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RELIGIOUS MYTH CRITICISM IN MYTHOPOEIC FANTASY LITERATURE: TERRY PRATCHETT' *SMALL GODS* (1992)*

Tuğçe SOYGÜL**

Abstract

Fantasy literature, particularly in its mythopoeic mode, is a modern literary form rooted in ancient myth-making, reconfiguring traditional narratives to engage with contemporary concerns. Rather than reinforcing myth's original function in pre-modern societies, this narrative mode transforms established mythic structures into symbolic frameworks for critique. This study, therefore, analyses Terry Pratchett's *Small Gods* (1992) as a representative work of mythopoeic fantasy, drawing on Mircea Eliade's theories of religious myth criticism to examine how the novel deconstructs religious dogma and exposes mechanisms, sustaining belief through revisionist myth-making. Building on Eliade's conception of myth as a sacred framework, the analysis explores how Pratchett reimagines sacred geography, divine authority, and the institutionalisation of myth and religion as human constructs shaped by belief rather than expressions of transcendent truth. The novel thus subverts the relationship between myth and religion within the Discworld universe, offering a critical lens on the socio-political function of religious systems.

Keywords: *Mythopoeic fantasy, Terry Pratchett, Small Gods, Religious myth criticism, Mircea Eliade, Discworld Universe.*

MİTOPOEİK FANTASTİK EDEBİYATTA DİNSEL MİT ELEŞTİRİSİ: TERRY PRATCHETT'İN *KÜÇÜK TANRILAR* (1992) ROMANI

Öz

Fantastik edebiyat, özellikle mitopoeik türüyle, antik mit yaratımına dayanan modern bir anlatı biçimidir ve geleneksel anlatıları çağdaş sorunlarla etkileşime girecek şekilde yeniden kurgular. Mitin ilkel toplumlarda üstlendiği özgün işlevi yeniden üretmek yerine, bu anlatı tarzı yerleşik mitsel yapıları eleştirel ve simgesel çerçeveler halinde dönüştürür. Bu çalışma, Terry Pratchett'in *Küçük Tanrılar* (1992) adlı romanını mitopoeik fantastik edebiyatın öne çıkan bir örneği olarak incelemekte ve eserin dinsel dogmayı nasıl sorguladığını, inancı sürdüren yapıları nasıl gözler önüne serdiğini Mircea Eliade'in dinsel mit eleştirisine dayanan kuramsal yaklaşımı çerçevesinde ele almaktadır. Eliade'in miti kutsal olan ile dünyevi olan arasındaki ilişkiyi kuran bir yapı olarak yorumlamasına dayanan analiz, Pratchett'in kutsal coğrafyayı, ilahi otoriteyi ve mit ile dinin kurumsallaşmasını aşkın hakikatlerden ziyade inanca dayalı insan yapıları olarak nasıl yeniden tasarladığını ortaya koyar. Roman böylece Diskdünya evreninde mit ile din arasındaki ilişkiyi ters yüz eder ve dinsel yapıların toplumsal ve politik işlevlerine eleştirel bir perspektif sunar.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Mitopoeik fantazi, Terry Pratchett, Küçük Tanrılar, Dinsel mit eleştirisi, Mircea Eliade, Diskdünya Evreni.*

*This article presents a revised and condensed version of the second chapter of my unpublished PhD dissertation, along with the theoretical background derived from the relevant sections of the first chapter.

**English Lecturer, University of Turkish Aeronautical Association, Department of Common Courses, ANKARA.

e-mail: tsoygul@thk.edu.tr, (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9267-0228>)

1. INTRODUCTION

Fantasy literature offers a narrative framework in which ancient myths¹ are reimagined, giving rise to a new tradition deeply rooted in myth, now referred to as ‘mythopoeic fantasy,’ a distinct literary mode that operates beyond the bounds of myth’s original sacred function and reimagines it for modern cultural reflection. The adjective *mythopoeic* is defined as “[m]yth-making; productive of myths; pertaining to the *creation of myths*” (Simpson & Weiner, 1998:179; emphasis added), and is commonly applied to narratives that construct or resemble mythic structures. In pre-modern societies, myth functioned as a foundational tool for establishing sacred space, legitimising hierarchical authority, and structuring collective identity. However, many mythopoeic works appropriate these structures to subvert their original religious and ideological authority. By reworking established myths and blending tradition with innovation, they shape contemporary understandings of the world in significant ways. Central to this creative engagement is ‘mythopoeia’,² a term derived from the Greek ‘mythos’ (legend) and ‘poieein’ (to make) (Trident Press International, 1996:841), which refers to the imaginative act of constructing or adapting mythological narratives to articulate symbolic meaning relevant to modern contexts. As Harry Slochower explains, “while mythology presents its stories as if they actually took place, mythopoeisis transfers them to a symbolic meaning” (1970:15). In this sense, mythopoeic fantasy not only draws on ancient traditions but also reinterprets them to reflect contemporary values, spiritual questions, and ideological tensions. By constructing richly imagined secondary worlds that echo mythic systems, authors challenge inherited truths, critique dominant ideologies, and explore the interplay between belief and authority through their narratives. This evolving function of myth is particularly evident in works that seek to interrogate and expose religious institutions and structures of power that uphold notions of transcendental truth by dismantling the mythic foundations of religious dogma. In this way, fantasy fiction becomes not merely an exercise in imagination but a lens through which the sacred is deconstructed and institutional power is critically examined. This article, therefore, examines the reconstruction of traditional myths in British fantasy fiction novels, *Small Gods* (1992) by Terry Pratchett (1948–2015), analysing how the author employs mythopoeic fantasy as a subversive literary mode to challenge dominant ideologies and religious norms through revisionist myth-making. Drawing on the analysis of sacred space, sacred authority, and the role of myth in pre-modern societies developed by religious myth critic Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), this study demonstrates how the novel deconstructs religious dogmas and reconfigures myth to expose the socio-political mechanisms underlying belief systems.

Situating mythopoeic fantasy within the broader framework of fantasy literature is essential prior to analysing the selected novel, as it is frequently examined within this wider literary context. Although scholarship on fantasy has expanded significantly over the last half-century, its place in literary studies remains unsettled, particularly regarding its classification. While scholars have studied its origins, functions, and cultural significance, there is still no clear consensus on whether it should be defined as a genre, narrative mode, or a recurring literary formula. While fantasy has only recently been formally recognised as a distinct category within the publishing industry, its roots can be traced to some of the earliest forms of human storytelling. For instance, oral narratives predating written language were predominantly fantastical in tone, reflecting Geoffrey Chaucer’s use of the word ‘fantasye’ to describe “strange and supernatural tales with no basis in everyday experience,” a definition that continues to shape modern understandings of fantasy (Stableford, 2005:xxxv). Historically, fantasy has been associated with a lack of seriousness, often perceived as escapist or unrealistic, which contributed to its marginalisation in literary studies. This prejudice contributed to its late inclusion in serious literary studies. Until around 1969, fantasy was largely confined to children’s literature, reinforcing the view that imaginative storytelling was inappropriate for adult readers. Nevertheless, the boundaries between children’s literature and adult fantasy are not rigid. Richard Mathews highlights a significant relationship between the two, characterising it as a fluid continuum

¹ Myths, as defined by *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, are symbolic narratives often of unknown origin and partially rooted in tradition, typically involving supernatural beings and extraordinary events, and commonly associated with systems of belief (2024). The term itself originates from the ancient Greek words ‘mythos’ (tale) and ‘logos’ (reason) (Richardson and Bowden, 1983:389), highlighting the dual nature of myth as both story and meaning. This duality underscores myths’ enduring capacity to function as intriguing stories for understanding complex cultural and existential realities.

² The noun ‘mythopoeia,’ closely associated with J.R.R. Tolkien (1892–1973), particularly through his poem of the same name (1988), has become a widely accepted term in both literary and academic contexts for describing the construction of myth in imaginative literature, especially within fantasy fiction. While the variant ‘mythopoeisis’ does occasionally appear, it remains uncommon in formal scholarly usage. For the purposes of this study, *mythopoeia* will be adopted as the primary term due to its established role in literary criticism and its prominence in Tolkien scholarship.

through which many young readers are gradually introduced to more complex forms of fantastical storytelling (2002:17). Although associations between children's literature and fantasy are apparent, they are insufficient to classify the genre as simplistic or immature, nor do they negate its literary significance. As Diana Tixier Herald notes, interpretation of fantasy "varies widely [since] any time an attempt is made to codify a 'true' definition of fantasy, there will be dissent" (1999:2). This ambiguity reflects a broader tension within the field, as some critics argue that fantasy is foundational to various literary forms, while others trace its origins to ancient myth and folklore. These competing perspectives highlight the genre's fluid and evolving role in literature, resisting fixed categorisation and inviting continual reinterpretation.

