

Are TBOTNS and UOTNS Christian Texts?

The Urth list — 11 messages, 5 voices, 28 Apr 1999

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Ori Kowarsky — 28 Apr 1999, 00:51

Rostrum wrote:

"Using the author's biography and alleged intent to interpret a novel can be interesting, but I prefer interpretations that stand on their own support from the text.

You may end up dismissing some interesting questions if you assume that because Wolfe is Catholic, Tzad is an angel and therefore a good guy."

I just wanted to second Rostrum's eloquent and elegant defense of a textual reading of Wolfe's work. Nonetheless, Nicholas Gevers' and Alex David Groce's advocacy of a Christian or specifically Roman Catholic reading of Wolfe's book have raised the spectre in my mind of my being told off by Gene Wolfe, in a scene not unlike Marshall McLuhan reading the riot act to the blowhard in "Annie Hall", that I have missed the point of his work completely.

Any interpretation of TBOTNS or UOTNS, whether secular, religious, or in between, can only serve to increase the enjoyment the reader can get out of the series. I offer the following analysis not as a definitive argument but merely as something to be considered in the continuing debate.

The prevalence of Christian iconography and fragments or echoes of the Christian story (no disrespect intended by these words, but I am not a believer) invites the reader to map, to some degree, Sev's story over the life of Jesus; but the very fact that Sev exists, and the destruction which Sev ultimately unleashes, is a complete refutation of every key Christian prophesy.

Let's start from the beginning. The Urth of TBOTNS is one where Christianity has obviously completely failed. If we accept Sev's narrative as a fair survey of Commonwealth and Ascian society, none of them have even heard of Jesus Christ. None of them can be said to be saved, or even capable of being saved; no one is witness to the crucifixion, death and resurrection. To the extent that Christianity can be said to survive at all it is as fragments, a detrius of images and concepts joining the Greek and Hindu gods in the compost heap of Urth culture. Needless to say, the end of humanity is horrific, but it doesn't follow the plan laid out in the Book of Revelations, and Jesus doesn't return at the end of it. Furthermore, with the coming of the New Sun, humanity is about to effectively evolve into Green Men. Are they covered by Original Sin? I mean, they're practically a different species.

I think that Gene Wolfe attempted to tackle this thorny theological problem in UOTNS. Tzad, on the seat of judgement, says of his "adventures" with Sev:

"[speaking of the Conciliator] Would they not have wished to walk with him, if they could? Stand beside him when he was in danger? Care for him, perhaps, when he was ill? I have been such an acylote, in a creation now vanished. In that too there was a Conciliator and a New Sun, though we did not use those names."

Now, I'm guessing that in a Catholic interpretation of TBOTNS, this would serve to distinguish *our* universe -- in which Jesus existed and the future will play out according to certain prophecies -- and Sev's universe, which, I am disappointed to discover five books into the story, is not ours at all. But this side-stepping of the issue actually creates a thornier problem than before. The problem has two parts: The first is, if Jesus never showed up in Sev's universe, then the population of Sev's universe are either unfallen (unlikely) or fallen and never redeemed by the Son of God. Why this universe should be so bereft is a divine mystery beyond me, but it is interesting that in the absence of their ever experiencing Christianity the population of Sev's universe seem no better or worse than our own. The second part of the problem is that in the "Key to the Universe" chapter in Citadel, Sev is told on good authority that "As the flower that comes is like the flower from which it came, so the universe that comes repeats the one whose ruin was its origin; and this is as true of its finer features as of its grosser ones ... though just as the flower evolves from summer to summer, all things advance by some minute step."

If my supposition is correct that Tzad's quote is meant to refer to our universe (with Christ) vs. Sev's universe (without), does that mean the absence of the Christian religion in Sev's universe is a mark of that progression?

These comments are in no way meant to criticize anyone's religion, and I certainly would not want to seem to put words into Mr. Wolfe's mouth which are obviously diametrically opposed to his stated beliefs. The above problem is the result of the author (allegedly) using allegorical techniques to convey religious information in a non-allegorical, or concrete, setting. Take a look at the works of C.S. Lewis, for example; on the one hand the "Narnia" series is theoretically supposed to be a young person's primer on Christian belief; on the other hand, whenever the Narnia kids get into trouble they don't call on Christ but on a *talking lion*. I guess you can call it the Golden Calf Syndrome; the metaphor is always at risk of being mistaken for what it is meant to represent. This is also called idolotry.

