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“A Poor Place for Gods”?

The Modern Attitude towards Religion and Spirituality in
Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods* (2001) and *Anansi Boys* (2005)

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Abstract

This thesis will investigate the modern attitude towards religion and spirituality as depicted in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* (2001) and *Anansi Boys* (2005). The research will be based on philosophical theories by Friedrich Nietzsche, Bruno Latour, Max Weber and Charles Taylor, which focus on the position of religion within modern Western society. It argues that the allegorical level within the novels serves as a reflection on the modern attitude, in particular in relation to how technological innovation and belief in the individual have replaced more traditional forms of spirituality in modern society. The findings, which serve as a mirror to society through the medium of fantasy, will shed light on the challenges of modern society in re-establishing a connection with religion and spirituality.

Keywords

Neil Gaiman, modernity, religion, death of God, Taylor, Latour, Nietzsche, Weber, philosophy, fiction, fantasy, enchantment, disenchantment, re-enchantment

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
Chapter 1 – Theoretical Framework: The Survival of God(s) in a Modern Context.....	9
1.1 Friedrich Nietzsche and the Death of God	9
1.2 Bruno Latour and Modern, Fabricated Gods	13
1.3 Max Weber and Charles Taylor, and Dis-, Mis- and Re-enchantment	18
Chapter 2 – Premodern Gods versus Modern Gods: The Shift	25
Chapter 3 – Gods versus Modernity: The Attitude	35
Conclusion	42
Bibliography	47

Introduction

Fiction can be a vehicle to present and reflect upon current trends and tensions in society, as is effectively indicated in Bloomsbury's *A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction* series. The editors of the series sketch the political contexts of a certain decade and connect works of fiction to particular events. The study covering the 2000s discusses the financial crisis of 2007-8, and the 9/11 attacks and the consequent war on Terror, both in relation to postmodernism and its supposed demise (Bentley, Hubble, and Wilson 5, 7). The financial crisis, for instance, caused disillusionment, as it was "a harsh intrusion of real life, which punctured the illusory nature of social life as it was lived and understood in Britain for most of the 2000s" (Bentley, Hubble, and Wilson 5). This disillusionment, which is pertinent to the twenty-first century, is not solely the result of the financial crisis, but rather of the revelation that the problems and tensions of the decade are consequences of longer underlying trends (Bentley, Hubble, and Wilson 4).

In an attempt to explain current tensions and movements that are considered 'modern', philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists claim to have identified this underlying trend as a shift of the position of religion in society and modernity's attitude towards spirituality, especially as influenced by technology and increasing individuality. Modernity, however, is a difficult term to define, since it can refer to the present-day situation as well to the historical period following the Age of Enlightenment, and is even occasionally mixed up with the modernist movement in art forms. In any case, however, it is related to the passage of time, since "the adjective 'modern' designates a new regime, an acceleration, a rupture, a revolution in time. When the word 'modern', 'modernization', or 'modernity' appears, we are defining, by contrast, an archaic and stable past" (Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 10). In this thesis, the terms 'modernity' and 'modern' refer to the period following this rupture or revolution, which is most famously defined by Friedrich Nietzsche as 'the death of God' in

1882 (Nietzsche 181). God's death, or the death of religion, marks the shifted position of religion and belief in society. This shift is argued to be an underlying cause of various present-day or 'modern' phenomena, such as the emergence of capitalism and consumerism, increased individualism, idolatry and obsession with public figures, hyperreality in culture and media, and the pervasive influence of and dependence on technology (Gane 15; Garbowski, Hudzik, and Kłos vii).

The United States of America (or "America") are often considered to be the figurehead of the modern West, as American trends quickly find their way to Europe and the rest of the world. In his novel *American Gods* (2001), the British ex-pat Neil Gaiman attempts to depict the 'American soul' by turning it into a mythical place where Gods roam the country (Gaiman, "Week three"). Not only are various phenomena relating to modernity featured in the novel; they are embodied in America's new gods with fitting names such as Media and Technical Boy. The new gods threaten the existence of the ancient gods (e.g. Odin, Anubis and the Queen of Sheba), which were brought to America by immigrants, since the Americans are abandoning their faith in the ancient gods and instead place their belief in the new, modern gods. The country is even described as "a poor place for gods" (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 266). Thus Gaiman problematizes the position of older religions and myths in a world that is becoming increasingly 'modern'. The protagonist, Shadow Moon, initially oblivious to the divine creatures physically residing on earth, runs into an old god (who turns out to be the Norse god Odin and who happens to be his father) and quickly gets caught up in the pending battle between the ancient and new gods, representing the bridge between the mythological and the modern. A similar role is assigned to Fat Boy Charlie, the protagonist of Gaiman's *Anansi Boys* (2005), which is situated in the same universe as and both novels feature the character Anansi. As the son of the West-African spider-god Anansi, Fat Boy Charlie, like Shadow, struggles with the influence of the divine in his own life and through him, it becomes clear how exactly

the gods can influence humanity. This connection between modern society and the problematic position of religion leads to the question: how is the position of religion in modern society depicted in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* and *Anansi Boys*? It is expected that the allegorical level of Gaiman's universe serves as a reflection of and as criticism on the modern attitude, especially in relation to how technological innovation and belief in the individual have replaced more traditional forms of spirituality and religion in modern society.

The analysis of the novels will be based on relevant texts from key theorists in the field of religion and modernity, Bruno Latour, Max Weber and Charles Taylor respectively, thus including anthropologist, philosophical and sociologist perspectives. A multidisciplinary approach is essential, since the very substance of a society cannot be explained or summarized by solely one perspective and such research "does not deal with nature or knowledge, with things-in-themselves, but with the way all these things are tied to our collectives and to subjects" (Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 4). Each of these scholars, in their own way, discusses the problematic term 'modernity', a period marked by unprecedented technological progression and which has radically changed our perception of the truth and the mystical.

The French philosopher, anthropologist and sociologist Bruno Latour – known for his innovative work in the field of science and technology in relation to (modern) society – contextualizes Nietzsche's 'death of god' claim by considering it the death of metaphysics. Latour thus claims that the death of god is the denial of the absolute, rather than a dismissal of the possibility of (an) existing god(s) (Gregersen and Riis 66). Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) denies modernity, as the title suggests, by questioning the definition of modernity as well as problematizing humanity's relation to nature. His key point concerning religion is that we are not modern in the sense that we still require an object of belief, something to provide meaning and fill the gap that god used to fill. Latour calls the modern man a 'fetish-worshipper', referring to human tendencies to create new gods despite being aware of how

fabricated those are. ‘Factish’ is another term coined by Latour in order to the dichotomy between fact (nature) and fetish (fiction, constructed by man), which is discussed in *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (2011), as a continuation of *We Have Never Been Modern*.

Sociologist Max Weber’s theory on (the demise of) religion in relation to modernity focuses on a similar dichotomy; that between rationalization and enchantment. Weber borrowed Schiller’s term ‘disenchantment of the world’ to refer to the modern world view, or, attitude, which has been emptied of any intrinsic, spiritual, symbolic or expressive meaning and purpose, and which instead is composed of facts (Tarnas and Segall). Naturally, the pantheon changes accordingly. Disenchantment, as a consequence of instrumental rationalism, leads to materialistic gods, which – like the fabricated gods in Latour – are meant for personal gain. The possibility of ‘re-enchantment’ of the world is subject to academic debate and new terms, such as ‘misenchanté’ are added to the discussion.

Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (2007), which corresponds in most of the key points with the Weberian approach, questions the impact of a society when it is secularized and becomes increasingly disenchanted. Taylor provides various synonyms for disenchantment, e.g. demystification, demythologization and neutralization of the cosmos, and attempts to provide an explanation for its occurrence. His approach is less critical than Latour’s, as the latter (especially in *We Have Never Been Modern*) brings forth a rather hostile view on ‘the moderns’ and how they consider their own practices, whereas Taylor is more mild in his suggestion that the process of fabricating materialistic gods is a natural response to the changing times.

These theorists and their key concepts regarding modernity and religion will be discussed more extensively in the first chapter, in order to provide a solid framework for the textual analysis of both novels by considering some of the ideas that have been developed in the field of religious philosophy and which build upon Nietzsche’s works. To contextualize the

aforementioned scholars, the starting point will be the death of god as described by Nietzsche and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Latour, Weber and Taylor each have their own, more developed and contemporary, theories on the shifted position of religion in modern society as well as on the modern attitude as a response to the shift from premodernity to modernity, which will be discussed and compared extensively. The modern attitude of Western society towards religion will become clear and serve as the basis for the following case study of the two novels.