Some scholars argue that fantasy literature, though rooted in ancient narrative traditions such as myth, legend, and folklore, only emerged as a distinct literary form in relatively recent history. This view is notably expressed by John Clute and John Grant in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997), where they define fantasy as "a self-coherent narrative which, when set in our reality, tells a story which is impossible in the world as we perceive it; when set in an otherworld or secondary world, that otherworld will be impossible, but stories set there will be possible in the other world's terms" (1997:viii). Through this definition, they highlight the defining characteristic of fantasy as a mode that defies reality while constructing imaginary worlds. Moreover, they assert that fantasy should not be regarded as a continuation of pre-Enlightenment storytelling but rather as a product of the cultural and literary shifts that began in the decades prior to the nineteenth century (Clute and Grant, 1997:ix). This distinction positions fantasy in dialectical contrast to realism and naturalism. However, before the Enlightenment, realism and the fantastic were not perceived as oppositional; instead, they coexisted fluidly within the same literary works, without any contradiction. The conceptual divergence between realism and fantasy, then, is a relatively modern phenomenon. Expanding on this dynamic, Ursula K. Le Guin offers a compelling revaluation of fantasy's epistemological function. She argues that fantasy is not anti-rational but para-rational a superrealistic mode that does not reject the real, but rather enhances and transcends it (1979:79). In this light, fantasy becomes a vehicle for engaging with alternative dimensions of meaning, offering symbolic interpretations of reality that realism alone cannot fully capture. Thus, fantasy reframes realist conventions not through opposition but through transformation, engaging with metaphysical and archetypal truths by means of inviting reflection on the complexities of human experience. It is precisely through this symbolic and imaginative capacity that fantasy, and by extension, mythopoeic fantasy, asserts its value as a serious literary mode, one that reflects on the complexities of human experience and existence, rather than serving merely as escapist or immature storytelling.

Building on this understanding, in *Fantasy and Mimesis* (1984), Kathryn Hume explores the relationship between fantasy and reality, noting that imagination, although it departs from "consensus reality," still acts as a "response to reality" (1984:21). She argues that grounding fantastic elements in realism enhances narrative plausibility, resulting in richer and more engaging stories. She focuses on fantasy as a broader literary process that reflects and interprets human experience. Thus, she contends that fantasy functions as a "literary impulse" shaped by assumptions about the nature of literature and its connection to life (1984:8), and that it extends beyond textual boundaries, offering "extra-textual insights into the author's worldview" (1984:24). For Hume, fantasy is not simply a narrative device but a means of engaging with existential, cultural, and philosophical concerns. Nevertheless, a significant limitation of her approach lies in her refusal to define fantasy as a distinct genre. Instead, she introduces a three-tiered structure referred to as "uses of fantasy," drawing on Aristotelian concepts like plot, character, and idea. This model, while thematic and function-oriented, lacks precision, and Hume herself acknowledges its reliance on "overlapping terms" (1984:151), which diminishes its analytical clarity. Given the ambiguity surrounding the definition of fantasy, Brian Attebery offers a significant contribution in *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992), where he proposes a flexible and nuanced model to conceptualise the genre. He delineates fantasy into three categories: formula, mode, and genre. To reconcile divergent scholarly perspectives, Attebery first defines fantasy as "a form of popular escapist literature that combines stock characters and devices—wizards, dragons, magic sword, and the like—into a predictable plot in which the perennially understaffed forces of good triumph over a monolithic evil" (1992:293). This formulaic version, he argues, is "essentially a commercial product," shaped by market expectations and relying on familiar tropes to meet reader anticipation (1992:294). In contrast, his second formulation frames fantasy as a mode:

Fantasy is a sophisticated mode of storytelling characterized by stylistic playfulness, self-reflexiveness, and a subversive treatment of establish[ed] orders of society and thought. Arguably the major fictional mode of the late twentieth century, it draws upon contemporary ideas about sign systems and the indeterminacy of meaning and at the same time recaptures the vitality and freedom of nonmimetic forms such as epic, folktale, romance, and myth. (1992:294)

This modal definition expands the scope of fantasy to include stylistic experimentation and ideological critique, emphasising its capacity to operate across historical and cultural contexts. To address the challenge of defining fantasy as a genre, Attebery turns to the theory of ‘fuzzy sets,’ inspired by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson³, to capture the genre’s inherently fluid boundaries. He indicates “fuzzy set theory proposes that a category such as ‘bird’ consists of central, prototypical examples like ‘robin,’ surrounded at greater or lesser distance by more problematic instances such as ‘ostrich,’ ‘chicken,’ ‘penguin,’ and even ‘bat’” (1992:305). In this model, fantasy is understood as a flexible category, described by Attebery as a ‘fuzzy set,’ organised around central texts that act as reference points for the genre. Among these, *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955) emerges as the most exemplary work, identified through a survey as the quintessential fantasy text. Consequently, Attebery’s study offers a foundational theoretical framework that systematically differentiates fantasy as a formula, a mode, and a genre. While acknowledging the challenges of fixed definitions, his approach foregrounds the complexity and dynamism of fantasy literature, affirming its significance within the broader landscape of literary studies.

The critical study of fantasy emphasises its controversial and evolving status within literary discourse, as its classification remains a subject of ongoing theoretical debate. Building on earlier discussions, Attebery’s and Hume’s frameworks collectively underscore fantasy’s conceptual fluidity, resisting rigid classification by functioning both structurally and cognitively as genre, mode, and imaginative response to reality. Together, these perspectives point to the need for a flexible critical model that transcends fixed genre boundaries. Given that fantasy can be approached as both a genre and a narrative mode, mythopoeic fantasy must likewise be understood through this dual lens. By synthesising Attebery’s structural framework with Hume’s interpretive model, this study adopts a hybrid approach that positions mythopoeic fantasy as a narrative mode grounded in the symbolic logic of myth and myth-making, situating it at the intersection of narrative function and revisionist myth-making. Thus, it establishes a flexible yet grounded methodology for understanding the ideological and symbolic significance of mythopoeia in modern fantasy fiction.

2. MYTHOPOEIC FANTASY

The theoretical frameworks of fantasy fiction, alongside the foundational insights of authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis (1898–1963),⁴ have been instrumental in defining mythopoeic fantasy as more than mere escapism or fanciful childlike entertainment. Rather, their works position the genre as a legitimate literary form capable of addressing profound socio-cultural questions. Central to Tolkien’s concept of ‘sub-creation,’ as articulated in his seminal essay “On Fairy-Stories” (1947),⁵ is his assertion that “[w]hat really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful ‘sub-creator.’ He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside” (Tolkien, 1947:132). This notion of sub-creation underscores the capacity of the author to construct internally coherent imaginary worlds, secondary worlds, that evoke a sense of reality distinct from, yet resonant with, the primary world. In this regard, sub-creation becomes the imaginative and structural foundation of mythopoeic fantasy. These secondary worlds are not merely products of imaginative invention but operate as mythic landscapes wherein symbolic meaning, moral complexity, and existential concerns are explored. Through the act of myth-making within these crafted realities, mythopoeic fantasy functions as a narrative mode that

³ George Lakoff is a cognitive linguist and Mark Johnson a philosopher, both known for their collaborative work in conceptual metaphor theory. In their influential book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), they argue that human thought is largely metaphorical and structured by embodied experience (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 247).

⁴ For an in-depth analysis of Tolkien’s and Lewis’s contributions to the development of mythopoeic fantasy, see Tom Shippey’s *The Road to Middle-Earth: How J.R.R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology* (1982; revised ed. 2003), Christopher D. Rhone’s *The Mythopoeic Worldview of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, G.K. Chesterton* (2010), and Jyrki Korppa’s *The Mythopoeic Code of Tolkien: A Christian Platonic Reading of the Legendarium* (2021).

⁵ Tolkien first delivered “On Fairy-Stories” as the Andrew Lang Lecture at the University of St Andrews in 1939. It was later revised and published in 1947 in an edited volume dedicated to the study of fairy tales and fantasy literature.

both draws upon and reframes archetypal patterns and sacred structures, enabling readers to engage critically with the metaphysical underpinnings of human experience. Thus, sub-creation does not simply support the mythopoeic; it embodies and enacts it, making a new modern mythology capable of cultural reflection and ideological interrogation. Furthermore, the enduring relevance of myth within Tolkien's and Lewis's work provides the conceptual and artistic groundwork for mythopoeic fantasy shaped by the inherently hybrid and flexible nature of fantasy literature itself. As Kirstin Jeffrey Johnson observes, "the word mythopoeic is used to mean 'a literary myth' or is even used simply as an adjective describing something reminiscent of Middle Earth or Narnia" (2014: 30). Although neither Tolkien nor Lewis formally adopted the term to characterise their own fiction, their narratives and critical reflections have retrospectively shaped its contemporary contours. In their hands, myth becomes not a static repository of archaic symbols, but a dynamic narrative framework through which cultural, theological, and existential themes are interrogated, reimagined, and reconstructed.

