
PARANORMAL AND RELIGIOUS AS PART OF POP-CULTURAL CONSUMERISM

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to interpret and analyse urban fantasy as an important current cultural form in connection to thesis that products of culture (pop culture included) represent significant and operational elements of culture. Pop culture offers entertainment and as well the collective participation in sharing of the experienced and the tasted. Paranormal urban fantasy genre represents a live and dynamical complex set of collectively shared symbolic representations with specific poetics, rhetoric and narratives. The aim of study is provided insight on context, in which the stories about paranormal reflects new spirit orientation of contemporary, the so called 'hypermodern times'. Recipients, especially female, used popular culture as a source of meaning: it helped them to make sense of their everyday lives and provided them with a vision of what an 'ideal life' might be about. Popular culture's stories about paranormal might provide a framework for recipients (both religious and no-so-religious) to think about religion and sacrum.

Keywords: creative industry, pop-culture, romance, religion, sacrum

1. Introduction

Popular culture is an inherent part of the world we live in, the result of the activities of creators, an object of reception or consuming, but also a market-evaluated system. We should consider as notable condition for diffusion of popular culture post-industrialization, the 'postmodern situation' (that has been transformed into a hypermodern times), changes in the perception of values (post-materialism, secularization and new religiosity) as well as the emancipation and pluralization of different 'world views'. Religion did not evade these changes either and it has become a part of consumer culture. Believers are more individualistic and they can make choices about what to believe in or not. The consequence of these social and cultural shifts towards spirituality and religion in the West is relativisation of the strong belief and understanding of the religion as matter of personal choice.

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2. Pulp ‘paranormal urban fantasy’ romance as a genre of pop-culture

Popular culture reinforces existing attitudes and ways of living of many recipients. It is an important source of information about social roles; it uncovers standards of acting, and strengthens/weakens social stability. At the same time, it facilitates the communication, presentation and uncovering of new models and formulas of acting. A. Possamai states that in the contemporary cultural situation (analysed by G. Lipovetsky as ‘hypermodern’), pop-culture is also a source of innovations for religiosity and religions [1]. G.L. Harmon suggests that the qualitative parameters of pop-cultural artefacts cannot be schematized simply as entertainment, as pop culture differs from other fields/dimensions of culture (in traditional reflection, foremost high, elite and mass) in its functions [2]. Popular culture – or pop-culture – is a part of a mass and consumer culture, but it can also be exploited as a source and an inspiration for creating patterns and norms of acting and behaving. Through reference to pop-culture, people are able to place themselves socially and culturally. Popular culture provides symbolic languages (and sometimes rituals, too) through which people communicate with others and perform their identities.

There are some very specific products in pop-culture: stories about paranormal and supernatural. Victoria Nelson ironically states that: “Paranormal, of course, is one of those great twentieth-century euphemism, like extra dimensional, that gives the old-fashioned supernatural a quasi-scientific spin.” [3] The popularization of new forms of spirituality and religiosity is connected with diffusion of the concepts of cultivating the human spiritual capacities. According to A. Possamai, as visual representation of those cultural trends, act superheroes with superpowers [1, p. 88]. In contemporary urban fantasy romance most of heroes are heroines. Paranormal fantasy romances belong to top-selling cultural products and they provided for contemporary female readers and recipients a framework to think about sacrum and/ or religion. The mixture of popular culture and selected symbols from religions, mythology, folk tales and pulp literature was shaped into a true cultural hybrid: paranormal urban fantasy romance. Even there are the basic definitions though the term itself, there are many examples that shift, transcend or even creatively negate already used *cliché*.

Paranormal urban fantasy romance has been established on crossroads of literature for women and fantastic stories with a touch of mystery or horror. As a subgenre, fantasy romance respects some specific symbolic conventions and *cliché* of the fantasy and romance. It is the example of *bricolage* that demonstrates how to create a new meaning from well-known and used symbols and meanings and proves the irreplaceability of the right publisher and of a well-set marketing campaign. Vampires, werewolves and witches do not roam in the woods of Neverland or in the dark mysterious groves, but in a contemporary city – or its ruins. Urban fantasy populated the scenery of the current post-industrial city with werewolves moving from the abandoned ruins into suburban zones of (mainly) the American mid-west to search for their own ‘American dream’. One

does not need to look for ghosts, pixies or elves in dark forests, as they serve customers in a local fast-food restaurant. At the graduation ball of a high school, vampires dance with witches, while a gorgeous fairy is the prom queen. And, there are vampires, who are the most noticeable from of all sorts of notorious paranormal beings (except zombies).

