Ursula Le Guin and Theological Alterity Elizabeth Anderson Stirling, March 2016

Recent years have seen terrorist action (from attacks in New York, Bali and London in the early years of the millennium to bombings in Ankara, Istanbul, Brussels and Lahore in the week of finalising this piece), American and British reprisals in the form of bombardment and land wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, heightened Western awareness of neo-imperialism and a growing global refugee crisis. Theological disagreements between those of different faiths may be turned towards violent ends as politically motivated conflicts use religion as a mobilising force. The imbrication of politics and religion is becoming a matter of growing interest for young adult writers and readers. Authors such as Karen Healey, Naomi Novik and Melina Marchetta re-deploy the tropes of fantasy writing, the creation of other worlds, the quest plot and the use of magic, to craft a mode in which the fantastical is sacred and world creation involves engagement with religious difference. Unlike Narnia's Deeper Magic or Middle-Earth's angel-worshipping Elves, the endgame of these texts is not a colonizing logic of sameness that focuses on the defeat of an evil Other, but rather dialogue and resolution that refuses the binary of victorious/vanquished. The work of American writer Ursula K. Le Guin is crucial to this shift because she is a highly respected and influential writer of science fiction and fantasy and has been explicit about her philosophical influences.[1] Most the criticism on Le Guin and religion has focused on the influence of Daoism on her writing; these discussions tend to emphasise the traces of Daoism in her novels as largely pertaining to the philosophy of the narrative investments and character development.[2] Le Guin has been exploring religion in her fiction for decades, from the Daoist Equilibrium in the early Earthsea books to the earthy sacred songs and dances of the Kesh in *Always Coming Home* (1985) to the critique of both rationalist and monotheistic totalitarian regimes in *The Telling* (2000). Her standing as an author and her long years of complex engagements with issues of religion and politics in her fiction suggest that questions of religious difference in contemporary young adult literature are best read through her recent work.

This article explores recent attention to religious difference in young adult literature, both between people who differ in terms of religion, culture and race and a more radical alterity between humanity and divinity.[3] Abigail Bray's definition of alterity reminds us to attend to difference: '[T]he other of the other [...] a form of Otherness [...] which exceeds the colonizing logic of the self/other binary [...] Alterity signals [...] the space of difference'.[4] The connection between difference in the divine/human relation and inter-human difference leads me to the resources of postcolonial theology.[5] In *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God* (2007), Mayra Rivera confronts the legacy of Christian discourse around transcendence. She points to the persistence of the understanding of God as transcendent whilst also acknowledging critiques of an otherworldly notion of divine transcendence that orients religious life away from social justice while simultaneously legitimizing unjust acts, hierarchies and systems of knowledge.[6] Working alongside such critiques, Rivera posits

an alternative understanding of transcendence that asserts a simpler formulation: 'God is irreducibly Other, always *beyond* our grasp. But not beyond our touch'.[7] She offers a vision of a relational transcendence that exists 'within creation and between creatures'; her understanding of God as Other and of relational transcendence leads to the argument that 'Our images of the divine Other shape our constructions of human otherness'.[8] She engages with theoretical discourses concerned with the ethics of difference and argues for the importance of radical (divine) alterity for the development of such ethics. Rivera's postcolonial theology enables my exploration of religious difference that considers both the differences between people and divine alterity itself. Mayra Rivera's postcolonial theology of transcendence, in which God is always beyond human grasp but still implicated in human relations, speaks eloquently to Le Guin's fiction, therefore this essay is framed primarily, though not exclusively, through her work.

Religion in Ansul[9]

Le Guin's 2006 novel *Voices* is the middle book in a young adult fantasy series, Annals of the Western Shore. The novel depicts the adolescent Memer's instrumental role in the liberation of her city, Ansul, from the invading Alds who have ruled for eighteen years, largely motivated by religious fanaticism. In the early pages of the novel, Memer describes how the city of Ansul had in the past been known for its beauty and learning, but the city she knew was a 'broken city of ruins, hunger, and fear'. The city of the past remains a haunting presence – even for those like Memer who do not remember it themselves. Memer's description of Ansul's former beauty notes 'the thousand little marble temples of the street-gods', indicating that religion forms a central part of the identity of Ansul and its citizens.[10] Moreover, when she describes how former members of the household returned to Galvamand, she notes, 'their gods were here, their ancestors who gave them their dreams were here, their blessing was here': location is important to the shape of religious life in Ansul (p.8). There are three aspects of Ansul's religion that are evident through the narrative: the plenitude of gods, the importance of ancestor worship and the ubiquity of shrines and ritual acts of worship or 'blessing'.

