

A comparative study of the theme of the process and development of religion, belief and worship in
"Small Gods" by Sir Terry Pratchett and *"American Gods"* by Neil Gaiman.

“Revenge, lust, ambition, pride, and self-will are too often exalted as the gods of man's idolatry; while holiness, peace, contentment, and humility are viewed as unworthy of a serious thought.”

– Charles Spurgeon¹

Small Gods by Sir Terry Pratchett focuses on the faith held by a simple farmhand by the name of Brutha. Society around him has lost their faith in God and, instead, replaced it with fear of the church. On a similar note, *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman centres on a seemingly typical American man called Shadow Moon who, in the midst of tragic circumstances, is hired by the mysterious Mr Wednesday as a bodyguard. Both texts start similarly - though the context may be different for each – both central characters quickly come into contact with the divine. In *Small Gods*, Brutha is a well-meaning, kind hearted, entirely forgiving individual – as he was taught to be through his religion. However he has a naivety toward the wrongdoings and the evil of the church and, thus, feels no fear for them, contrasting with the people around him. As the novel progresses, it is revealed that the fear for the church has spoiled belief in the Great God Om, which explains his fall from grace when he appears to Brutha in the form of a tortoise. *American Gods* begins with Shadow being released from prison several days early, paralleled with the news of his wife's death. He ends up in the employ of a Mr Wednesday, who later reveals himself as the Norse god Odin. Shadow is introduced to a host of gods from many ancient religions and is dragged into a war between the 'old gods' and a pantheon of modern gods, created through worship of new-age convenience and entertainment. Through both novels, the creation and dissipation of gods are detailed and explained through belief and worship, though they differ on the reasons for their existence and, by extension, the nature of belief and mankind's requirement for a greater power.

Both texts see man's requirement for belief as a simple fact of our nature. Not necessarily a belief in gods, but in something regardless. This boils down to many individual requirements which people in general have and are met with the application of religion such as a justification for one's actions; comfort in a community; self-affirmation; and, possibly above all else, hope. *Small Gods* addresses this several times, but notably whilst Brutha and Om travel in the desert and find a grave marked with Om's holy sigil:

“ ‘I don't understand that,’ said Om. ‘They don't *really* believe I exist, but they go and put something like that on a grave.’

‘It's hard to explain. I think it's because they believe *they* exist,’ said Brutha. ‘It's because they're people, and so was he.’ ”²

Here, Pratchett expresses his thoughts on how, ultimately, religion is just a metaphor we use to harbour and rationalise – even suppress – our passions and emotions which are too difficult to explain and acknowledge. This example being grief: the grave having a symbol – which never necessarily had to be holy – as a proxy recognition and representation of their feelings for their lost kin. Pratchett believes that religion is a wall to protect one's conscious self from one's deeper, more complex thoughts and feelings. Gaiman parallels this by directly approaching religion as a metaphor:

¹ <http://thinkenglish.me/quotes/38330.html>

² Pg 303, T. Pratchett, *Small Gods(for iPad mini)*, Victor Gollancz, 1992

“Religions are, by definition, metaphors, after all: God is a dream, a hope, a woman, an ironist, a father, a city, a house of many rooms, a watchmaker who left his prize chronometer in the desert, someone who loves you – even, perhaps, against all evidence, a celestial being whose only interest is to make sure your football team, army, business, or marriage thrives, prospers, and triumphs over all opposition.”³

This makes clear his thoughts that religion is simply a human construct designed to meet our specific emotional and psychological needs. God, in his view, is what we make of it. Something we worship and pray for. God is the most important thing in each individual’s life – a reflection of ourselves through our needs and desires. While this agrees with Pratchett’s metaphoric approach, it differs from his idea of religion as a shield, expressing religion as an idol representing our needs and desires, but what is ultimately ourselves. This is where both points of view converge once more, agreeing that religion of all kind is, at its most basic, a belief in oneself. Despite this deep personal take on belief, these authors also address why and how people start to believe in gods, and it mainly comes down to symbols.

Both novels directly reference symbols as being one of the most important parts in inspiring belief, as they are simple, easy substitutes for a much more complicated concept. A symbol is something people can get behind and support. All large religions have symbols, from the Christian cross to the Buddhist Wheel of Dharma. People are drawn to symbols and these novels reflect that behaviour. *Small Gods* uses a drawing of a turtle as a symbol to represent the (heretical) theory that their world is balanced on the back of four elephants which stand, in turn, on the back of a colossal turtle which floats through the universe. Mirroring this is the symbol of the oppressive horns of Om, which represent the tyranny and oppression of the Omnian church. The idea of symbolism exists throughout the novel, but is featured when the philosopher Didactylos is trying to inspire a crowd to believe in the turtle theory;

“ ‘... And he just told them a lot of facts. You can’t inspire people with facts. They need a cause. They need a symbol.’ ”⁴