Urban fantasy utilizes specific fictional universes as one of its basic attributes. The narrations are taking place in familiar everyday, routine city environment, but this setting is 'enriched' through special experiences, exceptional superpowers or by paranormal course of events (magic practicing, seeing and communicating with dead, raising and laying ghosts etc.). Although narratives show some resemblance to our world, they bring components that our everyday experience defines as empirically unverifiable, such as paranormal beings, magic and superheroes with superpowers [4]. In commercially successful urban fantasy romances, even the narration itself changed significantly: it turns into the *STORY*. Primarily, the narration in *urban fantasy romance* is choreography of visually attractive and provocative desirable images. In contrast to its predecessors (myths, legends, or fairy tales), the contemporary story lacks an aspiration to encourage readers to develop their spiritual self by *imitation* of ideal, defined by religions or culture. Primary function of pop-cultural artefacts is to evoke a desire to watch, buy, experience and consume, not to initiate a follow-up (*imitatio*). In her works, H. Pravdová warns us about the consequences of the afore(mentioned) trends in the field of media culture [5]. Paradoxically, the desire to consume a popular product initiated the formation of a specific group of female recipients who set out to (illegally) digitize printed books: the red library and urban fantasy romances belong among the most popular illegally created and downloaded products on the Czech and Slovak book market [4].

3. Fatal passion, sexual desire and pleasure from reading

Paranormal urban fantasy romance is perceived as a subgenre aimed at a specific group: the recipients are primarily women; they are primarily produced by women and women are also the key agents and heroines. The 'female' in literature and culture represents an object of reflections and analyses of female and male theoreticians of the second half of the 20th century that cannot be overlooked. Despite the slow emancipation of reading as an accepted leisure activity for women, the reading woman was a desirably undesired phenomenon: while the woman was reading, she did not dedicate her time to activities corresponding with the expectations of her social and cultural environment and the stereotyped idea of a 'good woman'. J. Pearson suggests that at the end of the 18th century, the discussion about women reading books had a form of a discussion about morality and the nature of the reading subject. While virtuous women were searching for consolation in the Bible and religious books, shifty and promiscuous women found pleasure in frivolous romantic stories [6]. A good woman should 'take up the needle' by choice and resists the temptation of

‘pure pleasure’ of reading – as Jacqueline Pearson stated ironically [6, p. 2-6]. The advocates of reading as a socially justifiable activity argued that reading requires ‘employment’ of the mind and as a rationalized process it detracted women from dreaming and sexual desire. While men read primarily in their studies, reading women moved to boudoirs and beds. Within the concept of the modern *civilité*, reading in bed became an accepted free-time activity practiced individually, subjectively and daily [7].

The paperbacks of the so-called *red library* or *the harlequin* were the ‘embodiment’ of a frivolous, unintellectual and banal product primarily designed for women. The female reader of this type of cultural products was the subject of the in-depth qualitative research of J.A. Radway [8]. She discovered that the institutionalized form (and as she pointed only *slightly changing contents*) is related to the function romance has in the cultural system. Narrations about *damsel in distress* formulated and reproduced the patterns of idealized patriarchal relationships between the heterosexual pair consisting of an active male (hero and saviour) and a female, passive and expecting to be saved. In her analysis of the so-called ‘feminine genres’, D. Holmes asks whether women reading romance need to seek for essential vindicating (theoretical) justifications for the social acceptance of reading of this type of products even today or whether the genre of romance is more creative a free than the boundaries of the genre might suggest [9].

