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Apocalypse According to the Literary Vision of Michael D. O'Brien

Abstract: The article focuses on Michael D. O'Brien's novel trilogy consisting of *Father Elijah: An Apocalypse*, *Sophia House* and *Elijah in Jerusalem*, inspired by the biblical books, particularly the Book of Revelation. The analytical-interpretive and comparative method applied in the article reveal the scope and purpose of parallelism used by the author in relation to biblical characters, events and situations. This parallelism has been introduced in contemporary novels set in the twentieth century, especially at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Biblical references, plots, allusions and, above all, the biblical vision of the world and humans become a gauge that allows diagnosing modern reality and the rapid changes that occur in it. The recognition and full understanding of ideas included in the work are possible only after reading the biblical content inscribed in the novel. It forms the basis of the assessment of a model of the world in which spiritual reality permeates the visible realm, with a simultaneous occurrence of psychomachy. From this perspective, the warning that the writer addresses to his contemporaries becomes apparent.

Keywords: Michael D. O'Brien, contemporary novel, biblical inspiration, book of Revelation, diagnosis of modernity

1. Biblical Inspiration in Literature

A part from being the revealed Word, the books of the Bible are regarded as some of the world's best-known cultural texts, which have inspired and continue to inspire artistic and literary creativity. For this reason, the Pontifical Biblical Commission encourages the research on the history of the influence (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of the Bible.¹

¹ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible*, I.C.3.

From the point of view of literary theory, but also more broadly, from the point of view of culture, the relationship between literature and the Bible has probably received the most attention from Frye, the author of *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*,² who demonstrated the extent to which the Bible shaped cultural thinking in parts of the world where Christianity was the dominant religion. Furthermore, this writer regarded the Bible and its cultural language as a point of reference for his literary theory, primarily to describe literary methods of depicting the world and expressing how to understand it.³

However, in the following work, neither this nor other theories providing insight into the relationship between the Bible and literature (e.g., Hans-Georg Gadamer's⁴ and Paul Ricoeur's⁵ lectures on hermeneutics) will be necessary. A more convenient starting point for consideration is the simple observation that even in our contemporary times, despite the progressive processes of secularisation, the Bible has by no means become a drying-up source of inspiration for artists. This fact could be illustrated by a list of novels written in recent decades in different countries and languages, as well as works addressing biblical stories, thematic plots and depicting the profiles and fates of biblical characters. In fact, such a list would include works revealing very diverse attitudes of their authors towards the Bible – from full acceptance of and respect for the revealed Word,⁶ through individual interpretations modifying the theological sense to varying degrees, sometimes open polemics, to accusations towards the vision of the world presented in the Bible, including its mocking, derisive or purportedly neutral varieties when the text of biblical books is used solely for ludic purposes. Some of these novels have

² Frye, *The Great Code*.

³ Above all, in the work: Frye, *The Secular Scripture*.

⁴ Cf. e.g. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*; idem, *Die Aktualität des Schönen*.

⁵ Cf. Ricoeur, "La philosophie et la spécificité," 13–26.

⁶ The use of the term "orthodox" is avoided here because authors who take the biblical message seriously and seek to respect its meaning belong to different churches or treat faithfulness to the Bible in an individualistic manner even when they have no intention of polemicising with the interpretation prevailing in their native religious space.

gained popularity in a wide circle of readers and have been translated into many languages.

Since the focus of this article is novels whose author refers with full respect to the sacred dimension of the Bible, it will be appropriate not only to glean the most relevant content from the Holy Scriptures in his literary vision but also to make use of the efficient tool proposed by the eminent researcher of the borderline between literature and religion, Maria Jasińska-Wojtkowska, in her investigations.⁷ One of the most valuable achievements of her methodological reflections was the presentation of the so-called sacrological square, which makes it possible to make detailed observations on what and how a literary work refers to the supernatural sphere, what kind of *sacrum* we are dealing with in it, what its functions are in a given work. The “vertices” of this square are 1) *sacrum* itself; 2) *homo religiosus*, who interacts with it; 3) *epiphany*, thanks to which it is possible for the *sacrum*, which by its very nature is transcendent, to reveal itself at all; and finally 4) *sacrosphere*, i.e. “the entire range of fragments of time, space, objects and symbolic signs,”⁸ in which man’s bond with the *sacrum* is established, strengthened or broken.⁹

The following part of the article focuses on the novels of only one author, Michael D. O’Brien, which fall within a less abundant but nonetheless significant trend. It is formed by works that are not set in biblical times, as is the case in well-known novels such as *Joseph and His Brothers* by Thomas Mann (1933–1943), *The Last Temptation of Christ* by Nikos Kazantzakis (1951), *Jesus of Nazareth* by Roman Brandstaetter (1967–1973), *The Gospel according to Pilate* by Éric-Emmanuel Schmitt (2000) and many others. In the trend in question, the events described by the narrator take place in the present day, but their evaluation, similarly to the assessment of the entire world depicted in the work, is made using a gauge in the form of the Bible. Such famous novels as John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*

⁷ It is worth mentioning that the Lublin school of research has developed precise tools for investigating the links between literature and religion. Unfortunately, the work of the researchers in Polish is not known outside Poland – which is regrettable, given the value of research results.

