

**“All Men Must Serve”**  
**Religious Conversion in *A Song of Ice and Fire***

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Master's Thesis  
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May 2017

## Sammendrag

Denne masteroppgaven undersøker hvordan George R. R. Martin's episke fantasy-serie *A Song of Ice and Fire* kan bidra til en diskusjon angående religiøs konvertering. Ved å støtte meg på forskning fra sosiologer, antropologer, psykologer og religionsvitere, har jeg analysert ulike grunner for konvertering hos fire utvalgte karakterer i Martins bøker. Jeg argumenterer for at konvertering sjeldent er et resultat av plutselig klarsynthet, men at det heller er et resultat av en mengde små og store medvirkende faktorer. Det første kapittelet tar for seg temaet om kontekst, og hvordan forskjellige faktorer innenfor kontekst enten underletter eller undertrykker mulighetene for konvertering. Kapittelet er delt i to, der første del tar for seg den totale miljøkonteksten som konverteringen befinner seg i, inkludert politiske systemer, religiøse organisasjoner, økonomiske systemer, etc., mens andre del tar for seg den umiddelbare verdenen til den konverterende, inkludert familie, venner, religiøst samfunn, og nabolag. Kapittel to fokuserer på hvordan det å miste sin identitet eller en følelse av tilhørighet kan være grunner til religiøs konvertering. Ved å analysere karakterene Bran og Arya Stark, undersøker jeg hvordan de gradvis mister sine identiteter og sin tilhørighet til Stark-familien, og hvordan dette er en viktig medvirkende faktor i deres konverteringsprosess. Det tredje og siste kapittelet belyser temaet "makt" i forhold til religiøs konvertering. Første delen av kapittelet er en analyse av Stannis Baratheon, hvor jeg undersøker hvordan hans søken etter makt virker som en viktig drivkraft for hans konvertering. Andre del av kapittelet tar for seg karakteren Lancel Lannister som et eksempel på konverteringen av enkeltindividet under prosessen ved massekonvertering. Her ser jeg på den mulige massekonverteringen av Westeros som en helhet nå når den religiøse militærorganisasjonen "the Faith Militant" har gjenoppstått. Kapittelet tar også for seg de mulige konsekvensene for det religiøse livet i Westeros som både Stannis' konvertering og gjenoppstandelsen av the Faith Militant medfører.

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Laura Saetveit Miles, for never giving up on me, and always pushing me towards completing my work. She has provided me with endless amounts of good advice, making me see Martin's works in a whole new light. Our many, sometimes overly-excited, discussions of the books and the TV-series are also much appreciated. If not for her, this thesis would not be what it is today.

I also wish to express my sincerest thanks to my family, without whom I would never have been able to finish this thesis. My father, supporting me with an infinite stream of what we like to call "flybensin", or "flight fuel", continually supporting me and motivating me over the phone in between great and distracting talks of football. My mother, for always telling me how proud she is of me. You have no idea how much those words means to me every time I hear them. Also, for her amazingly comfortable hugs, and many wonderful dinners and baked goods only a mother can provide, when I have visited. My sister for the wonderful support and kind words she has given me over the phone during my many episodes of frustration, for the many sister-trips we have taken these last few years, and for always telling me that she is "rooting for me". And Last, but definitely not least, my brother, for always distracting me with hilarious memes, snaps, videos and great discussions about films and TV-series. You have given me the best kinds of breaks in between my writing sessions.

Finally, I wish to thank my dear friends Anette and Tore for volunteering to read through my final draft, helping me see my thesis with two new sets of eyes. Thank you both for also keeping my mind sharp with the many lovely quiz nights we have been to throughout the year. Along with our game nights and other social events, they have served as perfect breaks from an otherwise hectic daily life. As one of my fellow students said to me after meeting you, "you're lucky to have such good friends", and I couldn't agree more.

## Table of Contents

Sammendrag .....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iii
Table of Contents .....	iv
Introduction .....	1
Characters .....	7
Religions .....	10
The following chapters.....	15
Chapter 1.....	17
Introduction .....	17
Macrocontext.....	18
Microcontext.....	27
Conclusion.....	33
Chapter 2.....	35
Introduction .....	35
Bran – the broken boy .....	36
Arya – a girl of many names.....	49
Conclusion.....	64
Chapter 3.....	67
Introduction .....	67
Stannis – Azor Ahai Reborn.....	69
Lancel Lannister – The Warrior’s Son.....	85
Conclusion.....	96
Conclusion.....	98
Works cited .....	104

### Abbreviations

Got – Game of Thrones

CoK – A Clash of Kings

SoS 1 – A Storm of Swords 1: Steel and Snow

SoS 2 – A Storm of Swords 2: Blood and Gold

FfC – A Feast for Crows

DwD – A Dance with Dragons

*It is important to note that some versions of the book series divides some of the books, like the version that I am using which divides A Storm of Swords into two different books.*

For Martin André

my fellow nerd

Thank you for being the *bitch* to my *jerk*

## Introduction

“Who knows more of gods than I? Horse gods and fire gods, gods made of gold with gemstone eyes, gods carved of cedar wood, gods chiseled into mountains, gods of empty air ... I know them all. I have seen their peoples garland them with flowers, and shed the blood of goats and bulls and children in their names. And I have heard the prayers, in half a hundred tongues. Cure my withered leg, make the maiden love me, grant me a healthy son. Save me, succor me, make me wealthy ... *protect* me! Protect me from mine enemies, protect me from the darkness, protect me from the crabs inside my belly, from the horselords, from the slavers, from the sellswords at my door. Protect me from the *Silence*.” He laughed. “*Godless?* Why, Aeron, I am the godliest man ever to raise sail! You serve one god, Damphair, but I have served ten thousand. From Ib to Asshai, when men see *my* sails, they pray.” (Euron “Crow’s Eye” Greyjoy, *FfC* 293-294)

George R. R. Martin is undoubtedly one of the most popular writers of epic high fantasy in modern times, having made huge success with his book series *A Song of Ice and Fire*, which was also made into the highly successful HBO TV-show, *Game of Thrones*. The series currently consists of five books, with two more books to be published in the future. The story takes place in the imaginative world of Westeros and Essos, where a war is raging between the seven great Houses of Westeros, all fighting for the right to become king over the Seven Kingdoms. In the famous words of Cersei Lannister: “When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die. There is no middle ground”. Martin manages to capture the very essence of the complexity behind the Wars of the Roses and Imperial Rome, historical events which Martin himself has admitted to have based his works upon. Through his thorough world-building, Martin manages to incorporate the many elements of war, not only in the larger

sense of politics, war strategies, and economics, but also by dipping into the very human psyche of his characters, presenting us with the struggles of the royalty and the commoners, the rich and the poor, the children and their parents, the faithful and the non-faithful, the women, the homosexuals, and the cripples, exploring their reasons for lust, incest, plotting, vengeance, treason, rape, violence and murder. *A Song of Ice and Fire* is a work of epic high-fantasy that does not exist for mere pleasure and pure escapism; rather, it is engaged with society in a variety of ways, going beyond entertainment in order to tell us something challenging about our current society. The scopes available to the scholar who wishes to work with the series are endless, ranging from feminism, masculinity and sexuality, to politics, power and war, as well as history, culture and religion, to mention but a few.

The above words expressed by Euron Greyjoy stands as a clear representation of the range of religions in the lands of Westeros and Essos. There is a society where a more or less strong belief in higher powers as well as in the supernatural is deeply imbedded into their culture. In Westeros almost every child is raised to believe in either the old or the new gods while fearing the threat of the Others coming to claim them. Many children, especially in the lands of Essos in the East, are also given away, or choose to leave, to be raised by different clergies, devoting their lives to their faith. Martin colours his books with a wide and thorough history of the world's religions, ranging from the pagan religion of the old gods, to the current main religion of the Seven, as well as a whole variety of other religions from the lands of Essos, old and new, big and small, familiar and exotic.

While there is an abundance of superhumans and supernatural beings in fantasy literature, gods very rarely appear in the genre. Sure, there are exceptions, mostly with children and young adult fantasy literature, such as in Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* series, Neil Gaiman's works, or the *Narnia Chronicles* of C. S. Lewis. But the topic of religion, that is, with full-scale, seriously functioning deities is very seldom depicted across the range of the

fantasy genre (Kelso 1). Especially if we look towards the epitomes of modern epic high-fantasy, such as the *Lord of the Rings*, or the *Wheel of Time* series, we can see a clear exclusion of any form of deities or established religions. Martin brings something entirely new to the genre of high-fantasy, including the element of religion, not only as a background for shaping the world and the characters, but as an important part of Westeros' history and culture, and as the series develops, also a vital part of the plot. Martin goes into depth when exploring the religions he has created, presenting us with the religions' deep histories, as well as the anthropological, sociological and psychological elements of religious life in Westeros and Essos.

Laura Feldt notes the importance of us recognising and comprehending the current presence of religion in fantasy literature, and to discuss its significance in our own modern society, as well as the consequences such a presence has for our understanding of religion. The fantasy genre forms part of our society's discourse on the subject of religion, and it is important to note that fantasy literature, like all other literature, is not merely neutral vehicles for information, but that it also presents us with "... feelings and social relations – in this case about religion" (Feldt 554). As such, Martin's books are not only a part of the field of literature, but they are also a part of the field of religion, including religious anthropology, sociology and psychology. This paper takes a cultural approach to literature, where I will study some of the ways in which the novels lend themselves to cultural analysis with a religious focus – in this case, by looking at the subject of religious conversion.

Both in religious studies and in social studies, the term *conversion* is defined in several different ways. According to some scholars, "... conversion involves a dramatic turnabout – either accepting a belief system and behaviors strongly at odds with one's previous cognitive structure and actions or returning to a set of beliefs and commitments against which one has been strongly in rebellion" (Heirich, 654). Lewis Rambo's definition



of conversion varies depending on his research, and thereby incorporates a lot of elements into the meaning of the word, including, but not limited to "... simple change from the absence of a faith system to a faith commitment, from religious affiliation with one faith system to another, or from one orientation to another within a single faith system" (Rambo 2). As the term *conversion* is one that is difficult to define with one or two sentences, I will use one of the more broader descriptions presented by anthropologists Andrew Buckser and Stephen Glazier. Buckser and Glazier notes that religion constitutes a theory of the world, and conversion thereby means to change one's theory of the world. The question they then pose is, "If this is true, how can it be that individuals suddenly choose new religions? ... What can prompt such an abrupt and total transformation?" (Buckser and Glazier, xi).

The questions above are but a few that are constantly posed by scholars of religious conversion, scholars belonging to a great variety of fields, such as religious studies, sociology, anthropology, and psychology. The study of religious conversions, I believe, is not limited to these academic disciplines, as scholars of fine arts, performing arts, and literature can make equally important contributions to the discussion. It is possible to "... analyse some fictional texts in order to grasp some anthropological features of religious conversion" (Leone, 3). To the extent of my knowledge, the subject of religious conversion has not been much examined or discussed in the field of modern English literature. *The European journal of English Studies* has currently made a call for papers for a new volume on narratives of religious conversion. The call states that while much work has been done regarding representations of religious conversion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, not much research has been done regarding the representation of religious shifts in later times. The contribution to the study of narratives of religious conversions, created within secular or secularising contexts, in both fictional and non-fictional genres, is therefore of great importance and need. My hope is that this paper will contribute to both the broader discussion

of the subject of religious conversion, and to the narrower aspects of literary narratives of religious conversion in modern novels.

What we know about a person's conversion, we know through the narrative, both oral and written, first person, and third person. Many conversion narratives depict religious conversion as either an occurrence of sudden insight (as is the case with the conversion of Paul in the Bible), as a purely spiritual conversion (such as the conversions of Augustine of Hippo or Francis Petrarch), or as an overly simple act of leaving behind your own beliefs for the sake of someone else's (as can be seen from the example of the character Meg in Madeleine Brent's *Golden Urchin*). The author often neglects to, either intentionally or unintentionally, examine the many contributing factors behind the conversion. This is especially the case when missionaries speak of previous converts, as it usually seems more attractive to the audience. To many, the stereotype convert is therefore an individual touched by divine grace, rather than a product of his or her time and place. The discussion about religious conversion often regards arguments about its causes. Believers often argue that the causes are simply divine-human encounters, whereas scholars of social sciences argue a range of both social and psychological elements involved in the process (Leone, 653).

In Martin's work, we find an imaginative exploration of the subject of religious conversion. *A Song of Ice and Fire* is a series that is particularly worthy of study, as Martin does not only present us with *one*, but a whole range of cases of conversions, including de-conversions, re-conversions, and intensifications. Throughout the current five books, Martin presents the reader with the complexity and diversity of religious conversion, representing the issue of shifting faiths not as a case of sudden insight and simple change, but as a complex process that is dependent on a whole range of contributing factors. What makes the study even more interesting is the variety with which the different conversions are presented to the reader, where not all of the conversion narratives are seen through the eyes of the convert.

Martin's books are divided into chapters based on the point-of-view of some of the most significant characters. Characters such as Bran and Arya Stark have their own point-of-view chapters, giving the reader a front row seat to the character's thoughts, and feelings during their conversions. Other characters, such as Stannis Baratheon and Lancel Lannister, are only presented through the eyes of secondary characters, and consequently, so are their conversions.

Religious conversion is a broad theme to delve into, and studying the entire phenomenon and the elements involved in relation to Martin's work is beyond the scope of any academic paper, let alone a Master's Thesis. I will therefore narrow down my focus to examining the causes behind some of the characters' most prominent conversions, and how the context surrounding the characters either facilitates or represses the possibility of conversion. What goes on when religious conversion occurs? How does religious conversion make sense and feel to the character? What motivates this sudden shift in beliefs, and what emotional and cognitive changes does the process involve for the converting character? How does the culture and historical setting of Westeros shape the possibilities of conversion? These are all questions I wish to answer in this paper, hoping to map the complexity of Martin's characters, and his representation of their religious conversions.

As a way of tying the conversion in *A Song of Ice and Fire* to the current studies done in the fields of sociology, anthropology and psychology, I will be using the philosophy scholar Lewis Rambo's model for religious conversion, as well as the studies of several anthropologists collected and published by Andrew Buckser and Stephen D. Glazier. Rambo's model for understanding religious conversion is recognised by most scholars in the subject, both scholars of psychology, religion, anthropology, and sociology. The model shows conversion as a highly complex process, which involves seven stages: *context*, *crisis*, *quest*, *encounter*, *interaction*, *commitment*, and *consequences*. Some of these stages, such as

context, crisis, and consequences will be discussed in a more thorough manner in this thesis, while other stages, such as commitment and interaction, will be touched upon to a lesser degree. It is my hopes that further research within the field can shed light upon the stages that I am not able to include in this thesis.

By focusing on two major causes for conversion, the search for a lost sense of identity and belonging, and the quest for power, I will be analysing the conversions of three major and one minor character in the books: Bran Stark, Arya Stark, Stannis Baratheon, and Lancel Lannister, respectively. Through close reading of the characters, I will explore the contributing factors to their conversions, the way the cultural and historical elements of their society either facilitate or repress their conversion, and the psyche of the characters before, during and possibly after their conversion. The works of Rambo, and Buckers and Glazier, as well as a variety of other scholars in the fields of religion, sociology, anthropology and psychology will be used as theoretical frameworks for my analysis.

First, I wish to give a brief overview of the characters I will be discussing, and their role in the plot, followed by the religions that are most narratively significant, which should make it easier for the reader to navigate through the vast sea of information the books contain.

## Characters

### Bran Stark

Bran Stark is the second youngest son of Eddard Stark and Catelyn Tully. Being a member of House Stark, he lives in Winterfell in the north of Westeros where the old gods stand strong. The Stark family are direct descendants of the First Men, making them firm believers and

worshippers of the old gods of the north, like most other northmen in Westeros. Bran is one of the more central characters in the books, having his own point-of-view chapters through the whole series. As of the beginning of *A Game of Thrones*, Bran is pushed from a tower in Winterfell, causing him to become paralysed from the waist down. After his father and sisters leave for King's Landing, his mother and older brother leave to fight the war, and his half-brother Jon leaves to join the Night's Watch, Bran is left alone in Winterfell with his younger brother Rickon. As the series continues, Bran has mysterious dreams and visions, causing him to join forces with two children of House Reed to go on a quest to find one of the mystical greenseers of the old gods, who he wishes can give him back the ability to walk.

#### Arya Stark

Arya Stark is the youngest of Bran's two sisters, and an equally prominent character with her own point-of-view chapters. Also being a member of House Stark, she belongs to the faith of the old gods. Arya is a tomboy-ish girl, more interested in fighting with swords and shooting bow-and-arrows than with being a "proper lady". After the execution of her father in King's Landing, Arya escapes with a group of people headed to the Wall in the north, hoping to go home to her family. On the road, Arya takes on several different identities in order to hide who she really is. As more and more of her family member die, and as she meets several people who wish her or her friends and family harm, Arya develops a serious thirst for revenge, which eventually leads her to seek out the Faceless Men of Braavos, an order of skilled assassins who have the power to change their appearances.

## Stannis Baratheon

Although a highly important character in the books, Stannis does not have his own point-of-view chapters, which only gives the reader a view of him through the eyes of other characters, such as Ser Davos Seaworth, Jon Snow, and Melisandre. Stannis Baratheon is the second oldest of the Baratheon brothers, being second in line to the throne should his older brother Robert die without leaving an heir. After the death of Robert, Robert's son Joffrey is given the right to the throne, something which is taken as a great insult after the rumours regarding King Robert and Queen Cersei's children being bastards born out of incest between the queen and her twin brother Jamie. Additionally, Stannis' younger brother, Renly, claims himself as the rightful heir of Robert, challenging Stannis for the throne. On his quest for power and his rightful place as king, Stannis, who is of a family belonging to the Faith of the Seven, joins forces with a red priestess of the faith of R'hllor, wishing to use her and her god's powers to win the war against the other self-proclaimed kings.

## Lancel Lannister

Although he is not a very prominent character in the books, only appearing in minor scenes in other characters' chapters, Lancel is still a member of one of the most important families in Westeros. Lancel is a member of House Lannister, cousin to queen Cersei, and known for being "a poor copy" of Cersei's handsome twin brother Jamie. After having been anointed as a knight of King's Landing, Lancel resides in the capital, where we see him sleep with his cousin Cersei on several occasions, a woman whom he claims he loves. After fighting in a great battle against Stannis Baratheon, Lancel is left deformed and on the brink of death. As a sop to his father, Lord Tywin Lannister makes him Lord of Darry, and arranges for him to marry a girl from House Frey. However, during his recovery after the battle, Lancel comes

into contact with the High Septon, leader of the Faith of the Seven, and consequently joins one of the faith's military orders, the Warrior's Sons.

## Religions

### The old gods

The faith of the old gods is the oldest religion in the lands of Westeros, having been in existence since before the Age of the First Men. The old gods were originally worshipped by the Children of the Forest before the First Men set foot in Westeros. Although the First Men warred with the children, and tried to destroy their religion, they eventually ended up adopting the old gods and lived peacefully by their side for several thousand years until the Andals invaded the lands. When the Andals arrived, they brought with them the seven-pointed star and the new gods from Essos. Unlike the First Men, the Andals did not accept the faith of the Children, and ended up gradually conquering the south of Westeros, burning down the weirwoods that they worshipped and killing the Children, who eventually had to flee north. The Andals finally supplanted the worship of the old gods with their own in all but the north of Westeros, where the old gods are still worshipped by northmen, crannogmen and free folk from beyond the Wall.

In the books, tales still tell of the existence of Children way north beyond the Wall, as well as their shamans who possessed strong magic, and were said to be able to talk with animals and birds, and to see through the eyes that were carved into the weirwood trees. Since both the First Men and the Andals worked to cut down the weirwoods throughout the Seven Kingdoms, there are only a few of these holy trees remaining south of the Wall. Some castles, especially those in the north, have godswoods within their walls where these trees have been preserved. Some of the weirwood trees have faces carved into them, making them

sacred heart trees. The tales say that it was the Children who carved the faces into the trees in order for the gods to be able to see through them. When the First Men and the Andals cut down the trees, the gods lost power in those parts of the world as it is believed that they only have power where they can see through the trees.