While paranormal urban fantasy romance has been a part of literature for women for only three decades, its evolutionary predecessors (as a romance with an aspect of fantasticism or gothic romance) are several centuries old. The post-modern mentality enriched the genre of romance with new settings and elements, like the post-industrial city, broad area of the fantasy and miscellaneous paranormal activities. Blood, tears and sex were significant spices in the subgenres of romance since gothic romance and they defend their place in postfeminist urban fantasy romance of late 20th century. Further persisting are burning passion, undying desire and deep lustful characters. Dark and mysterious heroes – „*mad, bad and dangerous to know*“ (as lady Caroline Lamb described her lover, lord Byron, in her diary) – play a key role in relaxing emotions, morals and imaginations of innocent and virtuous female readers who are in their ordinary dailyness tied down by the intimidating mechanisms of the concept of *civilité* within its idealized representations of ‘good woman’. In the genre of urban fantasy, authors work with the model (female) readers which are accepting the existence of a different reality more vividly. Within fiction reality of subgenre, all the rationalized institutionalized limitations of modern logic are not valid anymore. Heroines can devote themselves to their passions, desires, heroism, love, sex without any restrictions, limitations, reproach, consequences or implications. In other words, they are allowed to do everything, that (in the words of S. Freud) culture and civilization considered to be too natural and outside *civilité*.

Love, passion, lust and danger are idealized and glorified. A. Possamai suggests that if the recipients promote their object of interest into a position of fetish, many perceptual and consumerist strategies and activities acquire 'pseudo-religious' functions. They are manifested through general conceptions ('*imaginary doxa*' according A. Possamai) nested within the fantasies of everyday life fed by fictional worlds [1, p. 89]. In paranormal romances, there is the visual representation of beautiful, sexually attractive heroines which captured heart (or bed) hers idealized other as the key *imaginary doxa*. By the turn of the 21st century, the paranormal urban fantasy romantic story had expanded its territory across almost all media platforms of pop-culture. The 'brightest-shining stars' are those that are outside the boundaries of reality, everydayness, conventions and taboo. Thus, it probably is not a coincidence that an urban vampire, a werewolf and/or a witch are a repeated visual metaphor. They represent relativised sexual morality, they manifest the formula of romanticized tribalism and nomadism [10], and they defy death, old age and disease, thus emphasizing eternal youth and beauty. A pop-cultural urban vampire, a post-punk witch or a fearless alpha male (which, in case of werewolves, is not a semantically acceptable stereotype, rather an expected visual representations) are strongly eroticized, visually attractive and desire-stirring representatives of hypermodern individualism [4].

4. When to lust and to love have equal value in urban fantasy romance

'Babbling about relationships' (or some lush and detailed descriptions of active fulfilment of loving each other) remains an attractive, sensually expected or even a story-creating element of the story itself. In the history of human production, the motive of romantic love stands out as an apotheosis of human existence: it affects lives, organizes memories, and constructs meanings. The basis for a traditionally typed projection is a scenario in which a woman and a man find their idealized other. According to Angela Ndalians, blood, tears and sex represent the three symbolic manifestations of basic emotions, around which many metanarratives unravel [11]. Anthony Giddens suggests that since the end of the 18th century, the ideal pattern of romantic love 'for all time' has been established in the Euro-American culture, and romances with, among other semantic layers, a sexual dimension have also participated in its diffusion [12]. The stories about love are not only part of the history of narration and narrative strategies, but they also participate in the creation of a prosthetic memory [13], i.e. the memories a human being did not experience, but adopted them from narrations.

The myth of a romantic love of a heterosexual pair fortifying the institution of normative heterosexuality is also a part of prosthetic metanarratives. The romantic love of a heterosexual pair has represented an unchangeable and undisputed value in the dynamics of the changes of the modern world, in which the value of everything is openly and publicly discussed. Narrations on romantic love are a part of producing and reproducing

systems and formulas through which we define ourselves and through which we are defined and, as Lisa Fletcher pointed out, they fortify the hegemony of heteronormativity [14]. Paperback's 'novels for maids' (as Karel Čapek called them [15]) and the contemporary *urban fantasy* romances are a part of a metanarrative that has an important (though criticized by some both male and female theoreticians) function in culture.