⁸ Jasińska-Wojtkowska, “Literatura – sacrum – religia,” 48.

⁹ Cf. Jasińska-Wojtkowska, “Literatura – sacrum – religia,” 47–48.

(1952), Amos Oz's *Judas* (2014) and a work by the Polish author, Jerzy Sosnowski, titled *Instalacja Idziego* (*The Installation of Idzi*, 2009) can be classified within this trend as well. This literature directly refers to the biblical books but also inspires authors to create literary characters and situations that significantly resemble their biblical prototypes. This is why the inspirational role of the Bible, even when it is not directly referenced, constantly manifests itself in these texts.

2. O'Brien's Novel Trilogy with the Character of Father Elijah

O'Brien's novels, including *Father Elijah: An Apocalypse*¹⁰ and *Elijah in Jerusalem*¹¹ form a trilogy along with *Sophia House*,¹² written as a prequel after the creation of the first book. The plot of the last work is set several decades earlier than the events of the other two, whose main character, Carmelite Fr Elijah, is a man of relatively advanced age, although still perfectly fit and active. *Sophia House* unveils an essential part of the early stages of Fr Elijah's life, even though he is not its main character. It provides an insight into the difficult youth of David Schäfer, a pious, Warsaw-born, seventeen-year-old Jew who survived the Second World War, losing all of his loved ones as a teenager. He was the only member of his family who managed to escape from the Warsaw ghetto and found shelter in the home of a Polish bookseller, Paweł Tarnowski. Paweł also saved David when the German occupation authorities were informed that the bookseller was hiding a Jew. This "crime" and the fact that Tarnowski allowed the boy to escape cost him his own life.

The wartime fate and post-war experiences of Schäfer, who arrived in a land fought over by Jews and Palestinians, initially led him to embrace atheism, followed by despair and a decision to commit suicide when his wife and unborn child were killed in a terrorist attack. And yet, due to his brilliant career, he had a reputation for being a successful man and everything indicated that he could play an important role on the international stage. A coincidence, in

¹⁰ O'Brien, *Father Elijah*.

¹¹ O'Brien, *Elijah in Jerusalem*.

¹² O'Brien, *Sophia House*.

retrospect believed to be an act of Providence, led him to appear at the gate of the monastery of the Catholic monks of Mount Carmel instead of at the edge of the precipice he had intended to throw himself into. This is where his new life began, first as a Carmelite novice, then as Fr Elijah, who prayed and worked for twenty years, which led him to develop a deep inner life.

The novel repeatedly uses a biblical metaphor that tersely summarises what happened to David Schäfer, who transformed into Fr Elijah: “a branch pulled from the fire.”¹³ The same metaphor appears in the book of Zechariah to describe a prophetic vision relating to Joshua, the first priest to worship in the Jerusalem Temple after the return of the Jews from Babylonian captivity: “Then he showed me the high priest Joshua standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him. The Lord said to Satan, ‘The Lord rebuke you, Satan! The Lord, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! *Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?* [highlighted by the author – M.O.K.]” (Zech 3:2).¹⁴

The novel thus indicates God’s far-reaching plans for the extraordinary boy-tzadik that David was already in his teens. As Fr Elijah, he bears the burden of historical and personal experience and is deeply formed internally. He is summoned to the Vatican and ordered by the Holy Father to carry out a responsible mission associated with the rapid changes occurring in the world, culture and human mentality. Fr Schäfer represents the Catholic Church in its confrontation with the forces of evil aiming to take over the world. The leading representative of supporters of the Satanic vision of the human future is the president of the federation of European states, who has all the credentials to head the future global state. He is completely devoted to activities that are radically different from the values preached by the Catholic Church. Fr Elijah states: “I suspect he instinctively recognised that I represent the antithesis of his vision.”¹⁵

¹³ O'Brien, *Father Elijah*, 19.

¹⁴ The author uses the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

¹⁵ O'Brien, *Father Elijah*, 402.

3. Parallelism Between Events and Situations in the Novel and the Bible

The clash of various concepts of reality presented in the book, in material, economic, socio-political and, above all, spiritual and moral terms, does not only unfold on the level of ideological polemics. The president and his supporters do not hesitate to use any methods in their quest to take over the world, although they do their best to hide their lies, the tortures, violence and bloodshed, all the while their successes are spectacular, as only few people can see what really lies behind the vision of a united humanity, a global *Unitas* they are spreading. As he leaves the Carmelite enclosure at the pope's request, Fr Elijah discovers with astonishment that humanity's mental restructuring is already well advanced. He quickly comes to the realisation that faithfulness to God and the Church and the fulfilment of his mission require him to prepare for martyrdom.

