Christianity Under Fire:

An Analysis of the Treatment of Religion in Three Novels by Bernard Cornwell

B.A Essay

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May 2015
Abstract
This essay discusses the various different ways Christianity affects relations between different characters as well as political and historical events in three historical novels by Bernard Cornwell. Christianity had a large part to play in medieval societies and was often the source of many conflicts, especially in the British Isles. The three novels covered in the essay take place during different periods of time in the medieval history of England, that is, the Arthurian period in *The Winter King*, the Viking invasions by the Pagan Danes in *The Last Kingdom* and the high-medieval period in *Harlequin*. The essay discusses both the historical background of each novel and how these novels depict the Church as it was during the period in question, as well as the Christian and non-Christian characters and religions in general.

Furthermore, this essay discusses the troubling youth and life of Bernard Cornwell and how he has admitted to be prejudiced against all religions. Christianity is a religion which Cornwell treats with special contempt, especially when the faith is contrasted with the pagan or otherwise non-Christian faiths in his novels. The medieval Christians in these novels are extremely prejudiced towards their non-Christian counterparts, their adversaries in warfare, whether Christian or not, and even women, who are treated more badly than non-Christian women. Additionally, the Christians are usually seen as more corrupt, lazy, unjust, hypocritical, arrogant and bigoted than others. The Christian characters, especially the members of the clergy, are frequently seen occupying the role of the villain, the coward or the traitor. This is often contrasted with the less religious or pagan characters that are usually depicted as heroic, kind and just. The bigotry, misogyny, hypocrisy and religious fundamentalism of the Christian characters is a central theme in *The Winter King*, *The Last Kingdom* and *Harlequin*. 
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1. Introduction

Bernard Cornwell is a well-known author of historical fiction, as well as non-fictional works on historical events. The historical novels he writes are commonly set in the British Isles and cover an expansive timeframe. All of his novels aim to be as historically accurate as possible. The theme of religion is prevalent in many of Bernard Cornwell’s novels, especially those set during the medieval ages. Cornwell writes about characters from various religious backgrounds such as Christians, Norse pagans and Celtic druids. These characters and their respective religions often clash violently and realistically showcase how religion had a huge effect on people’s lives during medieval times.

However, Cornwell pays specific attention to the Christian characters of his novels and how their personal beliefs often negatively affect their actions and behaviour. Cornwell has a very unique portrayal of Christianity in his novels since he does not shy away from giving characters who are Christian a range of traits that are not, at least by modern day standards, compatible with someone of their religion, with priests and monks supporting warfare and persecuting non-Christians. The Christian church in the medieval period that he frequently writes about, ranging from the fifth to the fourteenth century, was directly involved in people’s lives and the day to day politics of the medieval governments. After all, the church back then was very different from what we know it to be now. The clergy not only fulfilled its expected duties of handling ceremonies but also held large swathes of land, collected taxes and ran businesses. The church was a rich and powerful institution where ambitious people could rise to the top regardless of birth and have enormous influence.

Overall, it can be said that many of Bernard Cornwell’s novels demonstrate a very interesting perspective on religion, especially those novels that are set in medieval times. The faith of the various characters has a large say in how they behave and what decisions they make. Three of his novels showcase his take on religion well, as demonstrated in this essay. These are *The Last Kingdom* (2004), *Harlequin* (2000) and *The Winter King* (1995). The perceived moral superiority of the Christian men above women, and those who they view as their adversaries, whether pagans, heretics or fellow Christians, is central to the plot of these novels and this misogynistic and bigoted view is often the source of conflicts in Cornwell’s novels, whether between people or between nations.
2. Bernard Cornwell, Background and Views on Christianity and Paganism

Bernard Cornwell was born in England in 1944 and raised in Kent but now resides in Massachusetts, in the United States. He was raised in a very strict religious household alongside his four siblings. In his website’s biography section he mentions that he was raised by adoptive parents who were members of a religious sect called the Peculiar People. Cornwell left his adoptive parents’ household when he was of age and started to attend London University, and after this he began working for the BBC. Much later, Cornwell moved to the United States with his American wife Judy whom he married in 1980 and started working on publishing his first book, so he could better qualify for the Green Card. Cornwell describes his marriage to Judy Cornwell as something of a marriage of contrasts, but says that they are blissfully happy together. His wife is a vegetarian, a liberal and a “stalwart in the Episcopal church” according to a 2011 interview in The Telegraph.

Bernard Cornwell’s youth is described as “the stuff of nightmares” in the same 2011 interview published in The Telegraph. His adoptive parents, Joe and Marjorie Wiggins, were members of the Peculiar People. The Peculiar People were a group of fundamentalist Protestants who had very strict rules on how people should run their lives. The Peculiar People were also the subject of some controversy in Essex throughout their history there. For example, the group dismissed all medical treatment for themselves and their children, and instead chose to put their faith in divine healing (“West Ham: Roman Catholicism, Nonconformity and Judaism”). This caused the unnecessary death of people, including a young boy in 1897. According to their history section on their official website UEC-churches.net, the same group now calls itself the Union of Evangelical Churches after a name change in the 1950s and operates fifteen churches throughout Essex and East London.

Cornwell additionally states in the Telegraph interview that he developed an interest in all things forbidden by the Peculiars at an early age, and despised his adoptive parents and strict upbringing. His father abused him physically, believing he could beat God into him and his mother showed him little love and Cornwell felt that she hated him. He says that his family was not a real family, and that the family “didn’t ignite.” He further reflects on his elder brother John, who committed suicide after being sent to a “Salvation Army reformation home.” The institution was run by a friend of his parents’ whom Cornwell accuses of being a paedophile, saying that the man is now imprisoned for having sexual relations with young boys.
When at his childhood home Cornwell developed a “mental wish list of – wine, women, song and tobacco,” all strictly banned by the Peculiars, as a reaction to the brutality of his parents. Fundamentalist Christian rejection of hedonism and the preaching of celibacy is one of the main reasons why Cornwell had a falling out with his parents and he has described the rule of celibacy in the church on his website as “insane.” Many of the characters in his novels reflect this view, especially Uhtred in The Last Kingdom.