Although the Alds have destroyed most of the public temples and statues and threaten or abuse anyone they see engaging in public acts of devotion, the Ansul citizens continue to hold to their beliefs and practices. Ansul has many gods: Lero, the ancient diety who inhabits the very ground of the city, is the god of 'justice, agreement, doing right . . . the moment of balance' (p. 38, p. 206); Ennu, who 'makes the way easy . . . speeds the work, mends quarrels, and guides us into death' (p. 274); Iene, the gardener who is represented in oak and willow; Sampa who is both Destroyer and Shaper; Luck shows the people's appreciation of irony as he is referred to as the one who cannot hear; and so on. There are also many minor spirits: each house and each room, even, will have a guardian spirit. As well as the numerous deities, the people of Ansul are also devoted to the spirits of their ancestors, who like the deities of hearth and sill (or doorway), abide in the homes of their descendants. Like the gods, the ancestors are offered devotion and in turn give blessing.

Richard D. Erlich notes Le Guin's early critiques of monotheistic religion. He points to an early science fiction story, 'The Fields of Vision' (1973), in which the protagonist encounters God, 'immanent in all things', as a visionary assault. Longing to see something, anything, besides God's face and the fear that his colleague will spread this holy word and establish a church leads him to suicide.[11] Unlike the immanence of God that blots out everything else in a subsuming, *Voices* offers a polytheist and animist version of panentheism in which divinity may be found within the material world without obscuring its unique contours. The multitude of gods and spirits are intimately involved with the daily life of the people. As Memer says, 'We have more gods in Ansul, I think, than anybody else has anywhere. More gods, and closer to us, the gods of our earth and our days, our blood and bone' (p. 24). The ubiquity of the gods is expressed through the sheer volume of references in the text, sometimes incidentally, other times more centrally to the narrative action. Memer performs the daily devotions of dusting the god-niches, leaving offerings of fresh leaves and incense, giving and asking blessings, giving additional devotion to the goddess Ennu on her special days, although she is not above expressing some exasperation at this routine of daily tasks; the spirits are numerous and 'they wanted so much looking after' (p. 24). Before the invaders' suppression of Ansul's religion, the city's devotion was public as well as private and the gods were represented and worshipped throughout the city as well as in the home. Memer describes the beautiful street temples that she has not seen herself:

> In Ansul, the world 'temple' usually means a little shrine on the street or in front of a building or at a crossways – altars, places to worship at. Many of them are just god-niches like the ones inside houses. You touch the sill of the temple to say the blessing, or lay a flower as an offering. Many street temples were wonderful little buildings of marble, two or three feet high, carved and decorated, with gilt roofs. The Alds had knocked those all down. (p. 146)

Although the public temples have been destroyed, the domestic rituals go on. The Waylord, Ansul's former leader, also performs devotions to the household spirits and frequently throughout the novel characters are noted to be making blessings, touching god-niches or sills as they pass in and out of the house of Galvamand. The ubiquity of the gods is expressed through the sheer volume of references in the text, sometimes incidentally, other times more centrally to the narrative action.

While the emphasis on Lero as god of balance reminds the reader of the Daoist-derived Equilibrium of the Earthsea mages, and the emphasis on wholeness and balance in *Always Coming Home* (1985) and *The Telling* (2000), in *Voices* religious practices are much more prevalent than philosophy. Rituals and devotions are woven into the fabric of daily life for those in Ansul. The religion of Ansul bears a marked resemblance to ancestor worship practices such as those found in Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and popular religious practices in China and Southeast Asia; religious studies scholars comment on the degree of syncretism frequently found between these systems.[12] Popular religion includes devotion to ancestors (family altars contain memorial tablets, flowers and incense and the ancestors' spirits are honoured at every festival and involved in every family event), heroes (who may also be considered deities), saints and local spirits (some of these

local spirits are trickster figures that may be destructive and are propitiated more than adored). The spirits of gods and ancestors are venerated with offerings of incense, flowers and food and shrines may be large, elaborate temples (where many will travel on pilgrimage) or small domestic altars.[13] However, we must remember that the religion of Ansul is an invented religion and not a direct analogue for indigenous Asian religions. Ansul's religious rites also have commonalities with the Roman pagan rituals of domestic devotion to the Lares and Penantes described in Le Guin's 2008 novel about Lavinia, the wife of Aeneas.[14]

