

The Light of Life

Essays in Honour of
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**When Gods are Absent from
Fantasy: Religion and Spiritual
Experience in Guy Gavriel Kay's
The Lions of Al-Rassan and *The
Sarantine Mosaic***

Guy Gavriel Kay, a Canadian author of fantasy fiction, who started his career as an assistant editor of Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*, and whose debut *The Fionavar Tapestry* (1984-1986) is confidently set in the tradition of portal-quest fantasy¹, has found his own unique formula for creating secondary worlds that combine fantasy and history to an unprecedented degree. While much fantasy fiction is set in quasi-medieval worlds, Kay's interest in history, rather than myth, appears deeper and more conscious than in other works of the genre as, apart from the first trilogy, all his fictional fantasy worlds are immensely inspired by real places in real historical periods. Varied as these inspirations are², they prove to be

¹ In Farah Mendlesohn's *The Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008), the most important feature of this category is the existence of the portal, through which characters enter the fantastic world, which diverts from the reality they know. This has important implications for the narrative strategies, as the unfamiliar world needs to be "discovered" during the quest/adventure, and hence the genre features extensive and detailed descriptions, relies on wise-man figures that explain the reality, and emphasizes the "healing", i.e. the restoration of the glory of bygone days. For a more detailed description illustrated with well-chosen examples, see Mendlesohn (2008: 1-18).

² For instance, *Tigana* (1990) has been inspired by Renaissance Italy; *Song for Arbonne* (1992) – by medieval Provence, the Albigensian Crusade and courtly love; *The*

quite carefully researched, with the numerous historical studies that lay behind them always listed in the prefaces to Kay's novels as well as on his official website. And yet the author firmly and consciously insists on the conventions of fantasy rather than the historical novel:

First of all the genre allows the universalizing of a story. It takes incidents out of a very specific time and place and opens up possibilities for the writer – and the reader – to consider the themes, the elements of a story, as applying to a wide range of times and places. It detaches the tale from a narrow context, permits a stripping away, or at least an eroding of prejudices and assumptions. (Kay "Home and Away"³)

Importantly, for the purposes of this paper, what is also "universalised" and "detached from a narrow context" is the concept of religion, which features prominently in Kay's fiction on the whole.

Focusing in particular on *The Lions of Al-Rassan* (1995), inspired by the twelfth-century Iberian Peninsula with its Muslim, Jewish and Christian influences, and *The Sarantine Mosaic*, a duology on the themes of the Byzantium of Justinian that consists of *Sailing to Sarantium* (1998) and *Lord of Emperors* (2000), this paper examines how Kay's signature manner of blending history and fantasy affects the depiction of religion in these novels. While institutional religion is presented as an important element of the social and political systems of the secondary world, it is also juxtaposed with individual spirituality and virtue. Furthermore, while in both works the clashes motivated by conflicting religious ideologies are staged as central to the development of the narratives, the demands of religion are also set against personal motivations and moral choices.

Last Light of the Sun (2004) – by the reign of Alfred the Great and Viking invasions; *Under Heaven* (2010) and *River of Stars* (2013) – by medieval China; and the most recent, *Children of Earth and Sky* (2016) – by Renaissance Europe (Croatia, Venice, Constantinople).

³ <http://brightweavings.com/ggk/globe/> (accessed: 10 September 2016).

Fantasy literature frequently relies on mythological narratives and includes within its plots elements of various religions, transforming their structural patterns, motifs and symbolism – e.g. the fight between good and evil, the quest, the rites of passage, the figure of a saviour whose sacrifice saves the world, etc. Consequently, it creates not only secondary worlds, but also secondary religions, and even secondary spheres of *sacrum*. Applying the tools of the phenomenology of religion to these texts uncovers both religious and mythological references and reveals the spiritual message of the books⁴. The approach has been successfully demonstrated with reference to *The Fionavar Tapestry* by Weronika Łaszkiewicz (2014: 183–188), who identifies various elements connected with Christianity, Norse and Celtic mythologies, Taoism, beliefs in reincarnation, and even shamanistic rituals as the basis of Fionavar’s multifaceted *sacrum*, which indeed impresses the reader with its sheer scale. The problem, however, is that the method appears less productive when applied to Kay’s subsequent novels, where he diverts from the model of the “patchwork” creation of complicated religious systems themselves and seriously reduces the importance of magic and supernatural elements, offering instead a more general reflection on the uses and abuses of religious principles.