Cornwell also developed an interest in all things related to the military, which was especially forbidden by the Peculiars who followed a very strict code of pacifism comparable to that of the Quaker movement. Unfortunately for Cornwell, however, he was ineligible for military service due to myopia. Eventually, Cornwell became a convinced atheist and he started to read up on theology at London University because he wanted to prepare himself to fight the Peculiar People. However, Cornwell realized that the fight was irrelevant and did not pursue any further action against the Peculiar People or any other fundamentalist Christian sect. He describes his childhood in the Telegraph interview as a “disaster,” and that he only stays in contact with his elder sister who married a priest and lives in Australia.

On his website’s “Your Questions” section Cornwell also admits to liking the old pagan religions, especially the Old Norse religion, which is a major theme in The Last Kingdom, but mainly because of Old Norse paganism’s rejection of the moral absolutism of Christianity, calling the Christian church a “killjoy” when compared with the pagan religions. He further states that he does not have any neo-Pagan sympathies and that the ancient gods are “no more effective today than they were a thousand years ago.” Moreover, he discusses his atheism on his website and again says that it is due to his strict Christian upbringing, and also the fact that he believes that there is not a scrap of evidence for the existence of God and that there is lots of evidence to prove the contrary. Cornwell goes further when he says that he will have no afterlife and that he finds comfort in the fact that there is neither God nor an afterlife.

I contacted Bernard Cornwell by E-mail in early March 2015, inquiring about his hostility towards Christians in his novels, more specifically The Last Kingdom and Harlequin. I also asked Cornwell whether or not he had a specific angle in mind on Christianity in his novels. Despite his busy schedule he sent me a reply and mentioned that he is prejudiced against all religions, but still he recognizes the fact that there were many good Christians throughout history although his novels might not always reflect that reality well:
I’m simply not a terrific fan of Christianity. Or of any other religion! So it’s an entirely personal prejudice! And yes, I know that Christianity has done a lot of good and there have been lots of wonderfully charitable Christians, but I still think it’s a load of nonsense. And that a polytheistic world was far more tolerant. (Cornwell, E-mail).

This E-mail reiterates his frequent responses to similar questions relating to Pagan or Christian themes in his novels. The novels, The Last Kingdom and The Winter King definitely reflect a polytheistic pagan world as more tolerant than a monotheistic world, since the pagans in those novels are not concerned with proselytizing their faith or making sure it was being practiced as it should like their Christian counterparts did. Whilst the Christian characters in the world of Harlequin are intolerant to characters of different faiths, such as Judaism.
3. The Last Kingdom, Historical Background

*The Last Kingdom* is the first novel in *The Saxon Stories*. The novel follows the story of Uhtred, a Christian Saxon boy that is captured by the pagan Danes, is brought up as a Viking and eventually finds himself in the court of Alfred the Great. Published by HarperCollins in 2004, the novel and the series of sequels that have followed it remain among Bernard Cornwell’s most celebrated works. Cornwell states in his notes on the research he did on *The Last Kingdom* that in this book he wanted to escape the stereotypical image of the horned Viking and shy away from the usual glorification of Alfred the Great (Cornwell, “Historical Note” 2004, 331). Una Maguire, in her *BBC* article states that the novels are now being adapted for the television screen as a historical drama, with the first season expected to air in 2016.

The historical setting of *The Last Kingdom* is ninth century England during the semi-legendary invasion of the sons of Ragnar Lothbrok. Although the invaders were Vikings from Denmark they did not come to the shores of England to plunder, although some looting definitely happened. The invaders were there to replace the many English kingdoms with a Danish society and they partially succeeded. Only the kingdom of Wessex in the south survived the invasion of the “Great Heathen Army” as it was described in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, giving the book its title, since Wessex was the last kingdom outside Danish rule. The “Great Heathen Army” eventually dissipated after the warlord Guthrum “the unlucky” lived up to his name after a large portion of his invading fleet was destroyed in a storm. Later he suffered another major military setback, as he was dealt a terrible defeat by Alfred the Great at the battle of Edington in southern England in the year 878. Although the battle did not end Danish presence in England, the invaders were driven back to their strongholds further north and the Danish never recovered entirely after their defeat.

There are many characters in *The Last Kingdom* that are based on actual historical people. These are Alfred the Great, the king of Wessex, and the two commanders of the Danish army, Guthrum and Ubba. Although Cornwell has tried to stay true to history when writing these characters he has taken several liberties with regards to historical accuracy. For example, the character of Ubba Ragnarson is given a very important role as one of the main antagonists and greatest threat to Wessex. In reality not much is known about Ubba. However, what is known is that, according to Michael Swantons’ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* he was a great commander of Vikings that was killed in battle in 878 whilst fighting the Saxons in Devonshire (Swanton 76). The exact accounts as to his patronage and ambitions in England are very unclear and there are some discrepancies in historical documents from the period.
Rolf H. Bremmer, in his thesis on Frisians in Anglo-Saxon England mentions that an unknown Lindesfarne Annalist in the year 898 contradicts the claim that Ubba was the son of Ragnar Lothbrok, and states that he was the Duke of Frisia in the present day Netherlands and that he later left England after invading it. Bremmer further mentions that this source is contradicted by much later sources claiming he was in fact, the brother of Halfdan and Ingvar, other sons of Ragnar Lothbrok. However, Cornwell ultimately went with the source that claims that Ubba was in fact, one of the sons of Ragnar Lothbrok. Cornwell also makes a reference to the blood-eagle, which is a gruesome way of executing captives. Modern day scholars such as Roberta Frank in her article “Viking Atrocity and the Skaldic Verse: The Rite of the Blood Eagle” dismiss the practice as a misunderstanding by the authors of the Sagas.