The practices of daily devotion show us that religion is an integral part of the people of Ansul's identity. However, Le Guin gives us very little detail about the content of daily worship or any myths or abstract beliefs that may accompany them. We know that the people regularly 'speak the blessing' but we rarely hear what the words actually are (once when referring to the gods, Memer says 'may they bless me and be blessed' (p. 173)). We know that Memer dusts the altars and niches and leaves flowers but we don't know if the Waylord's devotions are the same or what the larger public festivals involve. It is problematic to attempt to separate ritual practice from philosophy or belief (a legacy of Western philosophical categories). What Le Guin expresses subtly through the ubiquity of sacred places (shrines) and actions (blessings and other devotions) is the understanding of religion as permeating every aspect of life and holding all in sacred embrace. As Memer comments, 'the sea, the earth, the stones of Ansul are sacred, are alive with divinity' (p.119). Le Guin implies that the multitude of Ansul's gods and sacred spirits make the Ansul citizens more tolerant of religious difference. 'Heathen' is a word the Alds use to refer to those who do not worship their god, but Memer suggests 'If it meant anything, it meant people who don't know what's sacred. Are there any such people? "Heathen" is merely a word for somebody who knows a different sacredness than you know' (p. 119).

Religious conflict and Le Guin's critique of monotheism

The connection between worldview and practice is expressed by the Waylord when he outlines the differences between Ansul and the Alds: 'Having one king, one god, one belief, they can act single-mindedly. They're strong. Yet the single can be divided. Our strength embraces multitude. This is our sacred earth. We live here with its gods and spirits, among them, they among us' (p. 143). *Voices* can be read as a story of religious conflict, of opposing modes: singularity and multitude. Religion also pervades the Ald's culture. They worship the singular god, Atth and their king, or Gand of Gands, is also high priest and controls the military. Many priests travel with the army and military and religious leadership are entwined. The written word is anathema to the Alds but they place high value the arts of storytelling and oratory. As the story is told through Memer's point of view, we only see the religion of the Alds from her perspective, most of what we learn is how the Ald's worship of Atth impacts on their subjugation of Ansul.

The Alds are presented as 'single-minded' and Le Guin indicates the link between (Christian) monotheism and imperialist violence that has been highlighted by postcolonial theologians.[15] *Voices* is not the first of Le Guin's texts to critique religion. Richard D. Erlich argues that from her early science fiction she has criticized religion, largely conceived as monolithic systems of thought:

> in lumping together monotheists as a set, and adding zealous rationalists, Le Guin …managed to deal with one of the most important phenomena in the United States and elsewhere in the latter part of the twentieth-century and early twenty-first: the rise of an interdenominational, indeed inter-religious fundamentalism, with connections with other systems that allow potentially fanatical certainty, and are in competition to become our "cultural dominant".[16]

Erlich emphasises Le Guin's critique of zealous rationalists alongside monotheists, as *The Telling*'s protagonist comments, 'Secular terrorists or holy terrorists, what difference'.[17] Erlich also reads *The Other Wind* (2001) as criticizing Christian notions of the afterlife in the form of the dry lands of the dead and their ultimate demise.[18] As *Voices* unfolds, we see that Le Guin's critique is aimed more explicitly at fundamentalism. We learn that the religion (and the politics) of the Alds is more complex than the story of conquest indicates. The will to conquest derived from an Ald sect that believes in a 'Night Mouth', the source of evil, demons and wickedness, a black, wet, cold place; when a thousand righteous men find the Night Mouth they will fight and destroy the source of evil, 'Obatth . . . the Other Lord' and then the Alds will have total dominion (p. 79, 81). The former Gand of Gands belonged to this faction, as did Iddor, the son of Ioratth, the Ald leader in Ansul, and his supporters. They believed the Night Mouth to be located in Ansul and tortured the Waylord and other members of Galvamand seeking its whereabouts. The Gand Ioratth distanced himself from this faction and their prisoners. When the new king comes to power in Asudar (the Ald's homeland), he seeks the advice of the Gand, as he considers the conquest of Ansul to be spiritually questionable.

Le Guin objects to the alliance of religious and military power, but also to the violent insurrection of the oppressed, which fails. Instead, the diplomatic solution brokered by the foreign poet and orator Orrec Caspro between Ioratth (and his king in Asudar) and Ansul finally carries the day. What Memer first sees as a betrayal, she comes to realise is another kind of victory: 'I was able to understand that in fact Asudar was offering us our freedom – at a price – and that my people saw it clearly and truly as a victory. Maybe they could see it so clearly because it did have a price on it, in money and trade agreements, matters my people understood' (p. 313). Ansul is a city that thrives on trade and the people are well-prepared to negotiate, embracing a return to politics and trade agreements over armed conflict. Significantly, Iddor and his faction are expelled from the city and the narrative. They are returned to Medron to be charged with treason and attempted patricide. Memer observes their departure with ambivalence, acknowledging her own unfulfilled wish for vengeance. Despite the emphasis on reconciliation and diplomacy in *Voices*, Le Guin does not present a utopian vision in which reconciliation for all is achieved. Iddor is too blinded by his allegiance to a fundamentalist sect bent on the destruction of demons to consider that the demonic may be in his

mode of seeing, not in the external world. His power must be neutralised and his faction expelled before peace can be restored. However, his ultimate fate is left off the page. The implication is that Memer, and the rest of Ansul, may never know, and they must let go of the desire for personal vengeance.