In the second chapter, a textual analysis will be provided of the two types of gods as they exist in Gaiman's *American Gods*. Since the battle between the ancient and new gods can be read on an allegorical level, it will be compared to the religious shift that humanity has gone through since the Enlightenment, according to the theories discussed in chapter one. The content of Gaiman's *Anansi Boys* is not as extensive as *American Gods* in terms of this analysis and the novels "differ wildly in scope, tone and structure", which is why *Anansi Boys* does not receive the same amount of attention (von Czarnowsky 52). Yet, since the conflict between the old and modern gods remains unresolved in the previous novel and it features the same character (Anansi), *Anansi Boys* is an interesting addition for it sketches life after this lack of a resolution and features interesting characters dealing with the influence of modernity as well as the existence of gods in their lives. It is for this extra insight into the attitude towards and relation between religion and humanity that *Anansi Boys* is included in the analysis in chapter three. Whereas chapter two deals with the clash between two types of gods, the final chapter's focus will be on the relationship between gods and humanity, as the humans provide the gods with power through their belief and have constructed the new gods. There will be special focus on the human characters of both *American Gods* and *Anansi Boys* and their connections to the divine sphere, taking into consideration their (post)modern perspectives on life and spirituality.

Chapter 1 – Theoretical Framework: The Survival of God(s) in a Modern Context

“God is dead” is not the same thing as “God does not exist.” It is even the total opposite.

- Paul Ricoeur

1.1 Friedrich Nietzsche and the Death of God

Whereas a shift of the relationship between God and the Self could already be read in Descartes and Kant, the “intellectual maelstrom” it caused is attributed to its problematization in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche (Bubbio 690; Kubicki 95; Kaczmarek 105). No less than five times (three times in *The Gay Science* and twice in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*) does the philosopher state that “God is dead”, along with the consequent existential questions:

We have killed him – you and I. All of us are his murderers. (...) God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? (Nietzsche 181)

Nietzsche, by proclaiming the death of God, then, wiped away “the entire horizon of meaning that has held our civilization together” (Tarnas and Segall). In premodern times, God was the prerequisite of society through which people understood one another, as well as issues concerning life and death; God was the subject towards which all thought was ultimately directed (Kesel). In the Middle Ages, war was legitimate if waged for religion sake and

“regardless of its real causes, conflict would always enter the public sphere, being wrapped in them. There were always enough people who were eager to die for God, therefore God was undoubtedly great and present in their world” (Kubicki 97). With the developments in science and rational thought during the Enlightenment, crusades died out and God’s position as *hypokeimenon* of society started to become threatened (Kesel).

In *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781), Kant attempts to save the position of God by redefining the notion of science. By claiming that science is based on the phenomenal (i.e. all that can be perceived by the senses) and cannot access the noumenal (i.e. that which cannot be perceived by the senses), the increasing rationalization in science and society at large would not be able to influence God’s position (Kesel). The damage, however, proved to be irreversible. Religion became belief (or perhaps even just ‘a’ belief) and belief, in turn, became a set of truth claims freed from any restrictions or requirements. God moved from being the *hypokeimenon* to the object-position of thought: from now on, people were free to believe in any god(s) if they pleased and, since He ceased to be the supposition, no one’s belief could be questioned (Kesel).

Nietzsche is, contrary to popular belief, not the first to have philosophically considered ‘the death of God’. The German philosopher Georg Hegel had already entertained this possibility, for the first time in *Faith and Knowledge* (1802):

By marking this feeling [the feeling that ‘God Himself is dead’] as a moment of the supreme Idea, the pure concept must give philosophical existence to what used to be either the moral precept that we must sacrifice the empirical being [*Wesen*], or the concept of formal abstraction [e.g. the categorical imperative]. (qtd. in Bubbio 690)

Hegel is, when interpreted as acknowledging the death of religion, consequently considered to be the “inspiring mentor of nontheistic philosophers such as Feuerbach and Marx” and celebrated as well as criticized for instigating fascism, communism and existentialism as well as nihilism and the death of God theology (Bubbio 689). There is, however, no consensus among academics about Hegel’s stance towards God with the emergence of left Hegelians, who are atheistic, and right Hegelians, who have not abandoned their faith in God. Since Nietzsche’s position – when interpreted correctly – leads to much less disagreement and his collection of more concrete claims comprise “one of the acutest [criticisms] of the idea of transcendence,” his works are generally considered the true starting point of the death of God theology (Kaczmarek 104).

By proclaiming that God is dead, Nietzsche did not refer to a previously-existing God who, at some point, demises and falls out of heaven onto earth, as happens in James Morrow’s fantasy novel *Towing Jehovah* (1994). Rather, he “[proclaimed] the death of metaphysics” and “the withdrawal of any notion of the absolute” (Gregersen and Riis 66). He alludes to the shattering of the Western world’s foundation; its reliance on God and the spiritual as core moral principles of life and as empowerment and source of meaning. By relieving God of His power and providing humankind with personal agency, Nietzsche “annuls religious supervision over men in order to replace it with human desire and will as empowering strength. The protective line of spiritual life was severed to leave room for free and unfettered human self-creation” (Kaczmarek 105).

Kaczmarek’s wording positions Nietzsche as the agent and instigator of the death of God, which is misleading. Rather, Nietzsche expresses his concerns about what would become of the world following the decay of religion and the loss of a higher moral compass. Instead, the damage is caused by the instrumental rationality of the Enlightenment, which “leads to the destruction of ‘life’: by reifying experience and human relations it stifles the human potential

for genuine well-being and true sociality” (Smith 202). Subjective freedom, as a result of the Enlightenment, makes it impossible to justify morality, resulting in a feeling of malaise. Nietzsche, therefore, had reason to believe in the prospect of (moral) nihilism, i.e. the notion that, without any higher religious and moral supposition, life in itself is meaningless and acts can no longer be deemed inherently right or wrong, thus plunging the world into ethical chaos. Despite the fact that Nietzsche is generally defined as a nihilist, he warned against this, claiming that nihilism would pose a threat to society (van Tongeren 7).

Whereas Nietzsche certainly challenges the idea of the transcendental Omni-God, of the “theistic notion of God as an absolute authority, as a higher reality, as *verum esse*”, he does not deny the possibility of the existence of a more modern and constructed god, or gods, such as Latourian gods, as will become clear (Gregersen and Riis 66). Nietzsche is therefore – from a modern perspective, at least – not the atheist he is often made out to be and his (in)famous proposition became the starting point of different theories and approaches regarding the position of religion within society and God’s relationship with humanity. The Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor, for instance, among other theistic scholars, contests Nietzsche’s thesis as it supposedly “favors cruelty, humiliation and dominance. As [Taylor] sees it, Nietzsche extols the idea of an emancipated human being, freed from all meanings and presents a human as the participant of a power play, a ruler (...) who now has the world on one’s shoulders” (Kaczmarek 106).

A less negative approach is to consider the death of God as an opportunity to re-invent God and fit religion in a post-metaphysical society (Gregersen and Riis 66), as attempted by Bruno Latour. One commonality of all the diverse theories regarding the death of God is that, ever since Nietzsche challenged the foundation of ideals and underlying elements of Western society, academia as well as the individual attempts “to adopt an intellectual framework in which human conduct and convictions would cease to be grounded in a God who provided

meaning in life” and to develop alternative ways of ascribing meaning to life (Kaczmarek 105). With Nietzsche’s work as the groundwork for modern theories regarding the modern attitude towards the position of religion in society, Latour, Weber and Taylor discuss these alternative ways in which modernity finds a place for religion within their set of values and convictions, as the framework for analysing the relation between modernity and religion within the *American Gods* universe.

1.2 Bruno Latour and Modern, Fabricated Gods

In his early work, Bruno Latour emphasizes the importance of the interaction between and mutual influence of nature, knowledge and culture rather than treating them as separate things-in-themselves (*We Have Never Been Modern*, 4). Ironically, this is exactly what Latour accuses the ‘moderns’ of doing; making dualistic distinctions where there are none, which is his reason for denying that contemporary society is, in fact, modern. Unfortunately, as Berliner, LeGrain and Van de Port point out, the scholar provides no clear definition of what those moderns are: “Are they contemporary Europeans? Americans? Asians? Intellectual elites or Madame-tout-le-monde?” (443). For Latour, being modern is not so much about demographics as it is about the moderns’ attitude towards themselves in comparison to the rest of the world. He criticises the way in which modern people flatter themselves in thinking they are fundamentally different than any other people which have ever existed, especially since, Latour argues, they do so for the wrong reason. Latour’s main ambition, therefore, is to challenge the worldview of the moderns, or, as he calls it, ‘the Modern Constitution’.

Relying on science and reason, the moderns feel equipped to “conquer all of reality” (Berliner, LeGrain, and van de Port 439). They believe in a given reality ‘out there’ as opposed to the sphere of human influence, which very much resembles the metaphysical approach to life as described by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, namely that there is “an

unchangeable suprasensory world *up there* understood as the real world compared to the changeable sensory world *down here*” (Gregersen and Riis 66). The suprasensory world used to be the unshakeable truth of a god as givenness of reality, which, in modern times, is replaced by nature. The moderns believe that nature functions independently of human behaviour and desires as it is “the default setting of life and being, and to know nature is to hold the key to indisputable truth and the real” (Berliner, LeGrain, and van de Port 440).