The Church's fight against the supporters of the new era, who are led by the president, takes on an apocalyptic dimension, while the book of Revelation becomes the primary source of inspiration and point of reference for the description of what is happening in the fictional world. In addition to citations, cryptic quotes and allusions to John's Revelation, the author of the novel refers to other books of the Bible, from both the Old and New Testament, especially the Gospels, the book of Daniel and the apocalyptic prophecies. For example, the main character of the two parts of O'Brien's trilogy takes on a new identity in the monastery of Mount Carmel and becomes the namesake of a prophet who denounced the evil of idolatry and protected himself from the persecution of the Israelite king, and particularly his wife Jezebel, in the caves of the same mountain. Fr Elijah, similarly to his biblical prototype, reaches out to the leader of the idolatrous cult, attempts to free him from the demonic forces that have taken possession of him and finds himself in the wilderness, having to protect himself from the wrath and vengeance of the president, who, after undergoing effective exorcisms, deliberately decides to once again collaborate with the forces of evil. The Carmelite then experiences a forty-day journey, parallel to the one depicted in the First Book of Kings, to "Horeb, the mount of God" (1 Kgs 19:8). It is preceded by Fr Elijah's descent

into spiritual darkness, from which he pulls himself out by means of angelic intervention and guidance. It concludes with the soothing and empowering encounter with the manifested love and power of God himself. The mystical experience of prophet Elijah was almost exactly replicated in the life of the Carmelite monk. At the same time, the final stage of the spiritual journey described by the Carmelite master of the spiritual life, St John of the Cross, is fulfilled in an exemplary way¹⁶ – inner purification (night of the soul) and arrival at the summit of the symbolic Mount Carmel entail mystical union with God.

When Elijah has to escape enemies who attempt to destroy him, he obtains a Vatican passport in the name of Davide Pastore, and with this document, he later makes his way to Jerusalem, where the president's spiritual assumption of world leadership is to take place. His name from the pre-religious period and his real name are used, although they take on an Italian form – "Pastore" is the Italian equivalent of the German word "Schäfer," which means a shepherd. It is David the shepherd, anointed king, son of Jesse persecuted by Saul, who sneaks into the camp of his persecutor by night not to inflict death on him, but to make him aware of his mistakes and the evil of his conduct (1 Sam 26). The purported archaeology professor, Davide Pastore, takes similar action.

4. References to Apocalyptic Content

The list of events, situations and characters parallel to various passages of the Bible that can be traced in O'Brien's novels would be very long. The book that had the greatest impact on the structure of the novel is the Revelation of St John, followed by other biblical works depicting apocalyptic prophecies and visions. A significant amount of attention is given to them by Fr Elijah himself, who meditates, particularly on the Revelation, and reads various commentaries. He writes down his thoughts in a letter to Fr Mateo – a charismatic Capuchin and stigmatic. A number of apocalyptic scenes are recreated in Fr Elijah's dream, in which certain words

¹⁶ John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*.

from the last book of the Bible are addressed directly to the dreamer, as if he had somehow taken the place of the visionary from Patmos.

In an effort to motivate Fr Elijah's interest in the Revelation, in the third chapter of the novel entitled *The Vatican*, which is still included in the introductory part of the work, the author depicts a dialogue unfolding between the Carmelite priest summoned to the Vatican, the pope and a cardinal called Stato (who is in charge of the Vatican Secretariat of State). They characterise and carefully diagnose the times in which they live. The cardinal speculates: "It may be that we are now facing the final confrontation between the Gospel and the anti-Gospel, [...] between the Church and the anti-Church."¹⁷ In turn, the pope, pressured by Fr Elijah's questions, initially says: "Several popes and many of the Church Fathers, in their respective centuries, believed that theirs was the time of the End, and that their flocks were the children of the Last Days."¹⁸ He then emphasises that he is expressing his private opinion and not some infallible truth *ex cathedra*, to finally confess: "Yes. I believe we are living through the culmination of history as we know it. I believe that the return of the Lord is imminent, perhaps within three or four years, possibly a decade."¹⁹

The determination of such an imminent parousia constitutes sufficient motivation for the Carmelite's meditations on the book of Revelation. At the same time, the introduction of an apocalyptic perspective aims to direct the reader's attention to anything that may indicate the fulfilment of apocalyptic visions in the depicted events and human attitudes. It should be noted that despite the prospect of the end of the world, so specifically set by the pope, and numerous signs that the final clash between good and evil is about to take place, the main character does not become obsessed with anticipating the end times. Most importantly, the author endows him with an awareness that is in line with a number of theological commentaries, such as the opinion of Hans Urs von Balthasar²⁰ that

¹⁷ O'Brien, *Father Elijah*, 59.

¹⁸ O'Brien, *Father Elijah*, 60.

¹⁹ O'Brien, *Father Elijah*, 60.

²⁰ Balthasar, *Das Buch des Lammes*.

the book of Revelation is not a linear record of events that are to take place before the definitive end of earthly human history. Recounting his thoughts on the manner in which St John's Revelation is presented, the Carmelite points out that it is not a simple record of facts about to happen, but multidimensional symbolic visions, scenes that often take place simultaneously "in a multidimensional form,"²¹ whereas "the evangelist was restricted to writing it down in a two-dimensional form – a string of letters on a page."²²