### The Faith of the Seven

During the time in which the plot of the books is set, which is more than twelve thousand years after the prehistorical time when only the Children lived in Westeros, the Faith of the Seven is the dominant religion in the Seven Kingdoms in terms of geographic spread, political influence and number of followers. In this thesis, this faith might also be referred to as the new gods, the Seven, or just the Faith. The new gods are worshipped all over Westeros, except for some places in the North (including beyond the Wall) where they still worship the old gods, and on the Iron Islands, where they keep to the faith of the Drowned God. Martin has on several occasions admitted that the Faith of the Seven is loosely based on medieval Catholicism, and he has used the idea of the Holy Trinity as a basis for the Faith's deity which consists of seven aspects or faces like a sort of "Holy Septinity". The followers of the Faith worship all of these seven aspects, each one representing a different virtue, and each one being prayed to for different needs, the aspects being: The Father, the Mother, the Warrior, the Maiden, the Smith, the Crone, and the Stranger.

The Faith of the Seven is the religion which is practiced by the Crown, thereby being greatly imbedded into laws and culture. Examples of this relationship between the crown and the Faith can be found extensively throughout the books, like for example Maester Luwin telling Bran Stark about how there are only three hundred knights in the North because most of the houses there worship the old gods, and one must be anointed in the name of the Seven



in order to become a knight.

Contrary to the old gods, the Faith has their own religious texts, houses of worship called septs, religious holidays, rites and rituals, as well as an important and prominent clergy. Their clergy consists of both men and women, the men being referred to as septons, and the women as septas. The clergy is a hierarchical system similar to that of the real-life College of Cardinals in Catholicism, the religion being ruled by the highest ranking septons and septas known as the Most Devout. The Most Devout choose one of their members to be their leader, the High Septon. The Septons and Septas usually reside in the septs throughout the Seven Kingdoms, with the High Septon residing in the Great Sept of Baelor in King's Landing, the capital city of Westeros, or the Starry Sept in Oldtown. The poorest of those sworn to the Faith have taken the name "sparrows" after the common bird.

One of the many traits that Martin has picked up from medieval Catholicism is that of religious military orders. The Faith has its own two military orders, The Warrior's Sons and The Poor Fellows, which together are known as the Faith Militant. The history of these orders is extensive, and they have experienced many a struggle with the Crown, at times working with it and for it, while other times causing an uprising against it. While having been prohibited to take up arms by the crown for several centuries, we see that during the events of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the Faith Militant is resurrected once again.

#### The Lord of Light

The Faith of the Lord of Light, also known as the Faith of R'hllor, is a rather small and almost unheard of religion in the lands of Westeros, whereas it is one of the most widely followed religions on the continent of Essos, with followers in many of the Free Cities, extending all the way to the mysterious shadowlands of Asshai in the far east. R'hllor is a

deity that is first mentioned in *A Clash of Kings*, the second book in the series, along with one of the books' most prominent worshippers of R'hllor, a red priestess named Melisandre.

As Martin himself has stated in several interviews, the religion of the Lord of Light carries a clear resemblance both to our own world's Zoroastrianism as well as the beliefs of the Cathars in the Medieval Southern Europe, both of which consist of a dualistic view of good and evil. The worshippers of R'hllor believe in the existence of two deities, a god of light and a god of darkness, R'hllor being the god of light while his opposite is called the Great Other. This dualistic view of the world has led the religion's more fanatical worshippers to believe that the only true god is R'hllor, and that all other gods such as the Seven, the old gods, and the gods of every other minor religion on Westeros and Essos, are false gods or demons created by the Great Other in order to steer people away from the Lord of Light. The religion states that there is no hell or heaven that they will enter in the afterlife (like the Faith of the Seven believes), but rather the present world that they live in now is "hell", and the Lord of Light will save his followers from it.

The Lord of Light is highly linked to fire and light which makes many describe him as a *fire god* while the clergy is often named *fire priests* and *priestesses*, or *red priests* and *priestesses*. The strong connection to light and fire is the only thing that can fight the darkness of the Great Other. Due to this, most of the religion's rites and rituals involve fire, be it only minor bonfires or more extreme cases of sacrificing "heretics" by burning them. In temples, which are found all throughout Essos, the Red Priests and Priestesses build bonfires where they sing and pray for R'hllor to save them from this dark world. Their prayers usually start with a common phrase sounding, "The night is dark and full of terrors. Lord, cast your light upon us". It is often believed by the worshippers that the Lord of Light answers their prayers by granting visions of the future, or even the ability to heal and raise the dead. Such abilities, as well as several others, cause many non-believers to view the religion's priests and

priestesses as wielders of dangerous and dark magic, which is the reason why the religion has so many adversaries throughout Westeros.

As previously mentioned, the Lord of Light and the Great Other, the god of ice and death, are locked in a perpetual war over the fate of the world. According to an ancient prophecy originating in Asshai, this war will come to an end when Azor Ahai, or “The Prince That Was Promised”, returns to the world wielding a flaming sword known as Lightbringer. During the events of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Melisandre is under the impression that Stannis Baratheon is Azor Ahai come again, causing her to seek him out and join forces with him to save the world.

#### The Many-Faced God

The base for the guild of the Many-Faced God, known as Faceless Men, is in The House of Black and White in the Free City of Braavos in Essos. The religious society originated in the slave mines of old Valyria, where the tales speak of the first Faceless Man. Upon hearing all the slaves praying to a variation of gods, a man came to the conclusion that they were all praying to the one and same god with many different faces, the Many-Faced God. The worshippers of the Many-Faced God therefore believes that their god is present in all religions, but that he simply goes by different names, such as “the Stranger” in the Faith of the Seven. The man believed that he was sent to the mines as an instrument of this god, to kill the slave masters.

The worshippers of the Many-Faced God believe death to be a natural part of the world, being a merciful ending to the suffering of human kind. As such, the guild of Faceless Men will assassinate anyone in the world, as long as the person who asks for it can pay the price. The Faceless Men who perform this service are highly trained assassins, having been

trained in the arts of deception, and trained to be able to alter their appearance at will. The Faceless Men are never allowed to kill anyone other than their target, as it is the Many-Faced God who decides who lives or dies, not the individual Faceless Man. The Faceless Men are known and feared throughout all of Westeros and Essos, as they are known to do their job efficiently and in secret, often making a death appear like an accident.

### The following chapters

This paper will be divided into three chapters. The first chapter will examine the first stage of Rambo's model for understanding religious conversion; *context*. Here, I will examine the many factors that may facilitate or repress the possibility of conversion in Westeros' society. The first part of the chapter takes into account the macrocontext at work, exploring the total environment in which the conversion takes place, while the second part of the chapter will examine the microcontext, discussing the immediate and personal world of the possible convert.

The second chapter will focus on the aspects of a loss of a sense of identity and belonging as causes for religious conversion. By analysing the characters of Bran and Arya Stark, this chapter will examine how these characters gradually lose their sense of identity and belonging to House Stark, and how this is a major contributing factor for their conversion process. Being children raised in the same environment, both immediate and worldly, the Stark children make an interesting study for exploring the different turns in terms of faith people growing up in the same context can take, making us have to consider alternate factors involved, including the psyche and personality of the person.

The last chapter sheds light on the issue of power in relation to religious conversion as well as the consequences of conversions of the more public sort. The first part revolves

around an analysis of Stannis Baratheon, where I examine how his quest for power works as a catalyst for his religious conversion, leading from being a non-believer, to affiliation with the exotic and much disputed Lord of Light. The second part of the chapter lends its focus to Lancel Lannister, as an example of the conversion of an individual in the process of mass conversion. Here, I will be looking at the possible mass intensification of Westeros as a whole now that the Faith Militant has been resurrected. The possible ramifications for religious life in Westeros that both Stannis' conversion, and the resurrection of the Faith Militant bring with them will also be up for discussion.

Both chapters two and three will take a closer look at especially important contributing factors to conversion, such as crisis, paranormal experiences, and the role and the strategy of the religious advocate. Seeing as context is not only the first stage of the conversion process, but something which follows the convert through the entire process, elements discussed in chapter one will also be discussed in chapters two and three in relation to the specific characters.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Before starting the analysis of the conversions of various characters in the books, it is vital that we spend some time discussing the context in which the conversions take place, examining what factors may contribute to or repress any form of conversion in the society of Westeros. Rambo's model for religious conversion starts off with the issue of *context* as the first stage in the conversion process, stating that "Conversion takes place within a dynamic context. This context encompasses a vast panorama of conflicting, confluent, and dialectical factors that both facilitate and repress the process of conversion" (20). To various degrees, conversion is related to and differs depending on time and space.

It is important to note that although context is the first stage of Rambo's conversion model, it is not simply a stage that is passed through on the way to the next stage of the process, but rather a factor that follows the convert through all of the subsequent stages, influencing the conversion from beginning to end. In addition, it is not always only a matter of the context influencing the conversion, as sometimes the conversion might reciprocally influence the context in which it takes place. John Gration sums it up nicely when saying that "In a very true sense every conversion is in context, a context that is multifaceted, embracing the political, social, economic and religious domain in which a person is living at the time of his or her conversion. Thus whatever the meaning of conversion, it never takes place outside a cultural context" (157).

Conversion is therefore dependent on the context in which it is set, being subject to contributing factors, both social, cultural, religious, political, and personal. These factors determine whether a possible convert might be encouraged, prevented or forced to convert. The goal of this chapter is to give a brief overview of the variety of forces and contributing

factors that shape context, encouraging or repressing the conversion process of several of the characters in Martin's books.

## Macrocontext

Rambo notes the importance of differentiating between *macrocontext* and *microcontext*.

Macrocontext is a matter of the total environment in which the conversion takes place, including political systems, religious organisations, economic systems, etc. Such elements as these have the ability to influence the possibility of a possible conversion, either by facilitating or repressing it, and they may have both broad, societal influence and individual influences. At the time of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Westeros seems to have become more pluralistic than it was during the invasion of the Andals four thousand years ago, and during some parts of the Targaryen rule. During the invasion of the Andals, the worshippers of the old gods were seen as enemies, and both they and the trees that they worshipped were persecuted and killed. Persecution of enemies to the Faith of the Seven was also a serious matter during parts of the Targaryen dynasty, when the Faith Militant rebelled against the Targaryens for their slights against the faith on several occasions. Equally, the members of the Faith Militant were persecuted by the Targaryens, with bounties being put on the heads of the members of the orders, and with Lord Goren Greyjoy being allowed to oust the Faith from the Iron Islands, keeping that region of Westeros strictly to the worship of the Drowned God.

The variations of religious influences have been many throughout the history of Westeros, with times where the different faiths have been at war with each other, times of more religious freedom, and times where the bond between the Faith and the Crown has been strong enough to grant the Faith great political power. However, the Faith's previous

traditional spheres of influence seem to have diminished over the years, giving room for other religions to be accepted and even flourish. This decrease in the Faith's monopoly in the kingdom has given root to a more pluralistic and secular society, opening up to more religious freedom for the people of Westeros.

Secularisation is a major force that influences the conversion process, as religious institutions no longer possess the power, influence and prestige that they used to. While we must acknowledge the fact that the Faith of the Seven is still the dominant and official religion in Westeros, being closely tied to the Crown, their relationship seems to be mostly a case of formality and tradition at the time of the books. Knights are anointed in the name of the Seven, kings are crowned and recognised by the High Septon, and transition rituals such as naming, marriage and funerals are performed in accordance with the Faith, but its power and influence over daily life, the individual Westerosi's personal life, and greater political matters has diminished. As such, the acceptance of other faiths amongst the Westerosi has flourished, leading to inter-religious friendships, political alliances, and marriages.

Peter L. Berger (qtd. in Rambo 29) states that one of the most important aspects of secularisation is pluralism. The awareness of the many religious choices available in the world gives people the option to choose another religion than the one they were born into. Through the reading of history, and through communication with people who have been in primary or secondary contact with other cultures and religions, the people of Westeros seem well aware of the range of religious options available to them. The most fascinating aspect I have found about the people of Westeros, however, is not their knowledge or acceptance of other religions, but rather the fact that they seem to *believe* in all the gods that other people of Westeros and Essos worship. They appear to draw a line between *belief* and *worship*, where, although a person *worships* the gods of the Seven, that does not mean that he or she does not *believe* in the existence and powers of other gods.



As an example of the common Westerosi's relationship to religion, both in terms of the society's acceptance of inter-religious relationships, and in terms of the issue of worshipping and believing in different gods, we can examine Catelyn Stark's relations to both the old and the new gods. Catelyn's storyline gives one of the first introductions to the religions of Westeros already in the second chapter of *A Game of Thrones*. The chapter presents a very good view of the clashing of the two current religions of Westeros (disregarding the religion of Drowned God that is exclusively worshipped on the Iron Islands), the old and the new gods, as we follow Catelyn's thoughts about the north, a place that has never quite felt like home to her. As Catelyn's storyline starts, she is on her way to find her husband, Eddard, who she knows is to be found in the godswood. While walking through the godswood of Winterfell, Catelyn, being originally of House from the mid-southern part of the realm, is reminiscing about the godswood of her childhood home, Riverrun, remembering "a garden, bright and airy, where tall redwoods spread dappled shadows across tinkling streams, birds sang from hidden nests, and the air was spicy with the scent of flowers" (*GoT* 19). The godswood in Winterfell feels different to her though. "The gods of Winterfell kept a different sort of wood," she ponders, referring to the dark and old scenery that is so different to the pleasant godswood she knew from her childhood:

It was a dark, primal place, three acres of old forest untouched for ten thousand years as the gloomy castle rose around it. It smelled of moist earth and decay. No redwoods grew here. This was a wood of stubborn sentinel trees armoured in grey-green needles, of mighty oaks, of ironwoods as old as the realm itself ... This was a place of deep silence and brooding shadows, and the gods who lived here had no names. (*GoT* 19)

Catelyn finds her husband at the centre of the godswood, sitting under a "heart tree", a weirwood tree with a face carved into it. Catelyn views the heart tree with the same

disapproval as she does the rest of the godswood, describing the “weirwood’s bark (as) white as bone, its leaves dark red, like a thousand bloodstained hands ... its features long and melancholy, the deep-cut eyes red with dried sap and strangely watchful” (*GoT* 20).

Eddard and Catelyn Stark, although happily married for several years, belong to two very different faiths, with Eddard worshipping the old gods of the north, and Catelyn worshipping the new gods brought to Westeros during the Andal invasion. As Catelyn observes the godswood that she is in, her focus seems to be on the archaicness of the place; “They were old, those eyes; older than Winterfell itself” (*GoT* 20), a true observation, considering that Ned’s faith is over twelve thousand years old.

To Catelyn, Ned’s religion is old and strange compared to her own, and she is continually preoccupied with, and somewhat uncomfortable with the differences between them; “Her gods had names, and their faces were as familiar as the faces of her parents. Worship was a septon with a censer, the smell of incense, a sevensided crystal alive with light, voices raised in song ... worship was for the sept” (*GoT* 19-20). The preoccupation and uneasiness with her husband’s religion does not seem to come from a lack of belief in the old gods, but rather a suspicion or a fear of them. As she is meeting with her husband in the godswood, she claims “the red eyes of the weirwood [seem] to follow her”, and she can “feel the eyes watching her” (*GoT* 20). She does not seem to be the only one, as several followers of the Faith of the Seven before her have had those same fears. As Catelyn states, “In the south, the last weirwoods had been cut down or burned out a thousand years ago ...” (*GoT* 20), which, according to Westerosi historians, was due to the fact that both the First Men and the Andals believed that the children were able to see through the carved eyes of the weirwoods, fearing that they were spying on them (Martin et al. 6).

The issue of *otherness* has, some anthropologists suggest, always been a part of our world’s societies. According to cultural anthropologist Wojciech J. Burszta, “The conviction

that the observer's society occupies a central – and thus privileged – position in the world, while other societies and cultures remain on the outskirts of our world, has been a part of human consciousness since the dawn of time” (qtd. in Romanowska). This “us” vs. “them” phenomenon has consequently led to human beings being not only intolerant and hostile towards otherness, but also neutral, awed and frightened.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the religious people of Westeros is how they interact with the otherness that they encounter. The reaction towards the otherness of the old gods differs from character to character in Westeros. The biggest difference can however be seen between the newly arrived First Men and Andals and the current residents of the Seven Kingdoms, taking the concept of time into the equation. Time has allowed for the people of Westeros to come to terms with the Faith of the old gods. While to the First Men and the Andals, the children worshipped strange gods and had strange customs, causing them to slaughter the children or drive them north into the wild, the current Westerosi have learnt to accept the old religion, and now live side by side with the people who follow it. This acceptance has extended as far as worshippers of the different gods joining Houses. Houses with long histories of different family faiths no longer appear to worry themselves about their different beliefs, and join together through marriage, friendship and military oaths. Even the royal family, a family that is closely associated with the new gods, have no qualms when it comes to joining houses with a northern family that keep to the old gods, as we can see from the betrothal between Joffrey Baratheon, the crown prince, and Sansa Stark, the eldest daughter of Ned Stark.

Catelyn's character also presents an example of the belief in other people's gods that is fostered by the current pluralistic society of Westeros, Catelyn believing in the ability of the old gods to watch her through the eyes of the weirwoods. It is interesting to see how, although some people might fear the strange gods and customs of the others' religions, the

majority of the people of Westeros do not seem to react towards the otherness they are encountering with much hostility or superiority. When Catelyn speaks of her husband's gods, she does not claim them to be false or non-existent. In fact, numerous Westerosi give the impression that they accept that there exist several gods in their world and that different people choose to worship different ones. When referring to different religions in Westeros, the characters tend to express themselves in the ways of "X worships Y", or "A belongs to the faith of B", like Catelyn does when reminiscing about her own family faith: "Catelyn had been anointed with the seven oils and named in the rainbow of light that filled the sept of Riverrun. She was of the Faith, like her father and grandfather and his father before him" (*GoT* 19). Most characters refrain from expressions such as "X did not believe in her gods, the real gods, he instead believed in Y". Of course, this cannot be said of all religions, as some, like the worshippers of R'hllor, or the more devout followers of the Seven believe themselves to be worshipping the one and only true god. In general, disregarding some of the characters' personal beliefs, no religion is presented as the true faith, and although there are displays of power on many sides, none of them appear to have a monopoly on truth.

The belief that the Westerosi have in other people's gods is an important factor when considering the context that encourages or represses religious conversion. A major contributing factor in conversion is the possibility of a person to believe in what he or she is converting to. As such, conversion in Westeros might not appear as radical as it often can in our own world, as what they are converting to is not something abstract and unrecognisable for other people. Should we consider a Christian's conversion to Hinduism, the conversion might be hard to accept for fellow Christians as they do not share the Hindu's beliefs. Equally, had the Westerosi lacked any belief in other gods than their own, their acceptance of a fellow member of their religion to a belief system based on completely different cultural traditions might have been severely different, resulting in a society which represses rather

than facilitates conversion. We need not look any further than Ser Davos Seaworth to see the effects such beliefs in other people's gods have on people and the possibility of their conversion. Being a worshipper of the Seven and a strong adherent of the faith of R'hllor, even Ser Davos claims that he "... could not deny the power of her [Melisandre's] god" (*SoS I*: 349), while admitting that "[his] heart ... is full of doubts" (*SoS I*: 348). Even the First Men, who started off by slaughtering the children for their belief in the old gods, believed in the gods' existence and powers, eventually ending up joining the Children and converting to their faith.

Another important factor to consider when it comes to macrocontext is communication and transportation. The possibility of conversion in an area is increased if that area is made accessible by transportation and communication, often through political connections, travel, and commerce. Areas that are penetrated by military and commercial powers are even more prone to conversion, as these powers often bring with them new religions and cultures. When the Andals invaded Westeros, they brought with them the Seven from the lands of Essos, changing the entire religious and cultural system of the realm, converting the First Men from the old gods to the new gods, and trying, with various results, to convert the Iron Islanders from their belief in the Drowned God (Martin et al. 175).