This evolving approach to myth in fantasy literature naturally leads to mythopoeic fantasy, whose role as a narrative mode is to both preserve and transform traditional myths and mythic structures to interrogate religious dogmas, cultural norms, and social hierarchies, while engaging with timeless human concerns. This imaginative engagement with myth aligns with Northrop Frye's observation that "learned and recondite writers whose work requires patient study are explicitly mythopoeic writers" (1957:117), including figures such as Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), Edmund Spenser (c. 1552–1599), and James Joyce (1882–1941). Such writers do not merely preserve myth but actively repurpose it, using archetypal structures, symbolic landscapes, and universal themes to delve into the philosophical and ethical dimensions of human existence. Accordingly, mythopoeic fantasy distinguishes itself by embedding metaphysical realities into the fabric of narrative. Protagonists, often psychologically realistic, navigate alternate or parallel worlds shaped by reimagined mythic laws, and their moral choices reflect ethical challenges mirrored in the primary world. Rather than offering mere escapism, this form of fantasy demands reflection on moral truths that are presented as timeless and enduring. By forging connections between ancient traditions and contemporary concerns, mythopoeic imagination creates new myths that resonate with modern readers. As Zachary Andrew Rhone notes, "[m]ythopoeic, or myth-making, writers engage in stories that inquire about something beyond the physical world" (2017:137) to reflect upon contemporary ideological tensions. This mode thus presents a serious literary engagement with existential and ideological questions, offering insight into the human condition. According to Marek Oziewicz, mythopoeic fantasy reflects a perspective that recognises the presence of supernatural elements⁶ (2008:83), while Chris Brawley highlights its critical potential, describing it as the work of authors "who are employing fantasy as a subversive mode of literature to revise our perceptions of the natural world" (2014:9). Brawley's analysis affirms the transformative function of myth-making within this mode, revealing its capacity to challenge and redefine dominant cultural paradigms. His definition thus aligns with this study's examination of mythopoeia as a subversive instrument, highlighting how myth-making can transform and reinterpret our perception of reality through storytelling. To this end, the enduring significance of mythopoeia lies in its ability to blur the lines between fiction and reality, enabling literature to function as a vehicle for symbolic and ideological reorientation. This importance stems from the relationship between myth and mythopoeia, with the latter emerging from the former by expanding its symbolic and narrative roles within literary forms.

By the mid-twentieth century, the theory of myth had expanded to encompass diverse perspectives, with scholars increasingly viewing myth not as an archaic relic but as a dynamic force intertwined with ideology, culture, and the unconscious. The 1940s marked a pivotal moment in this development, as figures such as Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, and Northrop Frye advocated for the revival and reinterpretation of myth, particularly within literature and popular culture. This period also witnessed the emergence of mythopoeic literature, exemplified by Tolkien and Lewis, who reimagined mythic storytelling to explore enduring human concerns. Against this intellectual backdrop, religious myth criticism, particularly through the work of Eliade, offers essential insights into mythopoeic fantasy's subversive engagement with sacred narratives and its capacity for critiquing institutional religion. Eliade understands myth as a sacred narrative that reveals the origins of existence

⁶This definition poses challenges because the boundary between natural and supernatural varies with interpretation and often blurs within fiction. As Brian Attebery notes in his foreword to Oziewicz's work, some non-theistic authors, such as Ursula K. Le Guin (1929–2018) and Algernon Blackwood (1869–1951), may not clearly fit the supernatural category. Therefore, the term should be applied cautiously in this context (2008:2).

and mediates the interplay between the sacred and the profane. His approach focuses on the internal logic of myth, which recounts hierophanies, moments when the sacred breaks into the profane world, thus rendering myth more than mere storytelling. Instead, myths function as vehicles for transcendent knowledge and cultural continuity (Eliade 1963:5–6). As Douglas Allen notes, Eliade seeks to uncover the hidden structures that express the sacred through symbolic meaning (2002:185). Even when addressing secular myths, Eliade highlights their foundation in sacred origins, demonstrating how they reinterpret and reshape traditional mythic significance. In this way, his thought foregrounds both the sacred roots and the enduring cultural functions of myth. Viewed through this lens, mythopoeic fantasy emerges as a powerful literary mode that reimagines cultural narratives, critiques religious institutions, and engages deeply with philosophical and existential questions. Eliade's framework thus provides a vital theoretical basis for understanding both religious myth criticism and the role of myth in *Small Gods*, supporting the analysis of how mythopoeia reinterprets and transforms inherited narratives within modern fantasy literature.

3. SUBVERTING THE SACRED IN TERRY PRATCHETT'S *SMALL GOD*

Sir Terry David John Pratchett (1948–2015) is one of the most influential fantasy authors of the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Cabell, 2012:3). His literary breakthrough occurred with *The Colour of Magic* (1983), the first novel of the extensive Discworld series, which grew to encompass forty-one volumes published between 1983 and 2015. The series offer richly imagined secondary worlds while providing sharp social commentary on belief, storytelling, and human nature. Unlike traditional fantasy epics, the Discworld consists of interconnected yet distinct narratives focusing on various characters, settings, and themes. As Lawrence Watt-Evans notes, the series is more “about people, and it’s about stories... It’s about people in general, not just the specific individuals having adventures” (2008:18). A cornerstone of Pratchett’s literary success is his successful fusion of fantasy with diverse sources such as mythology, folklore, legend, fairy tales and religious traditions. These mythic elements function as vehicles for critique, challenging religious dogma, exposing institutional manipulations, and inviting readers to re-examine familiar narratives through subversive lenses. Accordingly, Jacqueline Simpson highlights how Pratchett’s plots often engage with “social, moral, and religious issues which roused his fierce anger: jingoism, racism, sexist prejudice, snobbery, religious dogmatism, cruelty—condemning the systems of thought that bred them” (2015:233-4). As a notable novel in the Discworld series, *Small Gods* exemplifies this approach by satirising rigid belief systems and critically engaging with religious mythology. Although scholarly interest in Pratchett’s Discworld series has expanded, particularly regarding its distinctive narrative structure, use of his humour, and philosophical insights, there remains a notable lack of scholarly analysis through the lens of myth criticism. This article, therefore, aims to fill that gap by critically examining Pratchett’s use of mythopoeia in *Small Gods*, highlighting how he reconstructs and deconstructs myths to subvert and challenge prevailing religious ideologies. Through this approach, the novel is situated within the broader tradition of mythopoeic fantasy as a powerful medium for ideological critique and narrative transformation.

Pratchett’s *Small Gods* exemplifies mythopoeic fantasy through its secondary world, offering an expansive platform for mythic reinterpretation and a sharp critique of socio-political and religious structures. This perspective resonates with wider scholarly discussions on fantasy’s inherently subversive nature. As Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint argue in “Political Readings” (2012) that “[a]ll fantasy is political, even—perhaps especially—when it thinks it is not. From the abstruse literary confection to the sharecropped franchise series, a fantasy text at the very least functions like any cultural text to reproduce dominant ideology” (102). Despite dismissals of fantasy as pure escapism, many scholars have demonstrated its capacity as a vehicle for ideological critique, whether explicit or implicit. Pratchett is one of the foremost authors to exemplify the subversive potential of fantasy, and this is particularly evident in *Small Gods*, where he situates his critique of religious authority within the Discworld universe by portraying Omnia, a theocratic state governed by the rigid doctrines of Omnianism.⁷ The story centres on Brutha, a devout but modest novice, whose sincere belief unexpectedly revives the diminished god Om, now reduced to a powerless tortoise due to the loss of his followers’ faith. Brutha is revealed as Om’s last remaining true believer, and much of the narrative focuses on Om’s attempts to

⁷In the novel, Omnianism emerges as the predominant institutional religion, marked by rigid orthodoxy, a hierarchical ecclesiastical structure, and a demand for absolute belief in the deity Om—an allegiance that is frequently sustained not through genuine spiritual conviction but through the imposition of institutional authority and theological discipline.

convince him of a divine mission, despite Brutha's uncertainty. Once a mighty god, Om has been reduced to a powerless tortoise because of his followers' fading devotion, a transformation that serves both as a satire and as a reinterpretation of mythic archetypes, highlighting the fragile and constructed nature of the divine. Brutha's sincere, unaffected faith contrasts with the corruption and cruelty of Omnia's religious leadership, dominated by Exquisitor Vorbis,⁸ a ruthless figure who maintains control through fear and dogma, illustrating how religious narratives are systematised to sustain authoritarian power. A crucial moment in the narrative unfolds during the journey to Ephebe, a city-state modelled on classical Athens that represents the conflict between Omnia's religious authoritarianism and Ephebe's philosophical scepticism. Selected to accompany Vorbis because of his remarkable memory, Brutha unwillingly takes part in a mission to dominate Ephebe, revealing Omnia's imperial ambitions disguised as religious righteousness. As the story progresses, Brutha becomes increasingly aware of the moral decay at the core of the religious institution he has devoted himself to, particularly through Vorbis's brutal actions, such as the torture of philosophers and the destruction of the Great Library. The story reaches its peak when Brutha is recognised as the rightful prophet, granting him the authority to reform Omnianism from within.