Fr Elijah is also acutely aware that the apocalyptic predictions of disasters and various misfortunes do not apply to a brief period of human history, as the time from the birth of Jesus – the revelation of the Word of God – is treated as definitive in the New Testament. In a letter to Fr Mateo, the Carmelite claims: "There have been many apocalypses since the time of Christ – the reignest of Nero, Hitler, and Stalin, for example," and then adds: "They are prefigurements of the reign of the Man of Sin."²³ This is how an understatement regarding the status of times in which the protagonist of the novel is depicted is introduced – although many of the facts presented in the story refer to apocalyptic visions being fulfilled, at the same time, the apocalyptic battle between good and evil is extended to the whole human history. In fact, announcements of the arrival of the Antichrist are presented as a warning to people of all times: "Reminders that we must not perceive the struggle against Antichrist as simply a magnificent mega-drama reserved for a distant future. The actual battle against the spirit is waged from the very beginning of human history and continues uninterrupted to this day."²⁴

The literature read by the Carmelite, which may have been used by the author to create his novelistic vision, included anonymous commentaries on the last book of the New Testament, written by priests and holy mystics of the Church. The only person named was St Beatus of Liébany, a monk living in the eighth century, who wrote his *Commentary on Apocalypse* during a difficult time for Christianity

²¹ O'Brien, *Father Elijah*, 233.

²² O'Brien, *Father Elijah*, 233.

²³ O'Brien, *Father Elijah*, 235.

²⁴ O'Brien, *Father Elijah*, 235.

in the Iberian Peninsula, on the one hand as a result of the onslaught of Islam, and on the other due to the internal doctrinal chaos caused by the dissemination of Donatism and Arianism.²⁵ In his work, St Beatus, who was attentive to orthodoxy, drew on the teachings of numerous earlier authorities of such calibre as St Jerome, St Augustine, St Gregory the Great and many others, particularly relying on Tychonius Africanus.²⁶ It is therefore suggested that Fr Elijah received a synthesis of the awareness regarding the revelation granted to the visionary from Patmos, which existed in the Church until the eighth century.

Among the literature closer to modern times, it is possible to distinguish sermons on the Antichrist by St John Henry Newman.²⁷ Elijah finds it relevant that the author of the sermons also relies on the visions of Daniel and attributes the main feature of the end times to widespread apostasy. According to him, the Antichrist will gain power over the nations in a peaceful manner, primarily through flattering speeches. Moreover, Newman referred to the great rulers of the past, including Antiochus Epiphanes, Nero, Julian the Apostate, the false prophet Mohammed and the atheistic leaders of the French Revolution as types of the Antichrist. He argued that the arrival of each of them was preceded by numerous apostasies. Therefore, it is from his texts that O'Brien might have borrowed the idea that each of the aforementioned leaders, as well as other great rulers violently imposing their authority, beliefs, practices and ideas on nations, can be regarded as foreshadowing the Antichrist. The Antichrist himself will come at the end of the world when the mystery of evil is complete, as then believers will cease to live according to God's laws. The author of the novel attempted to create a literary portrait of this figure.

²⁵ Cf. Roszak, "Beato z Liébany," 125–147. Piotr Roszak reports that his main source of knowledge on Beatus of Liébana is the edition: Beatus of Liébana, *Obras completas*.

²⁶ When writing about this topic, Roszak cites an expert on the subject: Alvarez, "La importancia de los comentarios."

²⁷ The sermons in question include *Times of Antichrist*, *The Religion of Antichrist*, *The City of Antichrist* and *The Persecution of Antichrist*. Cf. a commentary on the eschatological vision of J.H. Newman: Guérin-Boutaud, *La vision eschatologique*.

It is worth noting that comments referring to secret knowledge and information encoded in the Bible, as well as ideas inspired by the Jewish Kabbalah, which the reader pursuing knowledge about the Revelation may encounter, remain completely outside O'Brien's observations, and thus outside the interests of the protagonist of his novel. The author of the works in question instructs the Carmelite he has created to move only within the boundaries of Catholic orthodoxy. In fact, there are many indications of respect for the Catholic point of view in the novel. These include the emphasis on the Catholic liturgy, cult of the Mother of God and the saints, accentuation of the authority of the pope, as it were, the communion of saints visualised in the work, demonstration of the power of exorcisms performed according to the Roman ritual, invocation of the Tradition of the Church and reference to the first centuries of Christianity as its still life-giving sources, recognition of Catholic ethics and morality, especially in the defence of life, opposition to abortion and euthanasia, emphasis on the virtues of humility, obedience, simplicity, truthfulness, purity of heart and, above all, love, which overcomes the persistence of the most hardened hearts, finally understanding evil as a real, personal force.

During his fight against the evil flooding the world, the main character is equipped solely with the power of faith, love and obedience to the Church, and uses only the word of exhortation and exorcism. As indicated by the commentators,²⁸ the final victory over the evil depicted in St John's Revelation is to not be achieved by means of a battle, which is made evident even in the layer of symbolic apocalyptic images. Although Satan initiates the attack and his forces are very numerous, as they consist of armies of many kings of the earth (Rev 17:12; 19:19), the response does not involve a military counterattack in the strict sense, as no confrontation between two opposing armies occurs. The beast and its false prophet are captured without a fight and thrown into the lake of fire. The only figure fighting alongside the riders on white horses and clad in white robes, who appear when heaven opens, is the "King of kings and Lord of lords"

²⁸ Cf. Nowińska, "Definitywne rozstrzygnięcie," 216; Wojciechowski, "Etyka w Apokalipsie," 234.