During my discussion in chapter three, regarding Stannis Baratheon and the Faith Militant, we shall see that also in present day Westeros, the military powers at hand bring with them new options and possibilities of conversion. As Stannis roams the realm searching for allies and waging wars on his enemies, he brings with him his new god R'hllor, providing advocates of the religion with the opportunities to make contact with new people in new places. The current war that is raging in Westeros also gives the sparrows the opportunity to proselytize the people of Westeros as they travel through the lands, helping common people who have been affected by the war. Should the Faith Militant gain more power, their

religious influence throughout the realm should only increase as their Holy Knights join the war and spread their faith more forcefully.

The religious options that travel and commerce bring are also worth taking note of. While not necessarily a place of modern communication and transportation systems, most of Westeros and Essos is made easily accessible through walking or horse riding for example on the King's Road, as well as by boating on rivers, and larger ships going between the ports of the bigger cities both in Westeros and in Essos. Both trade and political connections between Essos and Westeros have existed for many years, with merchants selling their fine gems and fabrics from Essos, sellswords selling their services to people across both realms, and even the Crown dealing in finances with the Bank of Braavos. Travel and communication between the two realms constantly brings with it new cultures and religions, contributing to a more pluralistic society. The access to and interaction with other cultures and religions that is made possible by these factor can be exemplified by Arya Stark, whom I will examine more closely in the following chapter. As Arya travels along the King's Road throughout Westeros, she comes into contact with people from all over the world, including a Faceless Man from Essos. Consequently, that connection sends her on a quest towards the city of Braavos, a journey made possible by the existence of trade ships going between Westeros and Essos. Arriving in Braavos, Arya is introduced to the epitome of a melting pot, a city where people from all over the world come to trade and live freely, which has over the years created the most religiously pluralistic city in their world, a city where "... all gods are honoured ..."  
(*FfC* 100).

It is important to note that the access to and interaction with other cultures and religions is only possible due to the macrocontext. In a macrocontext such as Westeros, no greater political forces are stopping people from coming into contact with people of other cultures and religions. The government does, however, have the power to either reduce, or

completely eliminate all contact with other cultures, consequently reducing the possibilities of conversion. As of yet, neither proselytizing, conversion nor apostasy is illegal, but it is important to note that this is always subject to change. As previously mentioned, context does not only influence the conversion process, but conversion also influences context. When considering the conversion of Stannis Baratheon, and the resurrection of the Faith militant, we must be aware of the changes these people might bring to the religious society of Westeros (see chapter three for further discussion). Should Stannis win the throne, he will bring with him an entirely new belief system to King's Landing, stirring up the relationship between the Crown and the Faith that has been a tradition since the arrival of the Andals. Should the Faith gain enough power, their violent fanaticism is bound to have serious ramifications for the religious freedom that currently exists in Westeros.

Context is a fluctuating factor, and it continues to change alongside history and geography, and as of now, the history and culture of Westeros seems to be changing drastically. Anthony Wallace claims that culture is dynamic, and constantly developing. Similar to all types of biological organisms, culture has a life of its own, and when a culture collapses, a defence mechanism is set in motion, where the process of breaking down and rebuilding the core elements of the culture begins in order to find something that can give the culture a chance to maintain its life. The culture of Westeros is currently on the stage of collapse, with war raging in all corners of the world, threatening the total destruction of Westeros. As a way of trying to revitalise the culture, new strategies are used in order to enhance and maintain life. It is noticeable that the people of Westeros are going back in time, trying to root up old core myths and rituals in order to try and save their world, or themselves, as can be seen with Bran who turns to the old mythical greenseers of the old gods, Stannis who is claimed to be Azor Ahai come again – saviour of the world, or the Faith Militant which is being resurrected for the sake of reinstating the supremacy of the Faith of the Seven.

The process usually starts with the conversion of one individual, who again communicates his vision to the wider culture, spawning a movement that eventually changes the culture and the society, ending in mass conversion.

### Microcontext

Where macrocontext is about the big picture, microcontext takes into consideration the more immediate world of the possible convert, including family, friends, ethnicity, religious community, and neighbourhood. These factors are especially important in a person's forming of identity and a sense of belonging, and it has strong influence on a person's thoughts, feelings, and actions. The influence that the microcontext has on conversion is something we see a lot of in the conversion processes of Bran and Arya Stark, processes that will be closely examined in chapter two, where their conversion is linked to a loss of identity and sense of belonging.

For families with people who belong to both faiths, like the Starks, it seems common to have a relationship with both the old and the new gods. The Stark children constantly refer to "their mother's gods" and "their father's gods", and although they are first and foremost Starks, considering the patriarchy of the Westerosi society, it is never really established which gods the children themselves follow, or if they have a choice in the matter. But it is clear that both religions are incorporated into the family as we can see from Ned's gesture towards Catelyn: "For her sake, Ned had built a small sept where she might sing to the seven faces of god, but the blood of the First Men still flowed in the veins of the Starks, and his own gods were the old ones ..." (*GoT* 20). Flavil R. Yeakley argues that children from mixed religious backgrounds are more likely to convert to a different religion than children of families with only one set of beliefs. The reasons for this is twofold, where on one side,



families with mixed religions are often more accepting of other religious options, giving the children more religious freedom, while on the other side, mixed religious families might not have the same hold over their children as families that are uniform in their religious beliefs, thereby not creating as much resistance towards a family member who wishes to convert. Two of the five Stark children (excluding Jon Snow), end up converting from or within their family's religion, Bran turning towards an intensified belief in older aspects of his father's religion, and Arya turning to a completely new and strange religion from the lands of Essos. While being of mixed families increases the likelihood and possibilities of conversion, we still see several characters being raised in monolithic families converting, including Lancel Lannister, Stannis Baratheon, Samwell Tarly, Selyse Florent, and Victarion Greyjoy.

In Westeros, family is one of the most influential factors of microcontext, as the belonging to a House and following the House's customs is an important part of the Westerosi culture. Almost every House in Westeros keeps to a set religion, and being a patriarchal society, the religion is passed down from a father to his children. The religion of a specific House correlates with its geographical placement in the Seven Kingdoms, where, as previously mentioned, many Houses in the north keep to the old gods, while most Houses in the south keep to the new gods. House Greyjoy, as well as other ironborns of the Iron Islands in the West, worship the Drowned God. An example of this link between family house and religion is house Stark, where lineage and ancestry is of great importance. As Catelyn states during her musings about her and her husband's gods, the blood of the First Men flow in the veins of the Starks. The Starks are an ancient house descended from the First Men. They were Kings of Winter for over eight thousand years, ruling the North from when the First Men first invaded the country, until they kneeled to Aegon Targaryen when he conquered the lands. The First Men adopted the old gods from the children when they first arrived in Westeros, and being their descendants, the religion has passed through generations of Starks, still

holding strong at present times, even after the Andals brought the new gods with them. A religion having passed through so many generations, even through the difficulties of religious persecution such as that of the Andals, and the Faith Militant, shows how strongly religion is connected to family. Belonging to House Stark means belonging first and foremost to the faith of the old gods, while belonging to House Greyjoy means belonging to the Drowned God. There are, however, as we have seen from House Stark, anomalies to this tradition, as inter-religious marriages can give birth to mixed families that are tolerant of family members practicing several religions.

To illustrate the importance of belonging to a House in relation to what religion a Westerosi practices, I would like to take a brief look at the character of Samwell Tarly, a recruit of the Night's watch, and son of a southern nobleman. As Sam and his fellow recruits are to take their vows, Lord Mormont asks if any of them follow the old gods and would therefore like to say their vows in front of a heart tree. Samwell Tarly states his wish to join Jon, a worshipper of his Ned Stark's old gods, in front of the heart tree. Upon Lord Mormont's question of whether House Tarly also keep the old gods, Sam answers: "No, my lord. I was named in the light of the Seven at the sept on Horn Hill, as my father was, and his father, and all the Tarlys for a thousand years" (*GoT* 499). Considering Sam's family's strong bond to the Faith of the Seven, one can indeed wonder why he would suddenly take to the old gods, to which he must have had no relationship when living on Horn Hill in the south of Westeros. Upon Lord Mormont's inquiry as to why he would forsake his father's and his house's gods, Sam states: "The Night's Watch is my House now ... The Seven have never answered my prayers. Perhaps the old gods will" (*GoT* 499).

Rambo states that pluralism has a tendency to cause a feeling of alienation and confusion, which may cause people to seek out new religious options in order to achieve a sense of belonging. Any loss of cultural traditions as well as being exposed to a secular

society can cause a person to no longer be able to define their own self, consequently losing their identity. Examining Sam's character, I found his chief problem to be that he is struggling to find out where he belongs. Through all of Sam's point-of-view chapters, and through all of his encounters with religion, be it in relation to weirwood trees, prayer, friends from other parts of the land, or family beliefs, we never see him referring to any of the gods as his own: "Old gods, hear my prayer. The Seven were my father's gods but I said my words to you when I joined the Watch. Help us now. I fear we might be lost. We're hungry too, and so cold. I don't know what gods I believe in now, but...please, if you're there, help us..." (*SoS* 2: 68). The same goes for the way he voices himself about the old gods: "Whether Jon's gods had heard him or not he could not say" (*SoS* 2: 68). Sam gives the impression of believing in both the old and the new gods, but he does not appear to feel like any of the gods actually belong to himself. He speaks of "his father's gods" and "Jon's gods" instead of just "the gods" or "the old and the new gods".

Macrocontext and microcontext always interrelate with each other to various degrees, either by facilitating or undermining each other. Having been forced out of his father's House, Sam no longer belongs to any family, and having taken the vows to become a member of the Night's Watch, he has forsaken all rights to ever start his own family or own any land, causing him to exist in a microcontext where the strong force of family traditions and influences no longer have the same hold on him. Living in a secularised society where there is no main religion that exerts any strong political power or influence over people's beliefs, and no longer feeling the ties to his House's religion, Sam is given the opportunity to choose freely from the religions available to him. Taking into account the macrocontext of transportation and communication, Sam, who has now travelled to Castle Black, is exposed to new cultures and religions as he comes into contact with people from all over the realm.

The common Westerosi's belief in the existence and powers of all gods also applies to

Sam, being a major contributing factor in the possibility of a conversion now that he has lost his sense of belonging to any specific House or religion. Even though the prayers before the weirwood tree at Castle Black is Sam's first personal interaction with the old gods, it is obvious that he has always believed they exist, even though he has not personally worshipped them. He feels their presence and their eyes upon him just by being in the godswood, just like Catelyn does when she visits the godswood of Winterfell. Sam's discussion with the wildling girl Gilly in *A Storm of Swords*, regarding the Seven, shows that although he has abandoned his father's gods, he still harbours a belief in their powers:

Gilly gave him a puzzled look. "Did you only sing of six gods? Craster told us you southrons had seven."

"Seven," he agreed, "but no one sings of the Stranger." The Stranger's face was the face of death. Even talking of him made Sam uncomfortable. (*SoS 2: 72*)

Context is also important in relation to the type of conversion that takes place. While Rambo mentions some of the most important types of conversion, including *tradition transition, institutional transition, affiliation, intensification, and apostasy*, I would also like to add what Arthur Nock speaks of as *adhesion*. Although Nock's studies of religious conversion have been much debated, recent scholars still cite him as an authority on the subject of conversion. Nock contrasts the idea of conversion, "the reorientation of the soul of an individual" with his own term *adhesion*, "the acceptance of new worships as useful supplements and not as substitutes" (Nock 7). The term adhesion seems to relate to several of the characters in Martin's books, as they often tend to keep parts of their old faith while supplementing it with a new one. In a society such as Westeros, where the people carry a belief in all the gods of their world, some might find it possible to belong simultaneously to multiple religious organisations. During his studies of Caribbean notions of conversion, Glazier found that some adherents did "... not feel the that they must break all ties with their

former religions prior to becoming involved with a new religious group” (150). Several subjects of his study claimed that they did not feel that joining a new religious group necessarily implied a total acceptance of the new religion’s belief system. Some of his subjects even claimed they felt it was possible for them to only convert temporarily. The case of using a new religion as a supplement for the old one, can be argued to be the case of several of Martin’s characters, including Stannis, who still claims to be a non-believer in gods while using the Faith of R’hllor as a tool for gaining power; Sam, who still believes in the powers of the Seven, while praying to the old gods for help; and Victarion Greyjoy, who makes offerings to both the Drowned God and R’hllor, praying to both gods to help him on his quest to marry Daenerys Targaryen.

Personal dimensions of context is not something that can be overlooked in our discussion. While anthropologists often keep to the external factors of the context of religious conversion, psychologists’ emphasis is on the individual and their psyche. The personality of a person must be taken into account when analysing the possibility of their conversion, as certain personalities might be more prone to conversion than others. Considering some of the personality traits of the different characters who are up for discussion in the later chapters, we can draw conclusions as to whether their personality has made them more open to the influences of other religions, as might be the case when considering the power-hungry Stannis, or the revenge ridden Arya, or even the young and easily influenced Bran.

Equally, the previously mentioned fragile self that arises from a secular society is all the more open for religious influences than the clearly defined self. Philip Cushman argues that the elements of a secularised society have a negative effect on people, creating a narcissistic, empty, and confirmation-hungry self. These people often end up in a search for nurture and something to fill an empty inner void, something which Cushman claims can leave the person more susceptible to the influence of charismatic leaders, and dogmatic belief

systems. As we shall see with Lancel Lannister in chapter three, the need for something to give meaning, someone to nurture him, and something to help him out of his crisis leaves Lancel all the more vulnerable to the influence of the High Septon.

Some elements of the microcontext might nurture the macrocontext, as when a religious organisation such as the Faith Militant reinforces the society's important values of helping the common Westerosi. Other elements of the microcontext might, however, oppose the macrocontext, trying to change it, as will be the case should Stannis decide to challenge the relationship between the Crown and the Faith. In some cases, with enough force, the microcontext might even be able to completely counteract the influence of the macrocontext, as was the case with the Iron Islanders, who, by being isolated from the rest of the world, managed to keep to their own god when the Andals invaded and brought with them the Seven.

## Conclusion

Macrocontext and microcontext always interrelate, sometimes by facilitating and nurturing one another, while other times hindering and undermining one another. The macrocontext allows for the microcontext to take place, as a macrocontext which facilitates conversion opens up for the possibilities of the microcontext exerting its influences. A great example of this is the way in how the society and the government of Westeros involves a current acceptance of several religions and inter-religious marriages, which consequently fosters children with mixed religious backgrounds who are more prone to religious conversion than those of monolithic backgrounds.

During the events of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the microcontext appears to be a more influential factor than the macrocontext in terms of repressing and discouraging conversion in

Westeros. My closer analysis of the microcontext in the following chapters will hopefully affirm or deny whether this is the case. However, this balance might be subject to change should the future Westeros include a more powerful Faith Militant, or Stannis Baratheon as king. My hypothesis is that should either one of these gain more power, there is a possibility of the emergence of a macrocontext that either represses or even completely denies the possibilities of conversion for the Westerosi people.

The forces within a context, both micro and macro, always work to facilitate or prevent conversion. Rambo states that although most conversion studies emphasise conversion, few of them mention that resistance is usually the reaction that most individuals and societies have towards it. The questions we are left with then are, if most people say no to conversion, and if most microcontexts and macrocontexts act as powerful resistances against conversion, what makes the few percentages say “yes”? Under circumstances that repress conversion, what contributing factors weigh the most for the possible convert?

## Chapter 2

### Introduction

In a society such as that of Westeros, where belonging to a House is central, and where a person's identity is so closely linked to family, it seems easy to lose one's sense of belonging and feel different and alone should one at some point lose one's ties to the House and family one grew up in. In our own world, religion has usually always been powerful when it comes to keeping a sense of belonging and community. Looking back to the origin of the word, religion is originally derived from the Latin word to "re-tie" or to "re-connect" (Oppong 11). Religion often tells people that they are not alone, that they belong to a group of people with the same theory of how the world works, with the same sense of spirituality, and with the same beliefs. The unity and closeness that a religious life provides brings with it a sense of belonging for many people. This is not only the case for those who belong to a congregation, or who live and worship together with fellow believers – it is also true for those who worship and believe alone. Even an individual who lives and worships in seclusion might feel their own sense of belonging, be it by being in continuous contact with a specific idea, moral, spiritual or political, or by being in continuous communication with the divine.

For many of the people inhabiting the Seven Kingdoms, religion seems a powerful force when it comes to preserving a sense of belonging. As Martin has remarked upon on several occasions, he especially enjoys playing around with the concept of identity loss in different characters. With the loss of identity that several characters experience, the search for a new identity and a sense of belonging becomes a central theme in the novels, a search that for some characters ends up becoming a strong contributing factor to their religious conversion.

As characters such as Bran and Arya Stark gradually lose their sense of belonging to



House Stark, we see that their situations open up the possibility of a religious conversion as they search for their lost identities. This chapter will explore the conversion process of the two Stark siblings, with a focus on religious conversion in relation to identity and sense of belonging. The storylines of Bran and Arya are clear evidence of Martin's talent for creating well-rounded characters, presenting us with two children of the same family, who have grown up in the same surroundings and who have experienced similar difficulties in their early lives, but who develop completely differently throughout the novels. Martin explores their psyche almost with a fine-tooth comb, and his narrative of religious conversions manages to show us the vast diversity there is to such a process, and the many factors that contribute to it.

### Bran – the broken boy

Samwell Tarly's conversion from his father's Seven to the old gods of the North gives only a small view of how the loss of one's belonging to a family House opens up to the possibility of religious conversion. A more thorough representation of this phenomenon is the storyline of Bran Stark, as he journeys beyond the Wall, looking for the Children and one of the old wise men of his father's religion of the old gods, in order to regain his identity. As the reader thinks of Bran's story, he might not immediately identify Bran as a religious convert, as he generally keeps to his father's religion throughout the whole plot of the books like most Westerosi children do. However, there are several questions that arise from analysing Bran's storyline, especially as it progresses in the later novels. Bran, having in his very short life gone through harder times than most adult men, both physically and mentally, has kept his father's religion of the old gods close to his heart, and has had no thoughts of either exchanging them for other gods, or abandoning his faith altogether, as is the case for Sam.

What has kept him from abandoning his father's gods? Or more specifically, what has caused him to develop an even stronger relationship with the old gods than what he used to have?

Taking a closer look at Bran's story, it is clear that he is one of the characters in the series who experiences a great shift in his faith. What happens to Bran might not be a religious conversion in the strict sense, from one religion to another, but rather what is referred to as a religious intensification, a term that is strongly linked to conversion, meaning a revitalised commitment to a religion that one has been brought up in or which one has only casually followed – a religious re-birth. As Brown states in his essay in *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*: “Conversion is a change in one's system of beliefs” (136). Taking this definition into account, I argue that the intensification of Bran's faith becomes an important part of this discussion about religious conversion, considering how the intensification changes his entire set of beliefs regarding the legitimacy and importance of his religion's old myths.

Having been raised in Winterfell as a Stark, Bran has a strong connection to the faith of the old gods, just like his father, his grandfather and the ancestors before them. However, this faith that he and his family, as well as other northerners worshipping the old gods, belong to is a mainstream religion that is limited to a simple belief in the existence and power of the gods, prayer in their godswoods and the performances of certain ceremonial rites in front of weirwood trees. There is a strong difference between the belief of the common northerner at the time when *A Song of Ice and Fire* takes place, and that of the Children and the First Men over twelve thousand years ago. The Crannogmen who live in the Swamps on the Neck south of Winterfell, or the Wildlings beyond the Wall, are amongst the few who still share some of the beliefs of the Children to some extent or another. Nevertheless, most worshippers of the old gods believe that the stories of the magic of the children, giants, greenseers and the Others are nothing more than mere myths believed by men who were, or are, less educated

than themselves. In *A Clash of Kings*, Maester Luwin, the maester of Winterfell who is responsible for teaching Bran how to run a castle now that the rest of the Stark family is gone, gives a good representation of the common northerner's beliefs when answering Bran's many questions regarding greenseers and the children:

“Meera says her brother has the greensight.”

Maester Luwin scratched at the side of his nose with his writing quill. “Does she now?”

He [Bran] nodded. “You told me that the children of the forest had the greensight. I remember.”

“Some claimed to have that power. Their wise men were called *greenseers*.”

“Was it magic?”