As a consequence, a series of dichotomies emerge: “nature/culture, humans/non-humans, objectivity/subjectivity, body/mind, fact/value, visible/invisible” (Berliner, LeGrain, and van de Port 440). Latour, then, argues that the Modern Constitution is misleading since reality comes into being in an entirely different way and challenges the supposedly mandatory choice between ‘real’ and ‘made by humans’ (Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, 81). The ‘warrior realism’ that Latour opposes employs two spheres: “the human sphere with all its subjects, signs, culture, beliefs and values on one side, and the non-human sphere with all its objects, things, Nature and facts on the other side,” of which the non-human sphere represents reality (Gregersen and Riis 69). “But these two guarantees,” Latour argues, “must not be taken separately, as if the first assured the nonhumanity of Nature and the second the humanity of the social sphere. They were created together. They reinforce each other. The first and second guarantees serve as counterweight to one another, as checks and balances” (*We Have Never Been Modern*, 31).

The moderns fail to understand that there is no such thing as a separation between ‘human’ and ‘nonhuman’, or a reduction of existence into either the sphere of soft constructions or stern realities (Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 13; Gregersen and Riis 71). Rather, for Latour, existence and reality are matters of actors. An actor is defined by its actions and therefore Latour’s ‘existential minimum requirement’, as stated by Gregersen and Riis, is to affect other actors (71). Resulting from this definition, objects and other nonhuman entities

are also considered actors – which is why Latour often opts for the word ‘actant’ instead –, since “a person, an idea, an object, the weather condition, a virus, a sentiment; anyone and anything that leaves a trace in the unfolding of a situated event qualifies as an actant” (Berliner, LeGrain and van de Port 441). “The empty world of the modern is in fact full of non-human factishes, hidden actants,” (Magne 296) which are defined in their relation to other actants and can only be studied as part of a particular construction as tied to other actants, since “their co-presence modifies their being”, which is an important part of Latour’s Actor Network Theory (Berliner, LeGrain, and van de Port 441-442).

In *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (2010), the word ‘factish’ is coined by Latour as a merge of ‘fact’ (Nature) and ‘fetish’ (result of human creation) in order to escape the dichotomy between those two concepts as created by the moderns. Since objects do not act by themselves but rather through their suggestions and representations to their human users, Latour claims “that there are no facts separable from their fabrication” (Magne 295; Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 18). Factishes

are a way of respecting the objectivity of facts and the power of fetishes without forgetting that both are fabricated. They are disturbing because they are hybrids, simultaneously objective and subjective, true and false, immanent and transcendent, knowledge and illusion, right and wrong: everything that a binary logic would abhor. (Magne 295)

In this lies one of the most striking paradoxes of the modern: whereas the modern prefers reason over fetishes (objects of worship and devotion) and uses reason to break such fetishes, represented in idols and icons, they, at the same time, erect new icons. Latour best describes a fetish as “something that is nothing in itself, but simply the blank screen onto which we have

projected, erroneously, our fancies, our labor, our hopes and passions” (Latour, *Pandora’s Hope*, 270). Latour describes the observation that “while the fetish worshipper knows perfectly well that fetishes are man-made, the modern icon-breaker inevitably erects new icons” as belief in naïve belief (Magne 295).

Latour will therefore agree with atheists that God is a construction, without, however, ruling out the potential existence of a god or gods, since construction and reality are synonyms, rather than antonyms (Gregersen and Riis 70-72). As a fabrication of the moderns, a god becomes an actor, and icons, prayers and scriptures become mediators, similarly to scientific instruments as all co-produce a certain reality (Gregersen and Riis 72-73). It should be noted that, while Latour only refers to the Christian God, his approach does not rule out the existence of multiple gods. Since a god is no longer a ‘false god’, one that does not exist, but rather a variety of constructions of gods that influence actors and actants, a polytheistic pantheon is not only possible but likely (Gregersen and Riis 73). According to Gregersen and Riis, the idea that certain gods are part of specific networks and worlds, the existence of multiple gods would serve as a reminder of the existence of “different worlds, i.e. differently constructed worlds” (73). Miller concludes that Latour’s theory on reality and truth makes him an “unrepentant populist” (qtd. in Gregersen and Riis 76). After all, the more other actors a given construction (a god, in this case) affects, the more real and influential this construction becomes.

Since Latourian gods are no longer “abstract, absolute and absent entities, but concrete, relative and present actors,” they re-orient the notion of the religious towards this life (Gregersen and Riis 75). It is now possible for the moderns to rid themselves of a god that does not change accordingly with the changing times, for instance a god that does not tolerate homosexuals. To dispose of such a god means to acknowledge the responsibility of one’s own creation and to refuse to provide it with any power. If a god cannot affect life in any way, it is no longer an actor and ceases to exist. Thus, the representations of the world change overtime

and, when the entirety of representations are considered to comprise reality, then reality ultimately changes as well (Gregersen and Riis 70). In Gaiman's *American Gods*, this process is referred to as a "paradigm shift" (537)

The gods of the modern, consequently, are nothing like the premodern necessary God, often referred to as 'God the Father'. A Latourian god, however, "cannot be a God that we necessarily need due to its relative existence" (Gregersen and Riis 78). Since the modern can choose to find support in a certain god, Gregersen and Riis propose that the Latourian god is 'god as a friend'. In that sense, religion (or 'belief' as Latour prefers to call it), transforms into some sort of political construction, almost resembling Thomas Hobbes's social contract between the absolute sovereign and the people, as described in *Leviathan* (1651). Despite being fully aware that democracy is a fabricated concept, the moderns still choose to align their individual lives and society after this democratic construction. And, just like Latourian gods, this democratic construction is subject to change over time to fit current developments. For the moderns, then, the process of belief becomes a "collective bargaining" and god's being "is reduced to a negotiation between actors", since Latourian gods are only able to live as long as they are allowed to affect life (Gregersen and Riis 78).

In *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, Latour creates an opportunity for god(s) to survive in a post-metaphysical world. He deems it extremely important that the modern community is aware of the fact that their gods are fabricated and to acknowledge and remember that "truth is image, but there is no image of truth" (qtd. in Gregersen and Riis 77). By acknowledging that God is constructed (like atheists) but at the same time acknowledging that such a construction is still able to influence life on earth, Latour "[liberates] us from the tiresome trench wars of atheism and theism" (Gregersen and Riis 69).

1.3 Max Weber and Charles Taylor, and Dis-, Mis- and Re-enchantment

Despite some differences in approach and methodology (such as a different understanding of hermeneutics within social sciences and epistemological versus more anthropological roots), Max Weber and Charles Taylor appear to generally reach the same conclusions in terms of secularized modernity and its causes (McKenzie 8). Some of the minor differences in their stance may be attributed to “the fact that Weber was a lapsed Protestant and Taylor is an ardent Catholic”, but other than that, Taylor is considered to employ a Weberian approach in his research of the changing position of religion in modern society (Larmore).

In *A Secular Age* (2007), Taylor discusses the secularization of Western society, by which he means “(1) the retreat of religion from the public space, (2) the decline of religious belief and practice, and (3) the change in the conditions of belief for our times” (McKenzie 1) and which is regarded as a result of modernity (Garbowski, Hudzik, and Kłos vii). Weber, on the other hand, defines modernity as the product of “the rise and spread of Occidental (instrumental) rationalism (the process of *rationalization*) and the accompanying disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) of religious superstition and myth” (Gane 15). Taylor considers disenchantment to be one of the main features of secularization (Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, 288). Weber borrowed the word disenchantment, derived from the German *entzauberung* (the German word ‘zauber’ means ‘magic’), from Friedrich Schiller to describe a phenomenon similar to, albeit broader than, Nietzsche’s claim of God’s death. Disenchantment could then be translated to demagification or demystification and refers to magic and spirituality in a more general sense rather than just to the death of a Christian omni-God.

Taylor and Weber, like Nietzsche and Latour, attribute the emergence of disenchantment of the modern West to the Enlightenment, as well as other developments occurring around that time, such as empirical science and increasing individualism. Taylor

describes ‘Enlightenment rationalism’ as “the dominant outlook of modern Western technological society”, which is dominated by an instrumental understanding of concepts such as freedom and reason (Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 234). Weber’s definition of rationalization is described by Nicholas Gane as “a general movement towards a condition of cultural nihilism, for it proceeds through the devaluation of ultimate values, and with this the reduction of questions of meaning and value, which define the scope for creative action, to scientific (instrumental) questions of technique and purpose, the value of which tend to be presupposed” (Gane 23).

