lying. Genuine seers, in fact, often have to be coerced into discussing their visions" (Picoult, 2008:255). This reluctance to speak about and display their wounds is characteristic of most stigmatics. Apart from the few similarities surrounding the stigmata, their introduction into the respective novels differs greatly. Hansen beautifies them, whereas Picoult introduces them without any decorum. In *Keeping Faith*, the first mention is when Ian Fletcher follows Faith into the woods one night and she faints. He then discovers blood on his hands: "Then he goes to wipe off his hands on his raincoat and realizes it's smeared with blood" (Picoult, 2008:122). Father MacReady informs Mariah that the stigmata are gifts to which she replies: "Some gift. To leave you in constant pain, and make you a freak show" (Picoult, 2008:138). Her view is that of most contemporary people when confronted with the miraculous or something out of the ordinary. What is inexplicable is linked to insanity. Faith and Mariëtte are two totally different vehicles for the manifestation of stigmata. Faith is oblivious to religion and does not have any desire to share Christ's wounds. She does not in fact say very much regarding this, as mentioned in the novel. Picoult creates a very unusual stigmatic in Faith and in effect revitalizes an ancient manifestation. In a televised interview with clergy from different denominations, Larry King asks Rabbi Solomon: "How come a Jewish girl would develop the wounds of a savior she doesn't believe in?" (Picoult, 2008:203). This is perhaps to show how life is full of surprises and the reader should be prepared to be confronted by the unexpected. Mariëtte, on the other hand, is ardent to have Christ's gifts and welcomes the wounds. She meets most of the common criteria for stigmatics. It is necessary to make the observation that neither of these visionaries are peculiar characters and both novelists succeed in creating characters that are different, though acceptable to society. Sara Maitland (2000:77) observes that "religious characters are usually comic, villainous or mad, and their religious peculiarities consume their whole presence in the novel". This is generally true, but Picoult and Hansen do the opposite and create "normal" characters as receptors of the miraculous.

Both novels are open-ended and the reader is left to decide what to make of the characters' claims. Mariëtte is dismissed from the convent, but she remains passionate in her devotion to God. God has not abandoned her now that she is living in her father's house again. She still experiences the pain of the stigmata and still offers herself completely to God. Hansen repeats earlier lines: "She stands before an upright floor mirror at forty and skeins hair that is half gray. She pouts her mouth. She esteems her full breasts as she has seen men esteem them. She haunts her milk-white skin with her hands. *Even this I have given you"* (Hansen, 1995:178). These lines serve a unifying purpose in the novel and Mariëtte has come full circle. She is back where she was and this fact has not changed her religious outlook. She is still Christ's bride. The suggestion here is that the convent is not necessary in order to experience God. He is also accessible in the mundane, everyday routines of our lives. She writes: "Even now I look out at a cat huddled down in the adder's fern, at a fresh wind nagging the sheets on the line, at hills like a green sea in the east and just beyond them the priory, and the magnificent puzzle is, for a moment, solved, and God is there before me in the being of all that is not him" (Hansen, 1995:179). She finds God in nature – in the small miracles of everyday life. Life and its mysteries remains a "puzzle" to Mariëtte, and if she looks at God's creation, this "puzzle" is momentarily solved in that she realises a supernatural being must have made these. Vattimo sees God as the trace "that makes itself felt in our language" (Vattimo, 1999:15). Although God is not visible, we see Him in the traces around us, we see Him in nature and the everyday routines of our lives. There is still a longing to be part of the convent, but she expresses no bitterness towards it. She also says that whenever she becomes sad and thinks that the years since age seventeen have been suspended, Christ reminds her of His love for her. He still sends her roses, which is a metaphor for the stigmata. God still speaks to her, but instead of completely revealing himself, He whispers "Surprise me" (Hansen, 1995:179). Mariëtte reaffirms the fact that we can know only partly and that the unpresentable should be accommodated – that something that the mind finds difficult to contain. Elizabeth McDonough (1992:67) observes that "eventually God's handiwork becomes manifest in how one deals openly and creatively with the dreadfully mundane elements of self and others in the everyday circumstances of our mostly uneventful and apparently mediocre lives".

The reader is left with many questions at the end of the novel: Are these wounds really the wounds of Christ or self-inflicted gashes? Is Mariëtte delusional or does she in fact hear the voice of God? Is she a charlatan or is she a saint? Hansen does not provide the answers. The implied reader should, according to Iser, weigh the different perspectives, join them together at the vantage point and find the place of convergence. The place of convergence is a sort of reconciliation between belief and unbelief in that there is no proof, no certainty. The function of the uncertainty is to focus the reader's attention on the multiple ways of interpretation, and the importance of considering alternative viewpoints, even if one does not agree with them.