(Rev 19:17), who leads them, and the instrument of victory is a sharp sword coming out of his mouth, with which all the armies of Satan and his prophet are defeated (Rev 19:15–21). It is worth contrasting this image of the sharp sword with a passage from the Letter to the Hebrews: “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Heb 4:12), after which it becomes clear that the leader of the white army, “called Faithful and True” (Rev 19:11), wins using only the spoken word, which immediately does what it means, and any additional action is unnecessary.

From the literary perspective, O’Brien refers to a rich literary tradition, which dates back to Christian antiquity, and creates a contemporary version of psychomachia. The tradition that falls within this trend and simultaneously is closest in time is the Catholic novel, which has its origins in the French Catholic Revival that took place in the first half of the twentieth century. A characteristic feature of authors of works classified in this trend was the recognition of the fact that regardless of how human redemption is accomplished, as long as humans live on earth, they must still struggle with evil actively working throughout the world. Even though in earlier novels, in addition to the main characters, the clash between good and evil involved a rather limited environment, such as the family (in *A Woman of Pharisees* by François Mauriac, 1941), a parish (*The Diary of a Country Priest* by Georges Bernanos, 1936), some country in which the persecution of the Church has just begun (Mexico in *The Power and the Glory* by Graham Green, 1940), in O’Brien’s novel, the problem has a global character, as the unfolding events represent a literary vision of what is to precede the end of human history.

5. Signs of Apocalyptic Times in the Modern World

An important task undertaken by O’Brien consisted in finding signs of the end times in the world. They are noticeable and form the subject of ongoing conversations, especially between Fr Elijah and other characters, providing the reader with an analysis and anticipated

consequences of many of them. The pursuit of globalisation in the political and cultural spheres is considered to be one of the most significant signs. In terms of the political organisation of the world, the goal is to subject all of Earth's inhabitants to one global government and one law. According to the smoothly running and mostly enthusiastically received propaganda, it is meant to prevent all conflicts and ensure lasting peace throughout the world. Only few people can recognise that this is false peace and fake unity, as the president and his circle of closest associates are essentially subjecting everything and everyone to their control.

The proposals of changes aimed to ensure the achievement of the established goals do not exclude any sphere of human life, and the global *Unitas* is to be achieved primarily through the reconstruction of human consciousness, which is expected to have the positive effect of freeing humans from the tyranny of old superstitions. The president and his supporters are spreading a vision of salvation that is fully within the reach of the individual and depend solely on his or her initiative and actions. The first public announcement and characterisation of the new era – the author is clearly referring to the New Age movement – takes place during the congress in Warsaw, and the president's speech evokes the enthusiasm of the international audience. No one, except the two listeners, was alarmed by the elevation of humans to a divine dignity in his message: "For in our own eyes, we shall see at last the radiance of divinity. *Doxa!* Glory! And on that day we will begin to worship in spirit and truth."²⁹ The president completely reversed the words of Jesus derived from the Gospels, which indicated how God should be worshipped (John 4:23).

According to this vision, humans are also to become self-creators, and the fact that they cannot turn back their history to stand at the threshold of the emergence of mankind does not hinder these intentions whatsoever since it is at the dawn of the "new era" that "a race of creators is being born."³⁰ These words echo the Nietzschean theory that a superman must come into being in the process

²⁹ O'Brien, *Father Elijah*, 330.

³⁰ O'Brien, *Father Elijah*, 347.

of evolution. Meanwhile, however, the practice of rewriting history employed in communist countries, and perfectly captured by George Orwell (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1949), is making itself known, although in the proposal presented by O'Brien, it does not refer to these or other inconvenient historical facts, but to the shaping of a single, universally valid truth about human origins and developed, standardised cultural heritage in which all myths, ideas and beliefs would be unified: "It is time for man to forge a new creation story, to reinvent the ancient myths without discarding them. By drawing upon the riches of our global cultural heritage, we shall do this!"³¹ The suggested unity was presented as the natural state of humanity: "*Unitas! Unitas! Unitas!*" called the president, "come home mankind! Come home from exile and *live* within your own body and soul. Find on this earth the ultimate meaning of our common destiny."³²

While the president's words retain a certain flicker of meaning, both his reference to the symbol of the underground river supposed to contain the truth and indication that the goals of the divinely radiating humans should be purely earthly leave no doubt that there will be no place for God and His cult in the new era he proclaims. In fact, the doubts are dispelled by dr Felix von Tilman, who presented a "spirituality of pan-mythology" at the congress, which was based on the belief that all religions of the world carry a single universal message that must be drawn, rejecting any differences that exist between them, and intended to replace any religion. As the speaker explains, this spirituality is becoming a broad field "and of course it is central to any successful transition into the new era."³³

The aspirations of the president and his associates culminate in Jerusalem, which is shown in the novel *Elijah in Jerusalem*. This is where, in the square in front of the Western Wall, the beginning of the new era is to be announced. Fr Elijah, who is observing the preparations for the president's ceremonial speech from behind the scenes, follows the installation of twelve pedestals on which symbols of the world's major religions are soon to be placed.

