The Taboo of Religion in YA Novels

I was an avid reader of young adult (YA) literature growing up, and I still am to this day. Growing up as a religious teenager, I read as many YA books as my small-town library could carry or get from other local libraries. I didn’t notice at first that surprisingly few books I read centered on religious themes, but I noticed it as I started getting older and experienced my own personal crisis of faith as a late teen. In my studies as an English Teaching major now, I have the time and resources to pursue a formal inquiry of the question that always burned at the back of my mind growing up: Why are there so few religiously- or spiritually-themed books in mainstream YA literature? In my research I have found many answers, which are later related, but to no surprise I have also discovered more questions.

A quick note before I get into my research findings: I recognize that there are religious YA books out there, but these are aimed at very specific target audiences, like Mormon teens or Jewish teens. These books are generally sold at religious-themed bookstores and published by religious publishers. The content is overtly religious, and generally only someone from that religion would understand all of the cultural and theological references. I decided that these books didn’t count as mainstream YA literature because of their specific content and small-scale availability, and so will not be included as part of my inquiry.

My first problem to solve was to think of actual ways to go about answering my question on the lack of religious books in mainstream YA lit. I had to examine existing books to see
which ones contain religious themes and how they treat religion. In public libraries near me, YA literature is one big grouping of books. There are no “religious” shelves or anything like that, and reading through the backs of every single book in the juvenile collection was impossible. Instead, I found the Database of Award-Winning Children’s Literature (DAWCL) online and used that as my main source to search for religiously-themed YA novels. I also drew upon YA books I read recently to see how they treated the subjects of religion and spirituality. In addition to all of that, I searched databases for articles dealing with the subject and spoke with my professor, who is not only a YA author but also co-authored a book about spirituality in YA novels.

In searching the DAWCL, I searched for chapter books for those 12 and up using the key word of “religion.” I found about 70 results from this search and studied each to see what they had to do with religious themes. I found that most books dealt with one of three subjects: the Jewish religion and/or the Holocaust, a mysterious cult and its teenaged members, and the death of a family member, usually a parent (Bartle). There were other uses of religion in these books, but I was surprised to see the aforementioned three subjects come up so much. I was mostly surprised by the fact that books centering around a fictitious cult were just as common as books centering around an actual religion, like Judaism or Islam. I also saw that few books centered on Christianity and, if they did, they focused on a strict Christianity that stifled their youthful protagonists. It was also interesting to see that even religious-themed books have tropes and common situations.

I did a second search with the same parameters but used the keyword “spirituality” and found only nine results. Six were non-fiction books or biographies about various religions and their mythology and culture, and three were fictional accounts of young adults’ interactions with some sort of spiritual organization, like the Australian aboriginals or a fictional tribe of spiritual
leaders in J.M. Barrie’s Neverland. It was interesting to me that the word “religion” gave more results, but I was not surprised because it is a broader term than “spirituality.”

While I recognize that the DAWCL does not contain information on every single YA book that centers on religious themes, it is certainly indicative of the rest of the genre. An article I found that listed the top 10 religious books for children in 2008 gave similar results: most of the books were historical fiction, with special attention given to Judaism, and the others were humorous and light-hearted (Cooper). With this search complete, I turned away from my general survey of mainstream YA literature and focused on three individual books I had read recently to see how they portrayed religion and spirituality. I recognize that this is only a small sample of what is available, but I found that each of the three books dealt with religious ideas and characters in very different ways with mixed results.

The first, Blankets by Craig Thompson, is a graphic novel that centers on the author’s own life and his struggle with his Christian beliefs growing up. The main character mostly battles with his love of God and the Bible with the inconsistencies in doctrine and church members’ behavior he sees around him (Thompson). Because this book is autobiographical, the author can get away with having his main character go through this trial without offending or alienating similarly-believing members. However, the author also takes upon himself the risk of readers not being able to relate to his own personal experiences because they are so individual. Reviews of the novel on Goodreads yielded more praise for the artwork than the actual content, with many readers complaining that the novel was too spiritual and not relatable to their own atheist/agnostic/other religious beliefs. I thought this book interesting when reading it because I identify as a Christian, but found that my beliefs of Christianity are very different from the author’s and also struggled to relate to the main character.
Another book I read was *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* by Chris Crutcher. The main idea of the novel doesn’t center on religion but there are many debates among high school students described in the plot that center on abortion and other religiously-charged controversial topics. The portrayal of religious characters in this book was very black and white: the religious characters were either zealous and hypocritical or very liberal and easygoing in their interpretation of Christian principles (Crutcher). At first I thought this portrayal highly unrealistic and therefore inaccurate. Though that may be true, I believe the author did it for a reason. Crutcher perhaps intended for his religious characters to be so polarizing so that religious readers would look at them and not feel offended by an inaccurate portrayal of Christian people. In other words, the religious characters were so overblown and almost like caricatures, religious readers would understand that the characters weren’t meant to be a representation of every believer in Christ out there because most Christians are more mild and moderate in their beliefs. This was an interesting take on religion I hadn’t seen before.

