

The Magpie:
A Novel as a Medium for the Study of Religion

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Abstract

The Magpie:
A Novel as a Medium for the Study of Religion

Sylvie Babarik

The study of religion can be undertaken using diverse methods. This thesis focuses on the novel as a medium for exploring theoretical, experiential, and fictional materials alongside each other. It is divided into two principle sections. The first is an essay explaining the reasons for choosing the medium of the novel, and exploring its advantages over traditional, non-fiction works. The second section is reserved for the novel itself, an original story that makes use of ideas obtained both through daily experience and formal study.

The novel, entitled The Magpie, tells the story of a woman in search of religious affiliation as a means of grounding and structuring her ideas about God. Her goal pushes her to accept a job in Guatemala, working alongside a Catholic priest and a Protestant missionary. The experience does not yield the desired results. Instead, the main character is forced to come to terms with what she has learned about herself.

One of the goals of writing such a novel is the synthesis of potentially disparate materials, treated both objectively and subjectively by way of a set of characters. By placing the narrative in time, there is also opportunity to imitate the types of transformations that can occur in the mind of individuals. Finally, as students of religion must consider a variety of forms of expression, it further made sense to experiment with a less academic form of written expression.

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PREVIEW

***A Swinging Door for Thought:
The Novel as a Way In and Out of Religion Issues***

In the study of religion, there is room for novels to stand alongside more traditionally academic forms of expression. Though works of fiction may not aim to explain the ways of the real world in quite the same manner, they are particularly flexible in terms of their style and content. Lived events and concerns can be intertwined with made-up scenarios. Furthermore, novels allow for a coexistence of issues so diverse that they would rarely be treated in a single, non-fiction work. These broad ideas legitimize not only the use of works of fiction in the academic study of religion but also justify their creation by students of the field. Those are the beliefs that motivated my writing The Magpie.

In traditional academic essays, there is frequently a demand for precise points to be presented and elaborated through argument. There is also a general expectation that the author will arrive at a definitive conclusion. Though I chose to express matters differently, in writing The Magpie, I still intended to explore a particular set of ideas. As for the ending of the work, it does not present the type of conclusions I would have used in an academic essay. Instead, I tried to create a scenario where my main character, Emma, raises questions and considers issues without finding all of the answers she seeks. I meant to suggest that she would find satisfaction at some later time, beyond the scope of the novel. I considered this valid because life is made up of plenty of partial answers – something occasionally lost in traditional, academic writing.

The Magpie is about a person in search of religion. Emma has some knowledge of Christianity and has some faith but is looking for more of both. One way she goes

about doing so is by linking up with more overtly religious characters. Emma learns what “liberation theology,” Christian dogma, and the role of social justice work can mean to the beliefs of others. I tried to show her swinging back and forth in her feelings about such matters, based, in part on the views of more religious characters. As previously mentioned, I did not intend to have her come to final conclusions. I merely wanted to present her as interested and involved.

In contrast to what I would have done in an academic essay, in writing The Magpie, I did not define terms such as “religion,” or matters related to it. I thought doing so might bog-down the story-telling. I left much to the understanding of the reader. That being said, I did have my own working-definition of religion. I used the term to refer to a human construct made up of elements of tradition, community, and personal belief. I further considered it as a system of ideas and practices, of symbols and reference points that help people determine the ethics of their ways and the reasons for their existence. In the context of the story, I also assumed the term to include a sense of a relationship with God. Though many contemporary theorists avoid speaking of divine figures in their definition of religion, The Magpie’s focus on Christianity means that ideas about God are to be considered.

Christianity is another term that might have required definition in an academic essay. Again, I did not do so in the novel. Aside from concern over slowing down the story, I avoided defining Christianity because I wanted to show, through a variety of characters, how the tradition could mean different things depending on the individual. For example, Emma initially sees it as one in which the place of Jesus as saviour is key. She struggles to adhere to such an idea, something that makes it hard for her to think of

herself a Christian. What she encounters in other characters like Martin and Henry (her two Guatemalan-based bosses), is a view of the faith that focuses more on the teachings of Jesus than on the nature of the man himself. Emma is impressed that both men privilege social justice work over preaching.

