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Maturity and Fruitfulness in *A Song of Ice and Fire*: A Reflection in Theological Anthropology

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Abstract: This article seeks to understand maturity and fruitfulness in terms of going beyond oneself toward others and, ultimately, the divine Other. It suggests that, from a perspective of Christian theological anthropology, the pursuit of maturity and fruitfulness in human life entails being in community since human nature is inherently relational. To grow in maturity and "bear fruit" in one's life, the whole web of one's relationships at various levels must be transformed. Christian maturity and fruitfulness, then, are understood in terms of love as a non-linear striving for perfection. Ultimately, this process must be enabled and carried by grace, lest it become futile and oppressive. Using an illustrative case of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, a popular epic fantasy series by George R. R. Martin, this thesis will be elaborated in this article throughout three steps that make for three interrelated dimensions of this process, namely, grace, love and community, respectively.

Keywords: theological anthropology; culture; theological hermeneutics; cultural theology; George R. R. Martin

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1. Introduction

While there is a range of hermeneutic lenses through which one can address maturity and fruitfulness, including parenthood,[1] various forms of human caring or scientific and artistic endeavors, this article opts for a different approach. Rooted in a relational anthropology, it will understand the two categories in terms of going beyond oneself toward others and, ultimately, the divine Other. In this process, so the argument will go, maturity and fruitfulness are negotiated in interaction with various sources of orientation and authority, with other people across time and space and with the reality one encounters in one's daily life—in short, with culture. With respect to particularly theological exploration, it is important to remember that, with Christendom having been disintegrated, it can presently be difficult to speak of "religious culture" as such without any further qualifier, not least in relation to Christianity. However, there are various resources, including those coming from popular culture, that enable pursuing such exploration. With its exploitation of religion, the epic fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire* (ASOIAF) by George R. R. Martin represents one such resource.[2]

There are several reasons why ASOIAF can possibly be interesting for a theological exploration such as this one. As Amy Tarnowski suggested, fiction in general is significant for either challenging or cementing the bounds of what a society or culture considers to be normal. This is done by either offering a mimetic reflection on or providing a speculative alternative to the reality as commonly perceived (Tarnowski 2019, p. 80). However, there are also additional reasons that are more unique to ASOIAF. In particular, this work of art has created, as I will seek to show in this article, a world that appeals to the sentiments of people living in the world formed by populist politics, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian war against Ukraine. In the series, there are deep enmities between rivalling factions, constituted by different Houses and their vassals. Yet, there is also a yearning to overcome these enmities through reaching out to the other. Furthermore, it is especially in *A Clash of Kings*, the second book of the series, that deities and divine signs significantly

shape the fortunes and actions of people. And yet again, there is also a sense that there is no immutable fate but that transformation is possible and that one can bring about change, especially if in cooperation with the other. Such a view nurtures one's growing into maturity and becoming able to fruitfully contribute to the upbuilding of one's community.

Now, I am *not* trying to suggest that ASOIAF is a Christian book series, nor is my intention to "christen" it. My theoretical approach in this article is rooted in a theology of culture that resists instrumentalizing culture, including works of art, for particular agendas. Rather, I regard culture as an autonomous mediator of meaning, good and truth (see, e.g., Lynch 2005, pp. 103–4). The (Christian) theological reflection of culture that proceeds from this understanding, then, does not seek to extract a ready-made meaning from a work of culture itself. Rather, its method is one of discernment; meaning emerges in the interaction between a work of culture (in light of the broader cultural discussion that exists on this work of culture) and an interpreter (and the broader theological tradition in which this interpreter is situated) (see Marsh 2018, p. 40). Some of the key questions for the theological hermeneutics of culture include: How does that which we interpret in a work of culture help us better understand and embody human action vis-à-vis the coming reign of God? How does our vision/anticipation of what we believe to be God's reign shape our theological claims? (see Marsh 2018, p. 42). In this process, it is good to bear in mind that works of culture, including those that are seen as belonging to so-called "popular culture," such as ASOIAF, are also significant for theological exploration, even if they do not explicitly deal with religion or topics customarily associated with religion (e.g., salvation or God). What is important is to pay attention to the ways in which, if at all, these works of culture introduce themes, such as guilt, evil, fear, remorse, repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, justice or grace.