In fact, like much of his fiction, *The Lions of Al-Rassan* and *The Sarrantine Mosaic* highlight the connection between violence and religious ideology, tempting one to see Kay’s novels as a manifestation of the gloomy view that religions originate and perpetuate violent behaviours and

⁴ Such an approach is exemplified by Jolanta Łeba’s (2010) study on religious ideas in fantasy literature covering the period 1930–1975 and focusing on the works of such authors as Robert Howard, Fritz Leiber, Ursula K. Le Guin, Andre Norton, C.S Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. Łeba proposes to compare the themes of literary texts with religious notions present in various cultural contexts in order to unmask religious ideas that remain hidden, degraded and transformed by the authors of fantasy narratives. Her analysis centers on the relationship between magic and religion, the portrayal of wizards and their connections with power, the construction of characters and their moral attitudes, and other mythological and religious motifs. Łeba’s major argument is that fantasy literature is a literary manifestation of a human need to find and reconnect with *sacrum*, as it draws the reader’s attention to the sphere of non-material, spiritual reality.

bloodshed. Such a link has been observed, for instance, by Leo D. Lefebure, who writes in *Revelation, the Religions, and Violence*:

the brutal facts of the history of religions impose the stark realization of the intertwining of religion and violence: violence, clothed in religious garb, has repeatedly cast a spell over religion and culture, luring countless 'decent' people – from unlettered peasants to learned priests, preachers, and professors – into its destructive dance. (Lefebure 2000: 13)

While it would be difficult to deny the fact that religions and violence might indeed go together, Lefebure's statement provides more questions than answers. Is there something inherent to religions that makes them more prone to violence than other ideologies and practices? Do they inspire followers to commit violence or are they used to justify acts of barbarity caused by something else? If so, for what reasons? Finally, what exactly is it that lures "decent" people, irrespective of their social standing, into religion-related violence? And if they are lured into it, do they actually remain "decent"?

Kay's novels invite readers to ponder these questions by depicting religions as social and political constructs created by humans rather than gods, who are generally absent from the narratives and do not interfere in the holy wars fought in their names. Furthermore, the religious conflicts, as depicted by the Canadian author, cannot be easily interpreted as the eternal fight between the forces of good and evil, as none of the sides can claim superior moral standards. This stems from Kay's decision to favour historical sources over mythological ones, and has interesting implications for the construction of his characters. If no side is destined to win by gods' favour, if there is neither a typical saviour figure nor an eternal enemy, if the outcome of events is the result of changing circumstances rather than prophecy, the actions performed by the protagonists are not predetermined but result from their personal motivations and moral choices made while the wheel of history – not fortune – is mercilessly moving. Consequently, their decisions are not always obvious, and righteousness and virtue are not automatically connected with any of the religions.

The plot of *The Lions of Al-Rassan* focuses on the conflict of three monotheistic religions and encapsulates the long history of the re-conquest of the Iberian Peninsula into the life span of three protagonists, entangled in a love triangle that is further complicated by the fact that each of them follows a different religion. Jehane bet Ishak is a female Kindath physician; Rodrigo Belmonte – a Jaddite cavalry commander; and Ammar ibn Khairan, an Asharite poet, diplomat, soldier, and assassin⁵. As for religions, Asharites, the descendants of the tribesmen of the desert, worship the stars; Jaddites – the sun; and Kindath – the two sister moons. Apart from this, little is known about their gods but just enough about their cultural practices to roughly associate these religions with Islam, Christianity and Judaism, respectively. For instance, Asharites are supposed to refrain from drinking alcohol, dancing, and non-religious music, but are great patrons of art and poetry, whereas Jaddites frequently make the sign of the sun-disk, kneel and pray in chapels, and wage a campaign to reconquer lands from the Asharite caliphate. Kindath, in turn, are depicted as eternal wanderers, usually merchants or medical practitioners, forbidden by both Asharite and Jaddite laws to own land or ride horses, and expected to live in restricted parts of the cities, which are occasionally destroyed and burnt in pogroms. While Asharites and Jaddites, holding real political power, fight for dominance over the Peninsula, the Kindath, branded as inferior, heretical, and even monstrous – one Jaddite saint refers to them as “animals [...] to be hunted down and burned from the face of the Earth” (105) – are persecuted by both. And yet, like in medieval Al-Andalus, the three populations have managed to co-exist for centuries in fictional Al-Rassan, even though their relationships are characterized by mutual distrust, resulting

⁵ Although examining the influences that lay behind the construction of these characters lies beyond the scope of this article, it is worth noting that the figure of Rodrigo Belmonte is loosely based on the Spanish medieval hero El Cid, a historical person and protagonist of the twelfth-century epic poem *The Poem of the Cid* (*El Cantar de mio Cid*), which connection is duly observed by Holly E. Ordway. Ammar ibn Khairan, as his name suggests, might have been partly inspired by Ibn Ammar – a Muslim poet living in the Iberian Peninsula in 1031–1086, yet more research is needed to support this point.

from insufficient knowledge of one another, false beliefs, and superstitions, which are envenomed by religious leaders and used by political rulers to clothe territorial and economic expansion as holy war.