³¹ O'Brien, *Father Elijah*, 332.

³² O'Brien, *Father Elijah*, 332.

³³ O'Brien, *Father Elijah*, 319.

The accumulation of apocalyptic references makes it possible to connect this symbolic number with a parody of the number of the twelve tribes of Israel, mentioned by name in the book of Revelation and symbolised by the twelve gates of New Jerusalem (Rev 21:12), signifying the world of the saved, as well as the number of the Apostles of the Lamb represented by the twelve layers of the foundation of the walls surrounding the Holy City (Rev 21:14). In the end, it can be said that a “new church,” or rather an anti-Church, is demonstrated since the reader is faced with a parody of the religious image of the Woman clothed with the sun with a wreath of twelve stars on her head (Rev 12:1). This collection of symbols is intended to represent the fullness and reconciliation of all peoples, cultures, religions and beliefs uniting around their one leader who assumes power over the earth. It is also important that the novel very explicitly portrays the universality of the Catholic Church, in which people of different nations, languages, races and cultures come together as the followers of the Lamb. This is where hostilities, resentments and wrongdoings are resolved so that, for example, Jews can work together well and enjoy good relations with Palestinians or Germans.

Two of the symbols placed on pedestals particularly show the type of force that the anti-Church created by the president is appealing to:

On the top of each was a large golden symbol representing one of the world's religions: a seated Buddha, a menorah, a dharm wheel, a lotus with a flame in it, a crescent moon with a star, a yin-yang, and so forth – and near the left end of the line, a simple cross. Beside [...] was what Elijah first took to be a Star of David, the Magen, or shield, of David. Then he noticed a circle around the six-pointed star, which in occult symbology made it a hexagram surrounded by a magic ring of power. On the other side of the cross was a sculpture of a male goat rising or metamorphosing from the body of a fish.³⁴

The symbols of Judaism and Christianity were profaned, as one was used to introduce a symbol of occultism and the other of

³⁴ O'Brien, *Elijah in Jerusalem*, 183.

satanism – a goat emerging from a symbol associated with the end of an old era, a time of Christianity’s dominance in world culture, in the New Age movement. Profanity relates to the symbols of two religions, which in the novel are regarded as developing the cult of God with respect for the truth of His revelation. Nevertheless, it is equally important that this truth contains the proper vision of human beings. These symbols are subject to diabolical falsification since the very essence of both faiths stands in opposition to the intentions of the creators of the new era.

The book illustrates how proponents of the global unification make various attempts to deal, above all, with the Catholic Church, which they regard as an outdated, irreformable institution caught up in the Middle Ages and thus, at best, worthy of isolation until it can be completely transformed, or, in the case of failure, until it is abolished. However, they first strive to democratise the Church, and in doing so, they receive support from the German and Austrian hierarchs and clergy, which is explained by the syndrome of the totalitarian rule during the Nazi period. It is easy to convince the clergy of these countries that the recognition of any individual authority is inappropriate by referring to historical experience. For people regarding the Church as one of many institutions founded by humans, the supernatural element is certainly not relevant at all – they disregard the possibility that the Holy Spirit may be at work and sin against it (Mark 3:29), treating the pope merely as the leader of one of many communities.

Another way to “soften” the Church is to allow the spirit of the world, primarily in the form of liberalism, to infiltrate ecclesial structures. For instance, the author shows how the supporters of liberalism take over various editorial boards of Catholic periodicals to influence public opinion, gradually shaping the audience in favour of slogans advocating the modernisation of the Church, which again involves a rejection of the hierarchical structure, but also of moral rigour. Principles taught by the Church begin to be presented as evil, while independence from moral rigour is depicted as the highest good, a condition of inviolable freedom. After establishing domination in the local churches, the proponents of liberalising rules and customs find ways to cope with resistant clergymen using

pseudo-psychological methods – they oblige them to undergo “therapy” in closed centres, where individuals treated for “fundamentalism” are subjected to a specific kind of re-education, which in essence consists of psychological pressure and manipulation.

Interestingly, there is also mention of the fact that authorities of communist countries had placed a significant number of their agents in seminaries, who by the end of the 20th century, when the action of the work starts, began to occupy important ecclesiastical positions – some became bishops to carry out destructive activities from within. The infiltration of the Church’s structures by the forces of evil is also evident in the Vatican itself, as it appears that the pope cannot rely even on the cardinals in charge of the Vatican dicasteries. A striking example is Cardinal Vettore, who brilliantly plays the role of a neutral collaborator of the pope when, in fact, he is a trusted agent of the president, hoping to replace the pope in the future to eventually unite Catholics with the currently formed anti-Church.

The apocalyptic signs of these times include the ability of the president and his supporters to deceive not only individuals but also whole societies, virtually the entire humanity. The world leader attracts large crowds with his beautifully worded lies and the ability to portray himself as someone who selflessly pursues only the good and is extremely kind, spirited and humble. When one supplements these characteristics with the fact, discovered by Fr Elijah, that the president is constantly under the influence of evil spirits, it becomes clear that he has all the traits of the Antichrist. Only a few individuals can resist his deceptive charm and preaching ideas. They primarily include people who have maintained deep faith, both Christians and Jews, but also outstanding individuals outside the circle of believers, provided that they uncompromisingly and honestly pursue the truth as the supreme good. Anna Benedetti, who paid for her search for the truth with her life, is one of them.