Apart from these observations, which are in accordance with Nietzsche’s claim, both philosophers bring other factors into the debate. For Taylor, the ideas and values of the Enlightenment originate from the deism of the eighteenth century, since it focused on human flourishing as a central notion to God’s intentions when creating the universe (Smith 207-208). Deists believed that they could use what God had given them to carry out God’s plan. The key, according to Taylor, is that the requirement for realizing this, is instrumental reason and that “providential deism construed God as a moral source in his very capacity as an instrumental reasoner” (Smith 208). God empowered human beings to develop a scientific stance towards nature and religion. It has also led to what Taylor calls ‘exclusive humanism’, referring to how “each individual human being is called to aspire to her/his own happiness on the basis of assured life and freedom” and which is focused on aiding other humans on the basis of mutual benefit and which, over time, became increasingly rational (McKenzie 2). On the one hand, the deistic approach ensured God’s self-preservation since He provides humanity with what is required, but on the other hand, it led to the Enlightenment which caused a significant demise of (the influence of) religion in Western society (Smith 209).

Deism is not the only form of belief that has been claimed to have contributed to the disenchantment of the modern world. Weber proposes that the root of capitalism – which is

detrimental to religion as it stimulates individualism as well as instrumental thinking – can be found in Protestantism, Calvinism in particular, as it “contained an ethic or ‘spirit’ which, albeit indirectly, enabled and legitimated the rise of capitalism in the West” (Gane 19). Protestants yearned for rational knowledge of God’s intentions and the world, by which the strand of religion threatened its own existence. Weber therefore classifies Calvinism as ‘this-worldly ascetism’, unlike Catholicism, which he deemed ‘other-worldly oriented’, accounting for the emergence of capitalism in the West, rather than in China or India, regardless of the presence of some key prerequisites were present (McKenzie 7). The Calvinistic approach invited a “secular science that in turn rejected and devalued all religious values” (Gane 21). Religions causing their own demise is not as paradoxical as it may sound when considering Latour’s Actor Network Theory. All actors or actants in the religious sphere have an impact on other actants in the religious sphere as well as other parts of life, such as science, which accounts for such a development. Without faith and therefore without any relationship between humanity and their god(s), even a Latourian god inevitably dies. Calvinism replaces faith with reason and thus removes the belief that gods require to exist as actants.

Taylor, albeit rather troubled by the consequences of disenchantment, touches upon the positive aspects of disenchantment for the modern individual as well. By demystifying the cosmos, the world becomes a materialistic means to an end which can be controlled and manipulated for personal gain. The potential psychological emancipation is tremendous, since “the subject no longer needs to define its perfection or vice or disharmony in relation to an external order” (Tarnas and Segall). Taylor describes the premodern self as porous in its boundaries between the self and the spiritual and moral forces (*Dilemmas and Connections* 287), whereas the modern self is a ‘buffered self’, protected by the boundaries of instrumental rationalism. “In the enchanted world, the line between personal agency and impersonal force

was not at all clearly drawn”, while self-governing and uninfluenced personal agency is what modernity prides itself on (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 32).

The attitude of the buffered self, however, also brings about negative consequences. As already seen in Nietzsche, modern society experiences nihilism, existential crises and a general feeling of malaise and unrest. Despite the modern’s need for self-assurance and feelings of rational control, there is “also the issue of the intrinsic meaning of death and suffering itself” which modernity is not able to solve, as well as “an anxiety over the adequacy of secular sources to empower the good, particularly the life goods of benevolence, authentic self-expression and the reconciliation of these ideals” (Smith 235). In other words, the human aspect of humanity does not fit the ideas of the Enlightenment and is at risk. This happens, Taylor argues, because the principle of autonomy, advocated in the Enlightenment, has been overstressed, leading to “an excessive exploitation of the term individualism” (Kaczmarek 110). A discussion about religion and spirituality becomes intimidating and less likely to take place due to this multitude of unquestionable and individual beliefs which are removed from the “sphere of the sacred” (Kaczmarek 110). The sense of emptiness, or malaise, or ‘nausée’ as Taylor calls it, therefore does not only occur on an individual level, but enters the public sphere as well (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 308). It even enters the literary sphere, as Gaiman reflects upon this malaise in both of the selected novels, as will be discussed in chapter two in relation to roadside attractions and television as well as in chapter three as embodied by the materialistic modern Grahame Coats.

Apart from the accounts of despair regarding the disenchantment of the modern world, Taylor and Weber each share observations concerning the possibility re-enchantment as well. Taylor firmly asserts that “the process of sidelining religion is not linear, but includes both the decline of some religious forms and the rise of new ones” (McKenzie 4). McKenzie claims that this process happens because of a “multi-causal process that includes as a key factor a change

in the social imaginary” (4), similar to Latour’s theory of the emergence of modern, Latourian gods. Since humans are by nature spiritual beings who require meaning in their lives, Taylor denies that religion will ever cease to exist entirely. Rather, it transforms to fit the present time, which Taylor calls ‘rationalized Christianity’, “which transformed the moral life by directing it towards the goods of ordinary life, self-responsibility, respect of individual rights, and the amelioration of the condition of humankind through instrumental reason” (Smith 227). Taylor’s solution to stay true to belief and not lose Christianity altogether is to “see god as helper, and not as cruel puppet-master” (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 389).

The word ‘helper’ is central to the modern attitude towards religion, as already pointed out by Latour’s theory of ‘god as a friend’ as long as the fabricated god serves a functional purpose. Taylor contends that, in the modern world, there is the prevalent premise “that genuine knowledge, *whatever its object*, involves the adoption of a disengaged perspective, that is, a neutralization of the meaning or significance things have for us as ‘subjects’ or ‘agents’” (Smith 237). The combination of Taylor’s belief that thoughts and “meanings are only in the mind” and that “the causal relations between things cannot be in any way dependent on their meanings, which must be projected on them from our minds” (Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, 288; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 35), results in a similar description to Latour’s argument about the emergence of Latourian gods.

Roman Kubicki discusses Taylor in relation to the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach “who once wrote that people believe in the God who has the most desirable features in an amount that cannot be achieved by man” (99). The idea is simple: the belief in a certain god functions as a mirror to a person’s personality and desires. The question arises “what sort of god does a statistical subject of a consumer society need?” (Kubicki 99). In modern times, in which “supermarkets have become the commercial temples of a consumer society”, the threshold of essentials for living (material objects, such as a television or car) is rising, while

fewer objects are considered luxurious, “we look for God who would be prone to provide patronage for such tepid and light-hearted rationality” (Kubicki 98-99). Taylor discusses (meta)topical spaces rather than the term ‘consumer metaphysics’ to illustrate this process: in premodern times, happiness would be achieved through good deeds, which is the metatopical space; in modern times, people buy brand clothing or shoes (topical) which are worn by famous icons in order to feel closer to them and their world (metatopical). This is the result of the modern feeling that material goods are able to ensure contact with some form of elevated existence (Kubicki 99-100).

Weber recognized this phenomenon early on as “the rationalization of religious belief, which entails the functional specialization of the gods, [which] is connected to the economic demands of a people and to the progressive delimitation of political jurisdictions” (Gane 17). This process, in which a group worships a god in search of personal gain, can be regarded a form of re-enchantment. Jenkins, in his analysis of Weber, attests that there are two forms of re-enchantment: one is the realization that there are aspects of the universe that do not fit the rationalist epistemologies of science, such as luck, fate, and the yearning for a moral, spiritual higher domain, and the other “includes collective attachments such as ethnicity, sexualities, intoxications and ecstasies; the escapism of television, computer games, and the internet; and consumerist cultural hedonism” (Jenkins 12-13). Some, however, prefer the term ‘misenchancement’ to describe the latter form, by which is meant that modern human beings are “sorcerers waging magical battle with dark magicians because those really do have the enchanting power to distract and divert people’s attention from what they should really be worried about, which is re-establishing a connection to the wider cosmos” (Tarnas and Segall). Misenchancement, then, is what makes re-enchantment so challenging: modernity tries very hard to re-enchant the universe but puts its faith in the ‘wrong’, material places.

Evidently, both Latour and the disenchantment theorists Weber and Taylor agree that despite the death of God, religion is not absent from modernity at all. Spirituality and worship manifest in different manners from premodern times, but given human nature, it is not likely that religion will cease to exist altogether. A similar conclusion can be reached based on the analysis of Gaiman's works, as will become clear in chapter two and three, in which the selected novels will be considered in light of the theories discussed in the theoretical framework.

Chapter 2 – Premodern Gods versus Modern Gods: The Shift

It's still God's Own country. The question is, which gods.

- *American Gods*, 440.

