Every year during my childhood, my dad would ask me if I wanted to go to Catholic school, and every year I would say, “no way.” When I was seven and went to vacation Bible school with my Baptist neighbor, I promised a teacher that I would ask Jesus into my heart after I played kickball a little while longer. In junior high, I refused to answer an altar call at a new friend’s interdenominational mega-church. And in high school, when I joined some Mormon friends at girls’ camp, all five of us were asked to leave midway through the week because we weren’t setting a good example for the younger campers. Unfortunately, this track record does not do justice to my respect for religion and religious people. I am intrigued by how people interpret and perform religious doctrine; how they struggle with, accept, and reject religion; how they use religion in both loving and hateful ways; and how public and yet deeply personal religion can be. I am especially interested in how authors use religion in literature for young readers.

As a part of my own research on Catholicism in young adult literature, I have asked a number of YA authors about their motivation for and challenges faced when invoking Catholicism in otherwise secular, mainstream press fiction. Not surprisingly, responses range in scope. Whereas Kimberly Brubaker Bradley, author of *Leap of Faith*, set out to write what she calls her “Catholic manifesto,” Donna Freitas asserts that with *The Possibilities of Sainthood* she did not endeavor to write a Catholic book; rather, she wanted to write a book in which a girl finds happiness in something other than marrying or getting famous. For Freitas, a cradle Catholic, the saints’ stories always seemed hilarious and provided the perfect playground for a happy story about a teenaged girl. Susan Beth Pfeffer, author of *The Dead and the Gone*, has a similar fondness for the saints, which she claims “may well have influenced my decision to make Alex and his family devout.” Not only does she find the saints’ stories fascinating, but she also notes that as a kid she was especially intrigued “because the stories of women saints offered a way of being female and religious.” Still, Pfeffer acknowledges that she chose Catholicism “not so much for the faith as for the Church […] To survive in [post-disaster] New
York City, [the main teen characters] were going to need a lot of help [. . .] and it seemed just as plausible to me that the Catholic Church would have at least as good, if not better, handle on how to get food and assistance to people in the city."

Han Nolen asserts that including religion in her novels is a very deliberate choice. For *When We Were Saints* she imagined a story in which her teens wanted to be saints; Catholicism naturally followed. Likewise, Karen Cushman, author of *The Loud Silence of Francine Green*, notes:

I wanted to tell the story of a girl growing up into herself while facing/dealing with authoritarianism both in her family and in the bomb fearing, Red-baiting outside world. I thought her being in Catholic school in Sister Basil’s repressive classroom expanded that and also explained much of Francine’s initial reluctance to challenge, well, anything.

Pete Hautman, author of *Godless*, “[. . .] wanted to write a book about an adolescent employing adult-size power [. . .] I settled on religion as the vehicle because I had a model in my own personal history [. . .] Also, it has a lot of voodoo to it—pre-loaded emotional resonance.” To be sure—and not surprisingly—what Catholicism represents narratively is often as much of a factor as is an author’s own belief system and/or religion (or lack thereof) in the decision to invoke religious imagery. Barry Lyga makes this absolutely clear when he admits: “Plus, there was, of course, the fact that *Hero-Type* already hit on a couple of touchy American topics—sex and politics—so why not include religion and go for the trifecta?”

Regardless of the reason why authors include religion, when they do so the literature has the increased potential to be exclusionary and, even when not proselytizing, is open to a more intense and specific type of critique. Notes Bradley: “I did have one editor at a different house reject [Leap of Faith] on the grounds that it was about religion,” though the publisher she ended up working with was complimentary about how she handled religious aspects, and reviewers “have complimented the publisher for taking a risk with the book.” Freitas shared that some of the larger bookstores passed on purchasing *The Possibilities of Sainthood* for their regular stock because it was “too Catholic” and there is no real market for books featuring a Catholic girl. And Nolan writes that “[o]ther people in the publishing house were surprised by my editor’s easy acceptance of [When We Were Saints] but it didn’t hurt its publication.” She continues,

I also know that there were lots of debates about my title and the cover because they didn’t want it to end up being shelved with Religious books and not with YA. The same is true for *A Face In Every Window* which at one time had the title, “The Three Wise Man” not Men, and they worried that it would be thought of as a religious book with that title, so I changed it back to the original title.