Kay emphasizes the economic and political motivations for the war over and over again, implying perhaps that the concept of “holy” or religious war is a misleading one. To put it briefly, religions as such do not produce wars, as it is not possible to separate them from wider political, economic and social contexts. In *The Myth of Religious Violence*, William T. Cavanaugh (2009) argues that while it is impossible to disconnect religious violence from secular violence, this division has been established in contemporary Western thought to present secular aggression as more rational, and therefore better sanctioned than that connected with religions. The problem with this “myth” is that “there is no such thing as a transhistorical or transcultural “religion” that is essentially separate from politics. Religion has a history, and what counts as religion and what does not in any given context depends on different configurations of power and authority” (Cavanaugh 2009: 9). This is not to say that ideologies and practices of all kinds (including religious ones) cannot and do not promote violence under certain circumstances, yet religions are not automatically more prone to violence than other ideologies.

When the religious teachings of the three religions in *The Lions of Al-Rassan* are taken out of cultural context and compared, they appear strikingly similar:

Asharite – “The deeds of men, as footprints in the desert” (109);

Kindath – “Nothing under the circling moon is fated to last”
(109);

Jaddite – “Even the sun goes down” (110).

All three of them strongly emphasize the transitory nature of things, in a way foreshadowing the inevitability of the war that would end a certain historical and cultural stage as well as radically affect the lives of individuals. Nevertheless, the war is not a direct result of religious teachings, but of a combination of many other factors. The Asharite caliphate, a place

where learning and culture reached their peak, is weakened by internal conflicts; the bordering Jaddite kingdoms with their warrior culture are regaining their strength and have produced a leader with a vision for expansion; and, finally, the crusade against Asharite overseas lands, inspired and sanctioned by the highest Jaddite authorities, creates the right atmosphere for the reconquest of Al-Rassan. The trouble is not with religions and their spiritual messages as such, but with their interpretation, and even more with connecting secular power with religious ideology – a mixture that becomes deadly in these particular historical circumstances.

While the *The Lions of Al-Rassan* focuses on the perilous effects of combining religious and secular power, *The Sarantine Mosaic*, “a fantasy on the themes of Byzantium”⁶, as Kay himself refers to it in Acknowledgements to *Sailing to Sarantium*, centers on the theme of iconoclasm, or “iconomachy”, the term the Byzantines themselves would have used to refer to the “image struggle”, as Brubaker (2012: 4) rightly notes. Furthermore, it provides a comment on the mechanisms of including and excluding the elements of various cults from the official dogma, showing how closely they are linked with politics. Here we see the Jaddite religion in a much earlier phase of its development, when the doctrine it is not fully fixed, but caught in the process of becoming, which is more often violent than peaceful:

Divisions of faith in the worship of Jad had led to burnings and torture and war almost from the beginning. [...] The god was in the sun, or he was behind the sun. The world had been born in light, or it had been released from ice and darkness by holy light. At one time the god was thought to die in winter and be reborn in the spring, but the gentle cleric who had expounded this had been ordered

⁶ In “Justinian Visited and Revisited”, an article from the French academic journal *Anabases* 5 (2007), translated into English and available on Kay’s authorized website, Pierre-Louis Malosse observes that in *The Sarantine Mosaic* “the debt to the real sixth-century Byzantium is not at all disguised”, and illustrates his claim with examples of a number of real people and places featuring in the novels under new, often transparent names (Rhodia – Rome, Varena – Ravenna, Trakesia – Thrace, Valerius I – Justinian I, etc.).

torn apart between cavalry horses by a High Patriarch in Rhodias.
(*Sailing to Sarantium*, ch. 5)

Still, the most important controversy in Sarantium concerns Heladikos, depicted as the Charioteer, who sacrificed his life to bring fire to the people. Being a combination of Helios, Prometheus, and Jesus Christ, at different points in history he was revered as Jad's mortal son, at other times as a half-mortal one, or even as a deity himself. Although at the time when the action is set he is ruled out from the official dogma altogether, Kay emphasizes that Emperors and Patriarchs frequently changed their position, and "Heladikos the Charioteer moved in and out of acceptance and fashion, much as the sun moved in and out of cloud on a windy day" (*Sailing to Sarantium*, ch. 5), in this way pinpointing the arbitrariness of deciding on what is accepted as an official doctrine and what is excluded from it.