In *Small Gods*, Pratchett engages in both myth-making and myth revisionism, using a multi-layered narrative to expose the constructed nature of belief systems while simultaneously challenging their authority. This entails a sustained process of demythologising, in which traditional religious myths are stripped of their transcendent claims and reinterpreted within a satirical framework that emphasises their cultural production and socio-political functions. This dual process positions the novel as a notable example of mythopoeic fantasy's capacity to subvert dominant ideologies and introduce alternative modes of understanding. The critique of religious structures extends into the novel's secondary world, which functions not only as a narrative setting but also as a reimagined sacred geography that reflects and interrogates traditional cosmological frameworks. Most religions conceptualise the cosmos as divinely ordered, composed of distinct parts, such as the heavens, the underworld, and sacred mountains, which attribute spiritual meaning to physical space. Eliade articulates this vision through the concept of the "Centre of the World" (2021:12), symbolised by the '*axis mundi*',⁹ a symbolic axis that connects the sacred and the profane. Frequently embodied by mythic locations such as Mount Olympus, Mount Sinai, or cosmic trees, the *axis mundi* serves as a focal point of religious experience and cosmological order. Eliade further elaborates this symbolism with three central aspects:

1. The Sacred Mountain, where heaven and earth meet, is situated at the center of the world.
2. Every temple or palace and, by extension, every sacred city or royal residence is a Sacred Mountain, thus becoming a Center.
3. Being an *axis mundi*, the sacred city or temple is regarded as the meeting point of heaven, earth, and hell. (2012:12)

With this structure, Eliade demonstrates that sacred geography offers both a metaphysical and physical framework for understanding the manifestation of the divine, typically symbolised by archetypal elements such as mountains, temples, and cosmic trees. Pratchett borrows from this symbolic tradition, but also transforms it, replacing stable cosmological structures with shifting, decentralised landscapes shaped by belief, storytelling, and imagination. In the Discworld universe, the idea of a singular sacred centre gives way to a cosmos that is itself considered holy, vast, tangible, and rich with mythological meaning. Instead of situating the sacred in transcendent locations, Pratchett places it in the structure of the Disc itself, whose form becomes a dynamic reflection of transformed mythic imagery. Through this reimagined cosmic order in the novel, Pratchett challenges traditional sacred landscapes found in mythologies by situating the divine within the imaginative design of its fictional world.

This cosmological framework is vividly depicted in the construction of the Discworld's universe, which serves as both a literal and symbolic foundation for Pratchett's mythopoeic reimagining. Central to this vision is the

⁸ Vorbis, the authoritarian head of Omnia's Quisition and an exquisitor outranking any inquisitor, is a grim, severe figure whose very presence evokes fear. What makes him most unsettling is his unwavering belief that he serves the true will of the Church, a conviction that makes him all the more dangerous (Pratchett and Briggs, 2004:430).

⁹ The idea of the *axis mundi*, in relation to both established cosmological models and its reinterpretation in *Small Gods*, will be further analysed in the following pages.

planet's iconic flat, disc-like structure, supported by four colossal elephants: Berilia, Tubul, Great T'Phon, and Jerakeen. These huge beings, composed of living iron and possessing nerves of living gold, evoke mythic imagery while simultaneously defying scientific logic. The elephants stand upon the shell of Great A'Tuin, an immense star turtle who carries the Discworld through the cosmos in an eternal voyage with no known destination (Cabell, 2012:xxv) (Figure 1). As Pratchett and Briggs describe, Great A'Tuin is "a ten-thousand-mile-long member of the species *Chelys galactica*, and the only turtle ever to feature on the Hertzsprung-Russell Diagram" (2004:47). Its shell, "frosted with frozen methane, pitted with meteor craters and scoured with asteroidal dust," conveys a sense of ancient endurance, while "its eyes are like ancient seas, crusted with rheum" (Pratchett and Briggs, 2004:47), reinforcing its role as a cosmic entity that bridges the sacred and the absurdity of the depiction. The brain of the turtle is imagined on an immense scale, "the size of a continent, through which thoughts move like glittering glaciers" (Pratchett and Briggs, 2004:47), implying a form of intelligence that, though unfamiliar, possesses a profound depth. Although its gender remains ambiguous, it is "the only creature in the entire universe that knows exactly where it is going" (Pratchett and Briggs, 2004:48). Through this construction, Pratchett not only engages with traditional cosmological symbolism but also critiques and reshapes it, situating his world within a mythic paradigm.



Figure 1. Great A'Tuin, the cosmic turtle that carries the Discworld through space, as depicted by Paul Kidby in *Great A'Tuin II*¹⁰ (Kidby, 2013).

While it is commonly acknowledged that numerous ancient civilisations once envisioned the Earth as flat, the specific imagery of a disc-shaped world supported through space by a colossal turtle constitutes a recurring mythological archetype across several cultural traditions. This symbolic motif is particularly prominent in Hindu cosmology, where the world is often imagined as being upheld by great animals. For example, according to one version of the myth,

there are four (or eight) great elephants named the *diggaja* or *digāja*, 'elephants of the directions,' guarding the four (or eight) compass points of this disc, with a type of god called a *lokapāla* riding on the back of each one. But the oldest texts do not claim that they carry the world. According to another myth, however, the world rests on the back of a single elephant, Maha-Padma, and he is standing on a tortoise named Chukwa. Finally, it is said in yet another myth that the god Vishnu once took on the form of a vast tortoise or turtle (*kūrma*), so huge that Mount Meru, the sacred central mountain of the world, could rest on his back and be used as a stick to churn the ocean. (Pratchett and Simpson, 2008:23)

Across various mythological traditions, the image of the universe supported by powerful animals symbolising cosmic order and stability, particularly in Hindu cosmology, is a recurring motif. According to scholars of Hindu mythology, the world is conceptualised as a disc sustained by a turtle and four elephants. While this model is

¹⁰ *Great A'Tuin II* is a painting that illustrates Paul Kidby's visual reinterpretation of Terry Pratchett's Discworld universe. For original Discworld artwork, sculptures, and authorised merchandise, Kidby's official website, Paul Kidby Art (<https://www.paulkidby.com/>), provides a comprehensive and authoritative resource.

most famously associated with Hindu cosmology, variations of the myth appear in other cultures. In Chinese mythology, as Sarah Allan notes in *The Shape of the Turtle* (1991), “the turtle was a model of the cosmos” (18), though in this version, the universe resides within the turtle rather than on its back. The seas are imagined beneath its lower shell, while the stars form part of its upper interior. Despite cultural differences, the turtle consistently functions as a cosmic being that encapsulates the universe. Allan describes this association as “an ancient mythic identification” rather than “a scholarly metaphor” (1991:105), suggesting its symbolic resonance across civilisations. This cross-cultural significance is further affirmed by David Leeming, who observes in *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology* that in many parts of the world, “creation takes place on the back of an animal such as the turtle” (2005:19), reinforcing the idea that the cosmic turtle is a widespread mythological archetype through which humanity seeks to explain the structure and origins of the universe.

Pratchett’s use of the cosmic turtle motif, which appears across a range of ancient cosmologies, reflects his engagement with mythic archetypes that transcend cultural boundaries. Found notably in other traditions, the turtle symbol is often associated with stability, eternity, and cosmic order, serving as a shared mythic figure in cultural memory. The motif is directly referenced in *Small Gods* when Vorbis, a powerful Omnian¹¹ inquisitor, recounts, “‘The writer claims that the world . . . travels through the void on the back of four huge elephants,’ . . . ‘What do they stand on?’ [asked Drunah, a librarian] ‘The writer says they stand on the shell of an enormous turtle,’ said Vorbis” (Pratchett, 2013:25–6). This layered exchange highlights both the fantastic nature of mythic cosmologies and the extent to which such frameworks are sustained through authoritative religious discourse. By placing this exchange within a dialogue between dogmatic certainty and scholarly curiosity, Pratchett reveals how mythic structures can be both unquestioned and problematised within religious contexts. In line with this, Pratchett also creates a connection between the cosmology of Discworld and ancient mythological traditions, situating his satirical narrative within a widely recognisable symbolic structure. By utilising the image of the turtle as a representation of the cosmos, he engages with a broader symbolic system that reflects what Eliade characterises as a universal human impulse to sacralise particular spaces and cosmological centres through mythic representation. However, rather than simply representing this sacred symbolism, Pratchett simultaneously questions and destabilises it. The turtle, rather than functioning as a divine authority or a fixed cosmological truth, is reimagined within the narrative as an object of speculation and uncertainty. This interrogation emerges most clearly as Brutha begins to challenge the foundational cosmology he has been taught since childhood. Thus, he utters in disbelief, “‘How can this be?’ . . . ‘A world on the back of a tortoise? Why does everyone tell me this? This can’t be true!’” (Pratchett, 2013:171). Through this moment of critical awakening, Pratchett foregrounds the tension between inherited dogma and individual understanding, using cosmic myths not as vehicles for certainty, but as dynamic narrative forms open to scepticism, reinterpretation, and reinvention.