Keeping Faith ends in a court drama in which Judge Rothbottom has to decide whether Mariah White is guilty of harming her own child. Tate (2008:69) concurs that the "court becomes an exemplary secular space that is haunted by the spectre of the sacred at the level of form and content: its hierarchical structure is quasi-religious with the judge a secular equivalent to God". Rothbottom, however, makes it clear that the jurisdiction of the court does not include making decisions about a person's faith, thus touching on the notion of separation between Church and state. He states: "But the job of this court isn't to ask whether Faith's visions and hand wounds are of divine origin. We shouldn't ask if she's Jewish or Christian or Muslim, if she's the Messiah or the Antichrist" (Picoult, 2008:460). By placing such emphasis on testimony throughout the trial, Picoult echoes David Hume's argument against miracles: a miracle is a "violation of the laws of nature." Proof is not found to validate any truth. There are only multiple interpretations and no single grand narrative. As far as the Catholic Church is concerned, the Faith White case remains open. Cardinal Sciorro places Faith's file in an active pile.

The novel ends on a rather ambiguous note. After the trial and domestic conflict, Mariah is granted custody of Faith, with generous visitation rights for Colin White. The conflict seems to be resolved on a secular level. The omnipresent narrator writes that Faith is in bed while Fletcher and her mother are downstairs. She calls God a few times without success. Faith then pretends to be talking to God for the sake of her mother who is checking on her. She slyly calculates when her mother will be within hearing distance: "She guesses how long it is before her mother is within hearing distance of her bedroom" (Picoult, 2008:468). These words seem to refute any possibility that she ever really talked to God: "Faith continues to talk to no one at all, until she hears her mother's voice again downstairs, until she is certain that nobody is listening" (Picoult, 2008:468). Many sceptics might argue that everything was a hoax and merely an attempt by a traumatised child to get attention, or that she invented this "guard" figure in order to have a crutch to lean on (a typical Freudian interpretation). Tate (2008:82) observes that it could also be seen as a "reminder of the dominant traditions of prayer in the major world religions, conducted as an act of faith that persists without the convenient reassurance of a visible embodiment of the divine by one's side". As with *Mariëtte in ecstasy*, it is the prerogative of the reader to decide what really happened. It is not primarily Picoult's or Hansen's intention to entice the reader to come to a conclusion. They give a platform to the conflicting voices that are prevalent in postmodern society. Fiction cannot prove whether miracles do happen or not, but they do provide witness to the appearance of the supernatural amidst the secular.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6

The postmodern novel shows indebtedness to Christianity or the Bible because the Bible serves as the novel's symbolic origin. If the Bible serves as a kind of Ur-text, then the subject matter is unlimited when considering the Bible's wide subject matter. Although the contemporary novel remains sceptical towards institutionalized religion, it is nevertheless preoccupied with religious themes such as providence, sacrifice, sin, guilt and redemption, as well as inexplicable phenomena such as miracles, faith healing and stigmata. Religious themes are introduced, reshaped and revitalized, mainly by writers who are not religious in the sense of adhering to or following traditional religious doctrines. These themes and phenomena naturally have an effect on the reader and the way such content is perceived. Both these aspects, namely the religious themes and supernatural phenomena occur in novels considered to be realistic. This novel form is most able to prove that the miraculous remains suspect, even for believers.

Without one examining Biblical content in novels, the general pattern of most novels confirm a sort of fictive kinship with theology in that there is a definite pattern of sin, the fall and redemption. Michael Edwards (1984:4) refers to this pattern as "Christian cosmology" which entails "creation, fall and re-creation". He also contends that our need for story "comes from the exile from Eden" and this is true whether one actually believes in the metanarrative of Eden or not (Edwards, 1984:73). If everything were good there would be no need for story. This stance is reinforced by Flannery O' Connor (cited in Ryken, 2002:167), who believes that drama is embedded in this concept of original sin regardless of the theological orientation of the writer. Without salvation, or as she calls it "loss of the soul" there is no story. The fact that we inhabit such an imperfect, fallen world necessitates the telling of stories and a reaching towards a better world, albeit in most cases just a fictional one. This identification of a pattern of sin, the fall and redemption in novels does not mean that one simplifies literature by earnestly searching for glimpses of Christian truths and turning secular writers, and at that non-religious ones, into Christians. This is by no means the intention of this dissertation. Paul Fiddes (1991:33) argues that because all fiction has as content human experience and is concerned with themes that touch on Christian faith; this human tendency towards self-transcendence is destined to intersect with the theological notion of the human reaching towards transcendence. He continues to say that one may compare the writer's fiction with its ascribed Christian content to those who do adhere

willingly to the Christian tradition as long as one does not simply assume that the secular writer has made "the jump from one dimension to another" (Fiddes, 1991:33).