In theological discourse, a suggestion has been made to distinguish between the "historical-experiential" and the "eschatological-intentional" approaches to study the processes of becoming human (Behr 2013, p. 27; Noble Forthcoming). Theological engagement with culture enables, I would suggest, making provisions for the objectives underlined by both approaches: culture helps theology remain rooted in and true to the reality of everyday life while inspiring it to see beyond the horizon of the imaginable. I will come back to this distinction in the conclusion. Before that, however, taking the ASOIAF epic fantasy series as an illustrative case, this article will explore how our theological reflection on maturity and fruitfulness can be informed today—in a world where organized and institutionalized forms of religion increasingly give way to implicit, non-established and privatized, yet meaning-making and orientation-giving, expressions.[3] In particular, three concepts will be employed to advance the argument—grace, love and community. To anchor my discussion, however, I will first inquire into maturity and fruitfulness from a theological perspective as movements beyond oneself toward others and the ultimate Other.

2. Maturity and Fruitfulness as Movements Beyond Oneself

In this article, I seek to make a case for such a form of maturity and fruitfulness that is neither merely inward-looking nor exclusively heaven-focused (see Mk 9:2–8 or Acts 1:9–11) but should include some form of sharing life with others, or even giving life to others. From a biblical perspective, self-centered and isolated "maturity" is undesirable (see 1 Cor 10:24). To use Christian theological discourse, one who is overly focused on oneself contradicts one's agency as a bearer of God's image (*imago Dei*), which is based on the Trinity as a community. We can therefore say that self-centered maturity is, in fact, a prolonged adolescence. In his recent book on maturity and youthfulness, Thomas Bergler makes a case for overcoming what he labels as "the juvenilization of American Christianity" (Bergler 2014). Bergler argues that being young is not a problem in itself, although, to him, this stage/state of human life by definition implies immaturity. The problem is the glorification of this state that has spread not only in culture at large but also in the (American) church. Bergler finds remedy in the spiritual nurturing of young people

and an intergenerational culture of spiritual maturity as a means to help young people grow toward maturity (Bergler 2014, pp. 111–12).

Now, Bergler's analysis of the situation in both the church and society might justifiably be deemed as too simplistic, as he seems to believe that being young always implies immaturity. If so, what about children and young people who are recognized as mature beyond their biological age? Furthermore, what about children whom the church has declared saints? Given these limitations, however, his emphasis on intergenerational exchange and formation still has much relevance, as it fosters growth toward maturity that is not self-centered but rather seeks fruitfulness. Still, I would add that this process can never be unidirectional (as the "passing on of knowledge" from the "old and wise" to the "young and immature"); it necessarily is of a mutual and life-long nature. Furthermore, the intergenerational dynamic must be placed in a broader context of human relationality; one cannot grow into a mature and fruitful person without both being nurtured by and contributing to the growth of others. This process includes observation, communication, learning and teaching, sharing as well as differentiation. One pursues one's humanity, including maturity and fruitfulness, by relating to others.

This communal aspect of maturity is also explored by E. D. Mbennah in his exegesis of The Epistle to the Ephesians, in which he argues that maturity means all Christians, together as the church, ultimately attaining oneness in full conformity with Christ (Mbennah 2016, p. 127). Mbennah maintains that this assertion also has implications for Christian existence in society (i.e., "fruitfulness"): "Only spiritually mature Christians will be able to have a positive influence on society and make the world a better and wholesome place. Similarly, only spiritually mature Christians, as light of the world, will be able to illuminate and give guidance to society" (Mbennah 2016, p. 131).

It should be noted that Mbennah interprets Christian maturity, based on scriptural evidence from Ephesians 4:13, in terms of doctrinal unity.[4] For the purpose of this article, however, I interpret "unity" as being-one-with-oneself (i.e., authentic and undivided) and with one's community (i.e., being a part of one's fabric of relationships).[5] In my understanding of maturity and fruitfulness, I see these two forms of unity (being-one-with-oneself *and* being a part of one's fabric of relationships) as interwoven. Moreover, they both are part of the movement toward being-one-with-God.

This understanding concurs with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the mature Christian faith for a world that has come of age as unity with oneself. It is in his *Ethics* that Bonhoeffer suggests that unity with oneself can only be attained in the act of giving oneself to God and to other people (Bonhoeffer 1992, p. 279). This act—and, indeed, the state of the mind—is linked to a liturgical and ethical presence that, for Bonhoeffer, finds its symbolic expression in "prayer and work" (Holte 2013, p. 154). He understands Christian life as participation in the act of the Christ-event—that is to say, the locus of redemption is to be found in God withdrawing Godself from the world to make space for human action (Bonhoeffer 1998, pp. 535–36; Holte 2013, p. 155). Based on this assertion, I would propose that, for Bonhoeffer, Christian (and, I think we could say, human) maturity presupposes an autonomous world, the world of God's withdrawal and Christ's weakness that allows for human participation in the event of redemption and genuine fruitfulness. Far from being dismissive of the reality of redemption, then, the German theologian postulates that maturity and fruitfulness—in a Christian perspective—demands that one takes seriously the self, the other and the world so that "prayer and work" (i.e., spirituality and action for the sake of transformation) become of central relevance (see also Holte 2013, p. 161).