Though I wanted the story to touch on Christian values, I did not provide a list of what those entail. Some examples should stand out, such as the idea of helping the poor and promoting social justice. For the most part, however, I left readers free to use their own understanding of what is implied by Christian values. One reason was that I wanted to avoid painting a picture of a character who has figured everything out for herself. Emma does not know which beliefs she is after, nor does she have a clear understanding of the nature of the ethical community to which she is trying to connect more deeply. She is drawn to Christianity based on a feeling that its tenets should be within her grasp because of growing up in a relatively Christian society.

One of the obstacles that Emma faces in trying to deepen her link to Christianity is the belief that she has to attend church every Sunday. Though she tries to improve her attendance record initially, as the story advances, she chooses other Sunday activities – such as spending time with her colleague, Javier. As their relationship goes from platonic to romantic, her drive to go to church is further eroded. She worries that she is acting against the values of the faith. However, as her remaining faith does not disappear she begins to look for a more individual model of religion, separate from potentially puritan community beliefs.

Elements of The Magpie are autobiographical. Like Emma, I spent some time in Guatemala City working for a labour rights group. I too came in contact with

missionaries of various denominations in the area. Writing The Magpie allowed me to reflect on what that time taught me, through both real and invented scenarios. The characters I wrote about were modelled after real-life people, not constrained by them. As for events, those described in the novel were created both to advance the general story and particular ideas. For example, I inspired myself with a unionization drive at a real factory to come up with a scenario that would shake up Emma. In the novel, events are far more violent than they were in reality. If I had described them as I experienced them, Emma's reactions might have seemed disproportionate. As another example, though I did work with a Protestant missionary, I only met Catholic ones in passing. However, for the sake of Emma's religious search, I chose to have her work closely with a Catholic priest. That relationship allowed me to better explore a subject of interest to me.

Intertwining experience and imagination would have been a great deal trickier in an academic essay. Unless there are statements identifying and explaining the fictional elements, those can weaken the overall plausibility of the text. With a novel, on the other hand, I do not believe there is any obligation to represent the world as most people experience it. In fact, had I so desired, I would have been free to insert even more fantastical elements into The Magpie. That being said, it might not have been stylistically effective, given the realistic bent of the rest of the story.

As a further point about style, there are few limits imposed on novels. As a result, I felt justified in experimenting with forms of expression. In The Magpie, I wrote about two different periods of time. I jumped between Emma's stay in Guatemala and the months following the receipt of a letter from the Latin American country – one in

which she is informed of Javier's suicide. That second period is set in her home city of Montreal. Being able to use time and place as aspects of thought-development helped to represent some of the fluctuations of opinion. I wanted readers to notice an evolution in Emma's search for faith as it wavered and evolved.

I began the story in Montreal, at a midway point in the development of some of Emma feelings about religion, a time when she is in a sort of spiritual limbo. To explain her point of view, I had her travel back in time through memories of Guatemala. Those instances also allow me to present some of her opinions on a variety of topics, and allow a partial mapping of events that alter them. In bringing the narrative back to the first period, I tried to show her being shaken out of limbo and slowly advancing into new reflections about what religion can mean for her. One reason this was so desirable to me was that I wanted to present as dynamic ideas about faith, religion, and morals. I wanted to give the impression that it takes time to reach conclusions about such profound issues. I felt that a time-based narrative, one that allows for evolution to be demonstrated, would be more effective in making that point than the type of static exposition often undertaken in non-fiction, essay form.

Writing The Magpie allowed me to consider how a person's emotion can taint an experience. For example, the way that Emma *feels* about the social justice work she does ends up being the main motivating factor in her decisions regarding that work. She quits her television job because she feels that working for a labour rights group in Guatemala will bring her closer to goodness and, therefore, God. When the reality of the work ceases to feed those emotions she finds herself rejecting the work and

returning to her home city and previous job. During the first year after her return to Montreal she feels that the implication of her decision is the end her quest for religion.