Much safer, I believe, to stick with a materialistic interpretation of the text.

Tony Ellis — 28 Apr 1999, 12:18 · follows Ori Kowarsky

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I don't understand why you think Sev's universe can't be ours. The "creation now vanished" Tzad is talking about is his own universe - which may or may not be the same as ours and Sev's, it doesn't really matter. How does its having a Conciliator and a New Sun mean that Sev's can't have a Christ? Sorry if I'm being thick.

Michael Straight — 28 Apr 1999, 08:36 · follows Tony Ellis

On Wed, 28 Apr 1999, Tony Ellis wrote:

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For most of the series, I assumed that the "Conciliator" was a set of poorly-remembered stories of Jesus (I forget how I fit Typhon's statements into that interpretation), so I was surprised in URTH to find that the Conciliator was Severian, and was someone far in Jesus's future, if there even as a Jesus in Severian's world.

When I read the passage quoted above, I interpreted it, as Ori does, to be Wolfe's coy way of referring to Jesus. If Jesus had existed in Severian's universe, I'd expect Tzad to say something like, "there was another sort of Conciliator earlier in your world's history, although we didn't call him that."

Or are you suggesting that Tzad isn't referring to Jesus at all, but rather yet another "conciliator" figure in a different universe who is neither a version of Severian nor Jesus?

-Rostrum

Tony Ellis — 28 Apr 1999, 13:26 · follows Michael Straight

Rostrum wrote:

Or are you suggesting that Tzad isn't referring to Jesus at all, but rather yet another "conciliator" figure in a different universe who is neither a version of Severian nor Jesus?

Almost. The Conciliator is Christ-like, but he's not Christ. So when Tzad talks about a Conciliator in his universe he -is- talking about another Severian, but not another Christ. As I see it.

The alternative is to assume that somehow Sev's Earth can have had a history identical to ours to the point of having a NASA-style man on the Moon, another St Catherine, another Jungle Book, another Edward Fitzgerald's translation of Omar Khyam and even another Frankenstein, all without ever having had a Christ.

Alex David Groce — 28 Apr 1999, 11:23 · follows Tony Ellis

On Apr 28, 12:51am, Ori Kowarsky wrote:

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Let's start from the beginning. The Urth of TBOTNS is one where Christianity has obviously completely failed. If we accept Sev's narrative as a fair survey of Commonwealth and Ascian society, none of them have even heard of Jesus Christ. None of them can be said to be saved, or even capable of being saved; no one is witness to the crucifixion, death and resurrection. To the extent that Christianity can be said to survive at all it is as fragments, a detritus of images and concepts joining the Greek and Hindu gods in the compost heap of Urth culture. Needless to say, the end of humanity is horrific, but it doesn't follow the plan laid out in the Book of Revelations, and Jesus doesn't return at the end of it. Furthermore, with the coming of the New Sun, humanity is about to effectively evolve into Green Men. Are they covered by Original Sin? I mean, they're practically a different species.

Ah, now this is interesting. I think that when you noted a materialistic explanation, I assume you meant an interpretation that just ignored/avoided the theological overtones. Which to me is textually out-of-question--there are too many clear references to Christianity to have that not come out as a "yes, but you've ignored the white whale, Sir" explanation of Moby Dick.

The question is, does the BOTNS necessarily mean Christianity has completely failed in Urth? Well, as far as being a clearly present religion, yes. However, the church invisible, as I understand it, can continue even if the visible church has vanished--and as I see it, the patterning of Severian's life after both Christic and, as importantly, maybe, Apostolic, events indicates that the Increate (guess who?) is still working through human history. I will be honest and say that in my interpretation, the New Sun is not the end of history, which in this universe may well (I suspect would be) the end of Christian revelation. In what sense is the New Sun an eschatological completion? It's the opposite--it starts things up, and prevents the icy/entropy future of Abaia & co. The New Sun is analogous to Revelation and Second Coming, but it isn't the same thing. It's a (here I agree with you) primarily material rescue--the spiritual end being the wiping clean of the dying culture of Urth. Things are just starting up again on Urth, and where the Green Men will go from there is anybody's guess. And

I'd say that the Green Men are "man" and probably, in Wolfe's schema, covered by original sin. A stage in evolution wouldn't make us gods or angels, and photosynthesis doesn't really impact metaphysically.