An essential figure through whom Pratchett articulates his critique of religious dogma and sacred cosmology is Didactylus, a philosopher living in Ephebe, a city renowned for its rational inquiry and intellectual traditions. As the author of *The Turtle Moves*, a subversive philosophical text that challenges Omnian orthodoxy, Didactylus advocates for a worldview grounded in empirical observation rather than dogmatic belief. Residing in a lighthouse, where he is surrounded by scrolls and manuscripts, he symbolises the pursuit of knowledge and the value of scepticism. His reflection, “[m]ountains rise and fall, and under them the Turtle swims onward. Men live and die, and the Turtle Moves. Empires grow and crumble, and the Turtle Moves. Gods come and go, and still the Turtle Moves” (Pratchett, 2013:262), expresses a view of the cosmos as enduring and indifferent, unaffected by the rise and fall of human institutions or divine constructs. As Eliade points out, religious mythologies often link divine identity to potent symbols that represent spiritual authority and cosmic structure. Sacred elements like trees or stones are not revered for their material form, but because they serve as “*hierophanies*,” manifestations of the sacred that transcend physical nature and reveal the “*ganz andere*,” or wholly other (Eliade, 1959:12). This insight highlights how diverse cultures interpret aspects of the natural world, including animals and objects, as embodiments of the sacred that uphold cosmic harmony and moral order. Such a framework offers a valuable lens through which to assess the mythic and cosmological structures Pratchett subverts. While religious traditions typically elevate natural symbols as indicators of transcendent order, Pratchett reconfigures these associations within a satirical mode. Rather than dismissing their symbolic power, he reframes them to foreground

¹¹ Located along the Klatchian coast, Omnia is a nation positioned between the plains and forests of Howonda Land and the deserts of Klatch. It has a population of approximately two million, with Kom serving as its most important city (Pratchett and Briggs, 2004:307).

human perception over divine revelation. In this light, the cosmic turtle becomes not a sacred icon filled with metaphysical significance, but a symbol of existential endurance, indifferent to belief or theological meaning. This reinterpretation contrasts with Eliade's notion of sacred geography as well, which views cosmological symbols as tangible manifestations of divine order. Pratchett, by contrast, destabilises this framework, presenting a universe fundamentally indifferent to human narratives. Didactylos reinforces this position in a moment of contemplative scepticism: "The Turtle exists. The world is a flat disc. The sun turns around it once every day, dragging its light behind it. And this will go on happening, whether you believe it is true or not. It is real. I don't know about truth. Truth is a lot more complicated than that. I don't think the Turtle gives a bugger whether it's true or not, to tell you the truth" (Pratchett, 2013:262). This assertion blurs the distinction between empirical reality and belief, revealing the fragility of theological assertions that claim access to absolute truth. The turtle, rather than functioning as a sacred centre, emerges as an impersonal force within a cosmos unconcerned with human meaning-making. As a cosmic figure, the turtle is stripped of inherent sacred significance and refigured as a neutral symbol of the universe, persisting regardless of belief, faith, or divine attribution. Through this transformation, Pratchett reimagines sacred geography not as a fixed site of metaphysical assurance, but as an ambiguous and fluid construct, continually shaped by mythic interpretation and the imaginative frameworks through which humans understand the cosmos. Therefore, rather than reinforcing inherited beliefs, Pratchett reconfigures them through critical reinterpretation, using archetypal figures and mythic motifs not merely to enrich world-building but to expose the constructed nature of religious dogma. In the novel, therefore, myth-making becomes an act of resistance, challenging both dominant doctrines and those that endure unconsciously within cultural memory. Consequently, he demonstrates that mythopoeia is not a static tradition but a dynamic process, allowing fantasy fiction to serve simultaneously as imaginative narrative and as a medium for philosophical and ideological critique.

Another significant mythopoeic innovation in *Small Gods* is its reimagining of divine authority through the subversion of traditional omnipotence. While theological conceptions of God differ across monotheistic and metaphysical traditions, Pratchett's critique specifically targets the image of God found in classical theism,¹² which envisions a deity as omnipotent, eternal, and unreachable. As David Bentley Hart explains, classical theism conceives of God as "the infinite fullness of being, omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient, from whom all things come and upon whom all things depend for every moment of their existence, without whom nothing at all could exist" (2013:7). Against this notion of a transcendent and immutable divine authority, a different portrayal is introduced by presenting a god whose existence is fragile and conditional, entirely dependent on belief in the novel. This idea is embodied in Om, who, once all-powerful, is now reduced to the form of a tortoise, with his diminished state symbolising the decline of divine supremacy in the absence of faith. As Pratchett writes, "Om had been a tortoise for only three years, but with the shape he had inherited a grab-bag of instincts, and a lot of them centered around a total terror of the one wild creature that had found out how to eat tortoise" (2013:69). This ironic image of a god ruled by animal instinct highlights the absurd vulnerability of divinity without followers. Stripped of worship, Om becomes a creature haunted by fear, "Gods have no one to pray to... But everyone needs *someone*" (2013:69), demonstrating that even gods need support. By engaging with this mythological tradition, Pratchett challenges the presumed permanence of divine authority and highlights belief as the unstable foundation that upholds sacred power. In *Small Gods*, he adopts a revisionist approach to mythopoeia, reworking inherited mythic forms to both critique and reimagine traditional theological assumptions. His portrayal of gods, particularly Om, as dependent on human belief echoes patterns from Greek and Norse traditions, where divine figures are sustained through worship and remain subjected to decline. In aligning Om with this mythic vulnerability, Pratchett subverts the notion of divine self-sufficiency and reclaims myth as a dynamic exchange between belief and power, exposing how sacred authority is socially and symbolically constructed. Thus, divine power is no longer depicted as immutable essence, but rather as a contingent construct, shaped by cultural memory and ritual practice, and subject to erosion through neglect or disbelief.

¹² Classical theism, rooted in ancient philosophical traditions, conceptualises God as the necessary and self-sufficient foundation of all reality (Leftow, 1998). It depicts the divine as "*immaterial . . . immutable . . . impassible . . . eternal . . . necessarily existent, omnipresent,*" lacking composition or dependence on anything external (Leftow, 1998). Consequently, God is regarded as an eternal flawless source and continuous sustainer of the cosmos.

In the Discworld universe, thousands of gods exist, and more may come into being, as divinity is generated through belief and worship. This concept is explored in *Small Gods*, where divine power is portrayed as entirely contingent on human faith, a theme illustrated by the multitude of unseen and forgotten deities that inhabit the world.

There are billions of gods in the world. They swarm as thick as herring roe. Most of them are too small to see and never get worshiped, at least by anything bigger than bacteria, who never say their prayers and don't demand much in the way of miracles. They are the small gods—the spirits of places where two ant trails cross, the gods of microclimates down between the grass roots. And most of them stay that way. Because what they lack is belief . . . what gods need is belief, and what humans want is gods. (2013:6-7)

A god's influence in the novel is portrayed as entirely dependent on the intensity of worship it receives, manifested through rituals, offerings, scriptures, and temples. Pratchett and Simpson note that "since belief is the life-force and nourishment of gods, in the course of time particular gods can and do lose power as the number of their believers drops" (2008:171). This idea is reinforced when Om reflects on the condition of divine existence: "You died if you had no believers, and that was what a small god generally worried about. But you also died if you died" (2013:55). These reflections challenge conventional portrayals of deities as all-powerful and self-sufficient, instead framing them as dependent figures whose survival relies entirely on human acknowledgement and the shifting dynamics of faith. In *Small Gods*, cultural expectations concerning the appropriate form of deities change according to religious tradition, institutional representation, and collective imagination. When Om manifests in the form of a turtle, Brutha perceives this as profoundly inappropriate, since divine beings are traditionally expected to appear in majestic forms, such as eagles, lions, or bulls, associated with authority and splendour (2013:20). This belief is not simply embedded in societal norms, but explicitly articulated by Brutha, who struggles to reconcile the god's undignified shape with the institutional images endorsed by organised religion: "'I've seen the Great God Om,' he waved a hand making the shape of the holy horns, conscientiously, 'and he isn't tortoise-shaped. He comes as an eagle, or a lion, or a mighty bull. There's a statue in the Great Temple. It's seven cubits high. It's got bronze on it and everything'" (2013:20). Through this ironic juxtaposition between traditional symbols of divinity and Om's current state, Pratchett critiques established iconographies of divine power and suggests that a god's grandeur is shaped as much by cultural projection as by any inherent quality.

This drastic change deepens as Om himself confronts his transformation. His fall from omnipotence is marked by confusion and disorientation, revealing how divine authority is destabilised when removed from its mythic framing. Upon awakening in his new form, Om confesses, "[o]pened my eyes . . . my eye . . . and I was a tortoise." When questioned by Brutha—"Why?"—Om replies, "How should I know? I don't know!" (2013:46). However, Brutha persists, reminding him, "[b]ut you . . . you're omniscognisant," to which Om admits, "That doesn't mean I know everything" (2013:46). The extent of his fall is further emphasised when Om misuses theological terminology and admits, "[t]hought that was omnipotent," clearly demonstrating his confusion over the concepts (Pratchett, 2013:46). Brutha responds by explaining that omnipotence "means you're all-powerful. And you are. That's what it says in the Book of Ossory" (2013:46). This exchange deconstructs traditional theological classifications, illustrating how divine identity in the novel is shaped not by inherent sanctity but by belief and narrative influence. Rather than rejecting myth entirely, Pratchett constructs a satirical mythology of his own, reworking religious elevation to imply that divinity stems not from transcendence but from human faith. His depiction of a god unable to defend himself, let alone guide or protect followers, dismantles divine invulnerability typically found in sacred narratives. Om's following physical condition points out to this idea: "He was too tired to waggle his legs now. That was all you could do, waggle your legs. And stick your head out as far as it would go and wave it about in the hope that you could lever yourself over" (2013:32). Such imagery reinforces his dependence on external support and disrupts traditional portrayals of gods as autonomous, immortal forces, ultimately exposing sacred authority as a fragile construct. Moreover, instead of affirming the essential role of myth, which Eliade defines as a means to reveal the sacred and provide exemplary patterns for human conduct, Pratchett intentionally challenges this function by highlighting the fragile basis of religious belief. Within the narrative of *Small Gods*, religious conviction, along with the myths that once reinforced it, is no longer depicted as a dependable source of timeless truth. Rather, both are shown to be unstable frameworks, sustained not through divine revelation but through widespread communal acceptance. This crisis of belief is

illustrated in a dialogue between Brutha and Om, who has taken the powerless form of a tortoise: “‘But if you’ve been down here as a tortoise, who’s been listening to the prayers? Who has been accepting the sacrifices? Who has been judging the dead?’ ‘I don’t know,’ said the tortoise. ‘Who did it before?’ ‘You did!’ ‘Did I?’” (2013:49). This moment questions the assumption of divine agency and the processes by which religious and mythological systems gain legitimacy. By presenting the sacred as neither fixed nor divinely ordained, Pratchett reframes myth as a culturally constructed illusion to expose how fragile belief becomes when it rests more on tradition and collective assumption than on genuine spiritual truth.