Another example of how feelings can affect experience is seen in Emma's rejection of Javier. When she does so, there are emotional implications that also play into her impression of giving up her search for religion. When she had first gotten to know him, she was moved by his opinions about the subject. She thought she would benefit from the way he had lived religion. However, when the two became sexually involved, Emma felt herself drifting away from her quest for faith. Leaving him ended up further accentuating her feelings of guilt. Emma's feelings for and against Javier ended up being a surprising part of her personal search.

Some of the examples previously cited point to the role that contingencies can occupy in a medium like the novel. They are certainly factors in everyday living, but can be left out of other modes of written expression. To further illustrate, Emma had a plan with regards to how she could effectively develop her fledging faith. The people and experiences she encounters distract her from that goal and she reconsiders her aspirations. She turns tail, goes home to Montreal, and only later sees what is left of her search for religion. Again, the cause is a contingency: the arrival of a letter. Life's unpredictable elements are major influences on her views. Writing a novel helped me play with that idea.

Writing The Magpie allowed me to play with different views of "the truth." Emma wants to believe that she did not harm Javier through their relationship and its end. However, she wavers, influenced by a letter in which she is accused of causing him pain. Its author claims that Emma's past actions demonstrated evil and selfish

intentions. This difference of perspective not only provides a reader with options for interpretation, but also allows the main character to reflect on whether or not she judges herself truthfully or is hiding from her real nature.

The Magpie is written in the third person. Clearly, the main view of events is Emma's. However, by avoiding not making Emma the narrator, it was possible to present the perspectives of other characters, without having her mediate the description of all events. For example, near the beginning of the story, I placed her in a setting with a group of more conservative, Protestant church members. She needs their approval in order to secure part of the funding to go to Guatemala. In their discussion, I inserted the idea that some of those church members do not see the point of an organization such as theirs undertaking labour rights work. They consider that it would make more sense to invest in teaching and preaching projects. Emma's is the contrary voice that argues that doing well-intentioned work is similar. It sends the message that a given religion or denomination is a positive force in society. Another instance in which Emma's point of view is challenged by that of other characters is when she begins to question the value of the work of *Modela*. After the violent incidents in the factory, she begins to feel that the labour rights group should be more militant. Other members seemingly disagree, comfortable to stay the course.

Writing a novel allowed me to present observations about real places and concerns alongside someone's subjective view of them. I was able to refer to events like Guatemala's civil war and use a character's point of view to infuse it with specific significance. Though non-fiction essays can also accommodate mixtures of subjective and objective elements, there tends to be the expectation that all views should be

attributed. Novels are looser on this point. Even when I wanted to describe something as being more objective, I did not need to insert explanatory essays within the story. I was free to scatter ideas over a number of pages. I could begin to describe a social justice project like *Modela* in one chapter and complete it only dozens of pages later. This seemed like a natural mode in which to present issues. In daily expression, it is normal to choose information that fits into a certain context or accompanies a point one is trying to make. One can legitimately leave out or save other details for a later time or a different listener. On the other hand, using such a structure posed a new challenge for me: I was forced to balance the need to provide readers with intelligible descriptions without losing touch with the overall story. This meant looking for, or creating a variety of instances in which seemingly objective description could be placed alongside subjective events and emotions.

The latitude allowed by the novel to express differences of opinions is also useful in creating the effect of complexity. Unlike an academic treatment of an issue where the goal is to render intelligible potentially complex elements, the exercise of creative writing allowed me to celebrate the idea that issues and stories are not always straightforward or clear. For example, Emma wants religious structure but does not want to church regularly. She wants to adopt Christian values but does not necessarily do so. Though she feels that the church condemns sex out of wedlock, she only feels guilty about engaging in such actions because she thinks others will disapprove – not because she agrees with such values. As a further example, she is drawn to the moderate and flexible views of Henry and Martin. At the same time, she

hopes the two religious men will help her convert to a more structured faith. She does not think and act consistently in her search for religion.

Exploring theoretical considerations also motivated my writing of The Magpie. I wanted the chance to experiment with some of the ideas that most heavily influenced me during my studies. Three thinkers stood out most in my mind, likely because of how they helped me interpret my own experiences and thoughts. Gregory Baum, Gustavo Gutierrez, and Paul Tillich are not frequently linked together. However, they all played a role in the formation of some of the ideas I used while writing the novel. Like my main character, I allowed myself to act like a magpie, collecting bits and pieces of religion and faith and putting them together with experienced and imagined events. Elements of Gutierrez, Tillich, and Baum showed up within the nest of notions that I built.