American Gods is the story of protagonist Shadow Moon's epic journey of self-discovery and his learning process primarily takes place through his interactions with divine beings; ancient as well as modern gods. Mr. Wednesday ropes Shadow into becoming his employee and together they travel across America with the intention of convincing premodern gods, e.g. Mr. Nancy (Anansi) and Czernobog, to fight in the pending battle between them and the modern gods. Gradually, Shadow learns that Mr. Wednesday is in fact the Norse god Odin and that the existence of the old gods is threatened by the emergence of modern gods, who function as representations of modern American phenomena, such as globalization and the prominent culture of internet and media. Various 'Coming to America' segments interrupt the main plot in order to provide insight into how several immigrants from different cultures brought their premodern gods with them to America. Another way for the reader to gain understanding of the interaction between religion and humanity is through the various people that Shadow meets during his journey. The Native-American culture hero Whiskey Jack, the hitch-hiking student Samantha Black Crow and the Jesus-like figure of Shadow's dream, for instance, each share their perspective on the modern attitude towards religion. In the end, it turns out that Odin and the premodern Norse god Low Key Lyesmith who poses as the modern god Mr. World (and which Shadow realizes is a phonological pseudonym for the trickster god Loki) have constructed "an elaborate con in order to fuel chaos and bloodshed among both the premodern and modern gods to serve as a type of sacrifice to both party leaders so that they can gain ultimate power" (Key 30). The ghost of Shadow's dead wife Laura kills Mr. World/Loki before

the battle starts and Shadow mediates between the premodern and modern gods and the novel ends without a resolution to the divine conflict regarding the right to exist. Shadow, as becomes clear in the novella 'The Monarch of the Glen' which takes place a few years later, travels through the UK to do some more soul-searching after all of these life-changing revelations.

Neil Gaiman's works are generally drenched with mythology and the *American Gods* universe, consisting of *American Gods*, *Anansi Boys* and "The Monarch of the Glen" (an *American Gods* novella added to the novel) is no exception. The definition of myth has changed over time. It used to be a classical fable passed on from generation to generation, about the adventures of heroes and gods, turning into a story that is not true, regardless of the fact that many people would still believe it and pass it on. As Irina Rata points out, connections are nowadays often made between myths and ideologies, but the broadest and most comprehensive definition may well be Joseph Campbell's:

Myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation. Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth. (qtd. in Rata 35)

If myth is indeed the base of human culture and *American Gods* sets out to explore America's culture, this endeavour soon turns out to be rather challenging, because the contemporary United States "are so much more diverse – in ethnicity, in social and political values, and in spiritual and religious beliefs – than they once were" (Knight 73). The mythic America in Gaiman's novel is "characterized by duality, alienation, hyperreality, (...) disconnectedness in geography and culture" (Rata 36-37), which is not surprising considering the country's history of settlers.

This aspect of American multiculturalism is emphasized through the several ‘Coming to America’ interludes, which describe members of various cultures journeying to North America and bringing with them their own gods and beliefs. Atsula’s ‘Coming to America’ segment surprisingly offers a rather modern outlook on religion, which ultimately causes Atsula’s death. She realizes that “gods are great, but the heart is greater. For it is from our hearts they come and to our hearts they shall return” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 449). Not only does she die, but so does Nunyunnini, the god of the tribe, once he was entirely forgot. The religion of Atsula’s Siberian tribe is a manifestation of Bruno Latour’s concept of the fabricated god. In premodern times, such gods gained their authority from certain dominant values relating to survival, such as agricultural or martial, and once a god is no longer needed, they will cease to exist as their tribe no longer chooses to find support in them. This segment, situated in 14,000 BC, also affirms Charles Taylor’s claim that the process of secularization or disenchantment is not linear and that both the decline of religions as well as the rise of new ones is a century-old phenomenon and not merely a characteristic of modern Western societies (McKenzie 4).

Gaiman’s universe does not (despite references to churches, Hell and Jesus) advocate a ‘traditional’ monotheistic God – “an old guy on a white cloud” – but rather challenges the reader to consider their definition of gods by asking, “what does a God look like? Are you sure God isn’t in there somewhere?” (Gaiman qtd. in Riesman). The *American Gods* universe is very modern in the sense that the gods are dead or dying throughout the story, entirely dependent on humans for survival. The gods, both the premodern and modern ones, recognize and voice this in various ways, referring to religions as metaphors, memes, evolutionary experiments, symbols and as “the dream that humanity creates to make sense of the shadows

on the cave wall” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 519).¹ As Shadow’s wife Laura, one of the few human characters, cleverly observes, however, “in this sorry world, the symbol is the thing” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 572). Since, throughout history, the core cultural values of society are projected onto gods, Gaiman’s claim in the caveat that “only the gods are real” turns out to be correct (Key 39). This observation is in accordance with Latour’s theories that “truth is image” and that gods are factishes; fabricated and at the same time knowledge and illusion, objective as well as subjective (Gregersen and Riis 77; Magne 295). This is why the battle between the old and new gods will be fought ‘backstage’, i.e. “in the hearts and the minds of the people” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 486).

Similarly to how ‘imaginary’ gods used to be the center of society and human thought, a literal, geographical center of the United States exists in Gaiman’s America. The West-African god Anansi (Mr. Nancy) argues that “it isn’t about what is, it’s about what people *think* is. It’s all imaginary anyway,” proclaiming that the center is important *because* it is imaginary, since “people only fight over imaginary things” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 462). Considering that a center is irreplaceable, one would expect it is stable and indestructible, which – as an illusion and subject to change based on the whims of humans – it cannot be. Related to this is Taylor’s notion that meanings are only in the mind and that the awareness that something is imaginary does not prevent it from being the basis of collective thought. This is why, in the beginning of the novel – long before Shadow can understand the true impact of it –, he learns that gods are ideas and that “gods die. And when they truly die they are unmourned and unremembered. Ideas are more difficult to kill than people, but they can be killed, in the end,”

¹ Similar definitions of religion are voiced by the narrator and the Jesus-like figure: “Religions are, by definition, metaphors, after all: God is a dream, (...), vantage points from which to view the world,” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 551) and “being a god means you give up your mortal existence to become a meme. (...) It means that everyone gets to recreate you in their own minds. You barely have your own identity any more. Instead, you’re a thousand aspects of what people need you to be. And everyone wants something different from you ” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 504).

(Gaiman, *American Gods*, 65). Wednesday explains that death is not all that important for gods, but rather “the opportunity for resurrection” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 470). Their physical body may die regardless, but as long as gods are loved and remembered, “something else a whole lot like us comes along and takes our place” so that their symbolic value and influence lives on (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 416). If, however, there is no one left to remember them, they die definitively. Once again, we recognize Taylor and Latour who state that as long as people are willing to assign agency and meaning to a construct, it does not cease to exist but rather lives on in a different form, adapted to the needs of humanity.

With society becoming increasingly modern, i.e. more materialistic, goal-oriented, individualistic and instrumental in thought and behaviour, the task of being a god becomes more challenging. The moderns expect from their gods that “their only interest is to make sure your football team, army, business, or marriage thrives, prospers and triumphs over all opposition” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 551). Instead of ‘God the Father’ that humanity worshipped in the premodern era, modern humans expect the gods to worship them, to become ‘god as a friend’ (Latour) or even ‘god as a helper’ (Taylor). A Jesus-like figure comes to Shadow in a dream, explaining to him that as a god, he has to be everything for everyone and because of this, he remains as hardly anything at all. The Jesus figure claims to welcome the new gods, those of guns, bombs, ignorance, intolerance, self-righteousness, idiocy and blame because of “all the stuff they try and land me with. Take a lot of the weight of my shoulders” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 504). Jesus’s positive attitude towards such abominable concepts (for Christians at least) may seem strange at first, but it is, in fact, not far from Taylor’s own observation. He does not regret what is called the “eclipse of Christendom”, arguing that modern unbelief preserves Christianity’s values, since “the conviction of the church could never instil or oversee a political order without compromising its own spiritual mission” (Knight 69).