Mythological traditions often portray gods as eternal and supreme beings, elevated both physically and symbolically above the human realm. Their placement ‘up there’ signifies more than location; it represents power, permanence, and control over the chaos of earthly life. This vertical separation shows divine inaccessibility and legitimises hierarchical authority. Pratchett describes this cosmological logic in *The Science of Discworld* (2013):

Up There was different from Down Here for a reason. Down Here was clearly designed for us. Equally clearly, Up There wasn’t. Therefore it must be designed for somebody else. And the new humanity was already speculating about some suitable tenants, and had been ever since they’d hidden in the caves from the thunder. The gods! They were Up There, looking Down! And they were clearly in charge, because humanity certainly wasn’t. As a bonus, that explained all of the things Down Here that were a lot more complicated than anything visible Up There, like thunderstorms and earthquakes and bees. Those were under the control of the gods. (Pratchett, et al., 2013:34)

This passage captures how divine supremacy is naturalised through spatial metaphor, where the gods’ elevation legitimises their absolute rule and affirms their separation from mortals. On the other hand, as for Eliade, his concept of the “system of the world” (1959:37) outlines a tripartite cosmological structure comprising “three levels – earth, heaven, [and] underworld” (1959:36), which together form a sacred hierarchy. These realms are unified by “the image of a universal pillar, *axis mundi*” (Eliade, 1959:36), a symbol that facilitates movement and communication among them. For such interaction to occur, Eliade argues, profane space must be ruptured by a sacred opening that enables passage “from heaven to earth and vice versa; from earth to underworld” (1959:36). This hierarchical structure not only brings order to the cosmos but also defines space as spiritually meaningful, grounding religious practices in symbolic spatial arrangements. Natural and constructed places, mountains, temples, sacred trees, often mark this axis, serving as points where divine and human worlds converge. As Eliade observes, “many different myths, rites, and beliefs are derived from this traditional ‘system of the world’” (1959:37), highlighting its foundational role in shaping religious experience and identity. Thus, the axis mundi transforms ordinary space into a sacred centre, where individuals locate themselves within a cosmic order and engage directly with the divine. Whereas traditional religious cosmologies often symbolise the divine as dwelling ‘above’ the human realm, Eliade’s conception of the axis mundi formalises this symbolism into a structured cosmology, positioning a fixed, vertical centre uniting heaven, earth, and the underworld in a sacred hierarchy that bridges the profane and the transcendent. In contrast, Pratchett’s novel offers a radical reimagining of this cosmological framework by dismantling the vertical hierarchy altogether. Divine authority, instead of originating from a transcendent, fixed centre, is portrayed as arising from human belief and perception. Through this subversion, Pratchett not only critiques the notion of divine transcendence but also redefines the sacred as inherently immanent, suggesting that deities are neither timeless nor autonomous, but entirely sustained by the unstable dynamics of faith, ritual, and cultural imagination.

Om’s transformation into a tortoise in the novel serves as a striking emblem of his diminished powers, both physically and symbolically. As a creature situated quite literally at ground level, the tortoise underscores the dramatic collapse of divine elevation and power. Removed from celestial grandeur and now stripped of voice, power and authority, Om is confined to a fragile shell and recognised by only one remaining believer, Brutha. In contrast to classical mythology, where deities often assume animal forms as an expression of power, trickery, or seduction, as seen with Zeus taking the form of a swan or bull, or trickster figures like Loki and Coyote using animal transformations to manipulate events (Leeming, 2005:19), Pratchett subverts this tradition. Rather than representing strength or divine mystery, Om’s form becomes a vessel for satire. This criticism is sharply captured in Om’s own words as he reflects on his failed manifestation: “‘As far as I can recall, . . . I’d intended to be a big

white bull.’ . . . ‘Or a swan, I thought. Something impressive. Three years later, I wake up and it turns out I’ve been a tortoise. I mean, you don’t get much lower’” (Pratchett, 2013:46). Om’s reflection challenges traditional mythic patterns by revealing that divine ambition becomes meaningless without belief. Rather than commanding fear, his diminished form invites mockery and sympathy, undermining the usual perception of divine invincibility. Through this satirical inversion, Pratchett reframes the mythic motif of transformation, not to glorify divinity, but to expose its dependence on human faith. He questions the core assumptions of conventional religious and mythic traditions, particularly the notions of divine transcendence and absolute authority. Om’s ironic fall from heavenly splendour to earthly existence reconceptualises the sacred not as a fixed metaphysical truth, but as a fragile construct reliant on collective belief and cultural affirmation. This literary strategy aligns with Elisabeth Rose Gruner’s observation that “in his Discworld fantasies for adult readers, such as *Small Gods*... religious belief is of central thematic concern, even if the gods believed in are frequently ridiculous” (2011:277), highlighting how Pratchett shifts critical attention from the authority of the divine to the cultural and ideological functions of belief. Gray Kochhar-Lindgren likewise argues that Pratchett reveals the ideological roots of obsolete deities, patriarchal orders, and outworn traditions, reassembling them into renewed symbolic patterns that offer fresh interpretive possibilities (2014:81). Accordingly, Pratchett dismantles the mythic frameworks that historically enforced the separation between gods and mortals, showing that divine authority rests not in intrinsic sacred value, but in sustained belief. By destabilising the axis mundi and reorienting divine hierarchies, he critiques dogmatic religion and reclaims myth-making as a reflective mode for exploring evolving spiritual consciousness. Through this inventive narrative practice, Pratchett’s mythopoeic method interrogates inherited theological systems while inviting a dynamic re-engagement with the religious significance of myth and belief.

Expanding on its revisionist engagement with myth, *Small Gods* offers a critique of institutional religion by depicting the Omnian Church as an authoritarian entity that no longer facilitates divine connection but rather exists to sustain its own power. Historically, religious institutions, through priests, temples, and ritual hierarchies, did not simply transmit myth but conveyed it as a vital element of communal life. As Eliade notes, myth in such contexts was “a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, assertions, even practical requirements” (1963:20). By continually re-enacting these sacred stories, institutions upheld their moral and cosmological authority. Myths, therefore, operated as legitimising tools within religious systems, providing symbolic foundations for both spiritual and political power. Classical theorists such as Edward Burnett Tylor, James George Frazer, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, and Bronisław Malinowski have similarly argued that mythic thought emerged as a way for early cultures to manage existential uncertainty and establish perceived control over natural and social realities (Cohen, 2010:584). In this light, myth was not only a proto-scientific mode of explanation but a mechanism for affirming social order, preserving cohesion, and sustaining institutional dominance. In that sense, beyond its symbolic or narrative value, myth also functions as a powerful ideological instrument that legitimises social hierarchies. Accordingly, Bruce Lincoln, argues that myth functions as a narrative vehicle through which social hierarchies are maintained under the illusion of natural order. Rather than being neutral stories, myths uphold power structures by presenting culturally specific systems of classification in compelling and memorable ways. These narratives influence how people understand the world, making temporary and culturally specific social structures seem permanent and divinely authorised (1999:147). For Lincoln, myth functions as “ideology in narrative form,” disguising its constructed nature while imposing these structures into the shared cultural consciousness (1999:147). Expanding on Lincoln’s view, Eric Csapo offers a more refined analysis in *Theories of Mythology* (2005), maintaining that myth is ideology in narrative form but emphasising its distinct ability to bridge social divisions. He differentiates between “subgroup ideologies,” which serve specific group interests, and “general ideology,” which mediates among competing worldviews within a society (2005:292–93). Myth, with its openness to multiple interpretations, enables this latter function by allowing diverse groups to find meaning in a shared narrative. Nonetheless, as both Lincoln and Csapo argue, this very plurality makes myth vulnerable to ideological use. Once integrated into institutional systems, its interpretive flexibility is deliberately restricted, reducing myth to a tool of ideological control that enforces fixed beliefs and maintains political or religious authority.