“Call it that for want of a better word, if you must. At heart it was only a different sort of knowledge.” (*CoK* 399)

While not necessarily depreciating believers in greenseers and the children's magic, like for example House Reed, Maester Luwin tries to rationalise their beliefs as “a different sort of knowledge”, an interpretation of certain events, such as dreams come true, by men who did not necessarily have the knowledge that the people of Westeros do now, twelve thousand years later. While some people believe it to be magic, others, like Maester Luwin, believe it to be misunderstandings. He does however acknowledge that nothing can be said for certain, as “No one truly knows ... The children are gone from the world, and their wisdom with them ... Supposedly the greenseers also had power over beasts of the wood and the birds in the trees. Even fish” (*CoK* 400). However, Maester Luwin claims that any sort of magic that might have been, is long gone:

Perhaps magic was once a mighty force in the world, but no longer. What little remains is no more than the wisp of smoke that lingers in the air after a great fire has burned out, and even that is fading. Valyria was the last ember, and Valyria is gone. The dragons are no more, the giants are dead, the children of the forest forgotten with all their lore. (*CoK* 401)

This being said, many of Maester Luwin's statements, where he uses terms like "supposedly" and "claimed" when speaking of the greenseers' powers, gives a clear indication as to his lack of belief in the possibility of the children ever having the greensight, let alone the possibility of any man or woman at present times possessing the ability. He is adamant in his belief when stating that "no living man has that power" (*CoK* 400).

Being a Maester who has studied the history of Westeros and even, as he tells Bran, magic, he sees it as fascinating history, but not as useful truth: "...I have studied what the Citadel calls *the higher mysteries* – magic, for want of a better word. A fascinating pursuit, but of small use, which is why so few maesters trouble themselves with it" (*CoK* 400). It is important to note here that what Maester Luwin terms as "magic, for want of a better word" is often congruent with any sort of religious paranormal occurrence for the devout Westerosi. One can wonder what makes Maester Luwin believe in the powers of the old gods, making him and his fellow worshippers pray to them for help or as thanks, while brushing off claims of greenseers' powers and the existence of children as "magic that does not work". Moreover, what makes Bran abandon the rational beliefs of his family and his wise maester for the sake of pursuing "magic" that few people believe exist? What exactly happens to Bran and his beliefs, and why does this happen exclusively to him?

Bran's religious transition from a mainstream worshipper of his father's old gods, to a strong believer in the magical powers of the children and the existence of greenseers first takes place in the middle of *A Clash of Kings* after the siblings Jojen and Meera Reed,

crannogmen from Greywater Watch, befriend Bran while visiting Winterfell to pledge their House's allegiance to the Starks on their father's behalf. As we shall see later in my discussion, the arrival of Jojen and Meera will have a great influence on Bran's religious intensification. Jojen Reed claims to be a greenseer, having acquired the ability after nearly dying of a fever as a child:

“My brother dreams as other boys do, and those dreams might mean anything,” Meera said, “but the green dreams are different.”

... “I dreamed of a winged wolf bound to earth with grey stone chains,” he [Jojen] said. “It was a green dream, so I knew it was true ...”.

... “*You* are the winged wolf, Bran,” said Jojen. “I wasn't sure when we first came, but now I am. The crow sent us here to break your chains.” (*CoK* 396)

As Jojen tells of his dreams about Bran, he also inquires about Bran's own dreams, telling him that these too are real. Bran however, does not believe the Reeds, claiming that “... it's only dreams. Maester Luwin says dreams mean anything or nothing” (*CoK* 395). At this point in his life, Bran's belief in the myths about the greenseers and the children's powers is still non-existent, or at least to some degree very weak, and he puts his trust in his wise maester's knowledge of the world.

So, where is the turning point for Bran? When does his belief all of a sudden intensify, and what is the main cause? Truth be told, there is no distinctive turning point where Bran has a sudden revelation and puts aside everything he has learnt for the sake of a newfound belief. As Rebecca Norris states in her article “Converting to what? Embodied Culture and the Adoption of New Beliefs”, conversion is usually a gradual process, not an occurrence of sudden insight. She claims that “although a convert experiences conversion as a reorientation to a new religious belief system, the conversion occurs primarily because it corresponds with the convert's pre-existing ideas or feelings about truth or meaning” (171).

Even if Bran claims to trust that Maester Luwin is right, part of him is still just a young boy who wants to believe in the mysterious greenseers and the fact that maybe he is one of them:

*Maester Luwin had the truth of it, he told himself ... Bran was relieved...but disappointed too. So long as there was magic, anything could happen. Ghosts could walk, trees could talk, and broken boys could grow up to be knights. "But there isn't," he said aloud in the darkness of his bed. "There's no magic, and the stories are just stories."*

And he would never walk, nor fly, nor be a knight. (*CoK* 402)

The question is what pushes him forward into going from *wishing* it was true to actually *believing* it and pursuing it? The second stage of Rambo's model, *crisis*, becomes a vital part of the discussion at this stage, a factor which is prominent in the research of many other psychologists, anthropologists and sociologists of religious conversion, and an important factor that also Martin has picked up on in his versions of the conversion narrative.

Bran's first step towards religious intensification is the emergence of a crisis, or to be fair, many crises in his life. "Every conversion starts with a crisis: with a moment or a situation involving some kind of suffering, physical, moral, or spiritual; with a dialectic, a tension, a pull, a duality, or a conflict" (Sheen 1). Rambo states that "some form of crisis usually precedes conversion" something which is "... acknowledged by most scholars of conversion", adding that the crisis "may be political, psychological, or cultural in origin" (44). At the beginning of *A Game of Thrones*, Bran continues to suffer both physical and social crises, starting with the paralysis acquired from falling out of a tower, to his family deserting him and leaving him alone in Winterfell, to the loss of his father, his mother, his brother, and for all he knows, both of his sisters, and eventually to the sacking of Winterfell which brought on the death of his mentor and close friend, Maester Luwin, and forced him and his brother to flee from the only home they had ever known. In his article about *The*

*Psychology of Conversion*, Sheen says that the crisis that a possible convert experiences is often accompanied both by a sense of helplessness and by a belief that "...God alone can supply what the individual lacks" (1). If there was only the sense of helplessness, without the feeling of a god being able to help, the only thing left would be despair and pessimism.

Bran's first encounter with the feeling that the gods will be able to help him through his crisis is when he starts having inexplicable dreams after his accident, dreams that only intensify as time goes by. This brings us to the next step in Bran's conversion process, namely mystical or paranormal experiences. Having researched religious conversion in relation to paranormal experiences, Thomas Kingsley Brown argues that although it is difficult to pinpoint the root cause of a conversion, paranormal or mystical experience often has an important role in it, claiming that "[A person who has] undergone sudden, inexplicable, mystical experiences [might] motivate them to explore such experiences directly" (136). He goes on to hypothesise that people "undergoing emotionally intense mystical experiences, might turn to alternative religions – particularly those better attuned to experiential exploration – as a vehicle for making some sense of experiences for which their [religious] background may not have prepared them for" (136). Although Bran's dreams do not necessarily make him turn to another religion, it does make him turn to other aspects of his own religion, aspects which might help him make sense of his dreams. Maester Luwin's answers to why Bran has these dreams and what they might mean, as well as why some of them have come true, do not give him any satisfaction. While Maester Luwin tells him after his dream about his father's death – a dream that turns out to come true – that he is "... old enough to know that dreams are only dreams" (*GoT* 712), a more satisfactory explanation might be found if Bran believes what the wildling girl Osha says, that "Some [dreams] are, some aren't ... The children of the forest could tell [him] a thing or two about dreaming" (*GoT* 712). As Brown points out:

Both “mystical” and “paranormal” experiences have the capacity to spark a shift in beliefs. People who claim to have had such experiences believe that these experiences provide evidence of phenomena that defy or overturn scientific or [other religious] understandings about the nature of reality. (140)

The arrival of the Reed children only increases Bran’s need for answers, as they not only confirm his previous suspicions that his dreams might mean something, but also add more mystical experiences to his life by telling him of dreams Jojen has had about Bran that later become true.

As mentioned, the Reeds seem to have had a major influence on Bran’s conversion. Many scholars disagree whether the conversion process begins before or after the convert has been in contact with subjects of the religion they are converting to. Rambo argues that there is no “either/or” here, and that the answer to this depends on each situation and each individual convert (45). Gerlach and Hine, for example, found that the subjects of their research had started their conversion process after “... they had been in contact with an advocate who sought to persuade them to see the world and themselves in a new light” (qtd. in Rambo 44), while other research has resulted in finding the convert to have been more active in their own conversion process (Rambo 44). Since we cannot pinpoint the starting point of Bran’s conversion, it is difficult to say whether the main part of his conversion process started before or after he came into contact with the Reeds and Osha, but it is safe to say that their influence is fundamental in pushing him forwards towards the pursuit of an answer to his dreams, as they do their best to persuade him to see the world as they do.

Looking back to the context in which Bran’s conversion takes place, it is important to note that Bran’s introduction to the different aspects of his own religion would not have been possible without a macrocontext that facilitates conversion. The opportunities for travel between areas in the Seven Kingdom is what has made it possible for Bran to come into



contact with the Reeds in the first place. Additionally, the laws that allows House Stark to keep Osha as a prisoner in Winterfell is what gives Bran access to the culture and religion of the Free Folk beyond the Wall. Without these possibilities for communication, it is unlikely that Bran would have ever come into contact with believers of the mythical aspects of the faith of the old gods. Also, we must take into account that Winterfell is situated in the north of Westeros, a more rural part of the continent where not much travel and commerce from the south of Westeros or from Essos takes place. Had the north been a more attractive place for people belonging to other parts of the world, the context would have given rise to a greater variety of cultures and religions in the north, consequently giving Bran the possibility to be influenced by worshippers of other gods than the old gods of the north.

The greatest difficulties with determining the Reeds' influence on Bran is his unwillingness to believe them when they first approach him with their world view, and his constant determination, albeit not always so convincing, that Maester Luwin is correct. The question we are left with once again is this: what makes Bran change his mind and, as Brown put it, start to pursue his paranormal experiences more directly? My argument is that, at this point in Bran's life, there is no belief. Rather, there is an immensely strong *desire* for his and Jojen's dreams to be true, a desire that later on becomes so strong that, with the addition of other contributing factors, it turns into a belief. This runs counter to Sheen's argument that a convert's crisis is directly followed by a certain conviction that a god will help him out of his despair. Although this belief emerges in the end, I believe there is often a stage in between that consists of wishful thinking or a simple desire to believe, while not yet fully believing. Bran, having lost the ability to use his legs, has consequently lost his dreams and prospects of becoming a knight:

It was knighthood he had always dreamt of; bright armor and streaming banners, lance and sword, a warhorse between his legs. Why must he waste his days listening to old

men speak of things he only half understood. *Because you're broken*, a voice inside reminded him. A lord on his cushioned chair might be crippled ... but not a knight on his destrier. (CoK 221)

The three-eyed crow in his dreams, on the other hand, is promising him the ability to fly – to be able to move again without the assistance of his servant boy Hodor, or anyone else for that matter. Having lost his family, his home and his dreams of becoming a knight, Bran Stark seems to have lost his whole identity, no longer feeling a sense of belonging anywhere; not as a Stark, not in Winterfell, and not as a future knight. His wish to feel whole again, to find someone or something that can fix him, even if it's just a part of him, is strong enough to make him accept the strange beliefs of the Reed children and the Wildlings, sending him on a quest to the foreign lands beyond the Wall in pursuit of the crow in his dreams who he hopes can give him back his legs.

However, as his desire grows stronger, so does his belief. His journey towards the north is accompanied by more dreams, more mystical experiences, and the Reed children by his side continuously helping him interpret his dreams and confirm their significance. As a result, what first started as a wish that the old gods could help him become whole again and give him a sense of belonging ends up turning into the belief which Sheen says will eventually follow the crisis.

After leaving Winterfell, Bran gains the ability to open his third eye like Jojen has prompted him to do, giving him the ability to change into the skins of different animals, including his direwolf Summer and, although not an animal, his servant boy Hodor. His ability to finally control the skin-changing ability is, in my opinion, a sign of a strong belief that has not previously been present within Bran. Jojen has on several occasions tried to convince Bran of his abilities to open his third eye, and that this is the only way he'll learn how to fly:

“How could I break the chains, Jojen?” Bran asked.

“Open your eye.”

“They *are* open. Can’t you *see*?”

“Two are open.” Jojen pointed. “One, two.”

“I only *have* two.”

“You have three. The crow gave you the third, but you will not open it.” (*CoK* 396)

Jojen’s encouragements fall on deaf ears, however, as Bran still has trouble believing something so obscure as having a third eye. Without any belief in his own abilities, Bran will not even practice opening his third eye, which is exactly why he cannot enter and leave his direwolf’s skin at his own command. However, although the reader does not get to witness the exact moment when Bran starts practicing his skin-changing, or the first time he manages it, it is clear that he has eventually decided to take Jojen’s advice. Jojen has been teaching Bran how to control his skin-changing, giving him tasks to do each time he enters Summer: “Jojen was always telling him to do things when he opened his third eye and put on Summer’s skin. To claw the bark of a tree, to catch a rabbit and bring it back in his jaws uneaten, to push some rocks in a line” (*SoS I*: 126). Where Bran was first doubtful of the mere existence of his third eye, Bran’s desire to have the ability to fly appears to have eventually shifted towards a belief that is strong enough to open the eye and learn to control his prophesised abilities.

On his quest to regain his identity as Bran Stark, we cannot overlook some of the indicators that he might also lose parts of his identity on the way. I will argue that Bran’s conversion process is one that brings him closer to his heritage through building a stronger relationship with his House’s gods, but that does not necessarily mean that Bran will have the possibility of going back to being Bran Stark of Winterfell, or that he has a future as a knight like he so desires. Bran’s skin-changing skills are constantly challenging his ability to remain

as Bran Stark, as there is a constant risk of the wolf taking over. While Jojen is the one who is teaching Bran to enter the skins of animals, he is also the one who helps him not to get lost in his wolf-dreams, making sure to remind Bran of who he really is:

“You are a prince,” Jojen reminded him softly. “You remember, don’t you? Tell me who you are.”

“You *know*.” Jojen was his friend and his teacher, but sometimes Bran just wanted to hit him.

“I want you to say the words. Tell me who you are.”

“Bran,” he said sullenly. *Bran the broken*. “Brandon Stark.” *The cripple boy*. “The Prince of Winterfell.” Of Winterfell burned and tumbled, its people scattered and slain. The glass gardens were smashed, and hot water gushed from the cracked walls to steam beneath the sun. *How can you be prince of someplace you might never see again?...*

“Remember that, Bran. Remember *yourself*, or the wolf will consume you...”

(*SoS I*: 126-127)

After having lost his sense of belonging, wondering if he’ll ever even see Winterfell again, the idea of living in the skin of his wolf, feeling free, and being able to run wherever he’d like, seems more appealing to him than staying Bran Stark, the cripple boy. After having learned the ability to skin-change, Bran finds that he likes Summer’s skin better than his own (*SoS I*: 127). Although becoming a skinchanger and a greenseer is what Bran needs in order to regain some of his identity as a Stark and a future knight, if he is not careful, this process might also end up steering him more towards becoming Summer than towards becoming Bran.

We also have to ask ourselves what will happen to his identity should he become the new greenseer after the three-eyed crow is dead. The three-eyed crow is teaching Bran how to

become like him, as it is destined for Bran to take over, being born with the rare abilities of the greensight. The three-eyed crow is described as a disturbing sight:

Seated on his throne of roots in the great cavern, half-corpse and half-tree, Lord Brynden [the three-eyed crow] seemed less a man than some ghastly statue made of twisted wood, old bone, and rotted wool. The only thing that looked alive in the pale ruin that was his face was his one red eye, burning like the last coal in a dead fire, surrounded by twisted roots and tatters of leathery white skin hanging off a yellowed skull. (*DwD* 529)

Bran is frightened of the sight of him, dreading the fact that this seems to be his own destiny:

*One day I will be like him.* The thought filled Bran with dread. Bad enough that he was broken, with his useless legs. Was he doomed to lose the rest too, to spend all of his years with a weirwood growing in him and through him? ... *I was going to be a knight*, Bran remembered. *I used to run and climb and fight.* It seemed a thousand years ago. (*DwD* 529-530)

Should Bran decide to accept his fate and become the new greenseer, he also has to accept the fact that he can never physically return to Winterfell. He has already had his hopes of having his legs fixed crushed as the three-eyed crow has told him that he will never walk again (*DwD* 207), also crushing his dreams of ever becoming a knight. Having lost this part of his identity, Bran is now frightened that he will lose the rest of himself as well, if he has to spend the rest of his life wasting away, rooted to a tree in a cave in the far north. His hopes for anything else seems lost though, as he realises there is nothing for him to return home to anyways:

What was he now? Only Bran the broken boy, Brandon of House Stark, prince of a lost kingdom, lord of a burned castle, heir to ruins. He had though the three-eyed

crow would be a sorcerer, a wise old wizard who could fix his legs, but that was some stupid child's dream, he realized now. *I am too old for such fancies*, he told himself. *A thousand eyes, a hundred skins, wisdom deep as the roots of ancient trees*. That was as good as being a knight. *Almost as good, anyway.* (DwD 530)

His quest to regain his identity might not have resulted in what he had wished for to begin with, but Bran gives the impression of coming to terms with his fate, realising that his prospects of achieving greatness as a crippled boy who no longer has a home or a family is forfeit. His search for his identity as Bran of House Stark, Lord of Winterfell, Prince of the North, and future knight of the Seven Kingdoms, has resulted in the realisation that his true identity might actually be what the three-eyed crow believes he is destined to be: Brandon Stark, wise man of House Stark's old gods, "*a thousand eyes, a hundred skins, wisdom deep as the roots of ancient trees. A greenseer*" (DwD 532).

### Arya – a girl of many names

What makes for an interesting discussion is the different turning points which the lives of Bran and Arya Stark take after they both end up losing their family, their home, and everything they have ever known. While one of them experiences an intensification of his beliefs, turning to the original roots of the religion of his ancestors, the other ends up turning her back on her old life entirely, and decides to join a religious guild of assassins who worship and serve a strange and exotic god of death, where she must relinquish her whole identity as Arya Stark of Winterfell in order to become one of them. While their lives have been somewhat similar, from their upbringing in Winterfell, to their loss of loved ones, their loss of a home, and consequently their loss of any sense of belonging, the later outcomes of their crises differ significantly. What are the key factors that eventually send the two young

Stark children on such different roads in life? What makes Arya turn her back on the life she has always known by turning to an exotic religion in the south, while Bran seeks to strengthen his bonds with his heritage by embarking on a quest to find the old wise men of the faith of the old gods?

As has been mentioned before, a conversion consists of many contributing factors, and there is rarely an experience of sudden insights. And although, as most scholars argue, the conversion follows a personal crisis, Martin shows that this crisis may be solved in several different ways, depending on the context in which the conversion is situated, the personality of the convert, their interaction with other religions and religious advocates, as well as what the convert wants to eventually achieve.

What we must first consider is the context in which Arya's conversion takes place, and how this differs from Bran's. While Bran is at all times situated somewhere in the North, being surrounded by northmen, weirwoods, and for a long time also his own home in Winterfell, after the execution of her father, Arya has lost all links to the North as she travels through the south of Westeros with a company of street rats, thieves, rapists and murderers from King's Landing. In *A Clash of Kings*, while on the road from King's Landing, there are no family members to remind her of either her father's or her mother's religion, no godswood or sept to pray in, and no other visible worshipper of either the new or the old gods: "Back in Winterfell, Arya had prayed with her mother in the sept and her father in the godswood, but there were no gods on the road to Harrenhal ..." (*CoK* 379). Having been a worshipper of both her father's old gods, and her mother's new gods, Arya now finds herself in a place with no gods at all. This lack of any family religion in her presence, and the feeling of the gods that she knew not helping her or her father gives her the possibility to seek whichever gods she sees fit – gods that might help her more than the old and new gods have. That being said, knowing that Winterfell has been sacked, her younger brothers presumed dead, her parents

and her older brother murdered, and her sister still in King's Landing, Arya has no reason to go back north, which presents her with the opportunity to travel wherever she'd like in the world, even the mysterious free city of Braavos, in search of some truth or meaning. Where she is, and where she is going, no one will wonder about her sudden change in beliefs should she wish to change them.