Now, what does this process look like in practice? One possible scenario is introduced by Christopher Chapman, who argues against the attainment of (Christian) perfection (or, in other words, maturity and fruitfulness) as a process of linear stages toward holiness ("the ladder of perfection") in favor of a more complex web of "four recurring movements of growth" (Chapman 2018, p. 10). The first movement is "rooting and grounding" where people recognize that they, like their fellow human beings, come from the ground (earth), are grounded and are sustained through God's grace. In facing oneself, one also faces God,

discovering that God is journeying with people, inviting "our trust and cooperation as this labour of love continues" (Chapman 2018, p. 12). The following movement is referred to by Chapman as "the emergence of new shoots." It involves the human response to an invitation by God. This invitation, or these invitations, can be variously experienced as "a stir of new energy, hope and possibility" (Chapman 2018, p. 12). In my understanding, this "stir" can theologically be interpreted in terms of grace because it comes as an undeserved gift, emerging out of one's personal encounter with the divine/ultimate.

The third movement involves the complex and mysterious development of what has begun to reveal itself. Intriguingly, this movement is conceived in terms of a struggle toward abundance. Interpreting Jesus's Parable of the Sower (Mk 4:5–7), Chapman sees the "rocks and thorns" as our own "well-worn patterns of thought and behaviour that may have protected us from harm in the past but now keep us in confinement" (Chapman 2018, p. 13). The role of resistance, then, lies in manifesting growth toward maturity. However, it is not yet full maturity because it does not include the movement beyond oneself toward others and the divine Other.

The latter comes in the final movement which is the generous bearing of fruit. Chapman interprets it as a dynamic of fruitfulness and fall. Here, the "fall" refers to a grain falling in the soil first to die in order to bear fruit. Chapman says, "The realization of the fullness of being lies not in self-protection or self-aggrandisement but in relationship. As we let our self-absorption fall we find in the giving and receiving of love" (Chapman 2018, p. 14). In line with these observations, I would like to suggest that maturity is understood in terms of the fullness of being, while fruitfulness is about giving and receiving love. The logic of maturity and fruitfulness operates within the framework of interdependence as "rooting and grounding in God moves us into fruitfulness that is generous and expressive of mutual interdependence" (Chapman 2018, p. 13). As such, spiritual growth is essentially a cooperative process. And in this process, relationship is of ultimate significance.

Based on the discussion above, I would like to argue that, from a perspective of Christian theological anthropology, the pursuit of maturity and fruitfulness in human life entails being in community since human nature is inherently relational. To grow in maturity and "bear fruit" in one's life, the whole web of one's relationships at various levels must be transformed. Seen through the lens of Christian theological anthropology, maturity and fruitfulness, then, are understood in terms of love as a non-linear striving for perfection. Ultimately, this process must be enabled and carried by grace, lest it become futile and oppressive. In engagement with and reflection on George R. R. Martin's ASOIAF, this thesis will be elaborated in three steps that make for three interrelated dimensions of this process, namely, grace, love and community, respectively.

3. Grace

I have already touched upon the reality of grace earlier when I discussed Chapman's second movement of spiritual growth toward maturity and fruitfulness. I suggested that stirs of "new energy, hope and possibility" (Chapman 2018, p. 12) be understood in terms of grace as they can be, to be sure, interpreted as an undeserved gift. In this respect, it is of much relevance to explore how the character of Jaime Lannister develops in ASOIAF.[6] The first-born son of Lord Tywin Lannister, the twin brother of Queen Cersei and a knight of the Kingsguard, Jaime is not one of the characters that the reader could easily identify with or feel attached to, not least in the first two volumes of the series. This is not only due to his long-term incestual relationship with his twin sister Cersei and his infamy as the Kingslayer, the derogatory nickname he earned after treasonously killing King Aerys II Targaryen, but also due to the fact that Jaime hardly ever appears directly in the first two volumes. As I have argued elsewhere, Jaime assumes a kind of spectral presence; it is a presence-in-non-presence (Bargár 2021, p. 48). That is, it is through his mere existence and notoriety that he moves people to think and act in certain ways. However, Jaime himself remains detached from and untouched by all this throughout the process. The reader cannot really observe any active sign of maturing or bearing fruit on Jaime's part. Jaime's

is a life devoid of humanly meaningful relationships—with either himself or others. His existence does not transcend the realms of the given.