One other reason for using religion in this book is to make it a catalyst for conflict. It can be assumed that the author knows that religious conflicts are at the heart of world history, and so religion can often be a way to create conflict and dissension. In mainstream YA lit, many authors seem to choose different topics for conflict, but it’s not unheard of to have religion or spiritual beliefs to be at the center of a conflict.

The last book, *How to Be Popular* by Meg Cabot, isn’t a religious book at all. It’s a teen romance that centers more on relationships and popularity than spirituality. The odd thing to me was that the main character was Catholic and common religious rituals or practices were occasionally mentioned; e.g., the character’s family went to Mass and sat in their family’s pew, the character went to confessional, and so on. However, these religious instances were all
mentioned specifically for a humorous effect. In Mass the main character was more concerned with the social dynamics of her family than she was with the sermon. She spied on her next-door neighbor and best friend while he was changing clothes and pondered how many Hail Mary’s she would have to say to repent of her error (Cabot). The humor was not meant to be degrading or mocking of Catholicism, but the portrayal of religious rituals was not serious either. I thought the situations were funny, but I also would have liked to see the character just once use her religious beliefs to help her in the conundrums she found herself a part of.

With my question on the lack of religious topics in mainstream YA literature still swirling in my head and only a few small answers to address it, I turned to another source of knowledge: my professor for my Young Adult Literature class. Dr. Crowe has written several novels for young adults and has authored or contributed to articles and books about young adult literature, one of which centers on how spirituality in young adult literature is “the last taboo.” When I asked him my question of why there are so few YA books that deal with religion and spirituality, his main point of response was that religious experiences are so personal and individual that it is hard for the author to give an instance of a religious experience without a reader who is a part of that religion saying “That’s not what I’m like at all! People of that religion are totally different from what you say they are!” For non-religious readers, they would have a difficult time identifying with religion in general, and any outsiders to the particular belief portrayed would likewise have a hard time connecting with a character part of a religion or belief system different from their own.

This response helped me begin to understand why books with religious characters and themes were scarce. But in reading Patty Campbell’s *Spirituality in Young Adult Literature: The Last Taboo*, I found myself questioning with her why there would be such a significant lack of
religion when there are so many teenagers that attend church weekly or monthly. Like her, I ask “How can teens be helped to confront and work through [religious] doubts when the whole question of faith in God is for the large part unacknowledged in the books they trust to explain their world to them?” (Campbell xv). Teens can learn about anything from sex to mental illness to friendship in the books written for them, but they are forced to learn about spiritual struggles on their own.

Diana Mitchell brings up an interesting point to think on as well, in response to this call for better religious representation in YA literature. In an article in the English Journal, she muses on how she as an English teacher can maintain the separation of church and state and still bring up religious topics in class for discussion and recommend religious-themed books. She argues that “Examining issues of faith [in the classroom] is important because it helps students broaden their views of others, challenge faith-based stereotyping, and clarify what they believe in” (128). I agree with her, and while I don’t know how far religious discussions should really go in an English classroom, I do think that this opinion should be considered when publishers look at new manuscripts and when English teachers look for new books to fill their classroom library.

I then wondered who is to blame for the lack of religious books: is it the authors who won’t write them, or the publishers who won’t publish them? In searching further articles, I found one that claimed, “[Mainstream publishers] are hesitant to alienate potential readers with books that either preach too much or don’t adhere closely enough to religious doctrine” (Auguste 38). This brought me back to what Dr. Crowe had said, but this time I saw that publishers were to be treated as the bigger culprit in the question of who’s to blame. The logical side of my brain said to me that publishers need to make money, so of course they’re afraid of alienating readers and losing sales on books with religious themes. The emotional part of my brain demanded
justice and equal representation of religion and spirituality in YA books, especially when I looked back at my own teenaged self, how I had no one but parents to turn to for questions of faith and beliefs. Of course, we all know how much teenagers love to turn to their parents with important and personal questions.

It might seem at this point that my research only gave me more questions. That is partially true, but through looking at databases, actual books, and articles to find answers I did find some. I recognized the need for publishers to make money on books and the fact that because religion is a very personal, highly variable topic, religious characters and books won’t be able to connect very well with every single reader.

The further questions I have range from “Why are other so-called ‘taboo’ topics more acceptable?” to “Are fictitious religions more relatable than actual religions?” These questions open up an exciting new avenue down which to explore, and I hope that through continual reading of YA books and continued research on the taboo topic of religion in YA literature I will one day get closer to having all the answers for my many questions.
Works Cited