Alfred the Great, one of the novel’s major characters, is given a more realistic image and less glorified than is usual; this, according to Cornwell, more accurately reflects the English king. This view is supported by Joanne Parker, who in her review of *The Last Kingdom* for *The Guardian* defends Cornwell’s decision to rely on a source written down by Bishop Asser, who was a contemporary of King Alfred and wrote down his memoirs. Cornwell also mentions that he is undeterred by the opinion of some academics that Asser’s work is a later forgery (Cornwell “Historical Note” 2004, 331). *Encyclopædia Britannica’s* article on Asser mentions that the memoir called *The Life of King Alfred* chronicles not only the reign of King Alfred but also his childhood and his wars with the pagan Danes. Furthermore, the article mentions that the book is said to draw largely on the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a medieval manuscript that chronicled the events of English history during the early middle ages.

Alfred the Great was undoubtedly a very pious man. His reputation as a God-fearing king is represented well in *The Last Kingdom*. King Alfred, for example, usually travels with a priest called Beocca, who came into his court after his master’s downfall. King Alfred often seeks advice among his bishops and priests and this can come at a disadvantage to him, as his meeting with them can take days. For example, when Alfred is faced with finding a new commander for his fleet, he is initially resistant to appointing Uhtred, presumably due to Uhtred’s pagan background and limited Christian faith. Ultimately though, he decides to confer the command to Uhtred but only after much talk with his bishops. One of these bishops is sexually coerced a few days earlier to support Uhtred’s appointment (Cornwell 255). The fact that the bishop broke his vows of celibacy and lied to the king when claiming that an angel visited him in the night saying that Uhtred would make an excellent commander is a good example of the corruption that is typical of the clergy in Bernard Cornwell’s novels.
4. Characters and Conflicts in *The Last Kingdom*

Uhtred of Bebbanburgh is the protagonist of *The Last Kingdom* and the best example that represents the religious conflict taking place in the novel. He is raised as a Christian by his father who is a great nobleman and the *Ealdorman* (or earl) of Bebbanburgh, now Bamburgh Castle, in Northumbria. By the time of the novel’s beginning Uhtred is an old man and a wealthy noble, who is writing down his life story. The story switches between the first person view of old Uhtred, and the first person view of young Uhtred. Uhtred’s father is killed by the Danish invaders after a short but decisive battle and the young Uhtred is taken prisoner by the Danish earl Ragnar. Ragnar is the commander of a large Danish force and a fierce believer in the pagan gods; he becomes a father figure to Uhtred as the story develops. Despite his Christian upbringing by his parents and father Beocca, Uhtred finds the pagan religion of the Danes a lot more appealing than his own Christian faith. Uhtred is relieved that his Danish captors do not insist that he should learn how to read and write, which is only taught by the clergy and something that Uhtred dislikes although he ultimately learns these skills. The pagan Danes, it seems, have no need to write anything down and view the practice as pointless. Uhtred is impressed by the lack of priests, churches and the freedom he has to indulge in activities that are deemed sinful by the church, such as lavish drinking and feasting. Uhtred has ambitions to become a famous warrior and the warrior culture of the pagan religion supports his dream. The Old Norse gods of war, *Odin* and *Týr*, are frequently mentioned by the pagans and they make frequent sacrifices to them.

The pagan characters are presented as being a lot more tolerant and less hostile towards the Christians than the Christians are to them. The Christians for example do not seem troubled by slaughtering Danish settlers, even women and children. At one point in the novel a Danish settlement is attacked by monks and the populace massacred (Cornwell, 124). The monks justify their actions by calling the brutal massacre a “holy war” and that their actions were sanctioned by God. The Danes respond with equally brutal retaliation and harry the monasteries in the north, much to the terror of the Christians. The nuns and monks are killed and all the treasure taken; the Danes, however, show more reluctance in their violence when attacking the nuns and monks, and justify their actions by legal reasons rather than ones concerning their faith. Cornwell based these events on a source he came across when writing the novel. This source is a chronicle by Roger of Wendover dating from the thirteenth century (Cornwell, “Historical Note” 2004, 332) which describes similar events. Many monasteries in northern England disappeared during this time so the events described in *The Last Kingdom* are not entirely out of place.
The religion of the Danish invaders is very different from the Christianity of the Saxons. They have no priests or nuns and no monasteries or churches. Uhtred is surprised by this and when he asks which of the Danish gods is the highest ranked, nobody seems to know or care (Cornwell, 39). One of the major strictly pagan events in the novel is Ragnar’s sacrifice of a horse to Odin (Cornwell 60); these sacrifices were commonplace in the pagan religion and horses were often promised to gods like Odin or Thor. This is very representative of the late Germanic paganism practiced in Northern Europe at the time. An additional difference between the two religions is that no office of pagan priesthood existed, or was very rare. Instead, political leaders such as earls and kings were expected to perform religious duties such as sacrifices (Jones and Pennick 141).

Alfred the Great, king of Wessex, wages war with a religious conviction and after his victory at the battle of Edington is cemented, he demands that the pagan warlord Guthrum should become a Christian. Alfred knows that he can unite the country of England under his rule by using the Christian faith and restlessly pursues this end. Alfred constantly demands that Uhtred be a better Christian and scolds him for his pagan ways. Alfred meets Uhtred when the latter is still young and in captivity by the Danes. During their meeting Alfred considers ransoming Uhtred and making him a Christian again but retracts his offer after learning the steep price that Ragnar demands for his release (Cornwell 95). Alfred would have a good reason for ransoming Uhtred, as he could eventually press Uhtred’s claim to Bebbanburgh and Northumbria and in the meantime make him his vassal and expand his future realm. Uhtred suspects as much later when he is a grown man and swears an oath to obey Alfred. Alfred rewards his loyalty by giving him a coat of mail and a helmet which is a considerable treasure (Cornwell 222).