All this changes dramatically in the third volume of the series, *A Storm of Swords*, after Jaime was captured by Robb Stark's army in the Whispering Wood.[7] During his imprisonment in Riverrun, the headquarters of the alliance of the Houses Stark and Tully and their vassals, Lady Catelyn Stark approaches him with an offer of freedom. She would let him go back to King's Landing on the condition that he sends back Catelyn's daughters, Sansa and Arya, who are held captive by Queen Cersei in King's Landing, in return for himself. Jaime agrees to the deal, having no intention, however, to keep his promise. Escorted by Catelyn's sworn sword, Brienne of Tarth, Jaime plans to kill his guard and escape while on the way.

Still, he gradually comes to change his mind. He contemplates sending Sansa and Arya back to their mother, simply because he finds the idea amusing, as everyone would expect him to do the opposite. This moment from ASOIAF can interestingly be related to what Chapman has to say: "Sometimes we feel disturbed out of a previously settled set of assumptions about ourselves, the shape of our life or the reality of God" (Chapman 2018, p. 12). Although Jaime's story does not bring God in the picture explicitly, one can certainly say that he feels disturbed with respect to how he previously used to view himself. Grace is, I would suggest, at play here. It is apparent not only in the "stir of new energy, hope and possibility," enabling Jaime to think and act against his better (or, usual) judgment. Above all, it can be detected as the power of a transformative encounter and relationship. In Jaime's case, it is his encounter with Brienne and his gradual development of a relationship with her. She comes into Jaime's life as a surprise, truly as a gift, and serves as a catalyst for his transformation—unintentionally, one should note.

There are several scenes in *A Storm of Swords* that illuminate this point. For example, having been captured by Vargo Hoat and his Brave Companions, Jaime tells Brienne his account of the Battle of King's Landing. His act of slaying King Aerys was motivated by Jaime's effort to save the city that the insane king was willing to burn down to ashes. Jaime confesses that he has never told anyone this story before. Here, it is not only that the reader's perspective on Jaime is gradually changing as he is getting more human(e) contours. Even more importantly, it is Jaime himself who is given an opportunity to receive a new perspective on himself, thus being able to grow, mature and "bear fruit." And this we can understand in terms of grace as a freely bestowed flow of energy from beyond that revives, sustains, inspires, provides hope and, ultimately, saves.[8]

Similarly, in the same conversation with Brienne, Jaime is deliberating aloud as to who he is without his sword hand that had been chopped off by Vargo Hoat's men. Jaime reasons that Hoat has thus rid him both of his glory (of a superb warrior) and shame (of being Kingslayer) at the same time since it was his right hand that earned him both his fame and notoriety. At first, this moment in Jaime's life is one of an identity crisis, as he seems to be nobody and nothing without his sword hand anymore. Jaime's self-image and self-esteem were founded on his sword hand. Gradually, however, it proves to be a moment of grace, as it liberates Jaime to construe a new self, a new identity for himself. The new Jaime is much more complex, relating to the other through selfless action. This kind of identity formation, characterized by a process of going beyond the given, speaks to people today, as it is identified with some of their central spiritual values, including wholeness, integrity, authenticity, freedom, creativity and the connectedness with the "Real," while standing in a distinct opposition to heteronomous authority, rigidity, dogmatism, hierarchy, judgment and punishment.[9]

Exploring another pop cultural icon, the Harry Potter book series, Sigrid Coenradie argues that as Harry is ready to give his life for his friends in the final book, he paradoxically receives his life back as a gift in the process. She contends that this action has nothing to do with magic per se but "can be regarded as old-fashioned religious grace" (Coenradie 2016, p. 165). In a similar vein, it can be regarded as grace when Jaime in ASOIAF receives his new life, although his willingness to save Brienne is itself a part—and not necessarily a

trigger—of this process, including various "stirs of energy and hope," such as his release by Catelyn Stark, his relationship with Brienne and the fact that his right hand was cut off. Jaime Lannister—and the readers of ASOIAF together with him—can experience these "fresh invitations to grow" (Chapman 2018, p. 12). Growth toward maturity and fruitfulness, then, is a response to a loving invitation. And it is to love that we next turn our attention.