There is a conflict in all the novels under discussion between the sacred and the secular, which as binary poles at first glance seems to be irreconcilable. On closer investigation there seems to be a definite space of convergence between sacred and secular and a confirmation of the interdependence of these two binary categories. Kaufmann (2007:608) refers to the work of Asad, who makes the statement that nothing is essentially, inherently or exclusively sacred or secular. He includes here people, experience, text, institutions and historical times. Kaufmann insists that these two categories (sacred and secular) are dependent on each other for rendering meaning and should therefore always be present simultaneously. He makes an important statement when commenting on the fact that meaning only changes when the relationship between the sacred and secular changes due to the conditions at the time. Thus referring here to contingent matters such as time and setting (Kaufman, 2007:610). In other words, the relationship between sacred and secular and how amiable or hostile this relationship is depends on many factors such as the general beliefs, worldviews and cultural environment of writers and readers. This fact gives credibility to the theory of interpretive communities of which we are all members and the fact that religion is seen as social construct. Lourdunathan (2008: 381-384), mentioned in the introduction, says that the sacred and secular are two sides of the same coin and that it is impossible to make meaningful statements about the one without considering the other. This interdependence is apparent in all novels discussed. The fact that sacred content pervades novels at a time that is considered by many as generally non-religious is proof that the sacred or religious is an inescapable need for the present and a past which we cannot negate. The fact that non-religious writers use religious content confirms this longing for the sacred or an awareness of such a need, if then not an endorsement of such content.

When referring to religious content in the novels concerned, an anti-doctrinal slant is taken, which is typical of postmodern trends. The emphasis is on spirituality rather than a strict following of theological dogmatism. Piscine Moliter Patel in *Life of Pi* summarises this understanding when he says that: "Religion is more than rite and ritual" (Martel, 2002: 48). When enduring innumerable hardships on the open sea with a tiger as companion, Piscine practises the rituals of many denominations, but soon realises that they seem empty and that a love for or faith in God (whichever Deity) is what is sustainable in the end. He admits: "They [rituals] brought me comfort, that is certain. But it was hard, oh, it was hard. Faith in God is an opening up, a letting go, a deep trust, a free act of love" (Martel: 2002: 208). Picine Moliter Patel experiences a variety of religions and comes to the conclusion that they

all have one thing in common – *caritas.* They all advocate love. A possible avenue for further exploration might be how writers from different religions incorporate religious themes. One may also explore different themes as they manifest in different cultures. Gianni Vattimo pleads for this same love (*caritas),* which should form the basis of religion and which should be the guiding force in our relationship with others. He says in *Belief* (1999:64) "The precept 'Dilige, et quod vis fac' (Love, and do what you will), found in the work of Augustine, expresses clearly the only criterion on the basis of which secularization must be examined." Emphasis for Vattimo is on love rather than doctrine and institutionalized religion, a trend which is, according to him, not necessarily regrettable. He asserts that secularization is a "positive fact" that implies a more "flexible literalism in the interpretation of dogma and precepts" and ultimately leads to a "fuller truth" which is the "*kenosis* or abasement of God" (Vattimo, 1999:47).

Owen Meany possesses this kind of free spirituality devoid of strict principles of theological instruction. He sees salvation as an act of love for others when he gives up his life voluntarily for the Vietnamese children. This selfless act of sacrifice is at the heart of Christianity and is thus linked to Christ's *kenosis.* John Irving introduces religious themes through the character of Owen Meany, who has many parallels with Jesus Christ, but who is not portrayed in a serious light. Owen believes in God's providence and ascribes nothing to sheer coincidence. He is a modern-day Christ-like figure and his steadfast belief in God's plan for him is the driving force in his life. Irving uses parody to deconstruct traditional themes. This does not devalue the Christian content of the novel or marginalize the Christian story. Black humour is used instead of highly serious tragedy, but the effect on the reader remains the same. Wright (1988:125) refers to Flannery O'Connor's argument that novelists often employ the grotesque or perverse to shock the reader into realizing that "what they take to be natural is, in fact distorted". This is confirmed by Sykes (1996: 59) who comments on the fact that this "Christ pattern" which is all pervasive in the novel in order to strengthen the supernatural is "refigured in a way that diverts our attention from the Jesus Christ of Christian scripture". The reader is lead to re-evaluate the Christian story when posed to us in a parodic way.