Readership, too, is a complicated group to navigate, as it includes both insider and outsider communities. Both Pete Hautman and Edward
Bloor, author of *London Calling*, notes that despite the less than positive images of Catholicism in their novels, as far as they know there has been no pushback from a Catholic audience. According to Bloor, “Catholics don’t seem to get that heated up about my books.” Similarly, Hautman asserts that “I think Catholics are more tolerant in the face of scrutiny than most other Christian religions. They seem to be more secure in their faith, and more intellectual […] in their faith.” But when invoking a specific religion, authors hold themselves up to speculation about accuracy and fairness in ways that other fiction might not be subjected to. Cushman and Pfeffer, for instance, have met with some issues of theological correction. Cushman claims that although “[m]any readers have responded to the Francine book with cries of ‘yes, it was exactly like that,’” one blogger in particular posted that he “didn’t believe Catholic schools ever punished children with[sic] in the ways I mention, but I saw it first hand.” Pfeffer contends, “I know there are people who get upset over the portrayal of religion in [*Life As We Knew It*]. I did read a blog review of [*The Dead and the Gone*] somewhere that complained I was wrong about the Church’s rules on cremation. Apparently it’s okay now (I had remembered [when] it wasn’t).” From apprehension about not wanting to be preached to, to the desire to have the details of one’s religion accurately depicted, the already thorny issue of navigating the broad needs of young adult literature’s readership is made even thornier when religion is involved.

Indeed, authors make decisions about using or not using religion in their texts for a variety of different reasons. From their own preference, to the needs of the story, to publishing and marketing pressures, to their perception of the needs of their readers, the motivations for and variety in representation are both predictable and surprising, troublesome and inspired. But what these authors have in common is the fact that, regardless of why or even how it is used, when religious imagery is introduced into a story, the story inherits layers of meaning that point back to cultural notions of religion and religious images, power, and adulthood. Religion becomes a sign to be read: a symbol of something concrete, abstract, and utilitarian, all at the same time. Children’s literature has long since evolved away from its religious roots, but when religion and literature overlap it still generates quite a variety of discussion. From didacticism to subversion, religion and religious imagery make for a multifaceted presence in literature for young readers that continues to enthrall children’s literature scholars. The *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* has dedicated two previous special editions to the topic of religion in children’s literature, one in 1989 and the next in 1999, and *The Five Owls* did likewise in 2000. Panels related to the theme have appeared recently at the annual conferences of both the Modern Language Association and the Children’s Literature Association.

What makes this special edition a unique contribution to the ongoing conversation is that the articles
here all investigate young adult texts, which, being all about the negotiation of power and authority to begin with, highlight how religion and culture intersect in sometimes interesting and sometimes frustrating ways. First, Elizabeth Gillhouse, in her article “‘Eve was Framed’: Ideostory and (Mis)Representation in Judeo-Christian Creation Stories,” comments on how gender ideologies affect retellings—from picture books to young adult novels—of the Creation and the Fall. Then, in “Wrestling with Religion: Pullman, Pratchett, and the Uses of Story,” Elisabeth Rose Gruner discusses how contemporary fantasy for children engages narratively with religion. Next, June Cummins offers a discussion of gendered trends within Jewish teen and tween fiction, especially as they relate to engagement with Judaism, in “What are Jewish Boys and Girls Made of? Gender in Contemporary Jewish Teen and Tween Fiction.” Finally, in “‘Be Afraid or Fried’: Cults and Young Adult Apocalyptic Narratives,” Susan Louise Stewart talks about the rise and subsequent patterns of cult imagery in YA fiction.

In this edition—which we hope will be the third in an ongoing decennial celebration—we work to continue adding to the conversation with a specific focus on religion, gender, and young adult literature, but with the same philosophical belief as that of previous editors, that this complicated topic will continue to enthrall scholars, authors, and readers alike.