In *Voices* we largely see cultural conflict, the violence and great loss when one group forcefully imposes its beliefs on others. There are few moments of real encounter between the religious others of Ansul and Asudar and we are left to imagine what the future may bring as Asudar and Ansul (may) learn to peacefully co-exist. Marek C. Oziewicz reads *Voices* as a script for restorative justice, pointing to the goal of restorative justice as 'the healing of the victim and the reintegration of both victim and offender into society through a process of personal and social-structural change' (p.36).[19] However, although there are clearly elements of restorative justice within the text, it is not as clear as Oziewicz argues. *Voices* does indeed abound with the telling of stories, a crucial element of the restorative justice process, and as the people of Ansul tell their stories they become 'more confident, determined yet responsive', yet their stories are not told to the Alds themselves and while social-structural change may happen, it is unclear what personal change may be taking place within the Alds themselves.[20] We are left with open possibilities; at the narrative's close the Waylord and the Gand are going to meet, but the meeting has not yet occurred and what the future holds is still uncertain.

Memer's reluctant conversations with the Ald boy, Simme, form the novel's only non-violent explicit inter-religious encounter. At first she wishes to know nothing of the Alds but the Waylord is more measured. Although he is rightfully wary after being tortured by Iddor, he wishes to know more about the Alds and their culture. While visiting Ioratth with Orrec, Memer meets Simme; he is unsophisticated and can tell her little about the Ald's religion except to note that their temples are large places to gather for ceremonies and to pray to Atth 'for life and health and, and, and everything else!' (p. 148). However, their conversation holds some key moments for the understanding of religious difference. Memer and Simme argue about the nature of divinity, Memer questioning what it means to 'believe in' a god and why worshipping one god means the denial of all the others. Likewise, they disagree on the nature of prayer, Memer arguing that Simme's prayers are only 'begging, not praying' and that in Ansul they 'pray for blessing, not for things' (although she acknowledges to the reader both her secret curiosity about the Ald's prayers and her understanding of Simme, as she puts it 'Everybody cries out to Ennu when they're frightened. Everybody prays to Luck for things they want' (p. 148). So here we have both (hidden) similarity and (overt) difference. The Alds and Ansul understand the sacred differently. The Alds sense of the importance of regulating the boundaries of the sacred accords with Durkheim's notion of the sacred as that which is separated from the profane, or the ordinary, while for the people of Ansul, the sacred is enmeshed in the everyday: every room has its guardian spirit, the god niches and temples are everywhere and the very ground of the city is sacred.[21]

Le Guin gives us one further encounter between religious others, this one also involving the interplay of sameness and difference. This meeting is not between persons but mediated through a text. When Orrec visits Ioratth, he is invited to speak the 'poetry of the west'. Orrec recites the poetry of Denios and Ioratth and his courtiers are deeply moved. At the novel's close Memer quotes Denios, 'There is a god in every leaf; you hold what is sacred in your hand' (p. 341). Thus there is a subtle suggestion that at least some of the Alds are open to hearing from worldviews different from their own.

Mayra Rivera argues that postmodern explorations of epistemological limits stem from postcolonial thinking, and what is beyond the colonial (epistemic) grasp troubles the certainties of signification: 'In postcolonial criticism the beyond (and therefore transcendence, I will argue) becomes inextricable from the witness of oppressed communities. . . . transformation emerges from the encounters with the otherness beyond. Thus the realm of beyond is not a static place of separation, but a dynamic space of encounters and transformation'.[22] We see here that difference does not entail static separation but that alterity which unsettles hierarchies of knowledge and signification returns in poetry and in halting encounters between adolescents. The beyond as the space of encounters between others and relational transformation suggests that transcendence (or alterity) is located *within* the world, not extrinsic to it. Rivera turns to Derrida to explicate the connection between human and divine otherness:

> If God is completely other, the figure or name of the wholly other, then every other (one) is every (bit) other. *Tout autre est tout autre*. . . God as wholly other, is to be found everywhere there is something of the wholly other. And since each of us, everyone else, each other, is infinitely other in its absolute singularity, inaccessible, solitary, transcendent, nonmanifest, originarily nonpresent to my ego.[23]

Rivera argues that this is not a non-presence that denies bodily experience, material realities, or the possibility of encounter but one that acknowledges that such experience is beyond any individual's grasp (totalising control). The encounters between others that remind us of the inaccessible singularity of each, bring us to an encounter with the divine other. Rivera defines God as the ground of difference itself:

> God is thus seen as that multiple singularity that joins together all creatures – creatures that are themselves irreducible in the infinite multiplicity of their own singularity. In God is the beginning of diversity as well as their joining together, that which makes possible and receives the outcome of each inter-creaturely encounter – past and present. This radically inclusive reality relates us to one another while maintaining a space of difference between us.[24]

In *Voices,* amidst the multiplicity of divinities and spectral ancestors that saturate Ansul with the sacred there is a divine other that unsettles the certainties of the named gods, a mystery that continues to elude the grasp of the wisest.