The invading Danes on the other hand do not seem religiously motivated when they wage their war across the British Isles, seeing their invasion as a way of enhancing their own prestige and wealth rather than as a way to proselytize their faith. The Danes have a different account on what happened to the monasteries in the north, stating that although the monks had first slaughtered a few men wanting to loot their holy places for treasure their subsequent attack on a nearby Danish settlement was unjustifiable. The Danish use the attack on the settlement as an excuse to destroy churches, monasteries and bishoprics all across Northumbria and replace the Christian society with a more pagan Danish one. Unfortunately for the Danish, this senseless act of violence only inspires the population of England to fight against them with even more viciousness. Instead of becoming a warning to any future uprising, the slaughtered nuns and monks become English martyrs and symbols of the
brutality of the invaders. Uhtred reflects upon these events later and witnesses a church sermon in which a priest tells a fabricated story of how the Danish Vikings attacked the helpless Christians with no warning and that they had no reason to do so (Cornwell 125).

There are considerable differences between the two religions when it comes to gender roles in *The Last Kingdom*, with the pagan religion being a lot more tolerant to women making their own decisions compared to the Christian women who are mostly powerless. The Christian women of England in *The Last Kingdom* face a less empowering life than their pagan counterparts. They are not represented at all in any of the decision making in day to day life and can be subjected to arranged marriages to further the ambitions of the men in their lives. For example, Uhtred is coerced by King Alfred into marrying Mildrith, a minor aristocrat. Mildrith is also a way for King Alfred to further cement Uhtred’s loyalty to Wessex. The marriage takes place in a minor ceremony despite Mildrith’s protests. Marriages of convenience such as these were commonplace among medieval aristocracy and people of noble birth rarely expected to marry for love (“Medieval Women”). Uhtred is unsympathetic towards Mildrith’s position in life and is annoyed by her reluctance to marry him. He says that the role of a wife like Mildrith is to “give me sons and make sure there is food and ale on the table” (Cornwell 263).

The pagan women of *The Last Kingdom* have a lot more freedom of choice than their Christian counterparts. There are however relatively few pagan female character in the novel as the setting is mainly Christian England. The main exception is in Earl Ragnar’s longhouse where there remain a considerable number of women who have arrived from Denmark, since the success of the Danish conquest means that the men can send for their wives and children from Denmark. The pagans hold their women in much higher regard than the Christians; for example, the warlord Guthrum is especially fond of his late mother, whose gold-tipped rib he carries around with him as part of his elaborate haircut at all times. Guthrum says that she was a remarkable woman and that any man that writes a good song about her can expect a reward (Cornwell 164).

Brida is a major character in *The Last Kingdom* and like Uhtred she is a Saxon and is taken captive by the Danes after her kingdom is conquered. Unlike Uhtred, Brida is not of noble birth. Although Brida was raised as a Christian she is quick to adopt the pantheon of the Danish and reject her own faith. She, much like Uhtred, is very impressed by the free spirited nature of the Danish invaders. Despite her foreign background, the Danish are very pleased with her feistiness and allow her to become one of them. Brida has a very important role in the novel as Uhtred’s playmate and later lover. Uhtred and Brida are unmarried but still have
a relationship, this is something that the Christians would have found very hard to accept, but the pagan Danes do not interfere with their relationship at all. Moreover, Brida has her own sword and fights against the Saxons when the opportunity arises. She is very different from most of the women in the novel, being very headstrong and aggressive, which is why the Viking chief Ragnar takes a liking to her and has her accompany Uhtred and himself in his travels (Cornwell 104).

Women warriors in the middle-ages were exceedingly rare and very unorthodox. In his article for *Scienceblogs*, Martin Rundkvist defends the theory that there probably were female warriors during the early medieval period, although they were probably vanishingly few. In addition to fighting, Brida is also taught how to make swords for the Danes, which is a rare skill, and being a blacksmith was traditionally a man’s profession and one of considerable prestige. This is an example of how the women in the pagan society are held in much higher regard than in the Christian ones, although they are not entirely equal to the men. The Christian Saxons have no women fighting on their side, the women are rather seen doing work around the house or are simply ignored all together. Additionally, Brida has some understanding of pagan magic and superstitions. This knowledge makes her important to the Danish and, she later casts a spell on Uhtred’s sword. Cornwell does not sing the praises of Christian women and they are usually just as arrogant and bigoted as their male counterparts such as Queen Ælswith who despises the pagans as much as her husband King Alfred.

The Christian women of *The Last Kingdom* have little to say about what goes on and are mostly minor characters like nuns or simple townswomen. They are never consulted when there is time to make decisions and are looked down upon by the men. The men have total control over them and they can be subjected to abuse, like Brida who was abused by the Abbot in her village (Cornwell 105). The Abbot did not seem worried that abusing Brida would have any consequences for him, as he held a powerful position and owned a rich monastery and adjacent farms; Brida was only the orphan daughter of a peasant. The women of the Christian world are also expected to marry at a very young age. An example of this is Mildrith who is subjected to rumours of being ugly, as she is unmarried at the age of sixteen (Cornwell 258). When Mildrith is married off to Uhtred her godfather receives a dowry of about thirty-three shillings, a considerable fortune. Mildrith does not see any of this money, and indeed is not expected to have any money of her own.

Queen Ælswith, King Alfred’s wife, is very pious just like her husband Alfred. She wears clothes adorned with angels and carries a golden crucifix around her neck. Queen Ælswith is much like her husband as she despises all things pagan. Like many of the
Christians in *The Last Kingdom* she is very hypocritical and bigoted. A good example of her hypocrisy is that she thinks very little of Brida because she thinks she is a bastard of the late King Edmund, and therefore of ignoble birth, although this was a lie Brida made, hoping that the Queen would treat her better if she claimed relations with the King (Cornwell 177). This behaviour from a Christian woman is very different from the reception Brida gets from the pagan Danes that accept Brida despite her background. Moreover, they accept her as one of their own like Uhtred. Ælswith also holds the opinion that Brida is best left off in a nunnery due to the embarrassment that her tainted blood would bring if she remained at court. In medieval Christian societies bastards were considered of lowly status and could rarely expect to amount to much. The fact that a Christian woman treats Brida, an orphan, so negatively, when in comparison the Pagans who treat her amicably, is an example of the bigotry of the Christians and the tolerance of the Pagans which is a recurrent theme in Cornwell’s novels and his own opinion on the two religions.
5. Harlequin, Historical Background

Harlequin is the first novel in the Grail Quest series by Bernard Cornwell. It was published in 2000 and the latest book in the four part series, 1356, was published in 2012. Harlequin tells the story of Thomas of Hookton, an English archer that fights for King Edward III in the opening stages of what would become the Hundred Years War. Like in all of his novels, Cornwell tries to be as historically accurate as possible and to represent historical characters in an accurate light. Many historical events such as the crossing of the Somme by the English army and the sack of Caen are included in the novel and are accurately portrayed.