One of the reasons why advocates of the new era are portrayed as servants of the Antichrist is because they aim for the widespread introduction of the right to abortion, euthanasia and eugenics. By shaping legislation that undermines the basic human right to life, they are standing up against the Creator and Lord of Life. At this point, apart from progressive secularisation, the obvious apocalyptic

phenomena include also mass apostasy – involving many hierarchs – and the persecution of Christians that is slowly spreading across the world (cf. Rev 6:9–11; 13:1–17). Furthermore, the number of false revelations (false prophets: Rev 16:13–14) is increasing, leading to growing confusion on spiritual, religious and moral issues. The fascination with the figure of the president slowly turns into a cult, consciously fuelled (Rev 13) and culminating in his speech at the surviving wall of the Jerusalem Temple, amid the aforementioned religious and occult symbols. During this time, all the other churches in the city were closed and the clergy disappeared – they were probably deported or kept as prisoners.

There are many more details of the literary creation that could be examined and compared with biblical apocalyptic visions, as well as commentaries and visions of the mystics. For example, it is possible to juxtapose information about the president's youth and his mother with the image of the Antichrist and his mother portrayed in the visions of St Hildegard of Bingen contained in the 25th and 26th point of the 11th vision of Book III.³⁵ The very name of Fr Elijah and Brother Henoch, who accompanies him on his mission in Jerusalem – two men destined to bear witness to the true Saviour in the place and time when the president “reveals himself” to the world (Rev 11:3–13) – alludes to an early Christian tradition, also repeated by St Hildegard, who claimed that two biblical figures – the righteous Henoch and the prophet Elijah, men who did not die but have been taken from this world to appear in the time of the deceiving Antichrist – will appear as apocalyptic witnesses to the Lamb.

6. Contemporary Traces and Warnings

More important than O'Brien's meticulous tracing of the sources of inspiration is his assessment of the modern world. In fact, a number of the novel's characters demonstrate traits of their prototypes – people living in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The aforementioned stigmatic, Don Matteo, was created to resemble St Padre Pio,

³⁵ Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*. II. *Księga trzecia*, 414–433 (chapters 25–42 on the 11th vision).

the pope who talks to Fr Elijah after his arrival in Rome brings to mind St John Paul II, Cardinal Dottrina bears the features of Joseph Ratzinger, and the novel *Elijah in Jerusalem* explicitly refers to Benedict XVI. In turn, Cardinal Stato is endowed with the appearance and traits of Cardinal Angelo Sodano. When creating the main protagonist of the novel, the author might have drawn inspiration from the figure of Oswald Rufeisen, a Polish Jew who survived the Holocaust, was baptised, became a Carmelite and a priest, and later found his place in the monastery on Mount Carmel.³⁶ On the other hand, Stefano Benedetti may resemble Aldo Moro, an Italian Catholic activist and the leader of Christian Democracy assassinated by the Red Brigades in 1978.

All of these traces, as well as many other clues referring to the present day, indicate that the apocalypse is happening at the very time we are currently living in. The opinion expressed by Fr Elijah is essential: “That is our real peril. Our own times, no matter how troubled they may be, are our *idea* of what is real. It is almost impossible to step outside of it in order to see it for what it is,”³⁷ and the conclusion that can be drawn from this observation: “The living apocalypse radiates a sense of normality. We are *inside* it.”³⁸

The novels in question are an attempt, made despite the identified difficulties, to see “our times” in their objective form. On the one hand, they contain almost all features identified as apocalyptic, while on the other, the observations expressed in the novel in many ways correspond to what popes have said about the modern world – for instance, John Paul II making judgements about contemporary culture in his encyclicals. He explicitly indicated the existence of structures of sin whose emergence is influenced not only by economic and political trends but also by cultural phenomena dominated by secularism and relativism.³⁹ In his interviews with Peter Seewald, Benedict XVI spoke about the signs of the times, including the dictate

³⁶ Cf. Tec, *In the Lion's Den*.

³⁷ O'Brien, *Father Elijah*, 157.

³⁸ O'Brien, *Father Elijah*, 157.

³⁹ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, no. 35–37 (esp. no. 37); *Centesimus annus*, no. 13, 29, 46–47; *Veritatis splendor* (entire); *Evangelium vitae*, no. 3–28; *Fides et ratio*, no. 45–48.

of public opinion (still as cardinal), characterised the culture of relativism, as well as identified the mechanism of secularisation and its causes.⁴⁰

O'Brien presented all these phenomena as apocalyptic, turning his work, in particular the final events – the “manifestation” of the Antichrist to the world – into a warning. One could say that the author made use of the model – the book of Revelation – in a novelistic fashion to produce a special summary of events leading up to the end of the world presented to St John. Certainly, the idea that everything should take place over the life of the main character, the holocaust survivor David Schäfer, rescued from the hell of the Second World War to bear witness to the Truth amid apocalyptic confusion, a prophet of the only Saviour exposing human usurpation and the reach for divine power, played an important role in this process.