To each of the three aforementioned authors, there are a number of ideas I can single out as particularly influential for me and the writing of the novel. Gutierrez was an important source in considering the connection between the Christian faith and social justice work. He also influenced me in some of my reflections on the challenge that poverty poses to faith, the spirit of ecumenism, and north-south power relations.

I was first introduced to the writings of Gustavo Gutierrez while in Central America. Two of the people that I got to know the best described him as a pivotal figure in the emergence of social justice projects in the area. I later learned more about his theories during the course of my studies. In writing The Magpie, I found it useful to have a theorist to fall back on in considering the role that social justice work played within the minds of religious people.

As one of the best-known voices of Liberation Theology, Gutierrez argues for a connection between basic belief in God and thoughts and actions that reflect caring for oppressed groups. “The mystery is revealed through contemplation and solidarity with the poor; it is what we call the first act.” More methodical and theoretical discourse about God follows from there as a second step (Gutierrez, 1999). This idea is in line with what my main character attempts to do with her seemingly small amount of faith. She has a basic belief in God, is hoping to attach herself to a more organized religious view, and considers that social justice work may be part of her way into such a state. Though the theory does not lead her directly to her goal, it was my intent to have it validated through the characters of Martin and Henry. Though coming from different perspectives, both were devoting their lives as church members to working for the poor.

Some of Gutierrez’ warnings about poverty challenging faith are also represented in The Magpie. The character of Javier presents an ambiguous attitude towards religion, in part, because of his situation as a poor man. He grows up with a religious mother, but recounts a crisis of faith emerging out of the inconsistency between the messages he heard in church and his unfortunate reality. Javier is an example of the problem that Gutierrez describes as the difficulty of proclaiming God as Father in an inhuman world. Gutierrez considers it difficult to raise people up as sons and daughters of God when their society lowers them to the status of “non-people” (Gutierrez, 1973). As someone from one of Guatemala’s marginalized economic classes, Javier echoes some of these concerns. He struggled to believe the idea, claimed in the Bible and by many church leaders, that God favours the poor. Like others, he considered that there had to be some proof of that in his life. Like Gutierrez, he felt the

message of God had to be related to life on earth, not simply a life yet to come. It is only when Javier hears a new priest speak, one with a more earthly focus, that he finds a place in his mind for God.

There were other aspects of Gutierrez's thought that I found useful in creating my characters. In the case of Martin, I wanted to demonstrate that people could be members of a seemingly conservative tradition, yet live their religion and lives in a very modern manner. He is a member of the Roman Catholic institution, but does not live that membership in an absolute manner. I met a number of Martin-like characters in Central America. They neither reneged on their vows nor seemed singular in their support of the larger church if it seemed in contradiction to the needs of the poor. They spoke more about the need for economic and social justice projects than they did about outright religion. On the other hand, the two goals likely went hand-in-hand in their minds. In Nicaragua, I met a pair of nuns who had set up a community centre to help train people for the work-place, offering courses in everything from computers to sewing. Others nuns I encountered focused their efforts on teaching literacy and mathematical skills to Guatemala's highly marginalized native women. The task pitted them against other, more conservative members of the male clergy. In The Magpie, I make mention of priests working with coffee growing communities. I met such people, and heard them discuss the need to fight for better wages and working conditions for those living in their communities.

In addition to putting into practice some of the ideas of Liberation Theology, the Catholics I met in Central America believed that ecumenism was a worthwhile path for their church to follow – an attitude shared by Gutierrez. What I witnessed time and time

again were Protestants and Catholics working together, without any sense of a clash of traditions. That observation pushed me to represent similar types of interactions in the novel – hence the friendship and partnership of Martin the priest and Henry the Protestant missionary. Though they do not pray together, they do indeed work together. Put otherwise, they pray for the same things. In helping marginalized factory workers, they give no thought to which denomination will be best served. They seek a form of good that does not get bogged down by labels. They go so far in their liberal-mindedness that they do not even appear to bring their religion into their work.