The miraculous is introduced in worldly circumstances and almost seems to be a natural component of the everyday humdrum of life. Owen Meany is aware of the sacrifice he has to make in order to redeem the death of Tabitha Wheelwright and he knows the exact date of his impending death. The final scene does not happen as he expected in a dramatic environment where he fights as active serviceman, but takes place at an airport – a liminal space – and all the subtle patterns of the novel culminate. This is perhaps what Salman

Rushdie (1991:376) pleaded for when he said that the novel in its realist form should accommodate the miraculous in order to satisfy the need for the sacred. Thus fiction is an imitation of everyday life, but there is also this impetus to transcend this same life. Knight and Woodman (2006:5) argue that "[…] the Biblical sacred is not so much the miraculous in the sense of the extraordinary wonders as the natural seen in its ultimate depth". According to them, realism may be seen as the preferred form for the incorporation of Biblical content in novels as long as it is conjured up with ample depth and sincerity.

Jodi Picoult's *Keeping Faith* displays this emphasis on sincerity in the portrayal of the supernatural within a realist form. Faith White is a very unlikely candidate to be endowed with supernatural abilities. She hails from a family who is not embedded in any Christian foundation, yet she has knowledge of Biblical content, which in the light of her secular background is impossible. This fact strengthens her authenticity. Picoult mentioned her intention of looking at faith rather than religion, thus once again this postmodern concern with spirituality as opposed to a rigid dogmatism is apparent. Faith claims to have seen God in a female form; she is capable of faith healing and displays stigmata. Picoult's distortion of the accepted, traditional image of God as male is a re-shaping of this theme in order to make a powerful statement about interpretation in a postmodern society. She questions this constant image that prevails of God being an all-powerful male. This image has been shaped by patriarchy over many millennia despite the fact that God is said to be spirit and no gender can be attached to spirit. This female God of Faith is indicative of a feminist *kenosis* – a rejection of patriarchal concepts. An interesting field to explore may be how writers revitalize and reshape the narratives of Biblical female characters in contemporary novels. Two writers doing just that are Margaret Atwood and Jeanette Winterson, respectively in *The handmaid's tale* and *Oranges are not the only fruit.* They specifically portray the patriarchal oppression of women, but in such a way that shows how women triumph through their steadfastness of character.

The introduction of these supernatural phenomena is done craftfully without being offensive to either believer or non-believer. I have mentioned the pitfalls of incorporating the miraculous or supernatural in novels earlier on and I want to emphasize this difficulty again. Flannery O'Connor (cited in Ryken, 2002:163) calls such an enterprise a "well-nigh insurmountable one" due to the fact that religious feeling in today's society has become "if not atrophied, at least vaporous and sentimental". These non-religious writers, with the exception of Hansen who is a confessed Christian, are sensitive to such a feat and seem aware of the spiritual climate of the time. Picoult introduces visions and faith healing without placing too much emphasis on the otherworldly quality and when these occurrences are

read out of context they seem like an extension of the natural world. Mariëtte's ecstasies and the visible perception that something is happening to her during these occurrences remain opaque and are not described in any detail: "Every thought I have is of his infinite perfection […] I have a vision of him but I cannot see his face or his form, only an infinite light and goodness […] I hear his voice in an interior way, his words have sweetness and charm but no sound" (Hansen, 1995:128). This inability to give expression to the supernatural is what Lyotard calls the "incommensurable" that needs to be tolerated and acknowledged. That which is unpresentable and not rationally explicable should enjoy the same preference as that which is scientifically explicable. The introduction of the supernatural does not occur in a blunt, explicit way, but rather with a sensibility that subtly speaks to the sub-conscience of the reader.