4. Love

In her book on the role of God's Spirit in the process of human flourishing, Daniela Augustine relies significantly on the concept of love to introduce her theological vision, arguing that to be human means to be for others (Augustine 2019, p. 16). Love, therefore, is the way of participating in the "cosmic community of the Spirit" (Augustine 2019, p. 15).[10] Augustine draws from Karl Barth, who says that "love is the one form of Christian action which does not require and is not subject to transformation of absorption into another, higher and future form" (Barth 1981, p. 255). Similarly, Ernst Troeltsch argues that love is "the power of this world which already as such is the power of the world to come" (quoted in Barth 1981, p. 255). Together with Apostle Paul (1 Cor 13:10–11), Daniela Augustine perceives love in terms of the believer's Christoformation as "the perfection which has come as Christian maturity" (Augustine 2019, p. 86). Drawing on Augustine's insights, I propose that love be perceived as an inherent movement in the course of Christian maturing in the power of the Spirit.

There are two aspects in Augustine's discussion that are of much relevance for my own reflection. First, love is inseparable from justice. As John Dominic Crossan writes, "Justice is the body of love, love is the soul of justice. . . Justice without love is brutality. Love without justice is banality" (Crossan 2007, p. 190). These words capture Jesus's teaching and praxis in the New Testament about the love of God as the ultimate other embodied in the love of neighbor as the immediate other expressed in the acts concerned for his or her flourishing (Augustine 2019, p. 115). The second aspect is related therewith and has to do with love as the materialization of God through a hospitable life in communion with the other, marked with unconditional love for this other, while always respecting and preserving his or her otherness (Augustine 2019, p. 48).

Love certainly is evident in ASOIAF. And there are many different kinds of love at play in the series.[11] Lady Catelyn Stark, who is willing to make high personal sacrifices to save her husband and children, only to find out that she has lost (as she believes, all of) them, represents an example of costly husband and mother love. Catelyn's sister, Lady Lysa Arryn, for her part, stands for a personification of inadequate mother love as she is unwilling to let go of her overprotective relationship with her young son, Robert. As already indicated, Queen Cersei Lannister exhibits perverted love when she engages in an incestuous relationship with her brother, Jaime, as well as love affairs with other men. Cersei's youngest brother, Tyrion, mockingly nicknamed the Imp, physically deformed yet highly intelligent, deeply craves love. Getting none from members of his own family, he seeks to find it with prostitutes. Therefore, Tyrion's love could be labeled as substitutional and desperate. The last kind of love acknowledged here can be referred to as existential. I recognize it in the character of Daenerys Targaryen, the youngest child of King Aerys II. Forcibly married by her brother, Viserys, to *Khal* Drogo, Daenerys eventually comes to love her husband. After his death, she becomes known as the Mother of Dragons. It is the love for both Drogo and her dragons that gives meaning to her existence.

What connects these very different kinds of love is that they all are tragic. To be sure, there are among them kinds of love that are both tragic and destructive, Lysa Arryn and Cersei Lannister being the most notable examples. They both fail in their respective pursuits of love because, first, they disregard justice, pursuing their own interests, and, second, they violate the otherness of their loved ones, seeking to affirm their own self in the other instead. Their love is thus a kind of self-love that disables any growth toward maturity and ultimately remains fruitless.

Having said this, however, not all kinds of love in ASOIAF are both tragic and destructive, as exemplified by Lysa Arryn and Cersei Lannister. While being certainly tragic in a profound sense, it is first and foremost Catelyn Stark and Daenerys Targaryen whose respective kinds of love both respect the other and have a high regard for justice.[12] Throughout her life, Catelyn Stark undergoes a deep transformation from a person who merely fulfils her duty as a girl, young woman, daughter and wife to an agent of her own will and action for which she is ready to take responsibility. Her love is nurtured by respecting the autonomy of her loved ones (for instance, her loyalty to her son Robb as her king) and honoring justice when she is willing to make a personal sacrifice for her deeds.

Similarly, Daenerys Targaryen expresses her conviction in a conversation with her sworn sword, Ser Jorah Mormont, in *A Storm of Swords* that royalty is in the world to keep justice. Shortly after, she commands her army of the Unsullied, eunuch slave soldiers trained to unquestioning obedience, whom she just purchased from the Good Masters, that is, slave traders and the rulers of the city of Astapor, to slaughter their former owners while liberating all slaves and saving children. Not only championing justice, Daenerys's attitude also honors the other regardless of their status, ethnicity or age.