After her father's execution, Arya's mission in life becomes twofold. On the one hand, we see Arya in search of an identity and a sense of belonging she has lost along with the loss of her family and home, and on the other hand, we see Arya in search of revenge. These two missions are at constant odds with each other, and they will eventually also be at odds with her newfound religion. As Arya's storyline progresses, her desire for both of these things increases to the point where she is ready to abandon everything she has ever known in order to achieve her goals.

In an interview at the 2011 San Diego Comic-con (Anders 1), Martin was approached with several questions regarding characters in his books losing their identities as a result of intense circumstances, and how they might reacquire their identities in the future. Martin acknowledged that he has indeed been playing more and more with the aspect of identity in his books, and that there are different ways for a person to assume and reassume an identity. He links this to Arya's storyline, stating that she has been going through a gradual loss of identity for the most part of the books, having gone through several different identities ever since she left King's Landing at the end of *A Game of Thrones*. He explains that while there are many characters in the books that at different points lose and reassume their identities, Arya's situation is somewhat different:

When you're dealing with Arya and what she's going through, or you're dealing with Theon... you're dealing with something much, much deeper there, where the original



identity is being threatened or kind of broken down by one means or another, and maybe is in danger of being lost entirely. (1)

The questions Martin poses after this are quite interesting: “what is it that makes us who we are? Is it our birth, our blood, our position in the world? Or is it something more integral to us? Our values, our memories, et cetera” (1).

Although we can ask ourselves all these questions about the characters in Martin’s books, I will explore specifically how religion is a part of their identity, and how easy it is for a person to change his beliefs when he loses his identity and everything that used to be a part of him. While religion is not all of Arya’s identity – it might not even be a big part of her it – it is still part of it, and when losing herself like Arya does throughout her storyline, she is given the option to change her beliefs as she creates a whole new identity for herself.

As Martin mentioned in his interview, Arya assumes many identities throughout her journey in the Seven Kingdoms, as well as while residing in Braavos. During her travels, she assumes identities such as the poor boy “Arry”, the help “Weasel”, the cup bearer “nan”, “Salty”, “Cat of the Canals”, “Blind Beth”, and countless others. She struggles with the constant change in her life, having lived her first years as a highborn girl and a member of House Stark, while, after escaping King’s Landing, “On the road, Arya had felt like a sheep, but Harrenhal turned her into a mouse” (*CoK* 415). While hearing talk about her brother Robb while residing in Harrenhal, she even feels like a Stark again: “For a moment, she had been a wolf again, but Weese’s slap took it all away and left her with nothing ...” (*CoK* 498). The feeling of being a Stark again does not last for long, and it disappears more and more as she continues to hear news about dead family members, and starts to completely lose the belief that she will ever be a Stark again. No one will believe her if she told them, and if they did, how can she trust that they are on the Starks’ side in this war and will want to help her (*CoK* 414-415). This continuing feeling of losing herself seems to drive her further and

further away from feeling like Arya Stark, which consequently keeps her from feeling like she has any home to go to in the end.

Throughout her storyline, Arya accumulates an abundance of people whom she wishes dead due to different pains they may have caused her, be it insignificant psychopaths and sociopaths she may have encountered on the road, or King Joffrey and his mother Cersei for betraying and executing her father. As her journey continues, Arya's preoccupation with revenge escalates until she has a list of people she wishes to kill that she recites every night before going to sleep. The list becomes like a mantra or a prayer to Arya, and, as she says to herself, "the only prayer she cared to remember" (CoK 379). As Norris claims, conversion occurs mainly because the new belief to some extent resembles the convert's already existing ideas about truth or meaning. For Arya, the meaning of life has become death: exacting her revenge upon everyone on her kill list. Her meeting with an advocate of a religion that trains expert assassins is then something that is bound to have a serious influence on her life, and consequently her conversion process. After Jaqen H'ghar, a member of the guild of the Faceless Men, has given her the opportunity to wish for him to kill three people for her, it takes no more than the first of those wishes to come true for her thirst for killing to increase: "... *it was me*. She had killed Chiswyck with a whisper, and she would kill two more before she was through. *I'm the ghost in Harrenhal*, she thought. And that night, there was one less name to hate" (CoK 425). Just with the help of a small whisper, her kill list, her prayer, has lost a name, and she realises how easy it is to take a person's life – this time, it only took her a whisper. The feeling seems to awaken something in her, making her crave more, almost causing an obsession with death where she continuously wishes people dead for the slightest pain or discomfort they may have caused her: "*I hope he [Marbrand] dies*, Arya thought as she watched him ride out the gate, his men streaming after him in a double column. *I hope they all die*" (CoK 494-495), "*Maybe if Weese were dead*, Arya thought" (CoK 495), and

*“They [Lorch and his soldiers] deserve to die” (CoK 624).* At some point she even thinks of killing her friend Hot Pie, simply because he might figure out who she really is: *“Maybe I should say Hot Pie’s name to Jaqen” (CoK 497).* While she is not yet ready or able to kill any of these people herself, Jaqen H’ghar has shown to be more than helpful on that account, causing her to be able to kill whomever she wishes through him with just a whisper in his ear.

Everywhere she went, Arya searched for Jaqen H’ghar, wanting to whisper another name to him before those she hated were all gone out of her reach ... He still owed her two deaths, and she was worried she would never get them if he rode off to battle with the rest. (CoK 495-496)

Her dependence on Jaqen is strong at this point, and although she started off as both scared of him, and mistrusting of him, she has grown to admire him for his skill and his significance to her. After trying to convince Gendry to help her break out some prisoners in Harrenhal, she starts to wonder how she has gone from being a scared child, hiding from the lords and soldiers in Harrenhal, to becoming brave enough to want to kill several guards and break into the prison cells: *“I was a sheep, and then I was a mouse, I couldn’t do anything but hide. Arya chewed her lip and tried to think when her courage had come back. Jaqen made me brave again. He made me a ghost instead of a mouse” (CoK 615).* By killing people through Jaqen, Arya feels like she’s finally doing something more than just hiding behind the identity of a poor boy from King’s Landing, or an orphan girl working in the kitchens. She has a purpose. She no longer feels insignificant, like a mouse, or a sheep, but rather she feels like a ghost, something others should fear, someone who can kill anyone who gets in her way with just a whisper. Her courage and her feeling of being of importance is so strongly linked to Jaqen that she is almost reluctant to give Jaqen the final name:

Jaquen still owed her one death ... *The last death has to count*, Arya told herself every night when she whispered her names. But now she wondered if that was truly the reason she had hesitated. So long as she could kill with a whisper, Arya need not be afraid of anyone ... but once she used up the last death, she would only be a mouse again. (*CoK* 615)

By giving Jaquen the last name, she will lose his service altogether, meaning she will no longer be a ghost for anyone to fear, as she does not possess the ability to kill whomever she wishes with just something as simple as a whisper anymore. In the end, she will be left with three options: she can stay a scared and insignificant mouse in Harrenhal, she can escape and try to make her way home to Winterfell, or she can do as Jaquen says and come look for him in Braavos if she wishes to learn how to become a Faceless Man, or in Arya's case a Faceless Woman, like him. The option to join and learn from Jaquen seems appealing to Arya, as she witnesses, with awe, his ability to change his face and whole identity with just a gesture of his hand:

Jaquen passed a hand down his face from forehead to chin, and where it went he *changed ...*

Arya's mouth hung open. "Who *are* you?" she whispered, too astonished to be afraid. "How did you *do* that? Was it hard?"

He grinned, revealing a shiny gold tooth. "no harder than taking a new name, if you know the way."

"Show me," she blurted. "A want to do it too."

"If you would learn, you must come with me."

Arya grew hesitant. "Where?"

"Far and away, across the narrow sea."

"I can't. I have to go home. To Winterfell." (*CoK* 623-624)

While Arya wishes to learn the impressive tricks of the mysterious assassin, her heart still lies with her family and her home in Winterfell, and her hopes are still that she will be back there soon. However, that does not stay an option for long, as not long after Jaqen's departure she hears the news of the sacking of Winterfell and the death of her two younger brothers. At the loss of her home, Arya despairs, wondering whether this is it for her, pondering that "*Winterfell is truly gone, is this my home now? Am I still Arya, or only Nan the serving girl, for forever and forever and forever?*" (CoK 808). As yet another part of Arya's identity slips away, she is left wondering if she'll ever be Arya Stark of Winterfell again, or if she will stay an insignificant grey mouse forever. With the option of returning to Winterfell, and later also the hope of a reunion with her mother and brother at the Twins, having been ripped away from her, and the option of staying in Harrenhal ending up being out of the question for her, looking for Jaqen in Braavos seems like the only valid option for Arya in the end. Her thirst for revenge has in no way decreased after the murder of her mother and brothers, and her list has only grown longer. Learning to become a skilled assassin so as to act out her revenge and start working on her kill list, must at this point seem quite attractive to Arya. Her thoughts when being asked by the Kindly Man in the House of Black and White whether she is hungry clearly reflect her intentions: "*Yes, she thought, but not for food*" (FfC 110). She is hungry for revenge, hungry for more kills, and her hunger makes her make the rash decision of becoming an apprentice in the House of Black and White, not yet being aware of the complexity of becoming a Faceless Man, and without knowing the strict religion that they belong to.

Upon entering the House of Black and White, Arya is still under the impression that Jaqen H'ghar was nothing but a skilled assassin, or possibly a wizard as she thinks after he kills Weese with his own dog, thinking that "... Weese has raised that ugly spotted dog from a pup, and only some dark magic could have turned the animal against him" (CoK 615).

Thinking back to Rambo's speculations whether the convert is active or passive, and whether the conversion starts before or after the convert has been in contact with an advocate whose goal is to persuade the convert to see the world like they do, we can wonder what the case is for Arya. Although Jaqen H'ghar has by all means had a great influence on the beginning of Arya's conversion, and although her conversion did not start before she came into contact with him, he has never advocated his religion in any direct way. She has observed him and his skills, and she has herself enquired about how to be able to ascertain such skills herself. Not once did Jaqen promote his religion to Arya, to be fair; he has never even told her anything about himself and his beliefs, not even telling her that it is a religion at all. Instead, he has indirectly shown her what he is capable of, and upon her request to learn his skills, he has given her the opportunity to come seek him out, should she wish to learn more.

The passivity or activity of a possible convert is a major topic for discussion amongst scholars on the subject. When considering whether Arya is a passive or active participant in her own conversion process upon meeting advocates of this new religion, I argue that she is active throughout the whole process. Even as she meets the Kindly Man in the House of Black and White, it is Arya, and Arya alone who decides to join the Faceless Men. The Kindly Man never promotes his religion to Arya, nor does he ever encourage her to join. Instead, he answers her questions, and gives her the option of joining, should she believe she is able and willing to. Several times he gives her the option, and sometimes even encourages her, to leave:

“You know that you may leave this place. You are not one of us, not yet. You may go home anytime you wish.”...

“I don't want to leave.”

“Then stay ... but remember, the House of Black and White is not a home for orphans. All men must serve beneath this roof. *Valar dohaeris* is how we say it here.

Remain if you will, but know that we shall require your obedience. At all times and in all things. If you cannot obey, you must depart.”

“I can obey,”

“We shall see.” (*FfC* 354-355)

It is Arya who argues to stay in the House of Black and White, and she is adamant about becoming one of them, no matter what the consequences might be. The bigger question here is if she is willing to give herself over completely to the God of Many Faces? A possible answer to this question can be found by examining how strong her belief really is, as well as her struggles to give up her identity as Arya Stark.

Arya never seems to have been much of a religious person. Although she used to pray with both her mother in the sept and with her father in the godswood, she herself seems to not really know how to pray, and she lacks any strong belief in the effect of her prayers. When praying in front of a weirwood tree outside of Harrenhal, her prayers seem awkward and full of doubt:

Arya went to her knees. She wasn't sure how she should begin. She clasped her hands together. *Help me you old gods*, she prayed silently. *Help me get those men out of the dungeon so we can kill Ser Amory, and bring me home to Winterfell. Make me a water dancer and a wolf and not afraid again, ever.*

Was that enough? Maybe she should pray aloud if she wanted the old gods to hear. Maybe she should pray longer. Sometimes her father had prayed a long time, she remembered. But the old gods had never helped him. Remembering that made her angry. “You should have saved him,” she scolded the tree. “He prayed to you all the time. I don't care if you help me or not. I don't think you could even if you wanted to.” (*CoK* 616-617)

The belief she once had in the old gods her father worshipped is fading away, along with the faith she had in her mother's gods, thinking that "*They are not [her] Seven. They were [her] mother's gods, and they let the Freys murder her at the Twins ... The old gods are dead, she told herself, with Mother and Father and Robb and Bran and Rickon, all dead*" (FfC 100).

Along with the loss of her family, she has lost the faith in the family gods, believing that they have no power as they have let the people who worship them die. What she finds in their stead, is a god who might answer her deepest prayers, the Many-Faced God.

Norris, having examined what makes a person able to convert to a belief system which is based in an entirely different culture, states that "conversion is a matter of matching a tradition to an ideal or experience that already exists" (174). Having interviewed several subjects, she was constantly told that their reason for converting was that they had "... recognized something that was previously a part of their inner life", and it was often "everything they had always dreamed of" (174). Arya, who has always been preoccupied with sword fighting, and later has an obsession with death and killing, seems to find exactly what she has always dreamed of in a religion that worships a god of death and teaches the art of assassination. Upon finding a place that she might call home, a faith that might benefit her needs, Arya starts the more formal part of the conversion process in becoming an apprentice and adopting the practices of the Faceless Men. However, there seems to be something vital missing in Arya's conversion, namely belief and devotion. As Norris points out:

Having acknowledged something in a religion that answers an inner need, the convert then, only after discovering that this is the "right" tradition precisely because it corresponds to something already existing, begins the process of assimilating the beliefs and practices of the adopted religion. (174)

Upon her first introduction to the religion, Arya recognizes that she "... did not know any Many-faced God, but if he answered prayers, he might be the god she sought" (FfC 100).



This reminds us of Arya's prayer again, which is no more than a kill list that she wants the gods to help her shorten down. This prayer is always with her, and while the other members of the House of Black and White pray prayers that are led by the Kindly Man, Arya "... prayed her own prayer to the Many-Faced God, the one that went, "Ser Gregor, Dunsen, Raff the sweetling, Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn, Queen Cersei." She prayed in silence. If the Many-Faced God was a proper god, he would hear her" (*FfC* 352). There seems to be more doubt than there is belief in Arya at the moment, as she is not completely convinced that the Many-Faced God will be able to help her, but her desire is strong, and like with Bran, it might eventually turn into belief.

As with Bran, Arya's conversion process has gone from the experience of a crisis, to a strong desire to achieve her goal, which in her case is the killing of several of her enemies. For Bran, the wish became so strong that, with the addition of paranormal experiences, it turned into a belief in mysterious aspects of his religion. Arya, on the other hand, maybe due to a lack of any paranormal experience, or simply because her desire is not strong enough, has yet to reach this stage of belief, and she currently remains at the wishing stage of her conversion process, lacking the conviction that a god can help her out of her crisis. This makes it significantly more difficult for her to completely give herself over to the religion of the Many-Faced God, as this faith demands one of the more extreme conversions in the books. It's not a matter of Arya just changing her world view, it's a matter of her changing her entire life and everything she has ever been. The Kindly Man tells her as much when teaches her about the God of Many Faces:

... Stay, and the Many-Faced God will take your ears, your nose, your tongue.

He will take your sad grey eyes that have seen so much. He will take your hands, your feet, your arms and legs, your private parts. He will take your hopes and dreams, your

loves and hates. Those who enter His service must give up all that makes them who they are. Can you do that? (*FfC* 357)

The religion demands the convert to give up their entire identity, and "... offer up all you are to Him of Many Faces. Your body. Your soul. *Yourself*..." (*FfC* 356), which means that Arya will have to give up all her possessions, her name, her memories, and her dreams, which includes her hate for the people who have scorned her, and her dreams of killing them. She must in fact give up her entire list, her whole reason for seeking out the Faceless Men in the first place. Upon hearing Arya recite her list, the Kindly Man enquires about her reason for seeking them out:

"Is this why you have come to us?" the kindly man went on. "To learn our arts, so you may kill these men you hate?"

Arya did not know how to answer that. "Maybe."

"Then you have come to the wrong place. It is not for you to say who shall live and who shall die. That gift belongs to Him of Many Faces. We are but his servants, sworn to do his will." (*FfC* 351)

Still, Arya stays on, insistent on becoming a Faceless Man, as for her, this is the only place that might help her out of her crisis. Her desire is strong, but is it strong enough to eventually result in a belief in the Many-Faced God and its ability to help her? And if the desire eventually turns into a belief, and she starts following the faith like the Faceless Men tell her to, must she not then accept the fact that she is no longer allowed to choose who lives or dies? Is she willing to let go of her list in order to serve the Many-Faced God and give herself to him completely? If she does, the whole reason for her conversion to begin with disappears, and she is left as *no one*, a servant of Him of Many Faces, not Arya Stark, assassin and avenger. Indeed, this paradox might be what ends up repressing the possibility of her

conversion altogether.

Even if Arya *is* determined to give herself to the Many-Faced God by becoming *no one*, she struggles to let herself go completely. Every day, the Kindly Man asks her who she is, and everyday she replies with “no one”, but the Kindly Man is not convinced:

“No one,” she would answer, she who had been Arya of House Stark, Arya Underfoot, Arya Horseface. She had been Arry and Weasel too, and Squab and Salty, Nan the cupbearer, a grey mouse, a sheep, the ghost of Harrenhal ... but not for true, not in her heart of hearts. In there she was Arya of Winterfell, the daughter of Lord Eddard Stark and Lady Catelyn, who had once had brothers named Robb and Bran and Rickon, a sister named Sansa, a direwolf called Nymeria, a half-brother named Jon Snow. In there she was someone ... but that was not the answer he had wanted.  
(*FfC* 351)

Arya, who has gradually been losing her identity ever since she left King’s Landing, who has had a dozen different names, might have thought it was easy to give up her identity completely, now that there is hardly anything left of it, but she comes to the realisation that it is not as easy as she might have believed. The feeling that she might originally have had, that by joining the Faceless Men she will regain her identity, is replaced by the frightening feeling of losing herself completely. While she tries with all her might to let go of her identity and become a Faceless Man, she also holds on for dear life to what makes her who she is. This becomes especially evident when she refuses to let go of her belongings after the Kindly Man tells her to do so:

“You need to rid yourself of all this,” he said of her treasures.

Arya felt stricken. “They’re mine.”

“And who are you?”

“No one.”

He picked up her silver fork. “This belongs to Arya of House Stark. All these things belong to her. There is no place for them here. There is no place for her. Hers is too proud a name, and we have no room for pride. We are servants here.”

“I serve,” she said, wounded. She liked the silver fork.

“You play at being a servant, but in your heart you are a lord’s daughter. You have taken other names, but you wore them as lightly as you might wear a gown.

Under them was always Arya.” (*FfC* 356)

The Kindly Man sees right through Arya and her different identities, knowing that deep inside, she is still Arya Stark of Winterfell, and she still wishes to be. She thinks she might be doing what is necessary for her to become a servant of the Many-Faced God by ridding herself of her belongings in the end, but she still keeps Needle, her sword, as she knows it is the last and strongest link she has to her home, and if she lets go of it, she will be letting go of herself forever.

“It’s just a sword,” she said, aloud this time ...

...but it wasn’t.

Needle was Robb and Bran and Rickon, her mother and her father, even Sansa. Needle was Winterfell’s grey walls, and the laughter of its people. Needle was the summer snows, Old Nan’s stories, the heart tree with its red leaves and scary face, the warm earthy smell of the glass gardens, the sound of the north wind rattling the shutters of her room. Needle was Jon Snow’s smile. *He used to mess my hair and call me “little sister,”* she remembered, and suddenly there were tears in her eyes.