Angela Ndalians discusses the radicalized mixing of love, sex and the romantic in the *urban fantasy* romances in the context of losing one's ability to distinguish between emotional expressions because tears, shudder and arousal have similar visible manifestations [11, p. 80]. So, in case of *urban fantasy romance*, the identity of the genre itself is schizophrenic: the same story can be labelled as a romance, horror but also as a detective or adventure story in bookshops. What makes the new subgenres of romance attractive for the contemporary female readers, if it reproduces the stereotypes and formulas of institutionalized normative heterosexuality? "Romance...deals with serious ethical questions: how to reconcile the fierce egoism of sexual and emotional drives with social responsibility, how to negotiate the boundaries between self and other, between loving desire and possessive control, between fascination with and fear of difference" [9, p. 19]. Diana Holmes suggests that *romantic* in literature does not reflect reality, but it is rather a medium that influences how a person 'reads' the everyday reality and perceives social events. Reading of romances is not comparable to drinking Coca-Cola which, as we know, tastes good, but it is not particularly healthy. Romance creates "a fictional space where women can address fears and anxieties raised by the conditions of their lives, and define positive values by imagining pleasurable solutions" and offers "a glimpse of how relations with the other may be" [9, p. 120, 139]. Even if romance is opium for the masses of female readers, sophisticated readers cherish the cognitive peculiarities offered by the fictional world, while the mass audience focuses on the 'may' and 'should'. Janice A. Radway explains that the pleasure on the pages of books for a reader reading romances is *a promise of a conceptual hope* [8] or *imaginary doxa*, quite steady attached to prosthetic memory. Conceptual hope could be found in the stories about love and lust which can be perfect and last forever, even in age of uncertainty and reflexivity (as the current period marked Zygmunt Bauman).

5. Woman in urban fantasy romance - just object for lustful gaze?

The end of the 20th century brought about a radical reform of the genre of romance: the invasion of mixed explicit sex and the supernatural power in the series of L. Hamilton about vampire-executioner named Anita Blake. This super-woman heroine first appeared in book called *Guilty Pleasures* in 1993 and she openly claimed that she did not date vampires, but executed them. A woman who did not suppress her aggression, she had the weapons and the reasons justifying their use and the legitimating to mask the killing as an act of a legally enforceable execution, became a controversial literary bestseller. „...she packs

more firepower than a small army, but is a dedicated Christian; she's tough-as-nails yet ultrafeminine; she tangles with seriously dangerous supernatural forces, but she's as matter of fact about dealing with magic as she is about bashing bad guys, and she's as quick with a quip as she is with a well-placed kick to the groin" – in these words Publishers Weekly announced the publishing of *Obsidian Butterfly* in March 2000 [Obsidian Butterfly Review, Publishers weekly, 03.01.2000, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-441-00684-7>]. The first nine books of the series in which woman openly and vividly narrating about killing, sex and relationships as a first-person narrator were an unexpected commercial success.

Today are part of bookmarkers' offer stories of other characters as Mercedes 'Mercy' Thompson (Patricia Briggs' series), Kate Daniels (Ilona Andrews' series), Dante Valentine and Jill Kismet (Lilith Saint-Crow's series) – and many more. In stories like those, recipients find new type of pop cultural heroine. In contrast to women in 'harlequins' waiting to be saved from all the dangers of the contemporary world by their 'idealized other', *urban fantasy* heroines are self-sufficient professionals who do not need their male counterpart as a Saviour and Messiah, but they desire him physically. Other specific aspect is eroticisation include testing new formulas of sexual relationships: promiscuity, hedonism, *carpe diem*, the cult of a young, beautiful and in all aspects perfectly functioning body. The so-called **ethics of the moment** (or 'ethical immorality' by some critics) was introduced by the French sociologist Michel Maffesoli in his provocative study *L'ombre de Dionysos: Contribution à une sociologie de l'orgie* could be considered their common denominator [10].

In comparison to representation of superwomen in other, alternative genres, *urban fantasy* romance established a new stereotype of woman: successful, tough and lustful. In the words of the established writer Lilith Saint-Crow: "Leather-clad chicks kicking ass in an urban environment where some form of 'magic' is part of the world. There. That's about it." [L. Saint-Crow, *Angry chicks in leather*, Pat's fantasy hotlist, 16.12.2008, <http://fantasyhotlist.blogspot.sk/2008/12/ad-lib-column-lilith-saintcrow.html>] In the fictional worlds of *urban fantasy* romance, pragmatic and rationalizing limits of 'everyday life' do not apply. Violence and sex became games from which women are no longer shut out or disqualified. And so the new visual representation of a **superwoman** has become the conceptual hope or model for expected behaviour for many female readers of *urban fantasy* romances. Experts link the visual representations of a superwoman in pop culture of the late 20th century with the diffusion of certain theses of second-wave feminism in the cultural environment of the Western society. But the strong woman has been appearing as a motive since the so-called 'pulp genres' of mass culture of the 19th century.