Here, Pratchett explains how faith is. It cannot be fact-based. This is preceded by an exchange debating the point that one cannot believe in something which exists, as existence defeats the purpose of belief. Thus, symbols are required for us to better portray the metaphysical. The symbol is a shortcut to the larger idea, the stories and lessons, the core concept of what it symbolises. A picture is worth a thousand words, after all. *American Gods* initially uses the symbol of an ash tree to represent life, drawing inspiration from Norse folklore, where the first man came from a supposed ash tree which connected the nine worlds. The tree in its entirety even revives Shadow after death, however, when a branch is taken from the tree, the Norse god Loki takes the symbol of life and health and twists it into something darker:

“ ‘It symbolizes a spear, and in this sorry world, the symbol *is* the thing.’ ”⁵

³ Pg 739, N. Gaiman, *American Gods(for iPad mini)s*, Harper Collins & Headling Publishing Group, 2001

⁴ Pg 302, T. Pratchett, *Small Gods(for iPad mini)*, Victor Gollancz, 1992

⁵ Pg 765, N. Gaiman, *American Gods(for iPad mini)*, Harper Collins & Headling Publishing Group, 2001

Here, Gaiman demonstrates two points; firstly, symbols hold power. A symbol is merely what it is believed to symbolise. It is the product of human beings linking an immaterial concept to a material object or shape to more easily grasp a complicated idea. Secondly, that belief is what gives it weight and power. The symbol is nothing but a vessel to carry faith. Anything could symbolise anything, provided at least one person wills. To that single person, a symbol could mean everything from love and hope to war and chaos.

This is why having faith has such a massive impact on an individual. Both novels observe this without sacrificing the significance and weight of faith in a society which seems to take a different effect. *Small Gods* in particular portrays a very personal and individually meaningful and beneficial relationship with people and their faith (or lack thereof). Even Simony, an atheist, is favoured by gods because of his whole-hearted disbelief in gods or, more, his belief in an absence of gods. Atheism takes the exact same faith as any other theism; the only difference is the subject. Pratchett believes that all that matters is having faith, not the stories or intricacies of what in, as it brings a deep fulfilment and purpose to the individual;

“ ‘...You can die for your country or your people or your family, but for a god you should live fully and busily, every day of a long life.’ ”⁶

Throughout this novel, Pratchett makes references to family – particularly paternity – in relation to gods. He theorises that the reason people think of God as being a big bearded man in the sky is because that is essentially most people’s first memories of their father. Though Pratchett seems to believe we create gods of our own mind, there is an obvious link in how gods are seen as creators, as fathers are to children, hence frequent references to the Christian God as “Our Father.” No child should die before their parents, certainly not for them. Parents are supposed to bring comfort and happiness and sculpt their children into well-rounded individuals, all of which applies to gods also. No one should die for their god. *American Gods* takes a different approach, reiterating the importance of the self and one’s own heart:

“ ‘Gods are great,’ said Atsula, slowly as if she were imparting a great secret. ‘But the heart is greater. For it is from our hearts they come, and to our hearts they shall return...’ ”⁷

Thus, Gaiman shows that the greater power is within ourselves. While Pratchett explores man’s association of gods with creators despite themselves being the creator of gods, Gaiman explores man’s acceptance of this role as their source. The good and the bad traits of gods come from man and, accepting that, we can better ourselves and accept that true happiness, hope and love as well as sadness, doubt and hatred can all be found within, and no gods truly hold that power over anyone. Many may find this a daunting prospect and reject it, finding comfort in their god. All this stems back to religion simply being a metaphor for believing in oneself; that gods are just reflections and the most important thing is simply to have faith in whatever brings comfort. To contrast the benefits of faith to the individual, an increased scope reveals a less appealing picture.

⁶ Pg 375, T. Pratchett, *Small Gods(for iPad mini)*, Victor Gollancz, 1992

⁷ Pg 610, N. Gaiman, *American Gods(for iPad mini)*, Harper Collins & Headling Publishing Group, 2001

One of the most prominent themes in each novel, second possibly to holy conflict, is the dwindling and corruption of belief. *Small Gods* demonstrates this with Omnianism, where over the course of years, the religion was twisted and malformed by its believers into a parade of temples, ceremonies, rules and false prayers, eventually letting the actual piety fade and die. The church eventually became more about the consequences of what would happen if the rules were broken or if someone was found to be of a different faith; prayer was a habit, fear of the source was seemingly indistinguishable from belief in the product:

“ ‘Around the Godde there forms a Shelle of prayers and Ceremonies and Buildings and Priestes and Authority, until at Last the Godde Dies. Ande this maye notte be noticed.’ ”⁸