...*The gods wanted me to have it. Not the Seven, not Him of Many Faces, but her father’s gods, the old gods of the north. The Many-Faced God can have the rest,* she thought, *but he can’t have this.* (*FfC* 359)

Arya uses the old gods of the north, her old gods, to defy the Many-Faced God and his demands for what to do should she wish to serve him. This lack of willingness to let go of her identity, including her old religion, shows that she has a long way to go in her conversion process, and begs the question whether she will actually go through with it in the end. While Bran's conversion process seems to be strengthening his ties to his ancestors, and his quest might end up helping him find parts of a new identity, Arya's conversion will force her to lose her identity completely, making the conversion process all the more harder on her. The question that remains is how much the person she wants to become is the same as the person the Faceless Men need her to become, and how much space between those two ideas of Arya they'll tolerate.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented some of the main causes and contributing factors behind the religious conversions of Bran and Arya Stark. While being children who have been raised in the same family, and the same social setting up until the events of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, their lives have taken different turns after the loss of their family and their home in Winterfell. Struggling with a loss of a sense of identity and belonging, their original faith in their father's old gods and their mother's Seven has been altered as a result of a search for either regaining their old identity, or trying to gain a new one.

Being part of a secular society has allowed Bran and Arya to grow up in a mixed religious family, giving them a feeling of more religious freedom. Additionally, their severance from House Stark upon the loss of their family and home has also severed all restricting bonds to their family's religions. The elements of microcontext such as family, friends, and home that would normally work to repress their conversion is no longer present,

opening up to a range of religious opportunities for them.

While the crisis of losing loved ones and a place to call home is a catalyst for both of the characters' conversions, the geographical context appears to be an important factor in their alternate change of faith. Still being situated in the north, and no longer being able to walk, limits Bran's communication with the world outside Winterfell, a place that mostly consists of northerners, people who worship the old gods. Although being separated from his family and eventually also being chased from his home, his connection to the old gods of the north is still strong, and with the limited communication with people of other cultures and religions, the context represses any major possibilities of a conversion to another religion. His conversion is, however, facilitated by the arrival of advocates of an alternate belief in the old gods than that which he is accustomed to, which contributes to an intensification in his already existing faith in the old gods.

Arya on the other hand, being in constant movement throughout the Seven Kingdoms, and eventually also reaching the land of Essos, experiences a conversion process that is influenced by a considerably different context. Her travels put her in contact with a vast variety of people from both Westeros and Essos, giving her access to a whole range of new cultures and religions. By being so far from her home, and continuously moving around, she no longer feels the same connection to the north and the old gods as her brother does. Consequently, the range of religious options for Arya is endless, presenting her with the freedom to seek out any culture or religion that she feels best suits her quest.

Considering microcontext, we should also take into account the personalities and psyche of Bran and Arya. After the crises that have befallen him, Bran's overall quest in life seems to not have changed. His dream of becoming a knight is still strong, but due to his paralysis, he now must take an alternate course in order to achieve his goal, by first regaining the ability to walk. And even so, Bran appears to have come to peace with the fact that,

although he hopes there is a possibility, he will never be able to walk again, and thereby never become a knight, making him less active in his quest to change his future.

Where Bran's conversion seems to be part of a "willingness to try" to achieve his goal, Arya's conversion is a result of pure obsession to achieve hers. Her life goals have changed drastically after the loss of her family, where she earlier only had minor goals of learning how to fight, she has now become obsessed with exacting her revenge on everyone who has ever slighted her or her family. Her obsession with her quest makes her a more active participant in her own conversion, being willing to go to any lengths in order to reach her goal.

While the religious conversions of Bran and Arya do not appear to have any major consequences for the religious society of Westeros, their conversions, should the process continue, will end up having a great deal of impact on their personal lives. As Bran grows gradually closer to the old gods of his ancestors, he also grows closer to regaining his identity as a member of House Stark. Although his connection to his ancestry grows stronger through his religion, though, the identity that he searches for might not be congruent with the identity that he ends up finding – the identity that he is destined to have. Should Arya continue her conversion process, however, she will move in the exact opposite direction of her brother, result in a complete severance from her ancestry, as she stands the risk of losing her identity altogether – indeed, such a loss may be required to complete her conversion.

## Chapter 3

### Introduction

“Power resides only where men believe it resides. [...] A shadow on the wall, yet shadows can kill. And oftentimes a very small man can cast a very large shadow.”

(Lord Varys, *CoK* 120)

Lord Varys' comment regarding the subject of power is one of the most famous lines in the books, a comment that describes the main events of the series almost to a point. As several characters fight for power over the Seven Kingdoms, their faith is constantly being tested and changed as a result of the actions of themselves and of other people surrounding them. Martin plays with the well-known link between religion and politics on several occasions throughout the books, exploring the idea that conversion in relation to power is not always a case of the status quo, using his characters to show the many varieties of conversion that may come from someone's pursuit of power. While some people might convert to a new religion as part of their own quest for power, others might convert as a result of someone else's wish for power, being influenced by the situation and the people around them.

This chapter will present a closer examination of two characters in the books who are both affected by the strong relationship between religion and power. The first part of the chapter will explore the conversion of Stannis Baratheon, a non-believer who slowly converts to a new and exotic religion in order to benefit from the god's powers while on his quest to take up his rightful place as king. The conversion of Stannis also gives an insight into a less explored form of conversion, where the character aims to convert himself and his kingdom from a majority religion to a minority religion. This issue raises the questions of how his conversion will affect his ability to rise to power and gain the acceptance of his royal subjects, as well as what his conversion will have to say for the religious society of the rest of



Westeros.

The second part of the chapter will take a closer look at the mass conversion of Westeros as a whole, as the Sparrows are gaining more power due to their growing relationship with the people of Westeros and due to the resurrection of the Faith Militant. As an example of the conversion of individuals, the vital first step in the process of a mass conversion, the focus will be on Lancel Lannister, a prominent member of House Lannister who decides to give up his lordship and his family to join the new military orders of the Faith.

Both characters, Stannis and Lancel respectively, are examples of public conversions, which stand in contrast to the conversions of Bran and Arya Stark whose conversions are quite personal and rather hidden from society. Stannis' and Lancel's status in their society makes their conversions all the more open for the rest of Westeros to see, and they both have the potential to, either directly or indirectly, bring forth some serious political consequences, where the religious society of Westeros is subject to future change.

Last, but not least, the chapter discusses some of the difficulties with analysing these characters as neither of them have their own point-of-view chapters, denying the reader an insight into the convert's personal thoughts and feelings regarding the process. By describing these important conversions through one or several other characters, Martin shows the different ways in which a conversion narrative might be presented. Not all conversion narratives come from the original source, and sometimes we only get to experience them through the eyes of an outsider, something that might affect the way in which we see the conversion.

## Stannis – Azor Ahai Reborn

One cannot examine the conversion narrative in *A Song of Ice and Fire* without including the religious conversion of Stannis Baratheon. Ever since being first properly introduced in *A Clash of Kings* (although mentioned in *A Game of Thrones*), Stannis has been the epitome of a religious convert in the novels, being the clearest converter of all the characters, going from being a non-believer who has been brought up in a family of worshippers of the Seven, to taking to the newly arrived and very mysterious and controversial religion of R'hllor.

The conversion narrative of Stannis makes for a very interesting read as he is a character who, although is a very central character in the novels, does not have his own point-of-view chapters. This makes for quite a fascinating analysis as we do not see his conversion process through his own eyes, but rather through the eyes of other characters, mostly non-believers of the religion he is converting to. For the analysis we lack the insight into the thoughts and feelings of the convert that we get when we read the chapters of Bran and Arya, but we instead gain something else. While the conversion of Bran and Arya is never viewed or commented on by anyone else, the conversion of Stannis is constantly viewed and remarked upon by several other characters such as Maester Cressen, Ser Davos Seaworth, Jon Snow, Melisandre, Tyrion Lannister and Tywin Lannister. The most insightful view we get of Stannis and his relationship to religion is the one we get through Ser Davos Seaworth in his point-of-view chapters, as he struggles between his loyalty to Stannis and his opposition to Stannis' conversion to the Faith of R'hllor and his relationship with Melisandre, the red priestess and strongest advocate of the religion. Stannis' conversion being viewed through the eyes of several other characters, both believers and non-believers of his new-found faith, only adds to Martin's attribute for diversity when it comes to the conversion narrative, as he does not only limit the narrative to being told through the converts themselves, but also takes it further into telling it through both a second and third party. It is not always possible to

present a conversion narrative in first person, and sometimes we end up learning about someone's conversion through the eyes of others, be it an advocate for the new religion, a fellow converter, a semi-outsider, a complete outsider, or an adversary. Martin's play with different viewpoints shows the complexity of not only the conversion process, but also the complexity of the conversion narrative itself and how different interpretations of a person's conversion can alter the representation of the process completely.

A second and equally important sign of Martin's talent for presenting a diverse conversion narrative, is the different primary reasons for a religious conversion that is attributed to the different characters. As a strong contrast to Bran and Arya's conversions due to a loss of identity and sense of belonging, Martin adds another factor, a factor that has been present in the history of religious conversion for as long as the conversion narrative has, namely conversion linked to politics and power. Be it where a single person has converted in order to gain the trust and devotion of a people, or where a whole people has converted in order to show their loyalty to their rulers, in fear of their rulers, or simply for personal gain, the issue of religious conversion in a political context is well known throughout history, with Henry VIII, and the Christian conversion of Iceland and Norway being great examples of this. This is also an issue which is quite prominent in Martin's Westeros, where several religious situations and conversions arise due to political situations.

While Stannis' religious conversion is closely linked to politics and his quest for power over the Seven Kingdoms, this chapter will also examine other factors that may have contributed to his change in faith. Martin goes deeper into the subject of religion and power, showing the political, personal and social complexity involved in such a situation, presenting us with Stannis' beliefs and doubts, his involvement from a non-believer to a religious fanatic, as well as the doubts, beliefs, fears and loyalties of his subjects. He presents us not with a black and white view of a person's exploitations of a faith for the sake of power, but gives us

instead the many shades of grey that such a phenomenon is painted with in real life.

Looking back to what Rambo and Sheen, as well as several other scholars, say about conversion usually being a result of some sort of personal crisis, we have to take that into consideration also when examining the conversion process of Stannis. Is Rambo's stage of *crisis* also instrumental to those who convert in the pursuit of power? Martin's representation of such a conversion shows that while it is not necessarily essential, it is possible. First we must ask ourselves what this crisis must involve in order for it to be prominent enough to invoke a possible change in beliefs in a person. According to Sheen, the crisis might be a suffering of any kind, even as little as a tension, a pull, a duality, or a conflict, which indicates that the size or seriousness of the crisis is not necessarily significance. Rambo adds that the origin of the crisis may be anything from political to psychological or cultural. For Stannis, the crisis is both political and psychological in origin, as he struggles to come to terms with the injustice that has been done to him in his earlier years, as well as the injustice that has recently been done to him in relation to the delegation of the crown after his brother's death.

In the prologue of *A Clash of Kings* we view Stannis through the eyes of Maester Cressen, a man who has served as the maester of House Baratheon ever since Stannis was a child. Through some of maester Cressen's reminiscing we are introduced to the earlier life of Stannis, and some of the difficulties he may have encountered through his younger years. Cressen thinks back to "... the boy he [Stannis] had been, standing cold in the shadows while the sun shone on his elder brother. Whatever he did, Robert had done it first, and better. Poor boy ..." (*CoK* 19), defining him as "... *the one unloved, ...*" (*CoK* 23) by his family, and the people of Westeros, with his older brother Robert and his younger brother Renly being more loved than him. Stannis' hatred for his brothers seems to rise with every injustice he feels they have done him, seemingly topped off when Renly claims himself king after the death of

Robert: “The bold ones have already declared for Renly. For *Renly!*” He spat out the name like poison on his tongue” (*CoK* 13). His anger is clear every time he speaks of his younger brother, referring to him as “...a thieving child who thinks to snatch the crown off [his] brow” (*CoK* 13), and a “...traitor blood of [his]” (*CoK* 14).

Stannis is immensely preoccupied with justice, with maester Cressen describing him as “...*strong, able, just ... aye, just past the point of wisdom ...*” (*CoK* 9). Everything that he feels has been taken from him or not given to him over the years when it has been his by right has accumulated to the point where he is ready to take it by force, no matter the consequences. He is adamant in the fact that he does not fight for the crown because he wants it, or because of revenge, like the other current “false kings” in Westeros do, but rather because the crown is his by right, by law, and that it is his duty to the realm:

Stannis ground his teeth again. “I never asked for this crown. Gold is cold and heavy on the head, but so long as I *am* the king, I have a duty ... If I must sacrifice one child to the flames to save a million from the dark ... *Sacrifice ... is never easy, Davos. Or it is no true sacrifice. Tell him, my lady*”. (*SoS* 2: 293)

The injustice of usurping the crown from the rightful king being done to a man so preoccupied with the law, by duty, and by birth right as Stannis is, undoubtedly counts as a crisis in the eyes of both Sheen and Rambo. Such a crisis that might open up for a search of some kind of spiritual force to help him set things right and perform the duty he believes he is meant to perform.

An interesting thing with Stannis is his lack of religious belief altogether when we are first introduced to him. Stannis is one of the few self-claimed atheists we meet in Westeros. While most men in the society of the Seven Kingdoms *believe* in one or several gods even if they do not personally *worship* any of them, Stannis, who has been brought up in a family

that worships the Seven, does not carry any belief in Westeros' or Essos' gods. During a discussion with Ser Davos, he tells of the incident that made him lose his faith:

“I stopped believing in gods the day I saw the *Windproud* break up across the bay. Any gods so monstrous as to drown my mother and father would never have *my* worship, I vowed. In King's Landing, the High Septon would prattle at me of how all injustice and goodness flowed from the Seven, but all I ever saw of either was made by men.” (CoK 147)

Upon his parents' death, Stannis did not only lose his faith in the Seven, but rather in all gods, in all religions, believing that only men are real, and only men can change the world for better or for worse. This leaves us with the question that Ser Davos so promptly asks afterwards: If Stannis does not believe in gods, why bother with this new one? Stannis' response to this question is as straightforward as it can get, clearly showing his intentions as to why he is consulting with a priestess of the Faith of R'hllor, a strange religion from foreign lands, when he so strongly banishes the gods of his own family and most of Westeros:

“I have asked myself as well. I know little and care less of gods, but the red priestess has power ...

“...The Iron Throne is mine by rights, but how am I to take it?

“...I have *her*. The red woman. Half my knights are afraid even to say her name, did you know? If she can do nothing else, a sorceress who can inspire such dread in grown men is not to be despised. A frightened man is a beaten man. And perhaps she *can* do more. I mean to find out...”. (CoK 147)

Stannis' belief in the power of gods seems to be absent even as he works closely with Melisandre. His desperation for power is clear enough, as even though he is first and foremost utilizing Melisandre for the fear she invokes in other men, he also seems willing to

exchange his previous atheism for the belief, or at least wishful thinking, that there is a possibility that Melisandre and her god can do more. The wish for setting things right, and achieving the power that he believes is his duty to obtain, causes Stannis, an atheist for the most-part of his life, to open up to experimenting with the existence of gods after all, and though this has not yet taken root as a belief within Stannis, it is at least such a strong desire that it has the possibility to turn into one, as the case is with both Bran and Arya.

Where both Bran and Arya were both believers and worshippers of several gods, Stannis' pre-existing atheism presents us with a different context for his conversion, and we must ask ourselves whether his conversion ever really becomes authentic, and, if it does, what causes him to have such an abrupt change in his perspective of the world? Some might claim that Stannis is never a true believer of R'hllor, which I do not necessarily argue against. What we must acknowledge though, is that on some level Stannis still converts, despite his lack of belief, and he also changes drastically by going from a firm non-believer, to a man of doubt, a man of hope, and eventually a man who goes to the lengths of demanding his subjects to convert with him should they wish to join his cause.

When examining Stannis' conversion process throughout the novels, I have come to the conclusion that, in addition to the crises that set the stage for his conversion, there are two main factors involved in his transition: the influence of the religious advocate, and the meeting with paranormal experiences, two contributing factors that go hand in hand. First we must address the role of the religious advocate in Stannis' conversion, Melisandre, without whom there would never have been any conversion to begin with. Where both Bran and Arya were to different degrees active participants in their own conversions, Stannis seems to be a more passive convert, constantly being influenced, convinced and sometimes pushed by Melisandre. Stannis' conversion corresponds well with Gerlach and Hine's findings (qtd. in Rambo 44) that the conversion process for their subjects started after they had come into

contact with a religious advocate who sought to persuade them into seeing the world and themselves differently.

Several of Stannis' lords and bannermen keep pointing out that Melisandre is almost always in Stannis' presence, noting on several occasions that "He [Stannis] is always with the red woman ..." (*SoS I*: 353), and that "She is never far from the king" (*SoS I*: 489). In the prologue to *A Clash of Kings*, Maester Cressen appears convinced that Melisandre is the one who is manipulating Stannis, despairing that she is changing him for the worse and is driving him close to insanity. After seeing Melisandre having "... won her [Lady Selyse], heart and soul, turning her from the gods of the Seven Kingdoms, both old and new, to worship the one they called the Lord of Light" (*CoK* 16), Maester Cressen fears that she will eventually fill Stannis and his daughter's heads with the same poison (*CoK* 4). He seems to be under the impression that Stannis and his family has had no say in the matter, that it is solely Melisandre who is at fault, filling their heads with poison and madness, making them very much passive participants in their own conversions. He thinks to himself that "The woman was the heart of it. Not Lady Selyse, the *other* one ... Melisandre whose madness must not be allowed to spread beyond Dragonstone" (*CoK* 18). After all his efforts to try and counter Melisandre's influence on Stannis, Cressen seems to forfeit the battle, seeing Melisandre's power over Stannis to be too great: "*I have lost him*, Cressen thought, despairing" (*CoK* 24).

Davos is in the same mind as Maester Cressen whom he almost admires for having "... *drank a cup of death to free Stannis from Melisandre*" (*CoK* 133), battling her influence on Stannis, believing her to almost have imprisoned him by poisoning his mind while feeding on his lust for power. While Stannis appears to have changed a lot in the eyes of Ser Davos, he never blames him directly for anything he is doing, constantly putting the blame on Melisandre instead: "This was *Stannis*, his just lord ... *Gods be good, what had she done to*



him?" (CoK 559). Reminiscing about some of Stannis' actions lately, Davos concludes that Melisandre is the one at fault:

At Melisandre's urging, he [Stannis] had dragged the Seven from their sept at Dragonstone and burned them before the castle gates, and later he had burned the godswood at Storm's End as well, even the heart tree, a huge white weirwood with a solemn face.

"It was her work," Davos said again, more weakly. (SoS 73)

Even when Stannis commands the burning of idols of the Seven from the sept at Dragonstone, and the entire godswood at Storm's End, Davos puts the blame on Melisandre. Stannis is the one in command, an obviously strong leader with the clear capability to speak his mind against whomever he likes, including Melisandre – which is the case several times throughout the books. Davos on the other hand still believes Melisandre to be the heart of these acts, having *urged* Stannis to do so, with Stannis lacking the will or power to defy her.

While Melisandre might not have had much power over Stannis to begin with, coming into his service through his wife and her family, her influence on him has grown over time, and continues to do so even more drastically throughout the novels. Ser Davos thinks to himself: "The red priestess had always seemed loyal to Stannis, until now. *She had broken him, as a man breaks a horse. She would ride him to power if she could ...*" (SoS 133). While Stannis started off by using Melisandre for her powers in order to take back his rightful place on the Iron throne, Davos seems more concerned with the fact that Melisandre is now the one using Stannis for her own cause of defeating the Great Other, manipulating him into believing that he needs her more than he actually does. After the battle of Blackwater, Davos is sure that the wildfire attack was Melisandre punishing Stannis for not bringing her with him:

*Melisandre*. Davos shivered. “The red woman did this to him,” he said. “She sent the fire to consume us, to punish Stannis for setting her aside, to teach him that he could not hope to win without her sorceries.” (*SoS* 139)

Melisandre seems to be turning the tables on Stannis, each day taking a step closer to convincing him that he is Azor Ahai reborn, and that her quest of defeating the Great Other is more important than Stannis’ quest for the Crown. But what is the eventual turning point for Stannis, where his affiliation with Melisandre and her god does from being strategic to sincere?