The relationship between the wealthier north and the poorer south is another topic in the novel inspired by Gutierrez. In some of his earlier writings, he seems to look for solidarity from the north because of the impact that wealthier countries have on the economies of poorer, southern states. At the same time, he makes it clear that the main drive of social and economic reform should come from within the southern context in which a problem is lived. The people of the south should act as masters of their own history. I approach the topic through characters from the different geographic areas. Emma and Henry are both northern characters, though he is firmly implanted in Guatemala, while she is essentially passing through. Still, both want to help improve the lives of southern people. The rest of the *Modela* employees are all southern representatives, only a little wealthier than most of their compatriots. Still, they too are working for the betterment of poor Guatemalans.

Though Gutierrez is very much influenced by the model of class struggle presented in Marxism, he calls for a Latin American model, better able to account for the role of foreign governments in the region. He also wants a model for improvement

that is sensitive to the type of oppression that native peoples have suffered in many of the area's states. (Gutierrez, 1973) I did not flesh out such ideas in a particularly overt way in the novel, but rather through the voices of characters like Maria-Elena and Javier. For example, in one of their first candid discussions, Javier puts Emma on the spot by demanding to know what she thinks she can bring to his country that locals cannot. He also points out that her solidarity with the poor is something she is free to end at any time, suggesting that her help is something she gives when it is convenient. Though she offers some gentle rebuttals, she cannot negate the truth of his words. She knows that she enjoys preferential treatment as an employee from the north. As well, she acknowledges that working for Guatemala's marginalized people is something that she is not likely to do for more than about a year. At the same time, she does not feel ashamed of the admissions because she can assure Javier that her actions and intentions are valid. She also feels that she has good, selfish reasons for being there: she is searching for religion and ethics. Furthermore, she knows that even if she is not planning to do foreign social justice work forever, she is open to a lasting mental transformation.

As Emma learns more about the taboos and prejudices of her temporary, southern home, she eventually realises that there is something that she can offer Javier that local women have not yet given him. She is willing to stand beside him as a girlfriend, knowing that many people see him as poor and unattractive. He claims that a female friend of his had rejected a romantic engagement with him because of his poverty. With Emma, on the other hand, he loses his feeling of belonging only in

certain spheres. He becomes relaxed about going to places that he would have previously avoided because of his economic status.

Whereas the words of Gustavo Gutierrez were particularly useful in exploring some of the social issues of religion and justice, Paul Tillich's treatment of faith and religion inspired some of the individual and internal debates at work within the character of Emma. In particular, his theories acted as an important counter-weight in her search for adherence to organized religion. His was one of the religious, yet liberalizing voices that helped me decide that she could come to peace with her inability to take in Christianity in the way that she initially felt to be necessary. His view of religion deemphasises some of the theological aspects of traditions, putting far more emphasis on the mindset of individuals. He refers to faith as a state of "ultimate concern" (Tillich, 1957). Emma may not see how she can fit herself into religion, or fit religion into her, but she knows she is immensely concerned about it.

Tillich's is also a voice in favour of scepticism and questioning of faith. It is in the name of faith that he promotes a certain type of doubt: "If faith is understood as being ultimately concerned, doubt is a necessary element in it. It is a consequence of the risk of faith" (Tillich, 1957). Emma doubts herself, her concept of God, and the implications of her faith in her life. At the same time, it is doubt that propels her on her search for greater faith, as opposed to being a factor that discourages her.

Emma is a character who grows up in a context where religion is not forced on people. She is exposed both to ideas promoting belief in God and others that reject his existence and relevance. The former are too often presented as simplistic, for her taste, while the latter are not persuasive enough to push her into a state of confident belief.