Central to the novel is the looming battle between the gods in which both sides will fight for their survival on earth. It is considered “a cold war at this stage, a phony war, nothing that could be truly won or lost” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 400). According to the narrator, the war had already begun, despite nobody realizing it, considering the wars on drugs, poverty, crime and all things going wrong in contemporary America, such as shootings, mass suicides, car accidents and all other incidents casually listed on the evening news. The new gods are phenomena prevalent to modern society, concepts that the modern puts their faith in.² The focus is on the value that gods can offer modern society, meaning that, to humans, gods become instruments for personal gain. The people no longer “see what is valuable – all [they see] is what [they] can do with it” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 361). Whiskey Jack, a Native American culture hero, claims that the new gods have won already, seeing a parallel between this battle and the one between the ‘white man’ and his tribe. The new gods, “proud gods, fat and foolish creatures, puffed up with their own newness and importance”, are confident they will win as well (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 151). Rather than a battle, Technical Boy (as a representation of the internet) considers it “a fucking paradigm shift. It’s a shakedown” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 537). He even, as the self-proclaimed ‘voice of reason’ proposes that the new gods wait until the old gods die out, by “letting market forces take care of it” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 548). By relying on capitalism and his reason to judge matters of belief, he embodies exactly what Taylor, Weber and Latour propose has become of humanity since the Enlightenment. Technical Boy’s arrogance is another consequence of the disenchanted world and the moderns’ utilitarian mindset since it “empowers arrogance towards other cultures and modes of knowing

² The new gods mentioned are: Mr. World (globalization), Mr. Town (urbanization, which Harvey Cox claims to be one of the main reasons for secularization in *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (1966)), Media (mass media and entertainment), Technical Boy (internet and technology), The Intangibles (modern stock market) and “gods of credit card and freeway, internet and telephone, of radio and hospital and television, of plastic and beeper and of neon” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 149).

and it increases the tendency to treat others as objects,” as primate aggression is legitimized and triggered by this modern neutralizing framework (Tarnas and Segall).

Technical Boy uses technological jargon to illustrate the shift from premodern times to a modern society. He talks about having reprogrammed reality, language being a virus, religion an operating system and “prayers are so much fucking spam” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 59). Technical Boy’s idea that reality is reprogrammed makes sense, since the religious operating system has changed over time, but he is too blinded by confidence in giving him and the other new gods all the credit. As Latour pointed out, the existential minimum requirement for actors or actants is to affect other actors, which is indisputably true in the case of the internet. Latour also argues, however, that a factish such as a god is only able to affect human kind if humans let it. It is therefore humans, not the gods, who have reprogrammed reality and have consequently provided the new gods with the power to overrule the premodern gods.

The old gods, in an attempt to adapt and survive in the modern world, end up “doing odd jobs, and having peculiar lifestyles; they are caricatures, parodies of their original selves” (Rata 37). Bilquis, Queen of Sheba, becomes a prostitute in downtown Los Angeles, still competing for worshippers and asking them to worship her and pray to her, before her vagina swallows them up. Because of the rain, Bilquis has to find customers on the internet and her client turns out to be Technical Boy. He kills her by running her over repeatedly with his limousine, while singing “You are an immaterial girl living in a material world. You are an analog girl, living in a digital world” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 404-406). The juxtapositions immaterial-material and analog-digital suggest that Technical Boy believes that the old gods are unable to survive the modern developments.

The old Norse gods Odin and Loki have a different approach to survival in modern America, which is argued to be “a bad land for gods” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 582). They orchestrate an elaborate scam, in which Odin, as Mr. Wednesday, convinces as many

premodern gods as possible to fight the modern ones, claiming that this is their only chance at survival. Loki poses as the modern god of globalization, Mr. World, and the two leaders intend to cause as much bloodshed as possible for their own gain. The massacre of premodern as well as modern gods will be a sacrifice to Odin, who feeds on death dedicated to him, and Loki who feeds on the chaos that would erupt (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 577). This revelation instantly transforms these two ancient gods into the most modern characters of the novel. Odin and Loki embody various traits that Richard Tarnas argues to be characteristic of the disenchanted modern. Tarnas claims that a utilitarian mindset, as a consequence of disenchantment, “supercharges the will to power as it desensitizes our emphatic sensitivity to the other in all forms. It empowers arrogance towards other cultures and other modes of knowing” and it upsurges the human tendency to treat others as objects (Tarnas and Segall). Whereas Odin initially seemed to approach his fellow old gods out of a pre-Enlightenment mindset focussed on the collective, it turns out he is led by what Taylor observes as the modern phenomenon of “excessive exploitation of the term individualism, which overstresses the sense of ‘self’ as a consequence of a fairly literal understanding of the Enlightenment’s principle of autonomy” (Kaczmarek 110). In the end, even beings with an initially premodern frame of reference can be corrupted by modernity’s exclusive humanism, since Gaiman’s modern America encourages individual survival instincts, no matter at what cost.

In a world “which is characterized by a profound loss of faith, an atmosphere of doubt, where progress has made us believe we can do anything, solve anything, cure anything,” the expiration date of all gods tends to be shorter than they would prefer (Slabbert and Viljoen 153). Wednesday reminds Technical Boy that “today’s future is tomorrow’s yesterday”, which sounds like a claim made about a new generation of iPhones but it appears to be just as true for gods, who are manifestations of human trends (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 472). Mr. Nancy claims that America is not a country that tolerates gods for long, which is concurred by Shadow

who claims that “new gods are as quickly taken up as they are abandoned, cast aside for the next big thing,” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 582). The ephemerality of gods is a logical consequence of Taylor’s exclusive humanism. After all, if each individual has their own aspirations which may result in the creation of a god, this god will become obsolete when the individual changes their priorities or goals. Without collective values upheld by the institutions of society, like education and churches did in premodern times, the pantheon changes with every new development and trend in a society which changes more rapidly than ever before (Prosser 26-27).

Various characters regard the emergence of new gods as a form of disenchantment and several quotes indicate that this disenchantment is characteristic of modern American culture. Gottdiener’s *The Theming of America* (2001) illustrates the prevalence of themed environments in the United States, which are aimed at “investing constructed spaces with symbolic meaning and at *conveying* that meaning to inhabitants and users through symbolic motifs” (5). Wednesday argues that America needs legends, something to believe in, especially since, unlike any other country with a rich history, America constantly “worries about what it is” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 386, 128). In their tendency to assign meaning to life, which is perfectly natural according to Latour and Taylor, Americans turn ordinary and commercial places into “windows to the Immanent” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 129). A clear example is America’s attitude towards roadside attractions, which have become ‘holy places of power’. Wednesday argues that Americans are very drawn to these places of power and “buy a hot dog and walk around, feeling satisfied on a level they cannot truly describe, and profoundly dissatisfied on a level beneath it” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 130). As a result, churches become as relevant and meaningful as dentist offices and no matter how hard they try to re-enchant their capitalist, material country, the Americans are left dissatisfied and unable to fill the void left by the loss of a higher spirituality.

Another, surprisingly literal, example of disenchantment in the novel is the commentary on the position of television in society, which ironically is told to Shadow through Media, a new goddess, inside the TV. She calls television an “idiot-box”, “the all-seeing eye,” and the “boob tube”. In Media’s allegory, the TV is the altar through which people sacrifice to her; “their time mostly, sometimes each other” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 189). From these examples, it becomes clear what is lost as a consequence of this disenchantment: relationships flatten as well as the experience of life itself. This is, however, argued to fit the American way as well, since “freedom to believe means the freedom to believe the wrong thing after all. Just as freedom of *speech* gives you the right to stay silent” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 437). Since religion and spirituality have shifted from collective principles to individualistic, personal practices, it is impossible to judge or question anyone’s beliefs or motifs and any and all forms become accepted.

American Gods thus turns out to operate on an allegorical level, illustrating the shifting position of religion as a response to an increasingly modern society. Whereas Latour and Taylor essentially discuss the Christian omni-God, their theories are not limited to a monotheistic god and can be applied to a pantheon of gods, such as Gaiman’s. As stated, the tension between the ancient and modern gods and their struggle for survival stems from the (lack of) faith of the American people, which will be discussed in chapter three to provide insight into the modern attitude towards spiritual entities.

Chapter 3 – Gods versus Modernity: The Attitude

“People believe. It’s what people do. They believe. And then they will not take responsibility for their beliefs; they conjure things, and do not trust the conjurations.”

- *American Gods*, 580.

American Gods and *Anansi Boys* are argued to have “a complicated relationship”, since they share the main theme of gods’ influence on humans and the human attitude toward religion, Anansi as a character as well as the same fictional universe, with gods roaming modern America, but are otherwise rather different novels in terms of tone and depth (Czarnowsky 52). In *Anansi Boys*, the reader once again encounters a protagonist, Fat Boy Charlie, who later learns that his father, the West-African trickster Anansi, is a god and who has to come to terms with the divine in his life. Charlie’s long-lost brother Spider appears, who messes up Charlie’s engagement and his job at Grahame Coats’s agency. In an attempt to get rid of his brother, who has godly powers, Charlie stirs up drama in the sphere of the premodern gods, through which the reader acquires new insights into the interaction between gods and modern humans. The attitude of those moderns towards religion as well as modern objects of disenchantment is further explored in this chapter.

