

Severian, the God

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 16 Apr 1997

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Jim Jordan — 16 Apr 1997, 15:44

At 03:11 PM 4/13/97 -0400, you wrote (on Whorl list):

And no, of course I don't think Gene Wolfe is a Gnostic. I think he is a Gnovelist.

And I think Severian is the Outsider.

-alga-

A gnostic universe. My conclusion exactly the first time I read the original 4. (Want my evidence?) When I re-read them, I read them in that light, and thought I was right. Then volume 5 came out. Now we have not just a cosmos, but heaven & earth (with heaven moving backward timewise). Even after that, I could still accommodate a gnostic universe, which is at once ancient, Hindu, and that of modern physics.

(In fact, my first conclusion was that Severian, like the clones in "Fifth Head" was the anti-christ of this universe. I was wrong, of course, but I can supply my reasons if you want them.)

But I no longer think we have a gnostic universe in operation. Reading the third time, I saw evidence of a Christian creational universe.

Lasrach comments that the Increate never personally intervenes in the universe, but works through angels exclusively. Now, that's all we see, but is that all we know? (A) There's nothing unChristian about God's using angels for many things, especially to keep nature running -- in fact, the latter is a Christian dogma. (B) I come back to the missionaries we see in volume 1. The incarnation of the second person of God as Jesus Christ is a definite intervention by the Increate. Of course, one can put a gnostic spin on this as well -- plenty did in the first centuries AD.

Severian's culture is that of early Byzantium, which had plenty of gnosticism as well as Christianity, and all kinds of mixtures. Wolfe has said (for those who did not pick this up from the books themselves) that this is so, and that he did much research in Byzantium in preparing the Commonwealth. (Interview in "Across the Wounded Galaxies," pp. 250-1.)

Please note: I'd enjoy the books either way. If Wolfe has created a gnostic, closed, circular universe without a true transcendent, and is simply using Christian symbolism within it, that's okay with me. That was my original thinking, especially regarding the huge amount of sacramental material. But I really don't think that is what he is/was doing. It is more complex than that. The "physical sacraments" in the books are only images of the real ones, which we just don't see presented anywhere.

I wrote Gene just before my interview: "I want to understand better the Christian sub-text, such as it may be, in your novels, and I have a few interpretive questions here. Severian is routinely called a Christ figure by commentators. I can see Severian as someone who becomes more Christ-like in the way all of us should, but who also falls away from time to time. Joan Gordon thought that the Conciliator was the historic Jesus, who died not only for our sins but for His own (not an orthodox notion!). That way she could identify Severian and Jesus. I don't think they are so close."

Gene replied: "You understand Severian; they don't."

Also, from the interview with Wolfe in "Across the Wounded Galaxies" (pp. 253-4): "I'm a

practicing Catholic.... And in the Book of the New Sun, I tried to work out some of the implications of my own beliefs."

So, a purely gnostic read of the Severian Quintet is out of the question. Severian is a New Sun only in a purely intra-cosmic, physical fashion, and thus a created replica of the true New Sun (Jesus). He is a Christian figure, not a Christ figure. He does on a grand scale what all of us are supposed to be doing: offering physical life to those in the shadow of death. He cannot offer ultimate Life from himself, for he is not Jesus. Severian dies and comes back to live over and over again, but not in a transfigured body like Jesus'. He is merely resuscitated, like Lazarus. This is a picture of the Christian, who dies and comes back to life over and over again in this world until his/her task is finished. (Of course, Severian's first death is also a baptism.) Similarly, the New Sun does not transform or transfigure the universe into a glorified New Heavens and Earth, but only resuscitates the solar system. All of this intra-cosmic stuff LOOKS like a gnostic universe that might have been "generated" by the Increate. But it's not. Beyond the Briah-Yesod universe is the Outsider, who does intervene occasionally in human affairs. Compare the Ruler in "Westwind."

Finally, Alga, on p. 251 of the book above, Wolfe says, "If you read the book carefully, it's clear that the action takes place in South America." I realize it's a bit brutal of me to throw this quotation at you (We Nutrias can be quite bestial!), but while it voids the geographical aspect of your proffered map, it does not void possible symbolical dimensions thereof -- especially since the Commonwealth is Byzantium-based.

Nutria (Jim Jordan)