Catelyn Stark's and Daenerys Targaryen's respect- and justice-oriented love echoes what Sigrid Coenradie observes with regard to Harry Potter and Tom Riddle (a.k.a. Lord Voldemort). Coenradie argues that it is their moral behavior that represents the dividing line between Harry and Tom. While Tom (Voldemort) sacrifices others to the "god of his own self," Harry freely decides to sacrifice his own life for his friends (Coenradie 2016, p. 170). Ultimately, an act of love transcends both sacrifice and self-sacrifice, providing space for freedom.[13] As such, circumstances do not determine human life. Characterized by justice and respect for the other, love as the dynamic of striving for perfection enables one to grow toward maturity and fruitfulness, in spite of harsh and even tragic conditions. It is out of love for the other that a community grows and is nurtured. And community is the third interrelated dimension that we are going to discuss next.

5. Community

One of the fundamental characteristics of the postmodern condition is a "turn to relationships," by and large in response to the previously dominant Enlightenment philosophy of the freedom and autonomy of the individual. In contrast, it is now asserted that "the pursuit of happiness" can only be experienced through relationships with others. The recent accent on community can, therefore, be understood in terms of the human quest for wholeness and integrity. According to contemporary sociologists, all functioning communities feature a set of common characteristics, such as a shared frame of reference with which to interpret and construct the reality, a sense of group identity and belonging and a "person focus" that outweighs the "group focus".[14]

In ASOIAF, it is first and foremost the tragic character of Theon Greyjoy who shows what the outcome might be if one is uprooted from one's community. The youngest child of Lord Balon Greyjoy, ruler of the Iron Islands, Theon was sent to serve as a ward to Lord Eddard Stark after his father's rebellion against King Robert Baratheon had been suppressed. While raised as a member of House Stark at their castle, Winterfell, and having become like a brother to the Stark children, Theon still feels alienated from the community. This becomes fully apparent in *A Clash of Kings* when, authorized with a task, Theon acts treacherously toward his best friend and now king, Robb Stark. This betrayal is motivated by Theon's attempt to win his father's approval and recognition, which, however, remains in vain. Balon Greyjoy only has contempt and disregard for his son, leaving Theon alienated from the family of his birth. Rejected by his biological community (Greyjoy) and unable to affirm the acceptance by his adoptive family (Stark), Theon is thus left hanging in vacuum, displaced and disoriented. His deplorable state finds expression in his actions when he takes over by force his former home, Winterfell. Eventually, he begins to feel remorse for his brutal and treacherous deeds, including the presumed killing of the youngest Stark boys, Bran and Rickon. Although some of it seems to be authentic ("How could I ever let

this happen?"), he is finding excuses, blaming others and asking himself, and others, if he even had any other option. The character of Theon Greyjoy proves, as one can observe, that low self-esteem, personal immaturity and estrangement from one's community is a volatile combination that can easily become oppressive and destructive both for oneself and others. All in all, Theon shows indications of regress rather than growth. By implication, then, rather going beyond himself to meaningfully relate to others, he becomes a prisoner to his own self and its desires and limitations, a state that has in classic theological discourse been described by the term *incurvatus in se*.

With respect to the role of community for one's growth toward maturity and fruitfulness, King Robb Stark represents Theon Greyjoy's counterpart. Raised by loving parents, enjoying the privilege of growing up with a number of siblings (Sansa, Arya, Bran and Rickon) and step-siblings (Jon Snow and, in a sense, also Theon Greyjoy) and being part of a web of relationships at Winterfell from his birth, Robb is deeply and organically integrated in his community.[15] Community can therefore have decisive significance for forming one's individual views and actions. To account for the synergy of the individual and the communal in the process of moral decision-making, Elizabeth Bucar introduces the notion of "dianomy" (Bucar 2010, p. 665).[16] To my mind, Robb Stark fittingly exemplifies a dianomous existence, as his deliberations and deeds consider both his own integrity and the well-being of the community. In *A Storm of Swords*, the young king gets married to Jeyne Westerling, of a lesser aristocratic family, after having slept with her during a period of his convalescence after a battle, although he was betrothed to one of the daughters of Lord Walder Frey, his powerful ally against House Lannister. As a result, he loses the support of House Frey to maintain his personal integrity. To win back this support, needed to protect his community, Robb is willing to accept a proposal by Walder Frey that is both humiliating and costly for him as king.[17] Furthermore, Robb always administers justice himself, as he was taught by his father, Eddard. Thus, for example, he personally executes his vassal, Lord Rickard Karstark, condemned for disobedience and treason. Growing toward maturity, Robb Stark pursues honor, justice and truth, which he owes to both the members of his community and his enemies.