Tillich seems sympathetic to such conundrums. In The Courage to Be, he admits to doing away with particular concepts of God. He understands how they can clash with other aspects and ideas of the modern world. For him, faith in God is that which remains after all the other notions of God have been proven inadequate. Mystical experiences alone are not enough to compensate for the role of earnest scepticism. (Tillich, 1952) This idea would have given a character like Emma some peace of mind, and eventually does. However, when she decides to go to Guatemala, she is dealing with frustration over her impression that mystical experience, or at least belief in the mystical, is key to religious faith. Moreover, it is something that she sees as accessible to others but not to her. It does not occur to her that a Christian, or someone of another denomination, could have faith and be sceptical at the same time. She does not recognize that “theism can mean the unspecified affirmation of God,” as claims Tillich. (Tillich, 1952).

Another aspect of Tillich’s thought that I found useful in imagining Emma’s spiritual angst is the idea of religion as a potential “escape into authority.” Part of what Emma is looking for is a set of rules to better discern good from evil. She thinks she wants a belief structure to which she can answer. I imagine that Tillich would have warned her against seeking religion for those reasons. He might have considered her search part of the “dissolutions of universals and the inability of the isolated individual to develop the courage to be as oneself” (Tillich, 1952). Such a critique would not necessarily have startled Emma. She knows that she is struggling with her identity, both in the sense of what she believes, and in terms of the socio-economic group to which she feels most connected. She imagines that religious rules could serve as default

positions when the ethics and beliefs become difficult to negotiate on her own. However, she finally realizes that neither the claims of others nor her own efforts at imposing a set of morals are enough to shame her into some new way of being. She has to accept who she is, even if she does not understand it.

The notion of “acceptance” also harkens back to Tillich’s writing. He suggests that it is one of man’s greatest challenges with regards to faith in God. He claims that what can separate a person from God, as well as self and neighbour, is the feeling of being unlovable and not deserving acceptance.

You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you’ll find it later. Do not do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything, do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted! (Tillich, 1952).

This is part of the conclusion to which Emma must come. In returning home, she acknowledges to herself that her search for God in Guatemala and in its residents may not have had sufficient basis. However, her apparent failure had less to do with other people and places than with her own state of being. Finding faith may not have been her quest to undertake, or at least not in as overt a fashion as she attempts. She starts to recognize that it may be the product of a ripening of the mind, something that occurs at its own rate, or a rate determined by God. Echoing Tillich, it may not have been up to her to “do anything,” “perform anything,” or “seek anything.” All along, all she needed to do was accept herself. Even when faced with the accusatory words of the letter she receives, it is not up to Emma to take any steps. The only challenge she needs to take on is to accept that she is accepted. One of the concluding ideas of the story is that if she relaxes her expectations she may be able to find spiritual satisfaction down the road.

When my main character contemplates faith and religion, she tends to bounce between the personal and more social points of view. Gregory Baum strikes me as a thinker particularly apt at doing the same thing. Some of his writings reflect similar social justice concerns as those of Gutierrez, albeit from a more northern point of view. At the same time, I felt certain links back to Tillich, particularly with regards to more individual feeling about religion. Finally, I appreciated having his voice as one that favours membership in faith communities.

In Compassion and Solidarity, Baum considers some of the effects of Vatican II and movements like Liberation Theology on wealthy northerners. He explains how the idea of solidarity with the poor can leave those who are better off feeling guilty and spiritually abandoned by God. He claims that they can enter their own type of disillusionment, the “via negativa,” a state of despair that can last for a short time or can lead to complete rejection of God (Baum, 1987). Emma goes through a process like the one Baum describes. Unable to feel like she is doing the right things to get close to God through solidarity with the poor, she withdraws from the search. She leaves her work at the labour rights group and goes back to Canada. She resumes her better-paying, amoral job without thinking if it will impact her relationship with God. What she goes through is not quite the crisis of faith described by Baum, but she is forced to to suspend her search for faith. Her attempts to work for the poor, live in a poor country, and love a poor man all seem futile. She is unable to force her mind and heart to comply. She basically abandons the search for organized religion, retreating into a position where God may exist but is irrelevant to her daily life. However, after a year’s time and a shocking letter, she begins to awaken to new possibilities. God may not take the shape

in her life that she had previously wanted, but that does not make him fully absent. The story ends with the idea that she may have a chance at a real, albeit less formal relationship with God. She relaxes her expectations enough to open her mind to forgiveness and to guidance from the world around her.