Brown’s argument that paranormal experiences often play a significant role in a person’s religious conversion is equally relevant to Stannis as it is to Bran, where both of them envision several prophecies that are continually fulfilled. While Bran keeps seeing his and Jojen Reed’s dreams coming true one by one, Stannis has the same experience with Melisandre’s visions in her flames. It is not until after her first major vision having come to pass that we see Stannis’ first sign of active participation in his wife’s religion. During a conversation with Ser Davos after the death of Renly, Stannis utters for the first time the well-known words of prayers that the worshippers of R’hllor have: “The night is dark and full of terrors, Davos” (*CoK* 557), causing the hairs on Davos’ arms to rise. Up until then, Stannis has been quite passive during any worship the other followers of the Lord of Light have done, showing that he does not share his wife’s faith. He clearly tells his wife this during one of their discussions, claiming that her “... god can keep his grace ... It’s swords I need, not blessings” (*CoK* 16). However, Renly’s death causes a turning point for Stannis, and although the change is small, we still see a clear shift in his beliefs after this incident. Stannis confesses his new-found belief in the validity of Melisandre’s prophecies to Ser Davos:

“Ser Cortnay will be dead within the day. Melisandre has seen it in her flames of the future ... Her flames do not lie. She saw Renly’s doom as well. On

Dragonstone she saw it, and told Selyse. Lord Velaryon and your friend Salladhor Saan would have had me sail against Joffrey, but Melisandre told me that if I went to Storm's End, I would win the best part of my brother's power, and she was right."

*(CoK 557)*

The paranormal experience of one of Melisandre's prophecies coming true, especially one that is so important to his quest for power, his belief in her powers is increased to the point where he is willing to defend her and follow her further prophecies and advice more actively than before. The death of Renly is seen as a great victory for Stannis, and he believes that the only reason that it happened is because he followed Melisandre's advice and went to Storm's End while his Lords and Bannermen were pushing him towards attacking King's Landing. After this incident, he continues to follow her advice over the advice of any of his other counsellors, commanding Davos to smuggle Melisandre into Storm's End so that she can use her sorcery to kill Ser Cortnay and claim Edric Storm, who she claims is vital to Stannis' cause.

The prophecies that have come true so far are of the smaller types, and are not necessarily such paranormal experiences that would completely convince a strong non-believer like Stannis. With the defeat in the Battle of Blackwater, where Melisandre had promised their victory, one would not be surprised should Stannis lose the little faith that he had previously gained. Looking back in history, great rulers such as Constantine and Clovis saw their victories over enemies as proof of the Christian God's power. A lack of victory, a loss of most of his men, and a very weakened cause for the crown, should only present Stannis with proof of his pre-existing non-belief in the existence of gods. Instead, the opposite seems to happen to Stannis: where his reliance on Melisandre and her powers, and his belief in her visions, only grows stronger. He does not blame the defeat on their lack of numbers in soldiers, and not on the non-existence of gods. Nor does he blame Melisandre for

causing the burning of his fleet with her fires, like several others do. He tells Ser Davos how he rather blames the defeat on the fact that Melisandre was not with them during the battle:

“You wrong her. Those fires were no work of hers. Curse the Imp, curse the pyromancers, curse that fool of Florent who sailed my fleet into the jaws of a trap. Or curse me for my stubborn pride, for sending her away when I needed her most. But not Melisandre. She remains my faithful servant.” (*SoS I*: 497)

After the Battle of Blackwater, Stannis seems to have grown more attached to Melisandre than he was before, and additionally become more open to her prophecies and advice. Rambo mentions that

... a crucial and dynamic interplay exists between the advocate and the potential convert. Both sides manoeuvre, strategize, and engage in various tactics during the encounter stage. The advocate assesses the potential target audience and formulates persuasive tactics to bring converts into the religious community. (66-67)

Melisandre finds an opening into Stannis’ mind after his defeat, making sure to intensify her persuasion on him now that he is in a newfound crisis, feeling beaten and abandoned. She strategically stays close to him at all times during his crisis, helping to build him back up by promising him the powers of her god. Salladhor Saan tells Ser Davos how Melisandre is the only one who is allowed to see Stannis after his defeat:

“... And your king, well, you will be finding him changed, I am fearing. Since the battle, he sees no one, but broods in his Stone Drum ... No one but *her*,” said Salladhor Saan, and Davos did not have to ask who he meant. (*SoS I*: 138-139)

Several of Stannis’ men note on how he has changed after the battle, the defeat showing its effect on him, and how all he has been doing since is spending time with Melisandre, alone. Ser Axell Florent explains to Ser Davos how Stannis does “... does not act. The defeat gnaws

inside him, a black worm in his soul. ...” (*SoS I*: 490), something Davos gets to see for himself, being shocked by how Stannis seems ten years older, having grey hairs, having lost weight, and having eyes that look like blue pits in deep hollows (*SoS I*: 491).

The difficulties with interpreting what happens to Stannis during this time is that we don’t get any insights into his storyline in between the battle and the time when Davos meets him again several weeks later. Not having the thoughts or actions of either Stannis or Melisandre, or the interpretations of Davos’ interactions with either of them, it is difficult to say exactly what has happened during this time. However, should we look to Rambo’s conversion theory, we can draw some conclusions as to what could have probably, and possibly, lead to Stannis’ new-found faith in Melisandre’s powers. While having tried to win the crown earlier without the help of Melisandre, believing that victory was possibly through gaining enough followers and fighting the most tactical wars, Stannis seems to eventually have admitted defeat on this part. After the Battle of Blackwater, he has lost countless men, many of them dying during the battle, and many of them bending the knee to King Joffrey after the defeat, and he is left with a small group of followers. His earlier beliefs of victory through pure human force has been shattered, and his desperation for something to help him rise again leaves him in dire need of the powers of Melisandre and her god. Most likely, this is something Melisandre is well aware of, strategically staying at the side of the weakened and easily influenced Stannis’, using persuasive tactics in order to promote her cause further than before.

Stannis’ faith in Melisandre’s powers is only strengthened by further paranormal experiences following his crisis. During their first meeting after the battle of Blackwater, Stannis tells Ser Davos of his own visions:

Stannis stared at the silver dish. “She has shown it to me, Lord Davos. In the flames.”

“*You* saw it, sire?” It was not like Stannis Baratheon to lie about such a thing.

“With mine own eyes. After the battle, when I was lost to despair, the Lady Melisandre bid me gaze into the hearthfire. ... I stared at them, feeling half a fool, but she bid me look deeper, and ... I was looking *through* the fire ... For all the heat of the fire, I felt a cold so terrible I shivered, ... But what I saw was real, I’d stake my kingdom on it.”

“And have,” said Melisandre.

The conviction in the king’s voice frightened Davos to the core. (*SoS I: 500*)

Through all the research that Rambo has done regarding the religious convert, he claims that the link between crisis and mystical experiences is often very strong, and although the nature of such an experience may vary, for most people the mystical experience can be quite disturbing. He mentions the conversion of Saul as narrated by Luke in the Bible as a prominent example of this, where an encounter with a mystical experience altered his life completely (Rambo 48). The link between crises and mystical experiences often goes both ways, where, as Rambo argues, a mystical experience can be a catalyst for crisis, or, as is the case with Stannis, where a crisis leads to a mystical experience. The crisis that Stannis experiences upon being defeated in Blackwater Bay is closely intertwined with the mystical experiences he has afterwards, as well as the influence of the religious advocate. It can be difficult to separate the three from each other, deciding which one is the ultimate catalyst for his increased faith, but it is important to note that it is unlikely that either one of them would have affected his conversion process without the contribution of the others.

While there is an obvious escalation of Stannis’ conversion, we still have to ask ourselves how deep his faith really goes, and whether it is a superficial conversion at best. His belief in Melisandre’s powers has most definitely increased, but is that to say that he has any faith in her god’s powers? I believe it is vital to differentiate between the two, as Stannis’

belief seems to direct itself more towards what Melisandre is capable of doing, and not towards what her god can do. As Ser Davos so astutely observes during one of the many worships by the bonfire that Melisandre and her followers perform, Stannis does not partake in the worship like most of the others, his wife amongst them, do:

King Stannis stood beside her, jaw clenched hard, the points of his red-gold crown shimmering whenever he moved his head. *He is with them, but not of them*, Davos thought. ... “*Lord of Light, protect us*,” the queen sang. The king did not respond with the others. He was staring into the flames. (*SoS 2: 284*)

Though Stannis is still not convinced of the existence and power of gods, the visions he has seen and the prophecies that have come true have convinced him of the power of Melisandre. And even his belief in Melisandre’s powers comes into doubt at times, as with for example the case with the death of the three “usurper kings”, Joffrey, Renly and Robb Stark, where he refuses to believe in her visions and her powers before the three kings are proven dead. After one of her visions he tells Melisandre: “The flames are full of tricks. What is, what will be, what may be. You cannot tell me for certain ...” (*SoS 2: 291*). He gives her the benefit of the doubt, wishing that her visions are true, but there is never any pure conviction. After all three kings having been proven dead like she had prophesised, he still questions her visions and her advice: “He [Stannis] turned back to Melisandre. “You swear there is no other way? Swear it on your life, for I promise, you shall die by inches if you lie.” (*SoS 2: 292*). His conversion process is a slow one, full of doubt and resistance, where he constantly argues against Melisandre’s council, choosing the advice that suits him and his purpose best. The authenticity of his conversion to the Faith of R’hllor is therefore still, I argue, something to be labelled with a question mark. However, no matter what his reasons for joining her faith, authentic or not, it falls under the category of religious conversion, even if the reasons are simply to gain power, as Rambo (85) argues that power is an important factor in many types

of conversion.

What is especially interesting about Stannis' conversion, and what makes it differ so much from that of the previous two characters we have studied, is the public nature of his conversion. While Bran and Arya's conversions were more personal and do not yet seem of significance to the rest of the realm, Stannis' conversion has immediate political impact. The Faith of R'hllor is still one that is new to Westeros, and it is quite controversial in their society. Being a religion that has its birth place in the Shadowlands of Asshai, it is a religion that is often affiliated with dark magic and demon worship. Being so new to Westeros, the religion is still one of marginality, and the process of convincing a majority religion to accept or convert to a minority religion, can be fairly difficult, almost to the point of impossible. And should it be possible, it is a long process, and not something that can be expected to be done within a fortnight. The fact that Stannis is willing to play these odds only goes to validate his preoccupation with power, obviously counting this power as more important than the devotion of his possible future subjects. This becomes clear from his discussion regarding the topic with Ser Davos:

“... Your people will not love you if you take from them the gods they have always worshiped, and give them one whose very name sounds queer on their tongues.”

Stannis stood abruptly. “*R'hllor*. Why is that so hard? They will not love me, you say? When have they ever loved me? How can I lose something I have never owned?” (*CoK* 147)

Ser Davos' question is just, as the Crown has always been tied to the Faith of the Seven in Westeros, and should Stannis become king, he will break with a tradition that has been there since the invasion of the Andals, and present the land with a ruler who brings a strange god, strange priests and priestesses, and strange customs to King's Landing. Stannis claims that he



does not need the people's love to rule, but looking back on the history of Westeros, kings that have not had the love of the Westerosi has not usually lived for long, the Mad King Aerys II Targaryen being a prime example of this (Martin et. al 113-121). There is no doubt that Stannis' conversion will therefore have major political consequences, and the question that stands is what he will do with this situation once he takes his place on the throne, should that happen. We have already seen several of his bannermen accept his new faith for several reasons, being out of loyalty as the case it with Ser Davos, out of fear as is the case with several who saw Melisandre burn Stannis' adversaries, or out of their own wish for power like many members of Stannis' council. However, there is a clear difference between individual conversion and mass conversion. In addition, we must also differentiate between the Westerosis' acceptance of Stannis' faith, and their willingness to join his conversion.

I will not dwell on what might or might not happen to Stannis' situation in the yet unpublished novels, but my analysis of his relationship to the Lord of Light has given me reason to believe that there are two possible results of his conversion, should he come into power. One is, after seeing his and Melisandre's demand for the wildlings to burn pieces of weirwood, parts of their gods, as sacrifice to R'hllor and as a sign of loyalty to Stannis, as well as the burning of septs and godswoods, that the religion will have a central place also in Stannis' rule, and a victory will only strengthen his belief in Melisandre's power, causing him to bind the faith to the Crown like that Faith of the Seven has been tied to it before. Should his faith, and the relationship between the religion and the Crown become strong enough, it is a possibility that he will demand the conversion of the rest of the Westerosi as well, as a sign of loyalty and fealty. Tyrion has already had the High Sparrow warn the people of Westeros of this as part of the Lannisters' propaganda against Stannis, having him spread the rumour that "... Stannis has vowed to burn the Great Sept of Baelor" (*CoK* 646).

The less likely of the two possibilities is, considering Stannis' reasons for conversion,

his currently lingering doubt in Melisandre and R'hllor's power, and the altogether superficiality of his conversion, that after having achieved what he set out to achieve, having found his rightful place on the throne, he will cast away his newfound faith, including Melisandre, as he no longer will have need of them, going back to his previous apathetic relationship with gods. There is a likelier chance that he shall gain the acceptance of his subjects as an atheist than there is as a follower of a strange and feared god, as several kings before him had a rather lax relationship with the Faith of the Seven. Either way, Stannis must first pass the difficulties of fighting his way to the throne, something that might be harder than first believed now that the Faith Militant is gaining power, a military order that might have fought for his cause should he have kept with the Seven, but who might turn their back on him and fight against him now that he brings another god into their lands.

### [Lancel Lannister – The Warrior's Son](#)

In relation to the more public and politically oriented conversion, I wish to briefly address the conversion of Lancel Lannister from a common worshipper of the Seven to a religious fanatic and member of the Warrior's Sons. When exploring religion and the ramifications of religious conversion in Westeros, it is impossible not to include a discussion of the Faith of the Seven, it being the most prominent and most followed religion in the realm. The necessity of bringing it into the discussion is even further increased if we take into consideration the more recent events in the last two published novels where the Faith Militant is being restored after three hundred years of being prohibited. The restoration of these religious military orders is destined to have some serious consequences for the politics of Westeros, and consequently also for the Westerosis' relationship with religion. As the resurrection of the Faith militant is something that has occurred in the later parts of the currently published

books, first being mentioned towards the end of *A Feast for Crows*, its influence on the religious society of Westeros is still a work in progress, and although it has already had some severe consequences for several of the characters, their future influence and the larger ramifications of their resurrection must be left to mere speculation.

Even though we cannot foresee what the outcome of the Faith Militant being restored will be, we can combine Rambo's research of the psychology behind religious conversion with an examination of the characters we already know to have been affected by the Faith in order to draw some conclusions as to what the possible result might be. One of the possibilities we must take into consideration is future conversion of many Westerosi, either by complete conversion from a different faith to the Faith of the Seven, or by an intensification of their already existing belief in the Seven. While the conversion of an entire people is a rather long and complicated process, it is important to note that such a grand conversion usually starts off in the smaller spectres, with the conversion of particular individuals. Rambo notes the importance of studying the conversion of the individual as they are often the first converts to a new movement (80). While several of these individual conversions have undoubtedly already happened during and after the Faith Militant's move towards power, these are conversions that we do not have any insight into, as they are most likely of the common Westerosi who is not central to the books. We do, however, get some insight into the conversion of Lancel Lannister, which makes him an excellent example of the start of the conversion and intensification process of the rest of Westeros.

The analysis of Lancel involves the same difficulties as the analysis of Stannis, although probably to an even greater degree. While neither Stannis nor Lancel have their own point-of-view chapters, causing a lack of insight into their personal thoughts and feelings during their conversion process, Stannis' conversion could be examined through the eyes of Ser Davos who followed his process from the start. Stannis' storyline can be followed up

close through all of the books (except for *A Game of Thrones*), giving us much clearer insight into his conversion than any meeting with Lancel gives us. Unfortunately, Lancel only gets minor mentions in the books, sometimes being presented in small fractions of another character's chapter, or simply just being mentioned by other characters. There is, however, one chapter in *A Feast for Crows* where he is more prominent, where we see his newfound faith through the eyes of Jamie Lannister as he visits Lancel in his sept at Darry. Although it is a small insight into Lancel's new life, the chapter does lend itself to some analysis of his interaction with the Faith and what might have been the contributing factors to his sudden conversion, as well as its larger relevance.

Lancel's conversion process originates from a personal crisis following the Battle of Blackwater. Previously a handsome young man with the typical fair physical traits of House Lannister, after he has fought in the battle he is left severely injured and deformed, "... grey-faced, gaunt, with hollow cheeks, sunken eyes, and hair as white and brittle as chalk" (*FfC* 116). Lancel admits to Jamie that he has always had him as a role model: "... I never asked for it. I never wanted it. I only wanted (...) Seven save me, but I wanted to be you" (*FfC* 514). Despite his fair looks, Lancel has always lived in the shadow of his older cousin, Tyrion describing him as "... a poor copy of Jamie ..." (*CoK* 405). Even Cersei has used him as a stand-in for Jamie, having had an ongoing affair with him during Jamie's absence. After his acquired deformity, however, he is not even a poor copy anymore, and any prospects of being like his handsome cousin Jamie is long gone. The injuries has clearly changed him, not only physically, but also mentally, as Cersei describes him as "... plainly miserable" (*FfC* 118) and "... the very picture of a man with one foot in the grave" (*FfC* 117), which is a far stretch from the bold and arrogant young knight he is seen as in earlier parts of the books.

During his crisis, he is treated by an advocate of the Faith of the Seven, the high Septon himself, who helps him through his recovery:

“When it seemed that I might die, my father brought the High Septon to pray for me. He is a good man.” Her [Cersei’s] cousin’s eyes were wet and shiny, a child’s eyes in an old man’s face. “He says the Mother spared me for some holy purpose, so I might atone for my sins.” (*FfC* 118)

The religious advocate has had great influence on Lancel’s conversion, being there in his time of crisis, advocating his religion when Lancel was at his lowest and most vulnerable. This makes us draw parallels to Stannis’ situation during the same time, enduring a crisis after the battle on Blackwater Bay, and being looked after and influenced by a religious advocate in somewhat secluded surroundings. When speaking of the interaction stage between convert and advocate, Rambo mentions the effectiveness of encapsulation strategies from the advocate’s side, “... the degree to which potential converts are isolated or restricted from communication with outsiders [and] alternative ideologies, ...” (104). He goes on to explain that there are different ways of using encapsulation, and almost everyone who wants to teach someone something new employs the procedure in some way or another, so the question is never *whether* people use encapsulation, but rather *how* they use it.

The method of encapsulation used by both Melisandre and the High Septon upon their interaction with the possible converts are quite similar, being of rather small degree and not necessarily restricting the converts from communicating with anyone else. However, these two advocates choose to insert themselves and their influence in the converts’ lives when they already are somewhat isolated from the other people, Stannis having chosen isolation while brooding over his defeat, and Lancel lying injured and close to dying in his bed. Their strategies are important to the conversion process as the outcome of their presence and influence would likely have been quite different should either of the two converts have been in the presence and under the influence of the people they usually surround themselves with (Ser Davos and several of his other bannermen for Stannis, and the Lannister’s and the king’s

court for Lancel). The strategy of exploiting someone's vulnerability is also a well-known and effective strategy on the part of the advocate. Rambo argues that "this self-conscious manipulation of emotional gratifications and vulnerabilities clearly approaches brainwashing and coercive persuasion, tactics that are most effective under conditions of encapsulation" (105).

The mere presence of a religious advocate can trigger a feeling of dissatisfaction for a potential convert, a feeling that he or she might not have previously felt. As the persuasion process is often intended to create a feeling of dissatisfaction with the convert's current situation, the presence of the advocate and their persuasions can stimulate the search for some other alternative (Rambo 55). Due to the lack of insight into Lancel's thoughts and feelings throughout the books, it is difficult to assert if there were any previous feelings of dissatisfaction. We can, however, safely argue that he has changed his perspective of himself and the world immensely after his encounter with the High Septon, and there is a great possibility that the High Septon's persuasion has triggered a dissatisfaction with himself and what he has previously done, leading him to seek forgiveness for sins he did not previously care much about. As Lancel comments to Jamie, he sees himself as a sinner: "He [Baelor the Blessed] was a rare spirit, pure and brave and innocent, untouched by all evils of the world. I am a sinner, with much and more to atone for" (*FfC* 515).