The artefacts featuring pop-cultural heroines cannot match high culture in aesthetic or artistic merits, yet, in many cases, they outmatch it by a more progressive adaptation of topics and also by engaging a wider group of female recipients than works with an openly feminist meaning classified as 'high

literature'. Pop-cultural narrations offer a material on the background of which female readers can analyse their own actions, values and beliefs knowing that even the binary opposition of good and evil is in essence just a culturally conditioned *cliché*. A part of the female recipients is fascinated by the fact they are entertained by the openly presented violence or sexual promiscuity of female heroines, but, as a part of consumerist pop culture, it does not force them to adopt a moral attitude or standpoint (even though the readers can do so, naturally).

In the forms of mainstream visual culture, the female element is often 'existence for the gaze': the woman looks 'damn sexy' even when performing physically demanding activities. 'Male gaze' is still present in the means by which the female is visualized in the current mainstream culture. Pop-cultural tough woman demonstrated that woman could look lustful and sexy even if she is dirty, sweat and bloody after brutal physical combat with monster or villain. Although tough strong woman characters were part of culture, what has changed is that they are appearing in real life, too. Heroines of urban fantasy romances on the covers of paperbacks present their own tough bodies with 'six-pack abs' and impressive physiques and they look like they should kill you. Those so-called '*Macho Macho Femme*' [16] are challenging the male monopoly on power, aggression and sex-based control. These changes in the representation are part of social and cultural changes in 'real life' and they are related to the change of real woman's roles in Western society. A physically attractive, manifestly female, primarily heterosexual middle- or high-class woman of Caucasian type has become the visual representation of urban fantasy romance heroine.

As boundaries of '*romance*' dictate, heroine needs the friendship of other women or is even balancing between friendship and love with another woman and men. A part of the production of urban fantasy romances has in many cases already transcended the boundaries of eroticism and openly tends towards pornography (for example the series of Laurell Hamilton about Anita Blake). Evil-eyed and primitively carnal vampires and barefaced and explicit eroticism are among the most obvious motives allowing to attract the interest of the viewers (and to fulfil the desire of the female readers and viewers). The shift in values, which M. Maffesoli labelled as the turn to Dionysus, is also related to the ethics of the moment. New ethics is seeking for ways to capitalize on one's desires in accordance with the social formulas and expectations, as it does not prioritize any specific value-based formula and it does not disqualify the carriers of different formulas or values. According to M. Maffesoli, narrations in pop-cultural urban fantasy romances uncover the vulnerability of a rationalizing, rigid operation. Within fictional worlds, the boundaries of ethics and morale are being tested (or redefined) so that they will not stagnate in the schemas of prohibitions, commands and orders [10]. Ethics of the moment is manifested as the refusal of the consequences of the linearly passing time: eternal beauty and youth of vampires, powerful bodies of the werewolves and the physical perfection of heroines. They also correspond to the narcissism and juvenilization of the current society, to the obsession with visually attractive images. Another

attribute is related to the adoration of *here and now* (*hic et nunc*), and the focus on the moment. Slavomír Gálik associated this with the dissolution of historic consciousness and with the spread of the influence of media [17].

Even if visual representation of heroines can be rooted in stereotyped female roles, they can simultaneously challenge such images. Pop culture offers a new formula for the super-woman as an ideal that is focused, more easily achievable by other women and not intimidating for the 'truly masculine'. The female heroine is not a ('typically male') lonely wolf, or, semantically more correctly, a she-wolf. A superwoman is not as tough to make her masculine environment nervous or jealous (including the potential readers). Urban fantasy romances present the superwoman as a new type of a representing stereotype through easily recallable properties and attributes that have already gained the structure of the iconography of super-womanism. The social and family background of a middle-class heroine 'guarantees' some important attributes, like good education and, relatedly, morality and even religious beliefs in some cases (rather a personal metaphysic authority than an organized religion or church in the context of the new religiosity influenced by the post-modern). Many heroines presented in the paranormal urban fantasy romance originate in prescribed social boundaries. The active model of action and the danger they face every day match the role of a mate, lover or partner, but they are partially exclusive with the role of a mother: maternity remains the conceptual hope of female (super-) heroines.