There is yet another aspect that theological reflection can particularly contribute to the discussion on community. From a Christian perspective, the church is an example of community par excellence, as it, among other things, develops and nurtures a special kind of solidarity that goes beyond the solidarity among group members. In other words, the church is arguably the only group of people in the world that "exists primarily for the sake of those who are not its members."[18] Moreover, this understanding of group identity and belonging disables any "blood-and-soil" concepts of community. The other can thus be unconditionally affirmed in his or her otherness and effectively welcomed to the community.

In ASOIAF, the significance of this point is very well captured in the way illegitimate children, or "bastards," to use the language of the book series, are generally viewed and treated. Most noticeably, Lord Roose Bolton of the Dreadfort, a vassal to House Stark, says with regard to his own illegitimate son, Ramsay, commonly known as the Bastard of the Dreadfort, that impure blood is always treacherous.[19] These words suggest that Roose Bolton—as well as many other characters in the series—understand community to be based on blood ties, purity and tribalism. The common spread of this view of children born outside matrimony is evident even more starkly as Jon Snow, himself the illegitimate son of Lord Eddard Stark, acknowledges that "bastards" are evil, mean and treacherous because they were born out of lust and fornication[20].

Although Jon for a long time accepts this "common knowledge" regarding "bastards," he eventually comes to adopt a different view. Thanks to the transformative power of encounter, most notably with Donal Noye, the armorer at Castle Black, and relationships with his new brothers of the Night's Watch (Samwell Tarly, Grenn, Pyp, Frog and others), Jon now thinks of community as founded on friendship, solidarity and loyalty that go beyond blood ties. He discovers that human existence is essentially relational; it is an

existence in community. The reader of ASOIAF, for her or his part, comes to realize that if such community is to be functioning, non-oppressive and flourishing, it needs to be characterized by diversity and the pursuit of honor, truth and justice.

6. Conclusions: Growing Toward Maturity and Fruitfulness

With the end of Christendom, any theological exploration of maturity and fruitfulness should go beyond the horizon of institutionalized religion. Having said this, however, it does not mean that religion plays no role in human life anymore, quite the contrary. Yet, the significance of religion for human existence in the 21st century, not least in the West, is increasingly marked by the shift from organized and institutionalized forms of religious life to decentralized and privatized ones—or, to use a convenient shortcut, from religion to spirituality.[21] Theology in the 21st century should, therefore, seek to engage various "non-religious" dialogue partners, such as culture.

We have seen in this article that contemporary cultural resources, such as ASOIAF, appeal to "nones," that is, the people who do not identify as affiliated with organized religion yet yearn for the encounters and relationships that have the power to transform their lives to pursue the values of justice, peace, reconciliation or community. In sync with the mindset of these spiritual seekers, the book series, moving on the fragile boundary between the unreal and the most real, strives for authenticity and meaning in life, fostering growth and transformation. I would argue that its main message is that change (for the better) is possible (e.g., Jaime Lannister). It is the message that one should not give up on the values of good, justice and truth even when one is ridiculed (e.g., Jon Snow and Tyrion Lannister), when it is personally inconvenient (e.g., Robb Stark) or when one must live under the circumstances of hardship (e.g., Daenerys Targaryen). In midst of all of this, one is to grow in maturity toward virtues and fruitful communal well-being. This is where ASOIAF is relevant for the theological understanding of maturity and fruitfulness as inherently linked to transformation, as proposed by this article. Illustrative of the "historical-experiential" approach proposed by recent discourse in theological anthropology (Behr 2013, p. 27; Noble Forthcoming), we could see that in order to grow toward maturity and "bear fruit," one needs to be enmeshed in everyday reality—living in a web of various relationships within one's community, experiencing love that seeks respect and justice and striving for moments of grace that enable such transformation.