For me, the best indication that Urth IS our universe, and Christianity is, while not exactly filling the pews, still around in the important sense, is in Long Sun. Silk, it seems to me, has been contacted by the Outsider as part of a revelation that is to (A) as in the BOTNS, save everybody's skins from a materially killing end, and (B) to slowly restore Christianity. The voided crosses, the images Silk sees, the direct reference to a man crucified--these seem to me to be sufficient evidence to place it all in our universe (since Long Sun and New Sun are surely the same universe!)

Both stories to me seem to be about historical, physical actions saving mankind or some subset thereof from material disaster, but the underlying patterns of the salvation are such that it is difficult not to see signs of a historically active God--specifically, the Christian God. In fact, the non-existence of an active Christianity reinforces the theological explanation of the BOTNS--if the heroes were devout Catholics they might have motives in making Severian's life analogous to Christ's, in arranging for him to imitate Peter by raising a woman named Dorcas, etc. But they don't seem to be. So, the patterning of Severian's life is best explained as the hand of the Increate, working through the physical world and, specifically, that rascal Severian.

I think that Gene Wolfe attempted to tackle this thorny theological problem in UOTNS. Tzad, on the seat of judgement, says of his "adventures" with Sev:

"[speaking of the Conciliator] Would they not have wished to walk with him, if they could? Stand beside him when he was in danger? Care for him, perhaps, when he was ill? I have been such an acolyte, in a creation now vanished. In that too there was a Conciliator and a New Sun, though we did not use those names."

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An interesting speculation--of course, there's my extra-textual reason for doubting Wolfe would imply that (in fact, doubting Wolfe would imply a universe without Christ in it), but my reasons for thinking the BOTNS universe is probably ours are given above (and such little correspondences as the astronaut on the moon).

So, I'd say Sev. wasn't present in the other universe, since Sev. was the Conciliator, but Christ was, as He is in Sev's universe.

If my supposition is correct that Tzad's quote is meant to refer to our universe (with Christ) vs. Sev's universe (without), does that mean the absence of the Christian religion in Sev's universe is a mark of that

progression?

Where I don't see (whether it's our universe or not) it being absent-Long Sun seems to clearly (even more so than New Sun, where God's the only one remembering Christianity in a sense) indicate a human recollection of the Incarnation.

These comments are in no way meant to criticize anyone's religion, and I certainly would not want to seem to put words into Mr. Wolfe's mouth which are obviously diametrically opposed to his stated beliefs. The above problem is the result of the author (allegedly) using allegorical techniques to convey religious information in a non-allegorical, or concrete, setting. Take a look at the works of C.S. Lewis, for example; on the one hand the "Narnia" series is theoretically supposed to be a young person's primer on Christian belief; on the other hand, whenever the Narnia kids get into trouble they don't call on Christ but on a *talking lion*. I guess you can call it the Golden Calf Syndrome; the metaphor is always at risk of being mistaken for what it is meant to represent. This is also called idolotry.

Yeah, but I doubt many kids end up worshipping a talking lion. BOTNS runs little risk, at least, of setting up Severian as an idol--since he's no role-model, and (in his best trait) tends to put all the credit in the Increate's hands. Of course, if you think the ice future is better, and the New Sun is a Bad Thing, that's another matter, but from a material prospective, surely a new chance is better than Ragnarok?

Much safer, I believe, to stick with a materialistic interpretation of the text.

Safer, maybe, but leaves a lot of stuff unexplained--such as the underlying pattern of Severian's whole mission--why, exactly, in a material interpretation (particularly one without a Christ in the universe's history), does Severian's life echo Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Acts? Are the hieros playing a wierd literary game?

B

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." - John 8:32

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Jim Jordan — 28 Apr 1999, 10:53 · follows Alex David Groce

At 11:23 AM 4/28/99 -0400, you wrote:

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Revelation and Second Coming, but it isn't the same thing.

I've been too busy to keep up with everything on this list -- I have a huge backlog of posts to read! But I do have a comment here. The coming of the New Sun is analogous to the Flood, not the end of history. Also, analogous to the First Coming, not the Second Coming, of the Messiah. The green man, I submit, is the Christian world, where Eden begins to be restored. The reason Christianity is not visible in the Commonwealth is that, in essence, the Commonwealth is pre-Christian.