Furthermore, Cornwell made sure that the battle of Crécy, the novel’s climax, was as historically accurate as possible (Cornwell, “Historical Note” 2000, 372). The novel is set during the opening stages of the Hundred Years War and begins in around the year 1343. The English and the French had by then fought for some time over the right of succession to the French Crown. The war began when Charles IV of France died without male heirs to the throne. This proved to be very problematic for the French as their succession laws decreed that only males were eligible for succession to the kingdom. The situation was made even more awkward since the throne was bound by law to pass down to Charles’ nearest male relative. His nearest male relative was his nephew, Edward III of England, whose mother was Isabella, the sister of Charles IV. However, the French simply changed the law again and made male succession through female inheritance null and void and Philip VI, who was the count of Anjou ascended to the throne (“Hundred Years War”). Naturally this outraged Edward III and in 1346 the king called his banners and sailed across the English Channel. He landed in Normandy and shortly thereafter he took Caen, a major city of critical strategic importance. What followed was a brutal harrowing of Normandy and the countryside around Paris. The French army eventually caught up with the English invaders at Crécy where the two armies met in battle. The Crécy Museum in France features an article by Dr. Ian Mortimer on their website where the battle is described as having been an absolute catastrophe for the French who lost a great deal of nobles and allies. The battle was a decisive victory for the English who had the upper hand in the fighting in the following years.

The laws of succession that limit the titles passed down to the male line are based on a medieval legal system called Salic Law (“Salic Law of Succession”). The French were zealous followers of this code of law which was legitimized, like many laws, by the pope in Avignon. Melissa Snell’s article about the Avignon Papacy explains how the Pope had moved to Avignon in southern France in 1309 following a factional and political strife; Avignon at the time was a vassal state of the Pope making the decision easier for the French Pope Clement V.
The fact that the city of Rome was a shadow of its former glory and decimated by the plague, in addition to being very impoverished, is also a probable cause for the papal courts’ abandonment of the city. The papacy at the time was dominated by the French at all turns so it came as no surprise that the law that barred women from inheriting was passed. This was a very troubling time for the Catholic Church. The Avignon Papacy which lasted from 1309 to 1377 is one of the main reasons behind the decline of the institution and the subsequent broadening gap between the Pope in Rome and the Christian laymen of Europe.

*Harlequin* is also set in Brittany in northwest France. Thomas of Hookton first makes his debut as a soldier and a strategist fighting with the English in their campaign to control the entire peninsula. Shortly before the English invasion of France, the Duke of Brittany died childless and left his sizeable duchy in chaos. What followed was a bloody proxy-war between England and France. According to *Encyclopædia Britannica*, John of Montfort, the next Duke of Brittany was very sympathetic to the English cause and forged an alliance with them against his rival Charles of Blois who had French support. Charles of Blois, according to the *Biography.com* article about him was a powerful noble and the son of Philip VI’s sister. Ultimately this war would end in a decisive English victory and the death of Charles of Blois.

Furthermore, the fourteenth century was a time of religious persecution, especially towards Jews. According to Michael Berenbaum, by the time the story of *Harlequin* takes place, the English Jews had already been expelled for about a generation. They had found refuge in The Holy Roman Empire, which mostly consisted of what are now Germany and Austria, and France, although they also faced a general anti-Semitic attitude in those countries as well. The Jews were faced with ignorant rulers and hostile populations. In France, where *Harlequin* is mostly set, the Jews faced much hostility from the nobility, burgher classes and peasants, and they were also blamed for the Black Death. This lie, fuelled by the horrible destruction brought by the plague would stir up extreme anti-Semitism in France. As a result of this propaganda the Jewish population was massacred and suffered expulsions, arrests and accusations of coin-clipping, a serious offense in the medieval world. Eventually the Jews were totally expelled from all French holdings by a royal edict in 1394 (“Expulsion of Jews from France”).

*Harlequin* opens with a quote from King Jean II of France which describes the concern for the Christian faith during the destructive period of the Hundred Years War. He laments over the robbing of churches and cruelties against women,
…churches, robbed, souls destroyed. The Christian faith has withered and commerce has perished and so many other wickednesses have followed from these wars that they cannot be spoken or written down (Cornwell, 29).

*Harlequin* has a large number of Christian characters due to the fact that it is set in the fourteenth century, which is centuries after the Christianisation of Europe and the British Isles. The novel has some characters of different faiths such as a Jew and most notably a nobleman that is a Cathar. The many Christians of *Harlequin* have troubles reconciling their faith in times of war. Unlike the wars fought in *The Last Kingdom* the Christians are fighting amongst themselves. The English also genuinely believe that God is on their side and that victory over the French in this war is their God given right. Equally, the French believe that their cause is supported by God. King Philip VI has many priests around him like Edward III and even an astrologer who tells him prophecies about how the battle of Crécy will end in a glorious French victory (Cornwell 322).