The new type of (super-) woman heroines indicates the manner in which certain women processed some specific theses of feminism, foremost the inevitability of autonomy and, at the same time, the 'eternally female' desire for a satisfying love-life and perhaps even a family. Through the fates of selected fictional heroines, it facilitates understanding the worries related to the inevitability of fighting for one's position in a predominantly masculine world, to the failure to fulfil the expected 'female' formulas, if the woman is over 30 years old and still does not have a partner and children, or may offer a corner in which one can hide before her relationship- or work-related or emotional failures. The hero (or, in our case, the heroine) must meet the criteria of psychological verisimilitude: they are one of us and, at the same time, they are in some aspects better and different from us, Alexander Plencner states [18].

An important motive of the current urban fantasy is the acquisition of out-of-the-ordinary psychological or physical powers. Popular culture presents familiarity with the mysterious, occult and paranormal abilities as unequivocal advantages. In the pre-industrial era, the idea of cultivating the spiritual dimension was more markedly present in specific genres of high literature, while paranormal or supernatural abilities were predominantly presented as acquired through 'divine intervention' or a complex initiation of the hero. The popularization of new forms of spirituality and religiosity brought about the diffusion of the thesis on the importance of cultivating the human spiritual capacities. This idea found its visual representation in superheroes with superpowers, as Adam Possamai states [1].

Women manifesting and demonstrating their power, toughness and aggression inspire optimism as model examples of the deconstruction of traditional gender stereotypes at the first sight. Even though they subordinate the logic of gender binary to critical discussion in some situations, at the same time they are constructed in accordance with the expectations and conventions of traditional or more conservative formulas (within the romance canon). At the beginning of the 20th century, Karel Čapek presented the preservation of the proven traditional morals and archetypal belief in the existence of an absolutely and essentially good order (*ordo*) and a foul, absolutely impermissible possibility of changing it (the forces of chaos or evil) to be one of the key functions of the 'novels for maids' [11, p. 140]. Northop Frye in the *Anatomy of Criticism* [19] considered the untruthfulness of the everyday life in a fictional world of romance to the logic of natural life to be one of the key signs of the genre. The function of romance is not to 'mirror' reality. Romance should be sufficiently real to be accepted by the readers as a fictional world and, at the same time, it should offer what is considered the key to a 'good story' in a post-modern world, where 'good' and 'evil' are relative.

We might consider feminisation to be an important aspect of *urban fantasy romance* as a subgenre. The 'female' is present in the normative pressure of the genre of romance itself, in authorship, but also in the form of reflecting ethics of power and consent, and the question of violence and gender equality. Women are not the protectors of 'true' values or a morally pure good. The relativized morality, reflective relationship, blurry boundaries between friendship and enmity or rights enforceable through weaponry and financial capital: this is the setting in which a woman acts similarly to savage men in traditional *film noire*. A superwoman in an urban fantasy romance is just a tiny bit 'more decent person in an indecent world'.

6. Conclusions

Cultural and social formulas presented in urban fantasy romances correspond to the social and cultural tendencies of the hypermodern. The transformation of organized religions to personal myths, commoditization and massification of rituals and practices, as well as the hybridization of beliefs and persuasions complete the context of a period characterized by pluralization, particularization and individualization. The 'paranormal' and the 'supernatural', which are presented by the fictional worlds of urban fantasy as a part of an attainable everydayness, are highly attractive due to the eclecticism and hybridization of ideas and symbols. Popular culture offers and co-forms the alternative forms of spirituality; it participates in the diffusion of the already de-sacralised, originally esoteric or magic practices, beliefs and persuasions. Adela Kvasničková notes that contemporary cultural *milieu* and modernity are conditions in which religion not only ceases, but also develops in new forms and performances [20]. New forms of spirituality, new religiosity and elements of mass- and popular culture can lead to new spiritual tendencies or enrich spiritual

forms or even disrupt the forms of practicing established religions. The recipients of pop-cultural forms and contents are also members of organized and mainstream religions and they can change the attitudes towards certain phenomena, they free themselves from ascribed bonds and often weaken social ties to institutionalized religions.

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