However, whatever Emperors and Patriarchs decree is not as eagerly accepted by ordinary people, who have continued to find the saviour figure, sacrificing his own life for the sake of humanity, exceptionally attractive. The debate on Heladikos unofficially continues in all corners of the empire and in the streets of the city of Sarantium itself, even though it has been formally declared a heresy⁷. In the world of *The Sarantine Mosaic*, various heresies and utterly pagan beliefs lurk behind canonical dogma, the establishment of which is intertwined with political and court intrigues in a never-ending struggle for authority. Religious fanatics are also juxtaposed with the fanatic supporters of chariot race factions, whose worship of the finest charioteers can be seen as a secular cult, and both groups are actually prone to violence and manipulation.

With the main theme centered around Caius Crispus, a mosaicist, summoned to Sarantium from Rhodia to create the mosaic on the dome

⁷ Interestingly, by the time in which *Lions of Al-Rassan* is set, i.e. a couple of centuries later, the problematic deity has disappeared from Jaddite teachings altogether. Jaddite religion in this novel is unified and much more institutionalized, but has also lost much of its earlier mysticism.

of the Great Sanctuary, the clash over the visual representation of Jad is only one aspect of the religious controversies depicted in the novel. Crispin's magnificent vision of the dome, and his aim to represent the entirety of creation, which entails orthodox, heretical, and even pagan beliefs, the world of the living and the dead, nature and culture, is never completed; and what has actually been created is to be demolished piece by piece, as in the meantime, together with the bloody change of the rulers⁸, the views on the visual representation of God change as well. The new iconoclastic emperor holds that it is "not proper for the pious to render or worship images of the god or show mortal figures in a holy place" (*Lord of Emperors*, ch. 15). Again, Kay shows religious issues against a vast social and political context, presenting them as elements of a continuously changing mosaic, each of them influencing one another, the whole configuration shifting when even one of the components is purposefully or incidentally altered. This is reinforced by the narrative technique, which features multiple plots and focalizers, ranging from aristocrats and senators, through merchants and craftsmen, to charioteers, soldiers, servants and even foreigners, who perceive the Sarantine empire from the outside. These multiple perspectives challenge any attempts to produce a unified and organized reality, or a coherent and structured view of the world, which would be stable and unchanging (Majkowski 2013: 316–8).

One of the unexpected developments appears towards the end of the duology, when it is implied that even if some stability is finally achieved within the Sarantine Empire, it is not to be permanent, as a new religion that would complicate the picture is being born somewhere on the margins of its territories, in the desert, "where a man in a hood, with a cloak drawn over his mouth, preserved a silence among the drifting sands, having remained awake all the night before, fasting, and looking up at the stars" (*Lord of Emperors*, ch. 15). The reference establishes the Asharite

⁸ Once more, for the sake of plot coherence and dramatic effect Kay plays with chronological accuracy, squeezing the debate on the role of religious images that preoccupied Byzantium from the 720s to the middle of the ninth century (Mango 1975: 1, Brubaker 2012: 4–5) within the span of his narrative.

religion as stemming from the epiphany of its first leader; yet, as *The Lions of Al-Rassan* demonstrates, with time it will be transformed into a codified system of beliefs and practices, the adherence to which will be of more importance than spiritual experience.

Religion in Kay's fiction is inseparable from history, and the two constantly influence each other. At the same time Kay's fiction avoids favouring one religious system over others, and refuses to evaluate them in terms of moral and spiritual truth, signalling that devotion to a given religious code does not automatically signify righteousness and virtue. This becomes particularly apparent in *The Lions of Al-Rassan*, where religion is politicized to a greater extent and cynically used as an excuse for war. The question "What shall good men do in such a war?" is answered simply "Kill each other, until something ends in the world" (430). Even if the protagonists are able to cooperate and form bonds of love and friendship that prove stronger than cultural and religious differences, their individual victory proves insufficient to stop the wheel of history, powered by political, economic and religious fuel, once it starts rolling. As Tomasz Z. Majkowski (2013: 315) succinctly puts it, *The Lions of Al-Rassan* is a "novel about the people who can communicate perfectly well when taken out of their cultural context but have to kill each other when they come back to it". In *The Sarantine Mosaic*, the mosaic of history and religion is created only by the few who arbitrarily include or exclude certain elements from their vision, with ordinary people being barely, if at all, aware that history-changing events are taking place. The vision of all-encompassing religion, symbolized by Crispin's artistic vision, is a mirage or a dream doomed to fail; yet the protagonist manages to find peace and happiness once he consciously withdraws from the central stage of history and renounces any attempts to change it. While the protagonists in none of the novels can actually significantly influence the course of history, which is indeed unstoppable, they do have command over their decisions and moral choices, which frequently demand some sacrifice and have an impact on the lives of those who are closest to them.