The Oracle's cave: alterity within

The city of Ansul holds many secrets. The novels first sentence introduces a secret room which we soon learn holds the remnants of Ansul's famous library; after Ansul's defeat the people continue to smuggle books to Galvamand where they are hidden from Alds. Memer begins to come into her own when the Waylord discovers she has found the secret room and he teaches her to read. Books are her solace and strength. However, there is another kind of wisdom and writing contained in the secret room, a kind of divine speech that is a mystery to all who hear it. At the back of the secret room the floor and ceiling are made of rougher stone and there are no windows so the space darkens and eventually turns into a tunnel or a cave – senses are confused, Memer sometimes thinks the space is larger in the shadows, sometimes smaller. The Waylord resists telling her of the deep secrets of the secret room but eventually tells her the history of the Readers of the Galvan books.

There is an ancient cave at the back of the room that holds an oracle which predates the city and the house itself. The oracle spoke the first travellers who settled Ansul, writing on the cave's wall bid them 'here stay'. In time, the words of the oracle were written down and the oracle became the books, rather than writing on the wall of a cave: 'Sometimes the writing in them altered though no hand had touched it, or a Reader would open a book and find in it words no one had written there' (p. 169). The relation between the Galvas and the oracle is one of sacred trust, is entwined with devotion to the ancestors and is related to significance of their particular location: 'We Galvas, whose ancestors inhabit this house as souls and shadows, we have – not a gift, maybe, but a responsibility. A bond. We are the people who live in this place. *Here stay*. We stay here. Here, this house. This room. We guard what is here. We open the door and close it. And we read the words of the oracle' (p. 166) The Waylord emphasises the mysterious nature of the oracle: 'But often the words themselves were dark. Interpretation was needed. . . . to read the oracle is to bring rational thought to an impenetrable mystery' (p. 169, p. 181). Neither we nor the Galvan Readers know where the oracle comes from or how it works. Memer comes to see that the oracle is not a divine voice giving orders but one that instead is 'inviting thought' (p. 183). The Waylord suggests that rumour of the oracle and the Galvan books is what brought the Alds to Ansul, seeking the Night Mouth.

In *Voices*, Memer reads the oracle twice, the first time in the cave at the back of the secret room, in private, with only the Waylord to hear the sound of her voice transform to 'a deep, hollow, echoing sound swelling out all round' (p. 177). The second time is a more public utterance. At a crucial moment, in the aftermath of the failed rebellion and Iddor's attempted coup, when the city is poised on the cusp of greater violence, the Waylord brings a book to the crowded courtyard of Galvamand and the oracle speaks: 'a voice cried out, a loud strange voice . . . saying 'Let them set free!' (p. 244-46). The courtyard itself is a liminal zone; it is less private than the rest of the house, especially the secret room, yet it is still part of Galvamand and not as public as the marketplace or the council house, places where the important political maneuverers of the novel take place. Memer has

become the new Reader of Galvamand, playing a crucial role in the liberation of Ansul while also indicating the space of change as the city moves into an uncertain future.

The voice of the oracle speaks from a deep alterity within the religiosity of Ansul. This is divinity that is mysterious and other to both the people of Ansul and their beloved Lero, Ennu and the friendly shades of the ancestors. The oracle has no name, no personification and no altar, the readers ask questions with reverence but it does not receive the kind of open devotion of the other gods and spirits.[25] This voice that speaks mysteriously from the beyond deals in words but also in uncertainty. While the words require interpretation, they are even more unsettled, changing on the page and in memory (after the moment of revelation in the Galvamand courtyard Memer cannot remember if the oracle said 'let them set free' or 'be set free' or 'set free' (p. 273)). The oracle has not been heard for hundreds of years, although the knowledge of the Galvan books was handed down from Reader to Reader. In reviving the ancient practice for a new time and place (the public courtyard rather than the secret cave), Memer partakes of mystery both ancient and new. She is a sign of sacred alterity for Ansul: 'They saw in me the mystery of what had happened yesterday – the fountain, the voice of the oracle. I was that mystery. The Waylord was their familiar friend and leader, a link to the old days. I was a new thing among them' (p. 275).