Complementarily, the "eschatological-intentional" approach is also vital for theological thinking on maturity and fruitfulness, as it offers a vision for going beyond the horizon of the imaginable. By immersing themselves in the story, the readers of ASOIAF can grow toward maturity and fruitfulness together with the book characters. They can acquire the imagination, insight and power to change their own world. Instituted and nurtured by grace, love and a sense of community, one grows into a pursuit of relating oneself to certain points of reference, such as truth, meaning, redemption, goodness or beauty, that give orientation and purpose to human life. In conclusion, to grow toward maturity and fruitfulness means, from a Christian perspective, to grow toward the recognition that human existence is inherently relational—that one does not only belong to oneself but also to others, be they immediate others (fellow human and non-human beings) or the ultimate Other (God).

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Notes

1 See biblical (e.g., Gn 1:28) and patristic (e.g., Augustine, *De civ. D.* XXII:24) emphases on human fecundity and multiplication as a human contribution to sustaining life on earth.

2 So far, five books have been published in the series, including *A Game of Thrones* (1996), *A Clash of Kings* (1998), *A Storm of Swords* (2000), *A Feast for Crows* (2005) and *A Dance with Dragons* (2011). Two more volumes are still forthcoming, *The Winds of Winter* and *A Dream of Spring*. Although there is a well-known and widely popular HBO-produced TV series based on *A Song of Ice and Fire*, called *Game of Thrones*, this article only focuses on the book series.

3 For a solid academic basis for this claim, see (Heelas et al. 2005).

4 The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translation of the verse reads as follows: "Until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

5 I appreciate that this definition might be exclusive and hurtful—for example, to people who are socially and spiritually discerned as being-one-with-oneself but who are experiencing various types of mental and/or identity tensions. I admit I do not have a clear response to this objection at the moment. I recognize it as a topic for further research. My gratitude goes to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

6 There are also other characters in the series who could be fruitfully analyzed to show how grace operates in their personal development and growth. For instance, Jon Snow, the illegitimate son of Lord Eddard Stark, comes to mind, notably with respect to his relationships with his companions in the Night's Watch. However, for the sake of space limitations and focus, this article will confine itself to Jaime Lannister.

7 The arrest as well as the preceding battle are described in the first book, *A Game of Thrones*. His imprisonment in Riverrun, as depicted in the second book, *A Clash of Kings*, only accentuates my thesis about the "presence-in-non-presence."

8 See also the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life" (Catholic Church 1997, para. 1996). From a Protestant perspective, Luther says, "Even so God deals with us; he is loving unto us with friendly and sweet words, promises us spiritual and temporal blessings, though everlasting life is presented unto those who believe in Christ, by mere grace and mercy, gratis, without any merits, works, or worthiness" (Luther 1950, p. 25).

9 In scholarly discussion on the role of religion in contemporary society, this duality has been thematized through the distinction between "religiosity" and "spirituality." See, for example, (Horie 2014; Kostićová 2018; and Bargár 2019).

10 Augustine refers to (Moltmann 1989, p. 60) and (McFague 2013, p. 188).

11 Arguably the only characters in the series who are completely detached from expressions of *any kind* of love are the Others (or, the White Walkers) as representers of absolute evil. This, in turn, makes them almost one-dimensional and kind of boring, especially when compared with most of the other, complex characters. See (Ozturk 2020, p. 2).

12 Additionally, Jaime Lannister and—to an even greater extent—Tyrion Lannister represent characters whose growth toward maturity and fruitfulness could also helpfully be explored through the hermeneutic lens of love, though this lens would likely have to be different than that of justice and the respect for the other.

13 For more on the dialectic of sacrifice and self-sacrifice, see (Coenradie 2016, p. 174). Coenradie refers to (Dalferth 2010, p. 80).

14 For a broader sociological discussion on and theological implications of these issues, see (Grenz 2003, pp. 252–54).

15 The contrast with Theon Greyjoy is even greater if one considers the fact that both have grown up in the same setting, the difference, of course, being that Theon has never accepted the Stark community to be his own.

16 Coenradie (2016, p. 173) applies this concept in her discussion of the Harry Potter series.

17 The fact that Robb's acceptance of this proposal leads to a tragic outcome has no bearing on the validity of my argument.

18 This formulation is ascribed to Archbishop William Temple, cited in (Bosch 1991, p. 375).

19 It is worth noticing that Roose Bolton himself eventually betrays House Stark to become a vassal to House Lannister.

20 Jon's cognomen, Snow, refers to his illegitimate birth, as this was how "bastards" were named in the northern part of Westeros, the (fictional) continent where ASOIAF takes place.

21 This proposal should under no circumstances be taken to mean that this trajectory is the only one currently existing in the world. There are many traditional forms of religiosity burgeoning globally today, alongside or in opposition to the trend that I am describing.

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