Pratchett then likens gods to a type of shellfish which builds a shell bigger and bigger until it cannot move and dies. This is a demonstration of how religion can fade into habit and lose all spiritual significance, simply by collapsing under its own weight. The message gets twisted and corrupted, or people try to use the church for their own gain, or maybe people find a newer, better god to pray to. Regardless, time rains on us all, and our gods are no exception. *American Gods* frequently references the likes of ancient tribal beliefs when talking about the “death” of a god:

“ ‘Gods die. And they truly die they are unmourned and unremembered. Ideas are more difficult to kills than people, but they can be killed, in the end.’ ”⁹

This is in reference to ancient tribes which are possibly featured in a later interlude which details a Siberian tribe’s journey to America where their gods are eventually warped into different iterations, the originals forgotten. Another example, not so much of death, but of warping, is the symbol of the ash tree. It is believed by modern scholars that the original tree was not ash, but instead an evergreen yew tree, which perfectly sums up the novel in its entirety: America warps and twists belief. It repels it. The foundation of the Norse pantheon in America was corrupt from the very beginning when the early Viking tribesmen hung Mr Wednesday on the grand ash tree. But this minor corruption in the mythos eventually became the believed truth and, if everyone believes it, what difference is there? Religion is simply a belief and that example became the truth. Thus, corruption, warping and death of religion are very prominent in both novels, though the largest theme stems from that same corruption – holy conflict.

As in the real world, the settings of *Small Gods* and *American Gods* are both plagued with conflict brought about by a clash of belief. Where *Small Gods* features the Omnian church engaging neighbouring countries in conflict à la medieval holy crusades, *American Gods* features conflict among the gods themselves, a clash of ideas in a more literal sense. Pratchett frequently references people sinning in the name of their god, particularly engaging in the murder and sacrifice of others. He clearly highlights this to emphasise the irony and nonsensicality of committing murder for a supposedly all-knowing, all-powerful, ever-present being:

⁸ Pg 204, T. Pratchett, *Small Gods(for iPad mini)*, Victor Gollancz, 1992

⁹ Pg 100, N. Gaiman, *American Gods(for iPad mini)*, Harper Collins & Headling Publishing Group, 2001

“The figures looked more or less human. And they were engaged in religion. You can tell by the knives (it’s not murder if you do it for a god).”¹⁰

This, particularly, seems almost scathing and possibly quite generalised, though it is more likely that it was used to exaggerate Pratchett’s point: religion has become somewhat iconic as a hive of conflict and hatred. He sees no sense in bringing pain to another living, breathing human being for the sake of something which, firstly, may not exist, and secondly, is supposed to inspire peace and love and happiness. This demonstrates mankind’s inherent incompatibility with complex thoughts and that, fundamentally, though we like to think otherwise, people are simply animals, subject to hormone and instinct. And the instincts of some individuals drive them to steal and to kill and to destroy, simply to prove to *themselves* that they are superior. These are the people whose knives are indicative of religion, and these are the people who corrupt an otherwise innocent and fulfilling experience. While *American Gods* also covers this stance, Gaiman also touches upon misguided belief and the dangers therein:

“ ‘... The really dangerous people believe that they are doing whatever they are doing solely and only because it is without question the right thing to do. And that is what makes them dangerous.’ ”¹¹

Gaiman’s thoughts here are that there are few things quite as dangerous to oneself and, possibly, to others as being misled which is reflected throughout the rest of the novel where Wednesday deceives Shadow into unknowingly helping him initiate a war between gods. Furthermore, this effect can be seen throughout history – most of the worst things that have happened to our world have been done by a group of people simply trying to help. Alas, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. As seen in both *Small Gods* and *American Gods*, a group of people were led by an influential leader into an unnecessary conflict in the name of a god or gods. Both of these leaders had ulterior motives, whether it be a delusion of grandeur or a quest for it. This story is told time and time again, from current radicalism in the Middle East to the Nazis of WWII, all the way back through our time. Religion is as inescapable as conflict, and conflict is as inescapable as the sunset. What Pratchett and Gaiman believe is that one should not fight for what they believe in; one person’s true faith is too precious to kill or die for.

In conclusion, the novels *Small Gods*, by Sir Terry Pratchett, and *American Gods*, by Neil Gaiman both observe and discuss religion in different contexts, and bring readers to, themselves, reflect upon the importance of faith in our society. It is undeniable, the impact that religion has had on our lives and will inevitably have in the future, and so, we must keep in mind the joys that such things bring, but also their dangers. We can embrace the fulfilment and comfort and guidance of a greater power, but we must maintain an understanding and acceptance of human nature and other people if we are to help improve our world for our future generations. As both of these fine authors have observed: religion and faith are truly wonderful things to have, but the most important quality one can ever possess is an understanding and acceptance of oneself.

Word count: 2,914

¹⁰ Pg 289, T. Pratchett, *Small Gods(for iPad mini)*, Victor Gollancz, 1992

¹¹ Pg 349, N. Gaiman, *American Gods(for iPad mini)*, Harper Collins & Headling Publishing Group, 2001

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