The unsettling voice of the oracle that ushers in mystery even as it provokes wise counsel, resonates with an understanding of the divine as unknowable and beyond all positive descriptions and images. The inaccessibility of divine difference is indicated in the tradition of negative theology which continually asserts the impossibility of containing God in words and images.[26] Catherine Keller's reading of the fifteenth-century apophatic mysticism of Nicholas of Cusa yields a theology of multiplicity in which God is in all things: 'there is a god in every leaf' – yet is not reducible to the 'all': 'Cusa's subtle panentheism situates difference *in* God'.[27] The difference of God, the wholly other that cannot be grasped by gesture, image or language resonates with the unsaying of Le Guin's Daoist philosophy. The opening lines of her version of the *daodejing* include a sense of mystery as the ground, not only of individual singularity but all creation: 'The name you can say / isn't the real name. / Heaven and earth / begin in the unnamed'.[28] However, this apophatic mode does not suggest an alterity that is transcendent beyond, but rather one that continually unfolds within, the material world. This material unfolding of difference is evident in the dynamic of the unnamed and the 'ten thousand things' which in Le Guin's rendition return to the Way.[29]

The comparative theologian Hyo-Dong Lee applies the language of apophasis to subversive currents within East Asian traditions in his investigation of difference within the related systems of Daoist and Neo-Confucian thought.[30] In a reading of dissenting voices within these traditions, alongside modern and postmodern thinkers from Whitehead to Deleuze and Catherine Keller, Lee formulates an understanding of *qi* (psychophysical energy) that challenges the dominant metaphysical hierarchies of Daoism and Confucianism in which the Way is the transcendent ultimate and *qi* mediates between this and the material world. Against this 'totalizing metaphysics of one empty

Nothingness', Lee, with the resources of the Donghak (a nineteenth-century Korean fusion of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism born in the turmoil of Western and Japanese imperialist expansion that emphasises psychophysical energy as the creative matrix of all being), confers 'creative subject-agency to the spontaneous and pluriform creativity of psychophysical energy whose harmonizing power is not predicated on some kind of transcendental metaphysical unity'.[31] This enables 'a view of the divine that is both one and many, divine and creaturely'.[32] The panentheism of this view of Daoism resonates with the religion of Ansul and suggests ways in which the apophatic can yield an understanding of divinity as the unfolding difference of multiplicity.

Conclusion

Religion has become an increasing matter of concern for children's and young adult fantasy writers and critics are beginning to respond to this trend.[33] Some writers, like Philip Pullman, have explored religious themes, ultimately espousing atheism, while others, like J. K. Rowling, have re-inscribed conservative Christian ideas around heroic self-sacrifice. However, Le Guin is part of differing tradition that does not assume that children's literature and specifically *Christian* monotheism and related imagery are entwined. The multiplicity of divine beings and sacred rituals in Ansul gestures towards a more inclusive vision of the sacred. There are a gathering number of writers who construct their plots around reconciliation rather than the defeat of enemies, and who address religious conflict and religious difference drawing upon a broad range of religious traditions and imaginaries. Karen Healey's *Guardian of the Dead* (2010) addresses the connection between magic and religion and the negotiation of cultural difference within a bi-cultural society (New Zealand/Aotearoa), while Naomi Novik's *Uprooted* (2015) takes a fairly traditional good vs. evil storyline and inverts it in a conclusion that turns away from violent conflict to focus on reconciliation, the release of wounded spirits and ecological flourishing. Laini Taylor's *Daughter of Smoke and Bone* trilogy (2011-2014) appears to fall into this category as well, but although the majority of the trilogy focuses on the resolution to the centuries-long war between her star-crossed lovers' respective species, she ends her trilogy with the beginning of an even larger battle between a new alliance and unknown 'monsters', despite having spent several books deconstructing this concept. A closer analogue to *Voices* is Melina Marchetta's, *Finnikin of the Rock* (2008), which details the quest of the heir of Lumatere to return to a land lost through betrayal, invasion and the curse of a scapegoated people. As part of their efforts to restore harmony to Lumatere, Queen Isaboe and her companion, Finnikin, take a syncretist approach, insisting that Lagrami and Sagrami (whose worshippers form a persecuted minority religion) are two faces of the same goddess and that they will worship 'the goddess complete'.[34] This syncretist strategy of looking for sameness within different beliefs and practices is more akin to pluralist strategies of inter-religious dialogue than the emphasis on difference I have explored in this paper.[35] However, Isaboe and Finnikin do not attempt to coerce the followers of Lagrami and Sagrami to abandon their

practices, their cloisters or priestesses. In practice the two goddesses continue to merge and separate; the 'goddess complete' is a dynamic figure containing difference within.