As we have seen, in both works religion constitutes an important element of the game for power, but how does it relate to individual belief,

the worship of God, and the sphere of the sacred? As Łaba notes, *sacrum* in fantasy novels is linked with magic/power, which is not only a basic constituent element of the genre, but also stems from the conviction that “parallelly to the material world, there exists a powerful spiritual reality that significantly influences the fate of the protagonist” (41). If the sphere of the sacred is strongly linked with the supernatural and fantastic elements in fantasy, then Kay’s narratives, in which the fantastic habitually gives way to the mimetic mode of representation, seem to devote little attention to it. While much effort is taken to outline the social and cultural context, as well as to provide psychological credibility of the characters, who are much more rounded than the plot demands, the fantastic remains quite vague, signalled rather than fully outlined, and, I believe, there is a reason for that. What Kay’s novels seem to imply is that *sacrum* is much more elusive and difficult to grasp, whereas religions provide only an imperfect substitute for spiritual experience.

In the *The Lions of Al-Rassan*, the only significant manifestation of the fantastic is the figure of the child-seer, the son of Rodrigo Belmonte, whose gift of predicting the future of his nearest and dearest is identified as both a blessing and a curse, impossible to control and unpredictable. Diego Belmonte may be referred to as “blessed by Jad” (112), but it is emphasized that under other circumstances people like him “had been burned, or nailed alive to wooden beams as sorcerers” (112). An attempt to use his powers in the campaign against the Asharites ends disastrously, as Diego is seriously wounded in the head by an enemy. Ironically, “a boy touched by god” (112) cannot be used as a tool in a religious war, which illustrates the premise that there is nothing “holy” about the whole campaign. Interestingly, the Jaddite boy survives thanks to a risky surgery performed by Jehane’s father, a Kindath doctor once famous, but blinded years ago for seeing an Asharite wife of the caliph naked while saving her life in a complicated labour. The physician appears on the scene only because he has just been rescued from the pogrom by Diego’s father, Rodrigo Belmonte, and Ammar ibn Khairan, whose knowledge of Asharite military plans allowed all of them to get there in time. The scene features an almost miraculous coincidence, yet the miracle is not

a result of divine intervention, but of the cooperation of the characters, who willfully disregard religious differences in favour of bonds of love and friendship. Holly Ordway (1998) reads the scene as hinting “at the possibility of peaceful interaction among the three embattled religious groups”, but it seems such a collaboration is possible only when the demands of three institutionalized religions are ignored, a condition impossible to fulfill in the world of Al-Rassan. Paradoxically, Rodrigo, Ammar and Jehanne, renouncing the cultural practices that have accumulated around their respective religious systems, truly adhere to the original teachings by always choosing to act decently irrespective of either external circumstances or personal desires, and accepting the consequences of their actions.

In *The Sarantine Mosaic*, showing religious principles in the process of becoming, the fantastic features more prominently, although it is officially banned from the doctrine. The citizens of Sarantium have no problem combining the beliefs in Jad and his Holy Church with those in ghosts, demons and curse-tablets, which makes the otherworld a part of their reality. There is also the pagan *ars magica* of the alchemist Zoticus, which does not appear particularly spectacular – “No half-world-spawned fireballs or death spells. No walking through walls or flying over them, invisible. Merely fabricated birds with... souls and voices” (*Sailing to Sarantium*, ch. 2). Later, however, it becomes clear that the alchemist’s art involved “stealing” the souls of women, killed as sacrificial offering to the old god, and transmuting them into wooden birds. Although the act itself does not produce spectacular effects, and his magic is not particularly important for the development of the narrative, it demonstrates that there exists another dimension of reality, which can neither be fully explained nor controlled. Finally, there is the *zubir*, the ancient spirit of the forest, or nature itself, the primeval oak god, the embodiment of a mythical god from the times before religions, encountered by Crispin in the forest on his way to Sarantium. The experience evokes a profound emotional response and is described in detail:

⁹ <http://brightweavings.com/ggk/worldbuilding/> (accessed: 25 August 2016).