Edward III believes in his divine cause and is a pious man. He is frequently seen accompanied by priests who support his belief that the war against the French has a divine nature. For example, when the king takes Caen in Normandy from the French he thinks that his new cannons can work miracles against the walls of the city’s castle (Cornwell 3926). Furthermore, during the battle of Crécy the king spends considerable time praying and consulting with his priests. Maximillian Singer states that the medieval concept of a battle was similar to that of a trial by combat, except that it was on a much larger scale, and when a side emerged victorious it was seen as a sign of approval from God. This also explains the use of what is considered to be the holy lance by the Vexilles in the battle of Crécy, as they hope that the presence of the lance shall make God look favourably upon them. The use of such relics on the battlefield was not unheard of in medieval warfare, although the practice is mostly associated with the crusades rather than wars in Europe.
6. Characters and Conflicts in *Harlequin*

Thomas of Hookton is a character who is religiously troubled. He is the son of a priest, which was unusual at the time since the Catholic Church forbade its clergy to have children. After his village of Hookton is destroyed in a French raid he is tasked with retrieving the holy lance of St. George, which many of the novel’s characters believe to have been the lance in the Hookton church. The lance is said to have divine powers and that it will grant victory to whoever wields it in battle. However, Thomas does not like being the pawn of powerful men and is disillusioned with both nobles and clergy, being the bastard son of a priest. Bernard Cornwell was asked about the religious nature of Thomas of Hookton by Richard Lee in a 2012 interview with the Historical Novel Society. He stated that despite the fact that some of his fans disliked that Thomas was very religious he had a good reason, that is, Thomas’s religious beliefs were simply a reflection of the society and historical period he lived in. Religion, Cornwell says, was simply a larger part of people’s lives in pre-scientific society because they lacked the answers to many of life’s questions which people have now.

Thomas is a religious man, but does not like to be told what to do by the clergy. He is frequently seen drinking or wenching and is rarely at church. The fact that he is the bastard son of a priest is presumably why he does not take what priests and other holy men tell him very seriously. His father had restricted his upbringing to his own desires, expecting him to take his place as Hookton’s priest. For example, he forbade Thomas to learn how to shoot the longbow since archery was the practice of a commoner and did not befit someone of Thomas’ status (Cornwell 7). While Thomas always expected to become a priest himself and was taught French and some Latin, he never wanted to take the vows and live out his days in celibacy and boredom. His father sent him to Oxford to learn how to read and write and finish his education for his eventual priesthood and Thomas always resents him for it. However Thomas only finished a single term before returning to Hookton (Cornwell 7).

Thomas also witnesses the hypocrisy of the church first-hand when the French are slaughtered in the name of God. Furthermore, he despises the fact that clergymen such as Father Hobbe constantly pester him about his divine mission to retrieve the holy lance stolen from Hookton, a mission that he has no real interest in fulfilling. He realizes that the religious zealotry of the church that eggs him on to fulfil his destiny to retrieve the holy lance is misplaced and, more importantly, none of his business. Eventually though, Thomas relents and embarks upon his quest out of sheer desperation rather than some newfound religious zeal. Being pestered by holy men and being urged to complete a holy mission, is also a central theme to many of Cornwell’s novels, like *The Last Kingdom* and *The Winter King*. 
The Jewish have a small but noticeable presence in *Harlequin*. They are represented accurately as a persecuted and landless people who cannot farm and have to make their way in the world by taking up trade or becoming doctors, artisans or tradesmen. The character of Mordecai is the only Jewish character in the novel. He is a brilliant doctor in the employ of Sir Guillaume in Caen, who is equally sympathetic towards his presence as Thomas is. Other characters in the novel are very bigoted and hostile towards Mordecai even though they need his services. This baseless bigotry towards Mordecai is an example of the hypocrisy of the church and clergy. One example of this bigotry towards Mordecai is that displayed by Brother Germain, a monk of high rank in a large Abbey that the English shelter in. He needs ointments from Mordecai to soothe the pain in his limbs and says, “…only Mordecai can relieve them ‘Tis a pity he will burn in hell” (Cornwell 237). This suggests that an abbey does business with Mordecai, a “non-believer,” out of respect for his medicinal aptitude even though their zealotry would forbid it. Furthermore, Jeanette, a major character in the novel, is angered when Thomas does not share her anger when she tells him that the Duke of Brittany called her mother a Jewess;

Thomas frowned. ‘I’ve never met a Jew,’ he said. Jeanette almost exploded.

‘You think I have? You need to meet the devil to know he is bad? A pig to discover he stinks?’ (Cornwell 171).

Women are relatively overshadowed by their male counterparts in *Harlequin* as the medieval world of the time forbade women from making any sort of decision or holding any land, so they had to fight twice as hard as the men to live an independent and happy life. Jeannette is a major female character and a noblewoman by virtue of her marriage with Henri Chenier, Count of Armorique, with whom she had a son, Charles, named after the Duke of Brittany who is Henri Chenier’s uncle. Her father was a wealthy merchant in the town of La Roche Derrien. The Duke opposed their marriage as he viewed Jeanette to be nothing more than an upstart noblewoman unworthy of a marriage to a Count. In the Duke’s view his nephew should have married a rich heiress; he says that “It was not the job of a wife to be beautiful, but to be rich” (Cornwell 48). Jeanette’s marriage to the count is yet another example of how women were often simply bartered off as goods in a Christian marriage. Marriages such as this one were common in medieval times and Cornwell’s criticism of them serves as an example of his opposition to Christianity. The pagans of *The Last Kingdom*, for example, have no marriages that are purely intended to increase status or wealth. On the other hand, Jeannette’s father had made sure that she would catch the eyes of noblemen by hosting feasts.
Jeannette suffers a terrible fate when her husband is killed fighting for the Duke in the war. The death of her husband and the capture of her hometown of La Roche Derrien mean that she drops considerably in status very quickly. She escapes her town with Thomas and pleads to the Duke of Brittany to restore her status, but to no avail.
7. The Winter King, Historical Background

*The Winter King*, first published in 1995, is the first of three novels in the *Warlord Chronicles* trilogy by Bernard Cornwell. Set in the British Isles during the sixth century, the story is filled with political and religious tensions between the warring tribes and petty kingdoms that struggle for control over Britain and are trying to fill up the power vacuum left by the Roman Empire’s departure. The story follows the adventures of Derfel Cadarn who is an orphan adopted by the Druid Merlin and a companion of Arthur, who is the regent of Dumnonia (south west England, now Devon) and Derfel’s liege. He is the sole protagonist and narrator of the entire story and shares many similarities to Uhtred from *The Last Kingdom* and Thomas from *Harlequin* in his personal beliefs. He is sceptical and distrustful towards Christian characters and more sympathetic to non–Christian ones. He lives in Dumnonia, a kingdom in western England that faces a struggle for its survival as its king has died of old age with only a sickly infant called Mordred to take the throne.