Despite the divine tendency to shift and escape at the moment of definition (like the mutable words of the oracle), it remains an ethical imperative to continue to give expression to divine alterity. Rivera quotes Spivak, 'For the wholly Other "must be thought and must be thought through imagining"' and goes on to emphasise how the imaginative figures are unverifiable and can never be fixed, controlled or made certain.[36] But the 'undecidability of imagination' is a lure towards (here Derrida joins Spivak) 'the calling of a future-to-come . . . the possibility of a different future'.[37] Fantasy fiction, in its explicit dealings with the fantastical, the impossible and other worlds, may be best placed to provoke these imaginings. In combining an exploration of theological alterity and reconciliation alongside more traditional coming-of-age narratives, Le Guin and others encourage young adult readers to imaginatively approach their own encounters with religious difference.

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[1] In interviews Le Guin has emphasised the importance of Daoist philosophy to her work: *The Guardian*, 'Chronicles of Earthsea', 9 February, 2004. Accessed 31/03/2016 http://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/feb/09/sciencefictionfantasyandhorror.ursulakleguin.

[2] For analyses of Daoism in Le Guin's fiction see D.C. Bain, 'The *Tao Te Ching* as Background in the Novels of Ursula K. Le Guin', *Extrapolation* 21 (1980) 209-221; D. Barbour, 'The Lathe of Heaven: Taoist Dream', *Algol* 21 (November 1973) 22-24; E.C. Cogell, 'Taoist Configurations: *The Dispossessed*' J. De Bolt (ed) *Ursla K. Le Guin: Voyager to Inner Lands and Outer Space* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1979), pp. 150-62; R. Galbreath, 'Taoist Magic in the Earthsea Trilogy', *Extrapolation* 21 (Fall 1980) 262-68; S.J. Lindow, *Dancing the Tao: Le Guin and Moral Development* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2012). For a religious studies perspective on Le Guin's contribution to Western Daoism that takes into account her rendition of the *Daode jing* published in 1998 by Shambhala Press as well as her fiction see J. R. Herman, 'Daoist environmentalism in the West: Ursula K. Le Guin's Reception and Transmission of Daoism' in N.J. Girardot et. al. (eds) *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within a Cosmic Landscape* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press), pp. 394-403.

[3] Alana Vincent reminds us that culture and religion are not hermetically sealed, but always interpenetrating, an important factor for post-colonial and comparative theology; *Culture, Communion and Recovery: Tolkienian Fairy-Story and Inter-Religious Exchange* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), pp. 4-5.

[4] A. Bray, *Hélène Cixous: Writing and Sexual Difference* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 73-74.

[5] The situation in Ansul is not precisely postcolonial; the Alds live in Ansul 'as soldiers in a garrison, they brought neither colonists nor women' (p. 84), there is little mixing between the two cultures and, aside from the racial hybridity of 'siege brats' like Memer, there is little in the way of the cultural hybridity and diaspora that is so important to postcolonial theory and theology. However, the subjugation of one people by another along racial and religious lines and the beginnings of inter-cultural exchange as the citizens of Ansul seek liberation and the hegemony of the Alds ebbs resonates with postcolonial writing.

[6] M. Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p. 1

[7] Ibid., p. 2.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Religious studies scholars have challenged the use of 'religion' as a viable category in the study of world cultures, arguing that the term is problematic, particularly for Eastern religions (or, as Kwok Pui-lan refers to them, 'wisdom traditions') and indigenous religions, as it encodes Western, Christian philosophical biases about what constitutes religion and how knowledge is produced and systematized: W.C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A Revolutionary Approach to the Great Religious Traditions* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), pp. 50-51; R. King, 'Cartographies of the Imagination, Legacies of Colonialism: The Discourse of Religion and the Mapping of Indic Traditions', *Evam; Forum on Indian Representations* 3 (2004), 283-85; P. Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2004), pp. 187-204. However, given the ubiquity of the term in popular discourse, I follow Kwok and King in retaining the term, whilst attempting to remain conscious of the diversity of sacred practices and philosophies.

[10] U. K. Le Guin, *Voices* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2006), p. 6. Further references will be cited in the text.