Pratchett critically explores this dynamic in *Small Gods*, presenting the Omnian Church as a paradigmatic example of how the intrinsic plurality of myth is reshaped into rigid orthodoxy under the force of institutional

power. His portrayal critiques the traditional framework of institutional religion, historically grounded in sacred narratives, by demonstrating how the Church systematically diminishes myth's interpretive range, converting it into a dogmatic system founded on strict authoritarianism. No longer acting as a mediator of genuine spiritual experience, the Church instead operates primarily as an instrument of imposed authority. By eliminating myth's multiplicity and enforcing fixed meanings, the Church secures its dominance, governing both belief and behaviour within a repressive ideological structure. As this argument develops, Pratchett further elaborates how institutional religion gradually displaces personal spiritual belief with passive obedience to hierarchical rule. This transformation is illustrated in a conversation between Om and Brutha, where themes of obedience, fear, and the shifting perceptions of belief becomes visible, particularly through Om's statement:

"Belief, he says. Belief shifts. People start out believing in the god and end up believing in the structure."

"I don't understand," said Brutha.

"Let me put it another way," said the tortoise. "I am your God, right?"

"Yes."

"And you'll obey me."

"Yes."

"Good. Now take a rock and go and kill Vorbis."

Brutha didn't move.

"I'm sure you heard me," said Om.

"But he'll ...he's... the Quisition would—"

"Now you know what I mean," said the tortoise. "You're more afraid of him than you are of me, now. . . ."
(Pratchett, 2013:176-7)

Brutha's reluctance to follow Om's commands, despite his firm faith in Omnian religion, reveals how institutional religion has replaced the sacred essence of mythic consciousness with fear of its worldly authorities. Pratchett illustrates the ideological appropriation of myth, as theorised by Lincoln and Csapo, in which belief is not sustained through interpretive plurality but is instead monitored and constrained by institutional power. Rather than conveying myth as a living, sacred narrative, the Omnian Church places it into rigid doctrine, transforming belief into a mechanism of control. Its authority stems not from divine revelation, but from the regulation of thought and behaviour, encouraging compliance through discipline rather than spiritual insight. As a result, Brutha's anxiety is directed not toward divine judgement, but toward institutional punishment. Through this portrayal, Pratchett's mythopoeic approach not only critiques the structures of religious institutions but also reveals how they construct belief through systematic discipline, turning myth, and the sacred, from a medium of transcendence into a tool of domination. Pratchett vividly reveals the oppressive strategies of institutional religion in his portrayal of the Church's violent suppression of alternative theological perspectives, most notably through the fate of the philosopher Koomi. A rationalist who questioned the core doctrines of Omnianism, Koomi advocated that religious belief be subjected to reasoned discussion and critical examination. As the narrator states, "[w]hen the Omnian Church found out about Koomi, they displayed him in every town within the Church's empire to demonstrate the essential flaws in his argument. There were a lot of towns, so they had to cut him up quite small" (2013:109). This quote highlights the extreme and brutal lengths to which institutional religion will go to silence intellectual opposition and eliminate any interpretive plurality that may challenge its authoritative structure. In such contexts, myth is no longer a medium for spiritual reflection or existential inquiry; rather, it is appropriated and transformed into a rigid framework used to shape belief through fixed narratives. By illustrating the Church's harsh treatment of Koomi, Pratchett demonstrates how myth is reconstructed by institutional forces into a closed, unchanging doctrine, stripped of its original multiplicity and rendered oppressive. His critique exposes how religious institutions transform myth into a tool of ideological dominance, replacing its culturally embedded openness with mechanisms of control. Through his subversive deployment of mythopoeia, Pratchett challenges the institutional impulse to reduce myth to dogmatic rigidity, thereby reasserting its earlier function as a fluid, adaptive narrative form through which the sacred was once explored and reimagined.

Pratchett's critique reaches a sharper focus in his satirical portrayal of the ideological clash between the members of the Omnian Church and the philosophers of Ephebe, a fictional society that resembles the intellectual capacity of ancient Greece. Within this context, Andrew M. Butler notes that "what marked out the

Greek philosophers from earlier thinkers was their rejection of not only religious explanations for phenomena, but also religious modes of thinking" (2007:176). This rejection is embodied in the Ephebian philosophers, who oppose the theological determinism enforced by the Church and instead embrace a method of inquiry grounded in empirical observation, logical reasoning, and scepticism. Pratchett uses this opposition to emphasise the persistent tension between institutionalised religion and the critical faculties of rational thought. The profound threat posed by reason is articulated through a revealing exchange with Vorbis, the embodiment of religious orthodoxy: "Well . . . Ephebe a place where madmen have mad ideas. Everyone knows that. Maybe the wisest course is to leave them to stew in their folly?" Vorbis shook his head. 'Unfortunately, wild and unstable ideas have a disturbing tendency to move around and take hold'" (Pratchett, 2013:9). Vorbis's response exposes the Church's anxiety that rational discourse, dismissed as irrational and subversive, poses a genuine threat to its doctrinal supremacy by offering alternative epistemological frameworks. This fear is most vividly illustrated during Brutha's visit to the Ephebian Library, a space that symbolises intellectual freedom. As he observes, "when Vorbis spoke about Ephebe, his face was gray with hatred and his voice was tense as a wire" (2013:172). The emotional intensity of Vorbis's reaction underscores the symbolic threat Ephebe represents to the Church's ideological hegemony. The Library, standing in sharp contrast to the Church's regulation of textual knowledge, comes to symbolise the very plurality of ideas and perspectives the Church seeks to extinguish. Hence, it does not function as an archive of written material but a politically significant arena where rational inquiry directly confronts theological absolutism. This sub message is made explicit in Didactylos's remark about the Library's "earthed copper roof": "Gods really hate that sort of thing" (2013:168). The roof functions metaphorically as a barrier against divine, or institutional, interference, reinforcing the Library's role as a sanctuary for secular thought. The gods' supposed hostility toward such a space reflects their intellectual fragility when subjected to rational examination. By establishing the Library as a place of resistance, Pratchett illustrates how free thinking becomes a direct challenge to religious authority. Moreover, he demonstrates how institutional religion actively suppresses intellectual freedom in order to manipulate myth as a mechanism of ideological control, resonating with Lincoln's definition of myth as "ideology in narrative form" (1999:147). The Church's efforts to destroy such challenges reflect its broader strategy of eliminating epistemological alternatives that cannot be absorbed into its doctrinal system. By erasing the plurality inherent in myth and religious thought, the Church transforms these traditions from open-ended frameworks for spiritual reflection into rigid instruments of domination.

Pratchett's critique becomes especially powerful in his depiction of how the Omnian Church suppresses different viewpoints, not only by controlling its own members but also by trying to expand its power over others, driven by both territorial ambition and the desire to enforce uniformity of belief. These ambitions manifest themselves in the Church's violent campaign, led by Vorbis, against Ephebe, an act of militant conquest justified as a divine mission. Framed within this theological rationale, the Omnians prepare to fight what is presented as a holy war. Although it is inherently paradoxical that gods depend on the belief of living people to sustain their existence, institutional religion nevertheless glorifies martyrdom in their own name, promoting sacrificial death as the highest form of devotion. Followers are conditioned to accept that dying for their god is the highest form of virtue by means of mythic language used to legitimise sacrifice. This effort to sacralise death is exemplified in a dialogue between Drunah and Fri'it, both high-ranking figures in the Omnian Quisition, who exhibit contrasting responses to the Church's stance on martyrdom. Drunah affirms, "to die gloriously for one's faith is a noble thing," delivering the line "as if reading the words off an internal notice-board" (2013:43). His affirmations emphasise how deeply the Church's ideological speech has been internalised, reducing faith to a ritualised script rather than an authentic expression. In contrast, Fri'it responds more cautiously, stating, "So the prophets tell us" (2013:43), suggesting scepticism towards orthodoxy. Through this contrast, Pratchett reveals how institutional religion discourages introspection and instead reshapes mythology into a rigid system of control. Myth, once grounded in symbolic richness and interpretive plurality, is recreated to justify suffering, warfare, and death as expressions of divine will. Drunah's subsequent claim that "no one could possibly doubt the wisdom of a war to further the worship and glory of the Great God" reflects the Church's extreme religious ideology, where violence is not just allowed but presented as a command from God. The war is reimagined as a sacred duty, most vividly illustrated in the following declaration: "At last! A not to be missed opportunity to die gloriously for Om, the one true God, who shall Trample the Unrighteous with Hooves of Iron!" (2013:41). This declaration critiques how religious institutions demand consent and encourage self-sacrifice, not in pursuit of spiritual truth, but to

sustain hierarchical dominance, by glorifying death as a sacred heroism. To this end, faith is no longer seen as a personal or spiritual journey, but is used as a weapon in religious conflict, and myth is stripped of its deeper meanings and used to serve political and ideological purposes. The elimination of interpretive richness is clearly seen in Didactylos's comments: "The Church is run by people like Vorbis. That is how it all works. Millions of people have died for—for nothing but lies" (2013:263). Here, sacred language no longer reveals moral or spiritual truth; instead, it becomes a tool used to hide organised violence and protect the power of religious institutions. Such examples demonstrate "how mythical discourse might be exploited for political ends," especially since "myth derives its dynamic vitality and capacity to provide symbolic resources for ideological narratives precisely because it was constantly being refreshed and rejuvenated" (Hall, 2007:359). This capacity for reinvention enables myth to be continually reworked in service of institutional interests, allowing authority to disguise itself in religious language. While Pratchett critiques the instrumental use of myth to uphold religious authority, he simultaneously engages in mythopoeic revision to offer a critical lens on the cultural, theological, and ideological systems that shape belief and human conduct.