The historical background for *The Winter King* is the legendary Arthurian Britain. The Arthurian period of British history is in the dark ages, so called due to the fact that the Roman Empire had fallen, leaving Europe in chaos, and likewise because relatively few historical documents exist from that era. *Encyclopædia Britannica*’s article “Barbarian Invasions” mentions that the dark ages were an era of a huge migration of Germanic tribes into Western Europe, including Saxons and Franks, and these have a large part to play in the story. Due to the scarcity of documented facts about this period of time, Bernard Cornwell can afford to take many liberties with regards to historical accuracy, without risking to be criticized for being inaccurate. Cornwell endeavours to present a plausible picture of the situation in Britain during a period in history from which little evidence remains. Arthur is not depicted as a warrior-king that has come to throw the Saxons into the sea and unite Britain but rather as a warlord in service to his infant king.

Historical resources on British history after the Roman Empire pulled out its last legion in 410 and before the start of the historical document *The Anglo Saxon Chronicle* in the ninth century are relatively scarce, and often it is hard to separate fact from fiction. What is known is that the Great Migration Period, as the Germanic settlement and sometimes invasions into the Roman Empire’s territory were called, played a significant role in the history of Britain. This is reflected accurately in *The Winter King* as Derfel, Arthur and his knights often have to fight off the various Saxon warlords that have come to take Britain for themselves, but the Saxons were a tribe originating in what is now northern Germany and southern Denmark (Snell, “Saxons”).
Furthermore, Derfel is sent to Brittany to help a local king defend himself from an invasion by a second Germanic tribe of pagans called the Franks. The Franks were a confederation of Germanic tribes that lived on the east bank of the river Rhine and frequently raided Roman territories. They invaded and conquered the entire Roman province of Gaul, and by the end of the fifth century had settled their tribe there, adapting some Roman customs and mixing their language with Latin, and this developed into what would eventually become French. The ruling classes of Europe, both on the mainland and in England, had by the year 550 mostly become Germanic, whether they had been Latinised or not (Jones and Pennick 112).
8. Characters and Conflicts in *The Winter King*

Derfel Cadarn is a character that has many religious questions and is curious about the Christian God as well as the various pagan gods that are worshipped throughout the British Isles. Derfel lives in a monastery and is writing down the chronicle of his life and the tale of Arthur; the story switches between this first person narrative of old Derfel in the monastery and the first person narrative of Derfel as a young man, much like Uhtred in *The Last Kingdom*. Cornwell based Derfel on an actual historical character called St. Derfel-Gadarn, meaning ‘Derfel the strong.’ According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia* online, St. Derfel-Gadarn was a Welsh hermit that was reportedly a contemporary of King Arthur. He lived in a monastery for the latter part of his life just like Derfel Cadarn and presumably died of natural causes in 660.

Derfel has a pagan upbringing with the pagan Merlin and believes in Merlin’s perpetrated magical powers and is distrustful of the Christians that threaten his power. By the time that Derfel is an old man living in the monastery he is not entirely Christian and is still distrustful towards the new religion. Derfel is also initiated into a mystical warrior cult called Mithraism, which was an outgrowth of the pre-Islamic Iranian religion of Zoroastrianism. The cult spread to the Roman Empire via its soldiers and gained considerable favour in the Empire (Jones and Pennick 58). However, Cornwell extends the life of the cult by at least a century, since Reginold Merkelbach states in the *Encyclopædia Britannica* that Mithraism had lost its standing and been replaced by Christianity by the year 387 at the latest. There are several Mithraist characters in the novel who take their cult very seriously and guard its secret rites carefully.

Merlin is the novel’s most important religious figure. Cornwell depicts Merlin as an old and wise Druid and as someone that reportedly has magical powers. His magic often seems to be preparedness, for example the various traps in his fortified house, or pure serendipity, such as when he is saved from a besieged island city in Brittany by the last boat, which miraculously escaped the chaos of the final assault and answered his call (Cornwell 284). Merlin is obsessed with restoring the pagan Druid religion which has been for so long repressed by the Romans, its sacred rites forgotten and its holy relics scattered across the British Isles. He knows that Christianity is very likely to succeed in the struggle over religious hegemony in Britain. He therefore goes on a five year long quest to try and restore the lost rites and relics of Druidism. Merlin is extremely hostile towards the increasingly popular Christian religion and is rightfully worried that the Christians will eventually outnumber the pagans. His quest even takes him to Rome which he describes as a “filthy place,” and goes so
far as to accuse the priests there of paedophilia (Cornwell 271). Additionally, Merlin dislikes the Christians’ way of writing everything down, making it into dogma and arguing over it. He says that dogmatic scriptures lead to men arguing more and more until they start putting each other to death (Cornwell 291).