[11] R.D. Erlich, 'Le Guin and God: Quarreling with the One, Critiquing Pure Reason', *Extrapolation* 47 (2006) 356-57.
[12] Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, p. 162; H.D. Lee, *Spirit, Qi, and the Multitude: A Comparative Theology for the Democracy of Creation* (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2013), p. 44
[13] J. Gentz, *Understanding Chinese Religions* (Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2013), pp. 112-15; A. H. Unger and W. Unger, *Pagodas, Gods and Spirits of Vietnam* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), p. 13-22. Hyo-Dong Lee interprets East Asian deities from Lord Heaven to 'the spirits of ancestors, natural features, and various locales' to be 'coalescences of psychospiritual energy' that are part of the cosmos of all creation, not supernatural entities that transcend it: Lee, *Spirit, Qi, and the Multitude*, p. 44.
[14] U.K. Le Guin, *Lavinia* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2009), pp. 42, 206-08, 264.
[15] Laurel C. Schneider describes the problematic of monotheism: the word itself was coined in relation to 'polytheism' in the matrix of the rise of European modernity and colonial expansion; this binary led to the weakening of Trinitarian thought in Western Christianity as well as the suppression of rival monotheisms (Judaism and Islam) for the sake of European cultural hegemony: L.C. Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 22-23. For further discussion of the use of Christian rhetoric to support Western imperialism (and neo-imperialism) see J. Daggers, *Postcolonial Theology of Religions: Particularity and Pluralism in World Christianity* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 61-83, Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, p. 7, 15, 94; Rivera, *Touch of Transcendence*, pp. 9-10.
[16] Erlich, 'Le Guin and God', 351-52. However, Erlich also notes occasions in Le Guin's corpus which are more gracious in their treatment of Christianity and Judaism (Islam is not dealt with directly alongside its sister monotheisms), p. 356.
[17] U.K. Le Guin, *The Telling* (London: Gollancz,2002), p. 62.
[18] Erlich, 'Le Guin and God', 366-70.
[19] M.C. Oziewicz, 'Restorative Justice Scripts in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Voices*', *Children's Literature in Education* 42 (2011), 36.
[20] Ibid., 38.
[21] W.S.F. Pickering, ed., *Durkheim on Religion: A Selection of Readings with Biographies and Introductory Remarks* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. Ltd, 1975), pp. 113-17.
[22] Rivera, *Touch of Transcendence*, p. 13.
[23] J. Derrida, qtd. in Rivera, *Touch of Transcendence*, p. 11-12.
[24] Rivera, *Touch of Transcendence*, p. 137.
[25] Although the oracle does not have a consistent personification, The Waylord responds to Memer's anxiety about the oracle's voices with a kindly image: 'If you must go into the dark, Memer, think, it's only a mother, a grandmother, trying to tell us something we don't yet understand' (p. 339-40). As she does with the Old Powers in *Tombs of Atuan* (1970), *Tehanu* (1990), and *Tales from Earthsea* (2001), Le Guin feminises the mysterious sacred powers of the earth. For a critique of the alignment of the old powers with femininity, see P. Nodelman, 'Reinventing the Past: Gender in Ursula K. Le Guin's *Tehanu* and the Earthsea "Trilogy"', *Children's Literature* 23 (1995), 186-90.
[26] For further exploration of negative theology in the Christian tradition see A. Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart* (London: University of Notre Dame Press,1995), pp. 17-19; C. Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), pp. 15-49; D. Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
[27] C. Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003) p. 27.
[28] U.K. Le Guin, *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching: A Book about the Way and the Power of the Way* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1998), p. 3. Le Guin has called the text 'a rendition, not a translation' (p. 107). It has been commended by sinologists, including J. P. Seaton, Professor of Chinese at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, who encouraged her to publish.
[29] Ibid., p. 45.
[30] Lee, *Spirit, Qi, and the Multitude*, pp. 4, 61, 218-19.
[31] Ibid., pp. 37, 41.
[32] Ibid., p. 41.
[33] For example, see 'Moral Horror and Moral Maturity: Philip Pullman's Theological Anthropology for a Godless World' by Emanuelle Burton and 'Relics and Intersubjectivity in the Harry Potter series and *The Castle Behind Thorns*' by Carissa Turner Smith in this issue.
[34] M. Marchetta, *Finnikin of the Rock* (Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press, 2008), pp. 233, 314.
[35] For discussion of a pluralist approach to inter-religious dialogue see Daggers, *Postcolonial Theology of Religions*, pp. 92-97, 171-76; P. Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 2010), pp. 109-45; P. Schmidt-Leukel, *Transformation by Integration: how*

Inter-faith Encounter changes Christianity (London, SCM Press, 2009). For a critique of liberal theological pluralism as insufficiently attentive to religious difference see Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, pp. 197-203; K. Tanner, 'Respect for Other Religions: A Christian Antidote to Colonialist Discourse', *Modern Theology* 9 (1993) 1.

[36] G.C. Spivak, qtd . in Rivera, *Touch of Transcendence*, p. 119.

[37] Rivera, *Touch of Transcendence*, pp. 119, 121.