If, as claimed by Anansi, the center of America is imaginary and therefore not constant or reliable, Michael Key concludes that all that remains constant after the decentring of what was previously believed to be true is people (39). Somewhere in the middle of his journey, Shadow believes that being a god is a good thing, while he realizes later on that he prefers being human than to be a divine creature since “we don’t need anyone to believe in us. We just keep going anyhow. It’s what we do,” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 386, 584). This claim seems ironic as the reader later figures out that Shadow is in fact Baldur the sun-bringer, son of the Norse god Odin (Mr. Wednesday). Due to the fact that Shadow is unaware of this integral part of his identity,

he not only feels but behaves like a human being amongst the divine and this is part of the reason he is such a complex character. Shadow is the story's traditional folk hero in his journey to self-discovery, in alignment with Joseph Campbell's monomyth, as well as the "new American folk hero" due to him opting for diplomatic solutions to avoid the divine war rather than to fight, as well as the fact that he "[advocates] multiculturalism and tolerance" (Rata 38-39). Compared to the other humans in the novels and most of the gods, old as well as new, however, Shadow does not voice many thoughts that Bruno Latour would characterize as modern. Rather, Shadow is considered to be the prophet or shaman; the means through which to "reach below the surface of modern superficialities and reconnect with something old and mysterious within the depths of our souls" (Freke qtd. in Slabbert and Viljoen 137). Shadow, as a rather ordinary anti-epic hero, dismantles the barriers between dream and reality and fulfils the function of bridge between the ancient and modern worlds. Through Shadow, the reader is able to experience the possibility of re-enchantment along with him. His positioning, moreover, challenges the dichotomic attitude, which Latour argues to be prevalent in modern society. Shadow's experiences illustrate the non-existent divide between 'real' and 'made by humans', since he comes to learn that gods are as much fabricated by humans as they are real (Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, 81).

Various characters in both of the novels discussed in this thesis serve as adequate examples of Latour's theory on the moderns and their attitude towards the non-human sphere. When the ordinary woman named Meave Livingstone, for instance, is murdered in *Anansi Boys*, she finds herself regretting not having been more religious (i.e. adhering to the Christian principles) in life, as she simply could not manage to believe everything told in the Bible to be true. This is not surprising considering her modern stance that "life, from birth to grave, was all there was and that everything else was imaginary" (Gaiman, *Anansi Boys*, 300). Meave's certainty rules out Latour's claim that the sphere of nature and that of non-humanness should

not be separated since both spheres reinforce each other and serve as checks and balances (Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 31). Such dichotomies are found throughout the novels, with countless references to ‘us versus them’, by which the old gods and new gods are juxtaposed, as well as the humans and the divine sphere. In the novella “The Monarch of the Glen”, which takes place a few years after *American Gods*, Shadow ends up working at a party, unknowingly roped into an annual battle between ‘us versus them’, which turns out to be men (or, ‘knights’ and ‘giant-killers’) versus monsters (e.g. dragons, ogres, old gods and other ancient creatures fabricated by mankind). Shadow is expected to fight for the humans against a beast but he refuses and the line between good and evil becomes blurry as the rich and elitist human spectators start clubbing the ‘hero’ as well as the ‘monster’ ferociously, raising questions about the purpose and accuracy of making such dichotomic distinctions at all.

This annual battle between men and mythological creatures is rather ironic, considering it was mankind who ‘conjured’ those creatures in the first place, by telling stories about them, and passing them on from generation to generation through the oral tradition of song and prose. *Anansi Boys* provides an explanation for the influences of such songs and tales, with at its core the notion that “when you’re a god, your emotions are contagious,” granted of course that this applies to those humans who have put their faith in this particular god (Gaiman, *Anansi Boys*, 236). A clear example from the book is Charles’s nickname ‘Fat Boy Charlie’, given to him by his father, the god Anansi, by which even strangers continue to address him, long after he and his father have lost contact, since “when his father gave things names, they stuck” (Gaiman, *Anansi Boys*, 5). In the novel, the songs and stories can be owned by a premodern god, one who is particularly popular at the time, and it would influence society significantly since “people take on the shapes of the songs and the stories that surround them” (Gaiman, *Anansi Boys*, 340). When the songs belonged to the god Tiger, it was a dark time since his songs were dark. A shift took place when Anansi ‘earned’ the stories, which inspired humanity to obtain

more agency over their own lives, by letting go of the doctrine of hunting and being hunted and instead starting to think their way out of problems. This shift might be considered a metaphor for the transition of the Middle (or ‘Dark’) Ages, which is often depicted as people focussing on survival and worshipping out of fear of the afterlife, to the Enlightenment, marked by not only the attempt to understand nature but moreover to gain more control over it as well as over human behaviour. With this emergence of a new dominant belief, humanity uses this new-found ostensible freedom to stand back from any “given situation to shape an identity in the light of his own desires and convictions” (Smith 204), as people respond to the songs and tales which they spread: “the stories spread and as people tell them, the stories change the tellers. People still have the same stories (...) but now the story means something different to what it meant before” (Gaiman, *Anansi Boys*, 341).

The trouble of these stories, i.e. mythological tales of gods and other creatures, is the extent of their influences on modernity in a time of exclusive humanism combined with the directing of religion towards ordinary life and individual gain by turning it into an instrument, as discussed by Taylor. As god-like constructs reflect the needs and aspirations of current modern society, which is focused on personal gain and based on a capitalistic, consumerist ideology, modernity ends up with gods that control them as much as the other way around. Towards the end of his journey, Shadow beings to realize that “people believe. It’s what people do. They believe. And then they will not take responsibility for their beliefs; they conjure things, and do not trust the conjurations. People populate the darkness; with ghosts, with gods, with electrons, with tales” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 580). In this quote, one might encounter the root of many contemporary global issues, such as climate change and civil unrest in Africa: imperialism, Eurocentrism, increasing consumerism and technological innovation are all humanity’s responsibility but many people refuse to acknowledge the consequences of their own conjurations. The embodiment of this modern trait is found in Gaiman’s Technical Boy,

who is too dependent on the internet to function without it and who is claimed to have been “screwin’ with something that screwed him right back. That’s the biggest trouble with the new kids – they figure they know everythin’, and you can’t teach them nothin’ but the hard way” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 488).

With this focus on instrumental rather than intrinsic value, disenchantment – or misenchantment – occurs along with the consequential malaise and emptiness, which could already be found in humanity’s interaction with themed environments such as roadside attractions, as those are used as instruments for acquiring joy but have no real value in and of themselves. This lack of meaning and spiritual connection is effectively voiced by Laura when Shadow tells her: “I’m alive, I’m not dead. Remember.” Her response, while directed at Shadow, is applicable to the majority of society as it describes the effects of disenchantment perfectly: “You’re not dead, but I’m not sure that you’re alive either. Not really” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 396). One of the most modern characters within the universe is Grahame Coats, Fat Boy Charlie’s boss and owner of the very expensive Grahame Coats Agency. The entrepreneur, described as an “albino ferret in an expensive suit” is rather materialistically inclined, to the extent that he starts embezzling money from his clients and attempts to frame his employees (Gaiman, *Anansi Boys*, 63). Coats, as the embodiment of the capitalistic and self-centred modern, experiences this emptiness after having killed a client and having fled to the Caribbean, with a mansion including personal chef waiting for him. He expected to be happy, living in peace and comfort but unsurprisingly “none of these things made Grahame Coats as happy as he felt was his due”, since being rich does not guarantee a rich life (Gaiman, *Anansi Boys*, 332). Coats used to be able to convince himself his life had meaning in the pursuit of wealth, which in his mind is the equivalent of happiness, but without pursuing anything, he fears he will go mad out of restlessness and malaise. Coats, as the typical modern does according to Latour, acts out of instrumental rationalism and attempts to protect himself with

it, behaving like Taylor's buffered self. As a result, Coats resorts to blaming the entire situation on Meave Livingstone, the client he murdered, deciding that she deserved to have been robbed and killed. Coats uses external blame as a buffer to lessen the pain of knowing he is responsible for his own suffering.

For the moderns, life, including spiritual practice, has come to be all about themselves. When Wednesday asks a 'pagan' woman who she bows down to she informs him that she worships "the female principle. It's an empowerment thing," and since she is the goddess "within us all", she does not require a name (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 333). The woman's beliefs revolve around human, earthly matters, focussing on personal gain through empowerment. She claims to believe in the empowerment within humans, therefore believing in humans rather than something or someone on a suprasensory level, even rather than believing in a god fabricated by mankind. Considering the ideas of postmodernism that have influenced modern notions of truth, it is not entirely unnatural to put faith in what you know; yourself. With new theories regarding truth, reality and spirituality emerging continuously, it becomes increasingly difficult to know what to believe in. The postmodern approach to religion has a voice in Gaiman's universe as well, portrayed by the character of Samantha Black Crow. When Shadow tells her that it is difficult to believe, she claims to be able to believe anything, starting a lengthy soliloquy full of supposed contradictions such as the belief in "absolute honesty and sensible social lies" and "a woman's right to choose, a baby's right to live, that while all human life is sacred there's nothing wrong with the death penalty if you can trust the legal system implicitly, and that no one but a moron would ever trust the legal system" (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 425). What happens in Samantha's monologue is a deconstruction of many aspects of modernity; some controversial, others more generally accepted, after which she draws conclusions about life. Samantha, from this postmodern perspective, believes life to

be a game, a cruel joke and that “what happens when you’re alive and that you might as well lie back and enjoy it,” (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 425).