The Christians of The Winter King are very ambitious and hope to make Christianity the chief religion in England. A few of the petty kings and chieftains already have a bishop or a priest that advises them on matters of state. The Christians are very disrespectful towards the pagan Druids and the various cults that still dominate the religious landscape of Britain. The Christians see themselves as the sole legitimate religion in Britain and have begun a vicious iconoclasm against the pagans. Ancient Roman temples are destroyed and new churches built on their foundations, and often this barbaric practice outrages the various pagan characters. Guinevere, Arthur’s wife, remarks that the Christians are narrow minded and laments the fact that the beautiful Roman temples are being torn down and that “cow sheds” are being built instead (Cornwell 239). Additionally, the hypocrisy of the Christians is made evident in many scenes, for instance, Derfel recalls a priest that used prostitutes to proselytize:

Christian missionaries they called themselves, and almost all of them had a band of women believers who were supposed to assist in the Christian rituals, but who, it was rumoured, were more likely to be used for the seduction of converts to the new religion. (Cornwell 316)

The Christian character of Bishop Sansum is a very dangerous and ambitious man, and a prime example of the worst types of Christians that are prominent throughout Cornwell’s novels. He despises the pagans, although he must hide it from his lord Arthur and his wife Guinevere for they are still pagans. However, Arthur is more accepting of the Christians than his wife and makes Sansum marry him and Guinevere in the Christian fashion. Sansum is very hypocritical and uses his position as Bishop to collect taxes in his own name and hoard an extensive amount of wealth for himself, whilst claiming that the wealth is for the people. At the end of the novel he has hidden a large amount of treasure in his monastery which he refuses to share with Arthur for the defence of young Mordred’s realm (Cornwell 5648). In order to avoid giving Arthur this treasure, he initially tries to trick Arthur into believing that the monastery is in fact very impoverished. Treachery and sometimes outright treason are commonplace amongst Christians in Cornwell’s novels but Sansum is especially craven and treasonous. Furthermore, Sansum is shown to be cruel to the poor and sick, which is very unbefitting of a man of the church. In one scene he is seen attacking a group of lepers in the
streets: “The saint was flinging clods of earth at them [the lepers], screaming at them to go to the devil and summoning other brothers to help him” (Cornwell 313).

Much like the women of *The Last Kingdom* the pagan women of *The Winter King* have a lot more authority and choice over their own lives. The Christian women of *The Winter King* do not have a role in the novel at all, which is not entirely surprising since the setting is more or less in various military missions across Britain, where the presence of any women at all would be surprising, especially Christian women, who naturally did not claim to have any magical powers that could change the tide of battle. The character of Nimue is a Druid priestess and the lover of Merlin, despite being raised by him as a child like Derfel. She, much like Merlin, despises the Christians and actively sabotages their efforts to achieve religious power over Britain. Nimue is especially unfriendly to Sansum, whom she nicknames the “mouse lord,” due to his small frame (Cornwell 53). She is very resourceful and her “magic” is, for example, one of the reasons Arthur is able to achieve victory in the climatic final battle. Nimue is central to Bernard Cornwell’s criticism of Christianity since she, unlike Derfel, notices the sway that the new religion has over the populace. Nimue shares Merlin’s efforts at trying to restore the old gods and even goes as far. With this she hopes that the gods will look more favourably on her and Merlin’s efforts.
9. Conclusion
This essay has demonstrated that Cornwell’s outlook on Christianity as conveyed through his novels *The Last Kingdom*, *Harlequin* and *The Winter King* is quite negative and often the religion clashes with pagan or non-Christian faiths. *The Last Kingdom* is a fast-paced narrative filled with exhilarating battle scenes, which covers the troubling time that is the ninth century invasion of England by the pagan Danes, who have come to conquer and settle new lands. The newcomers brought with them an old religion that is totally incompatible with the Christian faith of the Anglo-Saxons that they have conquered. These differences often result in terrible atrocities committed by both sides, such as the attack on a peaceful Danish settlement by zealous monks and the resultant revenge attacks by the Vikings on English monasteries and churches. Perhaps the most interesting differences between the two cultures and religions are manifested in how the status of women is presented. The pagan women have greater freedom than the Christian women and can, for example, fight alongside the men. Furthermore, *The Last Kingdom* is a personal journey of the protagonist Uhtred, who must decide between the Christian faith of his father and his King, and the Old Norse religion of his ancestors brought back to life by the invading Danes.

In the novel *Harlequin*, Cornwell takes Christianity onto a rather different level than in *The Last Kingdom* and *The Winter King*, seeing as there are no pagans to persecute or go to war with. Instead, Cornwell focuses his criticism on how obsessive the Christians are in their efforts to persuade Thomas in his quest to retrieve the “holy lance.” Additionally, the Christians in *Harlequin* are equally morally corrupt and bigoted as their counterparts in *The Winter King* and *The Last Kingdom*, revealed for instance in their hostility towards the Jew Mordecai. Lastly, Cornwell criticizes the way Christian women during the Middle Ages were often traded like chattel in marriages and frequently left completely hopeless and at the mercy of the men in their lives if they were widowed. Finally, much like *The Last Kingdom* the story follows a protagonist that is religiously troubled and has difficulties with the clergy throughout the novel.

*The Winter King* covers an interesting period of British history which is more legend than actual fact. At the time in which it is set, Christianity was a relative newcomer to the British Isles and the novel reflects this accurately, with the native population being very sceptical of the new religion’s intentions for Britain’s politics as well as its message of a single god rather than a pantheon of different gods. The Christians of the novel, much like those in *The Last Kingdom* and *Harlequin*, rely on their cunning and wealth to extort power and influence over the populace. The corrupt and cowardly character Sansum is an example of
this as he often abuses the power of his station for his personal gain. *The Winter King* is also a story which has pagan female characters of religious importance. For example, the character of Nimue has a large part to play in the novel as many characters rely on her abilities as a pagan Druid and warrior.

Cornwell can be rightfully scolded by his critics as being too hostile towards Christianity in many points. The Christian characters are seen as brutish, bigoted and misogynistic when compared to their pagan or less zealous counterparts. The critical and central theme of Christianity as a political device to gain power and wealth, or to subdue the faith’s enemies, is central to the plot of *The Winter King* and *The Last Kingdom*, and it is exalted as a major device against the French in *Harlequin*. The various differences between the religions that feature in these novels are obvious to all readers. The negative way in which Christianity is portrayed can be attributed to two main factors, the first being Bernard Cornwell’s troubled youth and upbringing in a very religious household, the second being his lifelong atheism and continued criticism of all religions, especially monotheistic ones like Christianity. He explores the various themes in which Christianity can cause trouble, such as wars fought over zealotry rather than justifiable causes and the differences in gender roles among Christian and non-Christian characters.
Works Cited