Terror consumed him, asserting mastery, dominance, as he followed the girl and the stupefying creature that was [...] more than he could grasp. A god? The showing forth of one? The numinous? [...] The bison was enormous, impossibly so, taller than Crispin was, wide as a house, the great, horned head vast and appalling. And yet, as they entered the woods, the first black trees like sentinels, wet leaves falling about them and upon them, the creature moved lightly, gracefully, never turning after that first look back – certain they were following. (*Sailing to Sarantium*, ch. 4)

The *zubir* demands a sacrifice, but Crispin and his companions are spared; what the beast really wants is Zoticus's mechanical bird, whose soul was stolen from the god years ago and now must be returned to complete the interrupted sacrificial offering.

Mysterious and awe-inspiring, fascinating and commanding absolute submission, the *zubir* can be seen as the representation of the *numinous*, understood as divine force that transcends the categories of history, culture and religion, something that can only be experienced, not defined (Otto 1923: 12–13). The encounter proves formative, changes Crispin's perception of reality, and leaves him with an understanding of God that goes beyond the teachings of Jad's Church. When asked how to worship Jad and his son after such an experience, he reflects:

We worship them as the powers that speak to our souls, if it seems they do." He surprised himself. "We do so knowing there is more to the world, and the half-world, and perhaps worlds beyond, than we can grasp. We always knew that. We can't even stop children from dying, how would we presume to understand the truth of things? Behind things? Does the presence of one power deny another? (*Sailing to Sarantium*, ch. 4)

In contrast to *The Lions of Al-Rassan*, which diminishes the sphere of the sacred, *The Sarantine Mosaic* presents it as something that is not limited to particular religions, but extends beyond their doctrines. Unlike religious ideologies that are always context-bound, *sacrum* is truly transcultural and transhistorical. While it cannot be precisely delineated or explained,

it is also uniquely immune to being manipulated, used, or abused, and as such does not partake in writing historical narratives. While deep spiritual experience plays no significant part in the course of history, it may have a tremendous effect on individual life, which is reflected in Crispin's artistic vision, and further demonstrated by his gradual acceptance of the death of his wife and daughters, which has haunted him for the major part of the story. Accepting the weight of both historical and personal past makes him finally ready to move on.

The paradox inherent to Kay's fiction is that he is both faithful and unfaithful to his historic sources. Although, his novels are grounded in meticulous research, he manipulates the material in terms of chronological accuracy, squeezing or extending the periods of events, including, excluding and reinterpreting historical facts to make his narratives coherent and emotionally involving. While each and every one of them sends us back to real events, detailed knowledge of these events is not crucial to understand the historiosophical problem chosen as the central theme. And the same is true of his treatment of religions. Kay is not really interested in creating dogmas or believable religious systems with fully developed cosmologies and myths. These are in fact quite vague, as the emphasis is placed on uncovering the mechanisms that make religion a tool of politics, or politics a tool of religion. The clashes motivated by conflicting religious ideologies and the un-holy economic wars fought in the names of fictitious gods are staged as central to the development of action and draw our attention to the role of an individual entangled in the process of historical change.

Deliberately exposing the fictionality of his fantasy of history, which in *The Sarantine Mosaic* is purposefully highlighted by the figure of a historian manipulating the facts to create his own version of historical events, Kay seems to question the validity of historical narratives as such, suggesting that perhaps they are not more "truthful" than literature is. Similarly, fictionalising religious ideologies removes them from the familiar and pre-conceived perspectives of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, which in turn encourages the readers to reflect upon religion and its mechanisms in a more universal context. While this reflection does not

offer much hope or consolation, Kay presents a more optimistic view on individual spirituality and sense of morality that do not need to be connected with a particular religious system, yet lie at the root of the choices made by the protagonists of his novels, whose humanity remains intact, even when the forces of history press them to take an uneasy path. Even though Kay “rejects the idea that human beings can ever by their own rational ingenuity escape subjection to the weight of their personal and cultural pasts”¹⁰, as observed by Christopher Cobb, the bitter-sweet – not eucatastrophic – conclusions of the novels foreground the message that it is possible to remain “decent” and come to terms with the burden of not only the political and cultural past, but also personal memory.

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¹⁰ <http://brightweavings.com/ggk/hspychologyhistory/> (accessed: 20 November 2016).

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