This dissertation links to Lyotard's work and notions concerning the metanarrative and scientific and narrative knowledge. It may seem at first that his summary of postmodernism as an "incredulity towards metanarratives" denounces religion all-together. What this in effect comes down to is that exactly because of the abolishing of grand narratives and the tolerance of many small narratives, *petit recits*, religion is once again a valid and legitimate (meta)narrative. Shah (2012:26) asserts that "Far from being incredulous towards the 'grand narrative' of religion, we see [a] revival of religious narrative" and more respect towards not only religion in a traditional sense, but also such forms as spiritualism, the paranormal and what generally resorts under "the realm of unreason". Lyotard's equalizing of the two main forms of knowledge, narrative and scientific respectively, has consequently earned respect for narrative knowledge, something that lacked during the Enlightenment or Modern period when the only knowledge acceptable was scientific knowledge. His whole argument is based on the fact that scientific knowledge also needs to be legitimated in order to be accepted and for this to happen it relies on narrative knowledge. Narrative knowledge, on the other hand, does not need verification as "they do what they do" (Lyotard, 1984:23). These narratives are part of communities and depend for their survival on the simple fact that they need to be told from one generation to another. These *petit recits* refer to Wittgenstein's language games or a kind of negotiation that needs to take place between sender and receiver. Wittgenstein believed that there are many forms of discourse, and each has its own rules and grammar (Law, 2007:327). Lyotard proposes "paralogy" as solution to differing metanarratives, which comes down to a disagreement which, to his mind, is preferable to agreement in a postmodern culture. This is a way to avoid totalizing forms in which one metanarrative dominates over another.

The manifestation of Christ's wounds or stigmata is responsible more than any other supernatural phenomenon in both *Keeping Faith* and *Mariëtte in ecstasy* for causing a rift between science and religion. Stigmata are not a subject that appears readily in many novels, although it happens more often in literature than in reality. In fact it is a phenomenon that is unknown to a vast majority of the population. Some pre-knowledge is needed for the subject to be fully appreciated by the reader. Both novels introduce camps respectively supporting the supernatural or dismissing its possibility. This rift is not just between sacred and secular, but within theological circles where no consensus can be reached. Many clergymen believe that no miracle is possible today and only those mentioned in the Bible are legitimate. They are suspicious of the inexplicable and have set ideas about the ways in which God works. Whatever is contrary to doctrine is simply not true. The comparative study in the previous chapter shows how two very different writers deal with the same subject matter. Their world views are at variance and their two female characters are greatly at odds even though they both experience stigmata. Picoult represents those non-religious writers who nevertheless see the need for giving scope to the sacred and Ron Hansen is a faithful Catholic who feels the need to employ religious content because of the general unbelief in society. Stigmata appear in a secular environment in Picoult's novel and in a sacred environment in Hansen's novel. This points to the supernatural being random and not subject to prediction.

Both novels have as extremes belief and disbelief, but in between are those who are in a liminal space, unable to fully accept the supernatural, but at the same time unable to fully reject it. Both novels give scope to a plurality of voices, which is imperative in a postmodern society. Literary critic Terry Eagleton comments that after the totalizing effect of modernity, we are now in "the laid-back pluralism of the post-modern, that heterogeneous range of life-styles and language games which has renounced the nostalgic urge to totalize and legitimate itself" (cited in Middleton & Walsh, 1995:37). Many readers may assume that the writers' theological orientation will at some point be evident in the novels. This, however, is far from true and at no point can one say with certainty that this or that is the writers' standpoint. A very subtle balance between belief and unbelief is maintained and the reader is left to his or her own devices to construct meaning. Many characters make compelling cases either for or against belief in the supernatural. An appeal to the allegedly superior knowledge of science is made in both novels to explain that which is inexplicable. Both science and religion are perplexed at the phenomena and ultimately no final answers are provided. Rational thinking or reason has its limits. Lyotard's (1984:7) assertion that "scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge" is proven when both science and religion have to admit that there are mysteries which might never be explained.