As it turns out, regardless of the type of god, religion or spirituality (if any) one believes in, the most effective way to learn about it is by considering its connection with humanity since gods’ importance and influences are measured by the value they can add to human lives. The interaction between the divine and human sphere seems to take place in a cycle, starting with people putting their faith in gods, allowing those to become actants, capable of having influence. As a result, the people change and perhaps even their spiritual beliefs and thus they move on to new gods that are able to serve their current needs and beliefs better. A summary of the modern attitude towards gods can therefore be found in Samantha’s soliloquy:

I believe in a personal god who cares about me and worries and oversees everything I do. I believe in an impersonal god who set the universe in motion and went off to hang with her girlfriends and doesn’t even know that I’m alive. I believe in an empty and godless universe of causal chaos, background noise and sheer blind luck. (Gaiman, *American Gods*, 425)

During modern times, with as many different desires, beliefs and doctrines as there are people, any religious manifestation is possible, from a deistic or monotheistic Omni-god, fabricated gods tailored to individual desires, to nothing at all.

Conclusion

As the editors of the *A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction* series have been demonstrating for years, fiction often reflects certain aspects of the socio-cultural situation of the era to some extent. In various British novels produced in the years 2000-2009, for instance, the effects of the financial crisis of 2007-8 as well as of the (War on) Terror resulting from the attacks on 9/11 are noticeable, which Bentley, Hubble and Wilson argue have contributed to the apparent demise of postmodernism. They concluded that 9/11 shattered our ‘reality’ and the financial crisis can be considered “a harsh intrusion of real life, which punctured the illusory nature of social life as it was lived and understood in Britain for most of the 2000s” (Bentley, Hubble, and Wilson 5, 7). This mirroring aspect of fiction is especially visible in fantasy novels, since a fictional world within fantasy is not entirely imaginative but rather the product of “pre-existing cultural discourses” and is as such embedded in the cultural manifestations at the time in which the author created it (Balfe 76). In “The International Relations of Middle-Earth: Learning from *The Lord of the Rings*” (2008), Ruane and James illustrate that works of the fantasy genre can be used to acquire a better understanding of the socio-political situation of the ‘real’, or, primary, world, which they made clear by comparing the three waves of feminism as featured in Tolkien’s trilogy to the manifestations of feminism in their own society. This thesis has employed a similar method of research, i.e. studying the fictional universe of *American Gods* and *Anansi Boys* as an allegorical version of the modern Western world, in particular in its attitude towards religion as argued in the theoretical framework.

At first sight, the message of the combined novels could be interpreted as not merely a reflection of the modern attitude towards spirituality in the twenty-first century, but as a criticism on the moderns’ tendency to replace spirituality with material trivialities. While it is always tricky to discuss fictional works or authors in terms of their intentions – after all, Roland Barthes declared in his famous article “The Death of the Author” (1967) that the author is dead

and it is only possible for the reader to interpret the text in their own fashion since there is no objective interpretation –, various aspects of the novels are too ambiguous to make an attempt at uncovering Gaiman's motives regardless. Who or what is represented as good or evil in Gaiman's creations is too blurry to bring the potential value judgments of the novels to light. Not only does the grand battle of *American Gods* end without victors and defeated gods, but rather as an impasse in which the ancient and modern gods continue to co-exist (which seems to be what Shadow prefers), but it is moreover the case that the ancient gods – who initially appear to be the 'good' ones – have antagonists among them as well, as characterized through the tricksters Mr. Wednesday (Odin) and Mr. World (Loki).

It seems as if Gaiman's works appeal to the reader to second-guess their deep-rooted beliefs regarding what qualifies as good or bad in the world and invite them to make up their own mind. The most obvious passage which has this effect is the fight in "the Monarch of the Glen", between Shadow and 'the monster' who serve as representations of humanity versus ancient human fabrications, of heroes versus evil creatures respectively. As soon as Shadow refuses to fight the monster, the human spectators join in, behaving as monsters themselves in their hunger for blood. It is altogether certainly possible to interpret the novels as criticism when considering the modern gods as manifestations of disenchantment who, as a result of human creation, remove humanity further away from opportunities of enchantment. But it is definitely too strong a statement to suggest that criticism is *the* way to understand the novels, especially since Taylor and Latour consider the human attitude towards religion in modern times as natural and understandable.

American Gods and *Anansi Boys* might not blatantly advocate criticism, but, as works of literature, in particular fantasy, they function as a reflection of developments and situations of the primary world. Fantasy theorists claim that the genre is intrinsically linked to escapism and that fantasy "is any departure from consensus reality, an impulse native to literature and

manifested in innumerable variations from monster to metaphor” (Hume qtd. in Bhelkar 12). This ‘escapism accusation’ contributes to the negative opinions of the genre, as people argue that – since fantasy novels are not set in the real world and feature elements that do not exist in the primary world – the stories cannot contribute or teach us anything. This perspective is, however, rather short-sighted, since fantasy “is a powerful tool for coming to an understanding of oneself. The magic trick here (...) is that when you pass through the portal, you re-encounter in the fantasy world the problems you thought you left behind in the real world” (Fassler). This process of “encountering earthly concerns in transfigured form” is definitely the case in the novels discussed in this thesis (Fassler).

Gaiman, in a similar vein to the philosophers Bruno Latour, Max Weber and Charles Taylor, albeit via a different medium, reflects upon the survival of religion after the historical process of disillusionment with, or, disenchantment of, the world. In accordance with the selected works of Latour, *American Gods* and *Anansi Boys* describe the emergence of fabricated modern gods, who, concurring with Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory, only have the right to exist and to influence mankind if humans acknowledge and desire them as actors in their network. If gods are no longer capable of influencing other actors, such as Gaiman’s ancient gods when humanity chooses to put its faith in modern phenomena instead, they cease to exist. Similar to Weber and Taylor, Gaiman identifies disenchantment (or even misenchantment if the reader concludes that belief in the modern gods is ‘wrong’) as one of the core challenges of modernity. As already found in Nietzsche’s nihilism and confirmed by Weber and Taylor, a sense of emptiness or malaise arises, which various characters, such as Grahame Coats and Shadow – who is argued to not really be alive –, can be diagnosed with.

The distinction between the premodern ‘enchanted’ world and the modern ‘disenchanted’ world is, however, more complex and not as black and white as it may seem. Richard Jenkins argues that premodernity was not as homogenous as Weber suggests, since

“the European world, at least, has been disenchanted, *in the sense of epistemically fragmented*, for as long as we can perceive it in the historical record,” even when ignoring the differences between ethnicities and communities (15). According to Jenkins, pluralism, heresy and scepticism are inherent in all historical periods and as such, anthropologists no longer believe in the existence of homogenous “primitive [societies]” (15). Similarly, arguments can be presented which indicate that modern society is in fact more homogenous than premodernity, such as the claim that processes of nationalism and globalization function as unifiers of society (Jenkins 16). Naturally, realizing that the separation between an enchanted and disenchantment society is not as strict as Weber presents it, does not deny the shift that has taken place since the Enlightenment. As Germán McKenzie claims, the rise and decline of religion is not a linear process since it is caused by multiple factors, with changes in the normative ideas as the main instigator (4). As a result of secularization and technological innovation, modernity faces different challenges than previous societies, which give rise to different objects of re-enchantment (or mis-enchantment). Whether or not modernity is more homogeneous than premodernity, there is still a strong case for the prevalence of disenchantment in modern society, manifested in nihilism, in particular loss of meaning and sense.

Considering Taylor’s semi-optimistic approach that the religious sphere does not simply decline linearly but rather leaves room for the rise of new forms, it will be interesting to keep an eye out for cultural endeavours that appear to be attempts at re-enchantment. One of the more obvious large-scale attempts at re-enchantment in the modern West might be the Burning Man festival, which emerges annually in the middle of the Black Rock Desert and is intended as a celebration of any and all individuals and spiritual beliefs. In a consumerist, materialistic United States – in particular so close to Silicon Valley, the capitalistic heart of America – it is not surprising that people make an effort to reconnect with the spiritual and transcendental. Similar endeavours are to be expected since Taylor argues that “experience

over cognition [is] the real locus of religion” (qtd. in Sherry and Kozinets 120). Various forms of re-enchantment as well as disenchantment will likely reveal themselves through all kinds of cultural endeavours before the moderns find a satisfactory way of re-establishing their connection with the spiritual and thus lessen, or even let go altogether, of their feelings of emptiness and malaise as a consequence of the modern attitude.

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