Now, to be sure, this future is actually post-Christian, as the scene of the protestant missionaries shows us. But the story as it actually unfolds is much more of a recap of the scaffolding of Bible history than of Bible eschatology. I'd say that the first coming of the Conciliator is not so much analogous to the first coming of Christ as to the coming of Yahweh (who, in Christianity, is the preincarnate Jesus) to Israel at Mount Sinai, or to Abraham at the

beginning of the covenant history. Then promises were made; now they are fulfilled and a new world begins. Note in the New Testament that as the Gospel arrives, Jerusalem is completely destroyed, and the language in Matthew 24 and other places speaks of this as a new flood. As Jesus wept over Jerusalem, so Severian is nonplussed by the destruction his new world brings with it.

Remember that Severian is not a Christ, but a "Christian figure." The Christian is supposed to be LIKE Jesus and do similar things, extending the Kingdom into history. Thus, what Severian does is like what Jesus DID, not like what Jesus WILL DO -- if you catch my drift. Accordingly, Wolfe's future history shows a renewal of the first coming of Christ, not an arrival of His second coming. Unlike the Silk narrative, where there are scores of very clear and deliberate parallels with the gospel narrative, the Severian narrative is more vague. But note these parallels: Jesus serves as a servant, and then is made king. He ascends into heaven, and then 40 years later "returns" to destroy Jerusalem and usher in the clarified new order. This final coming is at the end of the world. I submit that this is the scaffolding of the Severian narrative also.

Also, while many modern people take the book of Revelation as a prediction of catastrophes at the end of history, many interpreters (myself included) believe most of the book deals with the first century. The Beast of Revelation is the Roman Empire. If Wolfe shares this more traditional view, and as an R.C. I'll bet he does, then the destruction of Abaia, etc. links the with destruction of the Beast in Revelation: Rome. So then, not the second coming, but the final events of the first coming are in view in the Urth of the New Sun.

That would be my preferred interpretation, and I think it resolves the problems you wrestled with.

JBJordan

Michael Straight — 29 Apr 1999, 09:49 · follows Jim Jordan

Heh. The reply I was working on to Ori has been made redundant by Jonathan Laidlow who summed up what I was trying to say with this:

So, the discussion over whether Christianity ever existed on Urth is to me, a non-starter. Urth is never presented as a literal continuation of Earth history, but a post-historical, mythological point where Earth's stories retell themselves in exciting ways.

So I'll just add a few minor observations.

On Wed, 28 Apr 1999, Ori Kowarsky wrote:

Take a look at the works of C.S. Lewis, for example; on the one hand the "Narnia" series is theoretically supposed to be a young person's primer on Christian belief; on the other hand, whenever the Narnia kids get into trouble they don't call on Christ but on a *talking lion*. I guess you can call it the Golden Calf Syndrome; the metaphor is always at risk of being mistaken for what it is meant to represent. This is also called idolotry. I think that Gene Wolfe attempted to tackle this thorny theological problem in UOTNS. Tzad, on the seat of judgement, says of his "adventures" with Sev:

Lewis, unlike Wolfe, was writing a sort of "literal continuation of Earth history" with the Narnia and Space Trilogy books. The books speculate "What if there were other worlds? Given what Christians believe, how might God interact with them?" Aslan is not a metaphor for Jesus, he IS the Second Person of the Trinity incarnate as a lion. He does not die for Narnia as a sneaky way of retelling the story of Jesus, Aslan dies for Narnia because Lewis thought that was how God would redeem a world of talking animals. (I think Lewis must have realized that this implies a heretical view of the incarnation because his speculations are more sophisticated and more orthodox in the Space Trilogy.)

I don't think "metaphor" or "allegory" either one describe very well what Wolfe is doing. I think Jonathan's description is much better.

"[speaking of the Conciliator] Would they not have wished to walk with him, if they could? Stand beside him when he was in danger? Care for him, perhaps, when he was ill? I have been such an acylote, in a creation now vanished. In that too there was a Conciliator and a New Sun, though we did not use those names."

I think this passage is a wink at the reader, Wolfe acknowledging that Severian plays a role similar to that of Jesus (and perhaps that Tzad plays a role similar to the angels who ministered to him). TBOTNS is a story alluding to the story of Jesus and to other stories. To try to place Jesus within TBOTNS is a category mistake.

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I hate to break this to you Ori, but not only is TBOTNS not our universe, I'm pretty sure Wolfe made the whole thing up.