7. Literary Creation and the Spiritual Dimension of Reality

The presented novels are attractive in a number of ways. A reader who is familiar with art, literature and music will find many motifs alluding to world-class works. Fans of sensationalist plotting receive searches, investigations, wiretaps, prosecutions, assassinations, identity changes, etc. Sometimes, novels are advertised as apocalyptic-fantastic, which, in fact, does not reflect the truth. Eligible literary fantasy allows remodelling characters that have historical prototypes and depicting fictionalised events. The story does not feature any events or characters typical of the fantasy genre, and everything that is beyond the natural biological and physical laws does not fall outside of experiences and phenomena well known from the lives of mystics, charismatics and saints, such as the stigmata and bilocation of Fr Matteo, the revelation of Fr Elijah or phenomena characterised as “ordinary” in the world of believers, including the miracles of healing, for example, of the eye of Brother Henoch. At the opposite end of the spectrum are manifestations occurring during exorcisms, which also cannot be attributed to the fantasy world. Although non-believers

⁴⁰ Ratzinger, *W rozmowie z czasem*, 800–809.

may claim that all these phenomena fall within the realm of fantasy, they are merely external signs of something much more important, which the novel's author is trying to portray. He proves the constant presence of the spiritual world in visible reality and attempts to reveal the depth of the inner lives of certain characters.

Referring back to the method of literary *sacrology* mentioned at the beginning of this discussion, it can be said that O'Brien's novels offer a harmonious co-occurrence of all the vertices of the "sacrological square." The *sacrum* introduced into the novel is shaped primarily on a biblical model and with consideration for Catholic tradition and theology. The *homo religiosus* is represented not only by the central figure, Father Elijah, but also by a number of other individuals portrayed as either having a deep relationship with God and living, as it were, immersed in the spiritual world or seeking a relationship with the One who remains a Mystery to them, sometimes being pulled out of their indifference or even from under the power of the forces of darkness to which they have succumbed. The novel portrays characters who not only have consciously and of their free will severed their relationship with God but also take extensive measures to limit modern society's ties not so much with the spiritual sphere – by repeatedly advocating the space and influence of the *demonicum* they remain tied to that sphere of it which opposes any relationship with God. Meanwhile, God and His action are revealed in the novel in many different ways, but above all, through the parallels with biblical stories. The *sacrosphere*, on the other hand, the spiritual life of many characters, primarily the main character, but also the modern world, with its literary model is presented in the novel.

The purportedly fantastic elements of the works, as well as prayers, meditations and descriptions of religious experiences woven into the plot, ensure that there is a certain balance in the portrayal of human and divine matters in the presented novels. Therefore there is a balance between the *sacrum* and its *epiphany* and man entering into various relationships with the spiritual realm and the material and social reality in which he is immersed. Specific anthropocentrism can be observed in many contemporary works inspired by the Bible, as their authors focus far more on the affairs of human beings, their

environment, as well as the family, historical, social and cultural conditions that shape them, and pay less attention to their relationship with God, the way in which He reveals Himself and devotes Himself to His creation.⁴¹ They thus highlight the two vertices of the square in question, even if they use biblical inspiration, even if the characters in their works are aware of the existence of a spiritual world and sometimes seem to find traces of it in their lives or environments. In contrast, O'Brien argues that only a deep relationship with God, inspired by the biblical message and examples, can save contemporary humans from being seduced by the evil that is actively operating in the global arena. In doing so, he creates a vision of reality in which the vertices of the sacrological square remain in harmonious proportion to one another.

Apokalipsa według literackiej wizji Michaela D. O'Briena

Abstrakt: Artykuł dotyczy powieściowej trylogii Michaela D. O'Briena: *Father Elijah: An Apocalypse*, *Sophia House* i *Elijah in Jerusalem*, inspirowanej księgami biblijnymi, zwłaszcza Apokalipsą św. Jana. Wykorzystana metoda analityczno-interpretacyjna oraz porównawcza odsłania zakres i cel zastosowanego przez autora paralelizmu względem postaci, wydarzeń i sytuacji biblijnych, wprowadzonego do powieści współczesnych, których akcja rozgrywa się w wieku dwudziestym, a szczególnie u progu wieku dwudziestego pierwszego. Biblijne nawiązania, wątki, aluzje, a przede wszystkim biblijna wizja świata i człowieka stają się probierzem pozwalającym dokonać diagnozy współczesnej rzeczywistości oraz zachodzących w niej gwałtownie zmian. Rozpoznanie oraz pełne zrozumienie wpisanych w utwór idei okazuje się możliwe tylko pod warunkiem odczytania wpisanych w powieści treści biblijnych. W oparciu o nie oceniony zostaje wykreowany model świata, w którym rzeczywistość duchowa przenika sferę widzialną i w którym nieustannie rozgrywa się psychomachia. W tej perspektywie czytelna staje się przestroga, którą pisarz kieruje do współczesnych.

Słowa kluczowe: Michael D. O'Brien, współczesna powieść, inspiracja biblijna, Księga Apokalipsy, diagnoza współczesności

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⁴¹ Cf. Ołdakowska-Kuflowa, *Ewangelia według*.

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