Baum's presentation of the idea of transcendence also helped me in writing the novel. I appreciate the way he talks of sensitivity to the divinity of daily life. Like many other theologians, he calls for a concept of God that is "in and through," as opposed to "over and above." He presents the idea of prayer as a time of listening, as much as one of talking. He also believes people should demonstrate an openness to speech from God as found in the everyday, not just from sacred spaces (Baum, 1987). This is one of the ideas I tried to use in shaping Emma's search. For example, she initially considers Javier as a potential voice of God, presumably a fully unconscious one. He affects her soul with his poems.

Martin and Henry are also meant to embody a mode of religious living that is very much grounded in casual, daily experiences. Emma sees them as the sort of people who should radiate faith without even trying. I wanted to show her looking for sources of religion outside of sacred spaces, as Baum suggests is necessary. He goes on to explain that "hidden in our encounters with other people and in historical events is a voice not of our own making that addresses us" (Baum, 1987). This is an idea that Emma understands but still ends up trying to bring about in a deliberate manner.

Baum also served as a voice against which Emma can react. He is apparently among those Christian thinkers who believe that the "gracious call" of faith is one easy to hear when one surrenders to it. He also believes that "surrender" is easy (Baum,

1987). Not so for Emma. Part of the reason she takes steps as drastic as moving to Guatemala and teaming up with missionaries is that her attempts to surrender at home lead to little more than frustration. Reading about religion and attending church did not make it possible for her. Her mind is too full of choices and doubt.

Despite his mention of surrender as being a simple act, in other texts, Baum does seem sensitive to some of the challenges posed by organized religion to the critical mind. In looking at many books of the Bible, he points out how often there are calls for redemption, beginning with the Hebrew prophets and carrying on with the ideas of Jesus. He also cites a number of stories denouncing idolatrous, hypocritical, and legalistic belief systems.

The Bible paints a highly ambivalent picture of religion. The faith of people is ever threatened by various religious trends that undermine their openness to divine truth and falsify their understanding of the human world. It is possible to read the scriptures as a textbook on the pathology of religion (Baum, 1975).

This idea might also lead someone like Baum to warn a character like Emma against her initial mission in Guatemala. He might suggest that turning to ceremonies and commandments to try and establish a clearer link with God will only lead her to a false trust, were she to succeed at all. He understands that the legal elements of religion can help “proclaim and protect God’s liberating presence in the religious community,” but he does not see that as absolute. At the same time, he does not seem to bend as much as Tillich to the individual nature of a faith. He seems to believe in more subjective forms of faith, but not to the point of abandoning those common points that lead to communities.

Theologians who insist that Christianity is only God inspired faith, hope and love, and that the visible, social expression of these attitudes is always and

inevitably a betrayal of the gospel, prevent Christians from coming to a critical self-understanding and in the long run weaken in them the sense of responsibility for their own communities” (Baum, 1975).

Emma might have been tempted to grumble back at Baum’s statement. She wishes to connect to a religious community, and fails to figure out how to do so. For her, the idea that God could remain relevant outside of clear social expression is helpful.

Being able to collect and reject elements from both experience and theory was a major reason for writing The Magpie, it was not to shape Emma or her fellow characters into personifications of the specific ideas. Still, thinkers like Gutierrez, Tillich, and Baum acted as inspiration and as imaginary sounding boards. I regularly caught myself considering how they might have reacted to my invented scenarios. Sometimes I paraphrased them, sometimes I simply used them to propel my own thoughts forward. This was an advantage afforded me by the medium of the novel. I was both challenged and liberated by the possibility of gathering together elements from my studies with events and considerations that preceded them.

There is no question in my mind that I could have produced a traditional academic thesis. I could have written about the implications of Liberation Theology for missionary work in Central America. Alternatively, I could have produced a work on different views of religion and faith, and where the two notions overlap. As third possibility, I could have written a research paper about the role of religion and geography on identity. However, I did not want to limit myself to any one of these topics. By writing a novel, I was able to experiment with all of them in a single work. It has proven to be an opportunity I had never chanced upon before, outside of the unfinished work of living my life.