With Lancel's conversion differing so much from that of Bran and Arya in terms of what Rambo names *availabilities*, we must take a closer look at some of the context surrounding his conversion, and the issues that might influence his quest for atonement for his sins. There are several issues influencing the quest stage of a conversion process. Two of these, *structural availability* and *emotional availability*, are especially relevant to Lancel's conversion and must therefore be taken into consideration in our analysis.

*Structural availability* refers to "... the freedom of a person or persons to move from

previous emotional, intellectual, and religious institutions, commitments, and obligations into new options” (Rambo 60). A person’s many networks, such as family, friends, work, religion, etc. often have the power to either discourage or prevent any major changes such as a religious conversion, no matter how much that person wishes it. While both Arya and Bran have clear structural availability that makes their conversions possible, having lost all their ties and networks, the same cannot be said of Lancel. In theory, Lancel’s current situation works against his desires of repenting for his sins and becoming a holy man, as he will have to cut all ties to his family and his duty. Having recently been made the new Lord of Darry, and a newlywed to a girl of House Frey, he is expected to run a castle, bed his wife and procure an heir. He is also a prominent member of House Lannister, a family who expects him to uphold a proper public appearance and do his duty. Lancel’s newfound piety is obviously not well accepted by his family, and although we do not get to witness it, there is mention of a quarrel between Lancel and his father, causing his father to leave Darry (*FfC* 513). Jamie also tries to discourage Lancel’s new piety, reminding him of his duty to his wife and to Darry: “You should be sleeping with your wife, not with the Maid. You need a son with Darry blood if you want to keep this castle” (*FfC* 514), and of his position as a Lannister: “You are a lion of the rock, a *lord*. You have a wife, a castle, lands to defend, people to protect. If the gods are good, you will have sons of your blood to follow you. Why would you throw all that away for...for some vow?” (*FfC* 516).

Adding to the issues of general structural availability such as his duties as a lord and Lannister, we must take into account his *emotional availability*. “Previously existing and/or profound attachments generally limit an active personal quest for new attachments and hinder the success of proselytizing” (Rambo 61). Very often, people who have gone through parts of their conversion process will come out believing in the new faith that they have been introduced to, but they choose to leave it, or not to pursue it any further due to strong

connections to family and friends that they do not wish to give up. While Lancel has previously had strong attachments to his family and friends while living with them in King's Landing, there is a possibility that his current status as Lord of Darry has made him feel more removed from them, causing his emotional attachments to weaken enough for them not to discourage him from his quest. Equally, his connection to Cersei has weakened, a woman whom he, as he admitted to Jamie (*FfC* 515), loved, both due to the fact that his deformity removes any form of attraction she might have previously felt towards him, and due to his realisation of the sinfulness of his acts.

With issues of both structural and emotional availability working against him, Lancel's mind is still set on pursuing his quest, going to the lengths of officially cutting all ties to his family and his duty by deciding to join the Warrior's Sons. He tells Jamie of his decision during their meeting in the Sept in Darry:

“... I have asked the Father Above to show me the way, and he has. I am renouncing my lordship and this wife. Hardstone is welcome to the both of them if he likes. On the morrow I will return to King's Landing and swear my sword to the new High Septon and the Seven. I mean to take vows and join the Warrior's Sons.” (*FfC* 516)

While Rambo argues that these issues are important influential factors in the quest stage of the conversion process, often preventing the convert in pursuing his or her quest any further, it is not necessarily the case for every convert. In Lancel's case, it seems that his belief, the persuasion of the religious advocate, and his wish for atonement are all stronger contributing factors, outweighing the discouragement of others and his emotional ties to his family.

While Lancel's reasons for converting are of personal origin, with feelings of contrition, guilt, sin and low self-worth, his conversion might in some ways become politically influential. His position in society, as a member of a public house such as House



Lannister, makes him a person whose conversion will not go unnoticed and could have severe influence. Although the initial catalyst for the Faith militant's rising power is their resurrection by Cersei, Lancel's conversion and his connection to the High Septon might have been part of what sets in motion a whole chain of events that will end up having serious ramifications for both the Crown and the Faith. Even though it has never been confirmed, there are indicators showing that Lancel might have had a part in the High Sparrow finding out about Cersei's acts of incest and murder, something even Jamie suspects after learning that Lancel told of his and Cersei's sins to the High Sparrow's predecessor. Although this might not have been an intentional political move on the High Septon's part, and most definitely not any political move from Lancel, should this be true, then his conversion might end up being the tipping point in favour of the Faith's quest for power, eventually leading to a mass intensification of the society of Westeros.

The current situation in Westeros causes the common Westerosi to have to struggle to survive. As war is raging throughout the lands, thousands of innocents are losing their homes, being assaulted and raped, and slaughtered like cattle. This includes men and women of the Faith, as one of the sparrows residing outside the Great Sept of Baelor in King's Landing tells Cersei when she pays the sept a visit:

“Your Grace, these are the bones of holy men and women, murdered for their faith. Septons, septas, bothers brown and dun and green, sisters white and blue and grey. Some were hanged, some disembowelled. Septs have been despoiled, maidens and mothers raped by godless men and demon worshipers. Even silent sisters have been molested. The Mother Above cries out in anguish. We have brought their bones here from all over the realm, to bear witness to the agony of the Holy Faith.” (*FfC* 468)

The people of Westeros are currently getting no help from the Crown, and as Cersei tells the High Sparrow when he asks for protection from the king, “The realm is at war. His Grace has

need of every man” (FfC 474). The only ones who are helping the people of Westeros, both holy men and commoners, are the sparrows, walking with people to protect them from ambushes, feeding the poor, healing the wounded, and praying with them all. The love for the Sparrows is increasing at the same time as the love for the crown is decreasing, considering how, as one of the sparrows tells Cersei: “A king who does not protect his people is no king at all” (FfC 468). Additionally, people’s disdain for other religions than the Faith is growing stronger as much of the blame is put on Stannis and his new god, as well as the worshippers of the old gods. Cersei tries to put the blame on these worshippers as she tries to gain the favours of the sparrows:

Cersei could feel the weight of eyes upon her. “The king shall know of these atrocities,” she answered solemnly. “Tommen will share your outrage. This is the work of Stannis and his red witch, and the savage northmen who worship trees and wolves.” She raised her voice. “*Good people, your dead shall be avenged!*” (FfC 468)

The Sparrows already stand strong amongst the people of Westeros, and more and more people are joining them as time goes by, Cersei feeling that they are invading everywhere (FfC 472). By resurrecting the Faith Militant, the Sparrows will be able to help the Westerosis even more than before, having armed holy knights travel around the realm, protecting people from the atrocities of the war. The High Sparrow explains to Cersei the importance of the resurrection of the Faith Militant:

“The Faith Militant reborn ... that would be the answer to three hundred years of prayer, your Grace. The Warrior would lift his shining sword again and cleanse this sinful realm of all its evils. If his Grace were to allow me to restore the ancient blessed orders of the Sword and Star, every godly man in the Seven Kingdoms would know him to be our true and rightful lord.” (FfC 475)

The High Sparrow is well aware of the grand meaning the resurrection of the Faith militant will have for the Faith of the Seven, as should they be allowed to take up arms again, they will be able to reach more people with their faith. The future conversion of the people of Westeros will then become two-fold. On the one hand, there will be those who feel a stronger connection to the Faith as holy men and women are shown to help and protect the common Westerosi, as well as get rid of sin and evil in the realm, while on the other hand there will be those who will feel coerced or forced into conversion out of fear for the Faith Militant.

The latter is an especially important factor, as the Faith Militant has been known throughout history to facilitate a violent fanaticism, having been known to help in the suppression of worshippers of the old gods, and rebelling against the Targaryens and their practice of incest. As Cersei tells Lady Merryweather about the history of the Warrior's Sons, one of the two orders that make up the Faith Militant, she mentions that "they were Swords. Holy men, ascetics, fanatics, sorcerers, dragonslayers, demonhunters ... there were many tales about them. But all agree that they were implacable in their hatred for all enemies of the Holy Faith" (*FfC* 476). As the High Sparrow said to Cersei, should the Sparrows be allowed to take up their swords again, the people of Westeros will have no doubt regarding what the true faith is, which can easily be interpreted as a matter of the Sparrows using their swords on people to coerce them into joining their faith.

Throughout our own history, the use of force and coercion has been a big part of religious conversion, with most major religions having, at some point in time, used force to convert other people to their faith. As Rambo argues, "it is indisputable that in order to foster religious involvement and commitment, even well-intentioned people can and often do deliberately manipulate others through careful deployment of emotional [and physical] rewards and punishments (105). The Sparrows has already been seen to exert their punishments on several people, even their own holy brothers, and the family of the members

of the king's court. The High Sparrow tells Cersei that for the simple reason of being too overweight, "Septon Torbent has been confined to a penitent's cell on bread and water [as] it is sinful for any man to be so plump when half the realm is starving" (*FfC* 470). Even more so, the Queen Regent herself has been confined to a cell and made to make a walk of atonement down the streets of King's Landing, due to her many sins, including incest, adultery, and murder.

While most likely being unaware of the disturbing violent power the Sparrows possess, the people of King's Landing and the rest of Westeros seem to draw closer to the Faith after the arrest and punishment of Cersei Lannister. Their dislike for the queen, someone who has done nothing to help the poor or needy, and someone who has disgraced their gods with bloodshed and incest, is obvious during her walk of atonement. No matter if their hatred towards her is due to her atrocities against their gods, or simply because of her lack of humanity towards them, their hatred for the crown is clear, and with the Sparrows showing the power to rid them of these rulers, more will feel the need or wish to join them. It is unclear whether Lancel is aware of the lengths to which the Faith Militant is willing to go in order to spread their faith, and it is even more unclear whether Lancel himself is willing to go to those lengths in the future. However, his conversion and his joining of the Warrior's Sons is already steering him towards the violent fanaticism of his fellow holy knights, already willing to force a family member and previous lover to perform a degrading walk of atonement.

The Sparrows' persuasion for conversion appears to be growing stronger each day, and while their conversion of individuals has begun a long time ago, the mass intensification seems to have begun as well, whether the people of King's Landing and the rest of Westeros are aware of it or not. What is clear, though, is that a possible mass conversion such as this,

where the leaders of the Faith are not very receptive or accepting of other faiths, will have dire consequences for the current religiously diverse society of Westeros.

## Conclusion

While Stannis' and Lancel's reasons for religious conversions are quite different, we find several similarities in the processes and in the political issues revolving around them. Both characters are, to different degrees, very prominent people in Westeros, making their conversions prone to a lot of publicity. The public notion of these characters and their conversions makes them contrast strongly with Bran and Arya, whose conversions are more personal and secluded. Moreover, Bran and Arya's conversions do not appear to have any greater effect on the people surrounding them, giving no sign of being of any greater consequences for the religious society of Westeros. This is where Stannis' and Lancel's conversions differ widely from that of the Stark children, taking part in conversions that have the possibility of, in their own ways, having serious political impact on Westeros and its people.

Where Stannis' conversion will have a more direct impact on the religious society of Westeros, bringing with him a new god and the possibilities of mass conversion from a majority to a minority religion, the significance of Lancel's conversion is more indirect. The analysis of Lancel is used as an example of the intensifications in the worship of the Seven that has already begun for many Westerosi as a result of the Sparrows' increasing power. While Stannis uses religion to gain power for himself, Lancel's conversion, as well as Cersei's arrest and punishment, are signs of the effects such a quest for power might have on other people surrounding them. When it comes to the possible consequences of a religious conversion in pursuit of power, Stannis therefore perfectly illustrates the people who cause

the consequences, with Lancel, Cersei, the people of King's Landing, and those who have recently joined the Sparrows being excellent examples of the consequences themselves.

## Conclusion

Centred on these close readings of four selected characters in the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, I have sought to show the complexity and diversity with which George R. R. Martin represents religious conversion. My main purpose in this thesis has been to examine some of the main causes behind these characters' conversions, as well as how the context surrounding the characters either works to facilitate or repress the possibility of conversion. Expanding upon Rebecca Norris' claims that conversion is usually a gradual process, not an occurrence of sudden insight, I have turned to what is unarguably one of modern time's most popular high fantasy book series to illustrate that through the analysis of fictional texts, the field of literature can contribute to the current research and discussions on religious conversion.

I began the first chapter by introducing the reader to the importance of context in which a possible conversion takes place. The chapter is built around the first stage of Lewis Rambo's model for understanding religious conversion, where I have tried to examine the macrocontext and microcontext surrounding the four selected characters in order to figure out what societal and personal elements might work to facilitate or repress their conversion. I have shown that conversion is dependent on the context in which it is set, being subject to contributing factors, both social, cultural, religious, political, and personal. I have discussed how the macrocontext allows for the microcontext to take place, as a macrocontext which facilitates conversion opens up for the possible influences of the microcontext. My research for this chapter has resulted in the findings that in Westeros, where the macrocontext is one that facilitates conversion, seeing as Westeros is currently a secular society with a high tolerance for and acceptance of other religions, it is the microcontext that is the strongest influential factor in terms of repressing the possibility of conversion.

The second chapter aimed to examine the conversion processes of Bran and Arya Stark, trying to answer the question of what motivates their sudden shift in beliefs. Through

an in-depth analysis of their conversions, I have found that although they have led fairly similar lives up until the start of their conversion process, having been raised in the same society and the same family, the many contributing factors that are present in their conversion process lead them on completely separate paths in life. The chapter's focus was primarily on the subject of religious conversion as a result of a loss of identity and sense of belonging. Through my research I have found that while people often experience a shift in beliefs during their search for a previously lost identity, their quest for regaining their old identity often carries the risk of losing their identity altogether. I found that when a conversion process takes place as a part of a person's search for identity, the religion the person is converting to might demand for the convert to give themselves over to the new faith completely, resulting in the fact that the identity the new religion gives the convert might not be congruent with the identity he or she was originally searching for.

The third chapter has discussed the subject of religious conversion in relation to power. The first part of the chapter has detailed some of the underlying causes for Stannis Baratheon's conversion during his quest for achieving his rightful place as king of the Seven Kingdoms, as well as an examination of whether Stannis' conversion is sincere or strategic of nature. The second part of the chapter lends its focus to Lancel Lannister, who I have used as an example of the current and future mass intensification of the people of Westeros as a result of the increasing power of the Faith Militant. The chapter has a specific focus on the role and strategy of the religious advocate during a possible conversion, where I have shown the ways in which the advocate might exploit a convert's weakened state in to convince him or her of their world view. The most interesting part about this chapter is that the analysis of Stannis and Lancel gives an insight into conversions within a public sphere, and gives rise to important questions regarding the future of the religious society in Westeros in relation to the possibility of religious fanatics gaining power.



Looking back at my previous chapters I have found that there is one overarching main factor for religious conversion that has been impossible to shake during my research, which is *context*. While the discussion of Bran and Arya has shown the importance of the different elements of the microcontext, the bigger issue is the questions regarding the macrocontext that have come to light during my analysis of Stannis and Lancel. While I aimed to incorporate the role of the context more as a background for my following analysis, expecting it to play the role of a contributing factor parallel to such factors as *crisis*, *advocate*, and *paranormal experience*, I have found that it is my studies of this factor that can help my research inform one of the major questions for readers of the book series: “What will happen next?”

While I will not spend time delving into fan theories, and joining in on the speculations regarding how the books will end, I feel it is important to note that because the works are not finished yet, a lot of people are, after all, wondering what will eventually happen. While I cannot answer all of the questions concerning the fate of Westeros and its inhabitants, I do believe that some of these questions and answers are linked to the subject of religion, and also to the conversions of the discussed characters. The plot of the books has the political situation in Westeros working towards a major regime change, and it is clear that religious factors will be a major part of this change. With the crown having been linked to the Faith of the Seven since the beginning of the Targaryen dynasty, Westeros is for the first time looking at the possibility of future rulers who belong to different faiths. As the current king of Westeros is claimed to be an illegitimate heir to the throne, there are self-proclaimed kings rising in all corners of Westeros, several of whom do not belong to the Faith of the Seven. With Robb Stark, a worshipper of the old gods, proclaiming to be king in the north, the Greyjoys, worshippers of the Drowned God, fighting to have their own king or queen of the Iron Islands, and Stannis Baratheon, a worshipper of the Lord of Light, fighting to become

king of all Seven Kingdoms, the Faith of the Seven is facing a major threat to their position as a state religion.

Martin clearly stated during a panel interview at the 2011 San Diego Comic-Con that, while readers are indeed free to wonder about the validity of any of the religions in the books, there will be no god or gods appearing in the books, *deus ex machina*, to affect the outcomes of things (Anders 1). The religious plurality of Westeros is clearly not going to be resolved by one true god or religion, but that does not mean that a religion, true or not, that exerts power over the others will not. As such, some of the conversions presented in this thesis *must* play a greater part in changing the status quo. While families such as the Starks and the Greyjoys are seeking to divide the kingdoms by declaring independency from the rest of Westeros, a quest that will not necessarily have any greater religious ramifications than an official separation between these parts of the realm and the Faith of the Seven, the regime change that Stannis brings with him is something of a whole other calibre.

Stannis has already shown signs of forcing mass conversions as a proof of loyalty to him and his cause, as he does with the Wildlings at Castle Black. As of yet, the reader is given no verification that Stannis will ever reach King's Landing, but should he do so, he also exposes the religious society of Westeros to the possibility of some major changes. Since the invasion of the Andals, this will be the first time a conqueror brings with him not only new politics and laws, but also an entirely new religion. In chapter three I discussed how it is unclear to which degree Stannis' religious conversion will continue to influence him after a possible victory, as his faith is still somewhat fluctuating. It is, however, clear that after episodes such as burning the sept and godswood at Storm's End and Dragonstone, burning and sacrificing those who oppose him to R'hllor, and the forced mass conversion of the Wildlings, he has already shown strong signs of building up to becoming a religious fanatic. Should he continue to develop in this way, I believe we can be safe to assume that as a king,

he might end up demanding a mass conversion of all of Westeros.

In terms of changing the religious society of Westeros, Stannis' rise to power is not the only factor that might end in a possible mass conversion. With the threat of Stannis bringing a strange god to King's Landing, as well as the rise of kings with different gods all over Westeros, the Faith is fearing the loss of their position as state religion, and has consequently already started to retaliate in order to save themselves from their own demise. Through a new and revitalised cooperation between the Crown and the Faith, the Faith Militant has been resurrected after several centuries of being prohibited from taking up arms. The High Sparrow's declaration to Cersei that once the Faith Militant has been allowed to take up arms again, their swords will help them show the people of Westeros who is their true god, is a clear indication to his prospects for the realm. The mass intensification process of the Westerosi has already begun, with more and more joining the sparrows and the different military orders, as well as more common worshippers of the Seven experiencing an increased belief that only the Faith is able to help them out of their misery. Westeros' history shows that the Faith Militant are known as violent religious fanatics, which suggests that those who do not join the mass conversion process voluntarily will eventually be subjects to forced conversion.

The regime changes that the events in Westeros are working towards only work to verify the importance of the macrocontext when it comes to religious conversion. While I have previously argued that the macrocontext of Westeros is one that definitely facilitates conversion, with the Faith's traditional spheres of influence having diminished over time, giving room for a secular and religious pluralistic society, the future of Westeros holds the possibility of a whole other macrocontext. The probable future macrocontext of Westeros appears to be one that represses and discourages the opportunities for religious conversion, possibly to the degree of complete denial – a society where proselytising of and converting to

other religious beliefs will be banished by law. In combination with some already repressing elements of the microcontext, I argue that conversion in such a future Westeros will be almost non-existent. The conversions are happening now, and it seems like the plot is driving all Westerosi towards conversion in one way or another, both casual believers and fanatics, bi-religious and poly-religious, doubters and atheists, sinners and saints. By the end of the day, it seems like the Faceless Men's famous saying has the truth of it: *Valar dohaeris* – All men must serve.

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