Ron Hansen's *Mariëtte in ecstasy* is an example of a novel that does not have a parochial focus. He explores the very rare and often avoided subject of the relationship between spiritual and sexual experience. Terrell calls it a "Prudish evasiveness" (2002:249). Hansen develops this age-old theme which manifests in "The Song of songs" in the Bible and revitalizes it here in the very confines of a convent. Iyer (1993:495) comments on the fact that Hansen is aware of the fact that "eroticism is only as strong as the proscriptions against it" and he places Mariëtte's ecstasies within "the tight corset of the nuns' daily routine". This sexual rapture is indeed irreconcilable with the sacred to those dwelling within this ascetic, monotonous and harshly disciplined environment. Mariëtte is told by Mother Celine that: "We praise God in song here seven times a day. Matins and Lauds, and then for the first, third, sixth and ninth hours of the day: Prime, Terce, Sext and Nones (Hansen, 1995:32). Mariëtte has a dream that is saturated with sexual suggestion: "Hands haul her nightgown as high as her thighs and hoist it underneath her haunches. She prays as her knees are held wide" (Hansen, 1995:143). It is because of this very blending of sacred and secular that Mariëtte is dismissed. Her erotic sexuality is seen as a contamination of a sacred institution. The real reason for her expulsion is of course the inexplicability of her alleged stigmata, which points to a clash between science and religion. However, as mentioned in chapter 5 of this dissertation, it really points to the fact that both science and religion remain baffled. As Mother Saint-Raphaël admits: "And yet she is a challenge to our theology, psychology, medicine" (Hansen, 1995:149). Dan Brown (2008:171) while interviewing Hansen spells out the ways in which Mariëtte can be interpreted: "she was a con artist, she was a self-deluded hysteric, she was the real deal." Hansen's reply was that he thought she was the real thing, but left "room for obvious questions". We see that the novels give expression to and explore the supernatural and miraculous without giving a final verdict as to their truth value. Some readers may concur with David Hume's vehement denial of the possibility of the miraculous as violations of the laws of nature, while others may lean towards Richard Swinburne's assessment of a miracle as a violation of a natural law by an invisible being or they may hesitate in a liminal space between belief and unbelief. Swinburne believed that providing a scientific explanation for a miraculous event is a matter of "showing that the event's cause had powers to bring about the event (Law, 2007:147). What is important though is not the truth value of such phenomena, but the fact that writers give heed to or satisfy a need of postmodern people to once again interact with the miraculous, even if in a secular form.

Ian McEwan's *Atonement* deals with a fundamental Christian concept namely the possibility of atoning for one's sins and subsequent redemption. Briony, like McEwan, is a non-believer and this fact opens up a debate on whether atonement is then possible. The text shows that a secular redemption is indeed possible even in the absence of a Deity because Briony

states in the novel that the attempt is enough. One has to look at McEwan's idea that imagining what it is to be someone else is at the core of our humanity, although the relation between this and religion may not have been intended. Atonement is in fact a key Christian concept and in effect what Gianni Vattimo advocates with his *caritas.* Briony does not appeal to a Deity for forgiveness, but strives through fiction to rectify her wrongs. Her repeated drafts of Robbie and Cecilia's story is her albatross, her way of penance for her sin of failing to see "the other" as important as herself. She debases herself by becoming a nurse and caring for "the other" and thus fulfilling a very urgent requirement of Christianity – to heed "the other". McEwan employs metafiction and this reflects the uncertainty of any truth claims. The postmodern is an epoch that is characterized by uncertainty about any final truth claims and provides an array of choices between a polyphony of different voices. This story within another story makes it nigh impossible for the reader to make a final decision on what constitutes reality. At the end of *Atonement*, it is up to the reader to decide which version of Briony's, or in effect McEwan's story, is what really happened. Even though McEwan believes that religion is in effect a metanarrative and at that a totalitarian one, he seems to realise that science also fails to give the final answers. In his essay "The End of the World Blues" (2007:360) he argues that: "Scientific method, scepticism, or rationality in general, has yet to find an overarching narrative of sufficient power, simplicity, and wide appeal to compete with the old stories that give meaning to people's lives." These "old stories" are those we find in the Biblical narrative.

The "old stories" serve as inspiration for the non-religious writers and open debates that will occupy our minds infinitely. Jean François's incredulity towards metanarratives has not caused an abandonment of sacred themes and motifs from the contemporary novel. Those who are sometimes most critical of the Christian metanarrative make the most compelling cases for belief. Terry Eagleton (2006:32) in a review of Richard Dawkins's *The God delusion* maintains that: "The more they detest religion, the more ill-informed their criticisms of it tend to be." In other words, Dawkins's lack of theological knowledge makes his claims incredible according to Eagleton. The revival of the sacred proves its resilience and the nostalgia for the spiritual. Gianni Vattimo (1998:79) calls it a "dormant trace" and a "wound re-opened". The sacred and secular converge in many contemporary novels, which provide new spaces where all voices may speak. The existence of the miraculous is always difficult to prove, but the fact that the contemporary novel testifies to such phenomena is indicative of a polemic that has not yet been concluded.

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