The strategic manipulation of sacred language and religious symbols as instruments of control finds its clearest expression in the character of Vorbis, who epitomises the institutional mechanisms of religious authority that Pratchett aims to critique. As the head of the Church Quisition, Vorbis sees himself not merely as a servant of divine will, but as the very embodiment of ecclesiastical power—one who enacts the will of Om through discipline, violence, and theological absolutism. His role reflects the kind of institutional framework denounced by Didactylos: one grounded in oppression, deception, and the appropriation of divine authority to legitimise suffering and silence dissent. Andrew Rayment similarly identifies this symbolic merging of individual and institution, writing that "Vorbis symbolically embodies the authority of the church/god, but so pure is his instrumentality that it is almost impossible to separate wielder and instrument" (2014:56). This observation reveals the extent to which Vorbis has internalised his role, functioning as a fully integrated extension of religious power. Vorbis positions himself as a guardian of faith, convinced of his duty to defend religious orthodoxy against perceived threats. He declares the presence of "heresy and lies everywhere" (Pratchett, 2013:16) and insists upon his "holy duty" (2013:28) to shield Omnia from Ephebe and its foreign influence, referring to the Ephebians as "despicable infidel [who are] lower than the worms" (Pratchett, 2013:27). In his view, their "worship of false gods" (Pratchett, 2013:25) poses a grave danger to the spiritual and moral fabric of Omnian society. Abstract intellectual activity is likewise interpreted as a danger to theological purity, illustrating Vorbis's uncompromising belief in his divinely sanctioned mission. His absolutist worldview frames heterodoxy as a threat to survival itself, thereby validating the use of force and brutality as divinely authorised duties. Suppression is reframed as religious obligation, and violence is reimagined as an expression of sacred order. Through this portrayal, Pratchett critiques the Omnian Church's use of myth and theology not as vehicles for spiritual growth or metaphysical insight, but as tools for institutional preservation. The narrative illustrates how martyrdom is glorified, holy war is redefined as sacred duty, and opposing perspectives are systematically erased, all to sustain centralised religious power. Within this paradigm, faith is drained of its spiritual depth and reconstructed as a fixed ideological system. Mythic language, once marked by interpretive multiplicity, is reduced to inflexible formulas that eliminate nuance and legitimise violence. Figures such as Vorbis exemplify this transformation, in which strict doctrine replaces ethical contemplation, and religious legitimacy is no longer derived from divine inspiration but maintained through fear-based control. By exposing the ideological structure behind institutional belief, Pratchett questions the moral foundations of religious systems that sustain authority through belief and suppress inner reflection.

In this regard, Eliade's conception of myth as both an explanatory framework and a vehicle for symbolic transcendence provides a crucial theoretical foundation for understanding how mythopoeia functions in contemporary fantasy literature. He states that the symbolic potency of myth endures not through the preservation of its esoteric content, but through its capacity to adapt and reassert meaning across temporal and cultural boundaries. Accordingly, he observes in *Images and Symbols* (1969) that engaging with myth enables individuals to enter sacred time, thereby reconnecting with a sense of transcendent reality: "Consequently, in reciting or listening to a myth, one resumes contact with the sacred and with reality..." (Eliade, 1969:59). This act becomes a form of transcendence, as readers, listeners, or storytellers symbolically re-enter sacred time through

mythic reenactment. Eliade maintains that mythic symbols persist and evolve, adapting to new interpretations even when their original esoteric meanings fade. Their enduring relevance lies in this adaptability. Far from being obsolete, myths continue to shape human experience, particularly through modern narrative forms such as literature and cinema. He emphasises that the mythological function remains active in contemporary media:

A whole volume could well be written on the myths of modern man, on the mythologies camouflaged in the plays that he enjoys, in the books that he reads. The cinema, that “dream factory,” takes over and employs countless mythical motifs . . . Even reading includes a mythological function... through reading, the modern man succeeds in obtaining an “escape from time” comparable to the “emergence from time” effected by myths” (1959: 205).

This perspective affirms an important continuity between archaic mythic consciousness and modern imaginative expression, particularly as realised in the mythopoeic mode. Within this framework, works like *Small Gods* do not merely reproduce inherited traditions; rather, they participate in an ongoing symbolic reinterpretation, invoking sacred motifs to interrogate institutional power and redefine the sacred through ideological critique. In this light, mythopoeic fantasy not only affirms Eliade’s assertion that myth is never truly lost but also reinvents its narrative structures to engage with the evolving spiritual and cultural concerns of modernity, particularly in the hands of authors such as Pratchett, who employ mythopoeic fantasy as a critical and imaginative mode of myth-making.

4.CONCLUSION

Fantasy literature, particularly in its mythopoeic mode, serves as a powerful tool for socio-political critique by reworking inherited mythic structures into symbolic responses to contemporary crises, often through imaginative settings that enable authors to articulate cultural anxieties, examine human values, and envision alternative realities. Building on this, recent critical discourse underscores the conceptual fluidity of fantasy, emphasising its capacity to operate simultaneously as a genre and a narrative mode. This flexibility allows mythopoeic fantasy to serve not simply as a storytelling form, but as a dynamic interpretive space, in which traditional mythologies are reimagined and repurposed in response to cultural tensions and ideological uncertainty. Rather than reaffirming established narratives, mythopoeic works strategically use myth to question dominant norms and expose the constructed nature of belief. Drawing on Eliade’s notion that myth reveals sacred order through structured cosmologies and symbolic geographies, mythopoeic fantasy transforms these frameworks to interrogate, rather than legitimise, religious authority. Mythopoeia typically emerges in periods of cultural transition, when confidence in established structures begins to diminish, transforming myth into a medium of critical re-evaluation. This dynamic is evident across Pratchett’s Discworld series, as seen in *Faust Eric* (1990), where he parodies the Faustian legend; in *Witches Abroad* (1991), where he subverts fairy-tale archetypes; and in *Equal Rites* (1987), where he reworks patriarchal traditions of magic. Each example demonstrates how Pratchett demythologises inherited figures and tropes through subversion and reconfiguration. His *Small Gods* exemplifies this tradition by employing myth-making not to stabilise metaphysical truths, but to reveal the fragility of institutional belief and the ideological mechanisms that sustain religious power. Therefore, this study proposes that Pratchett’s novel uses mythopoeic fantasy as a subversive literary mode, one that negates theological orthodoxy, destabilises hierarchical authority, and reframes inherited myths to reflect contemporary concerns.

This study has shown that Pratchett critically reconstructs sacred geography by reimagining the cosmos not as divinely ordered, but as a flat, disc-shaped world carried through space by the cosmic turtle Great A’Tuin—a figure drawn from global mythological traditions, yet recontextualised as a symbol disengaged from transcendental authority and reframed through human perception and existential ambiguity. Through this desacralized cosmos, he questions the fixity of Eliade’s axis mundi, presenting the divine not as transcendent, but as dependent on human belief. In the novel, the collapse of sacred authority is dramatized through the figure of Om, a once-omnipotent deity now reduced to a powerless tortoise. Om’s physical decline and theological confusion highlight the constructed nature of divinity, whose very existence depends on the presence of believers. This portrayal, influenced by mythic models from Norse and Greek traditions, positions the god not as a timeless entity but as a fragile reflection of collective faith. Furthermore, the institutionalisation of myth is embodied in the Omnian Church and its enforcer, Vorbis, whose absolutist control illustrates how sacred narratives can be manipulated to

justify violence and silence opposing voices. Sacred symbols and theological discourse, once intended to convey metaphysical truths, are refigured as mechanisms of ideological control. Myth no longer functions as a place of pluralistic reflection, but is instead reduced, through institutional control, to a rigid doctrinal apparatus, what Lincoln defines as ideology in narrative form, imposed through fear to legitimise authority. Vorbis's suppression of philosophical inquiry and marginalisation of other perspectives reflect the institution's underlying discomfort in relation to the interpretive fluidity of myth. As the narrative progresses, faith shifts away from personal spiritual experience and is redirected toward unquestioning obedience to institutional authority, a transformation mirrored in Om's realisation that the Church evokes greater fear than the deity it professes to serve. To conclude, *Small Gods* demonstrates how mythopoeic fantasy can subvert dominant ideologies by exposing the mechanisms through which religious authority is constructed, preserved, and ultimately undermined. By reconfiguring sacred space, challenging the permanence of divine power, and revealing how myth is instrumentalised by institutional systems, Pratchett repositions myth as a dynamic, human-centred narrative form open to reinterpretation and critique. Therefore, this study affirms that mythopoeic fantasy operates as a subversive literary mode that challenges institutionalised belief systems, deconstructs rigid doctrinal authority, and reimagines myth as a critical medium responsive to religious concerns.

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