Seriously, Wolfe's playful appendices where he talks about translating a manuscript from the future are a kind of parody of the attempt to fit Wolfe's story into our world's history. They serve to highlight the fact that Urth is a fiction, that this is a story about stories. Again see Jonathan's post for a better explanation.

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Alex David Groce — 29 Apr 1999, 11:12 · follows Michael Straight

On Apr 29, 9:49am, Michael Straight wrote:

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Michael Straight — 29 Apr 1999, 16:10 · follows Alex David Groce

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If Wolfe were writing in the same way as Lewis, that is, in a future meant to be a literal extension of ours, then it would make sense to ask, "If Tzad is really an Angel of God, why doesn't he tell Severian about Jesus and the True Catholic Faith?"

I'm arguing that that sort of question would be a category mistake. Because Wolfe is not trying to imagine how the story of Christ and his Church might extend into the future, rather he is telling a story that is a sort of image or icon of the story of Christ. The picture is not equal to the thing it pictures. That doesn't mean the religious or metaphysical ideas pictured are not important, it just means that the pictures should not be confused with the thing itself.

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Ori Kowarsky — 29 Apr 1999, 18:45 · follows Michael Straight

Alex David Groce wrote:

Ah, now this is interesting. I think that when you noted a materialistic explanation, I assume you meant an interpretation that just ignored/avoided the theological overtones. Which to me is textually out-of-question--there are too many clear references to Christianity to have that not come out as a "yes, but you've ignored the white whale, Sir" explanation of Moby Dick.

I think we're talking to cross-purposes here. The fact that bits and pieces of the Christian story crop up in TBOTNS may mean nothing more than that Christianity was once part of the culture, once informed its myths and legends, and still remains in the form of a half -remembered cultural substrate. If by "theological overtones" you mean that physical miracles are happening, then we'll have to agree to disagree.

The question is, does the BOTNS necessarily mean Christianity has completely failed in Urth? Well, as far as being a clearly present religion, yes. However, the church invisible, as I understand it, can continue even if the visible church has vanished--and as I see it, the patterning of Severian's

I'm sorry, I don't know what "the church invisible" is.

life after both Christic and, as importantly, maybe, Apostolic, events

Severain is a torturer who goes on a journey to his new place of work, on the way he picks up a gem which appears to have magic powers, meets a variety of people, arrives at his job, leaves his job, goes to war, becomes an emperor. Which book of the New Testament should I pick up to compare these events with?

In what sense is the New Sun an eschatological completion? It's the opposite--it starts things up, and prevents the icy/entropy future of Abaia & co.

But the Undines *help* Sev, and if one Undine survives in Ushas, who is to say that Erebus and Abaia don't as well? It seems to me that these gigantic beings who have to live underwater to support their mass benefit more from a world that is mostly warm water than a giant snowball in space. Wouldn't Ragnarock be the end of them too?

and where the Green Men will go from there is anybody's guess. And I'd say that the Green Men are "man" and probably, in Wolfe's schema, covered by original sin. A stage in evolution wouldn't make us gods or angels, and photosynthesis doesn't really impact metaphysically.

Well, actually, we do know where they go; if they are the heirs of hmanity then they are a way-station on the way to becoming Hieros; and if, as I think you believe, Hieros are angels, apparently you *can* evolve out of Original Sin.

For me, the best indication that Urth IS our universe, and Christianity is, while not exactly filling the pews, still around in the important sense, i in Long Sun. Silk, it seems to me, has been contacted by the Outsider as part of a revelation that is to (A) as in the BOTNS, save everybody's skins from a materially killing end, and (B) to slowly restore Christianity. The voided crosses, the images Silk sees, the direct reference to a man crucified--these seem to me to be sufficient evidence to place it all in our universe (since Long Sun and New Sun are surely the same universe!)

I don't understand what you mean by point (A). Did not the coming of the New Sun kill every human on the planet save a few here and there? Oh, and the genetic breeding stock thoughtfully supplied by the Hieros. As for point (B), Silk cannot restore Christianity unless he knows what it is; that involves somehow learning about, and then believing in, the death, resurrection, etc. Until Silk (or Sev) starts witnessing, again, we're going to have to agree to disagree.

Both stories to me seem to be about historical, physical actions saving mankind or some subset thereof from material disaster, but the underlying patterns of the salvation are such that it is difficult not to see signs of a historically active God--specifically, the Christian God. In fact, the

What are these underlying patterns of salvation? In UOTNS the survivors are: Sev, an undine, two men and two women of indeterminate character, who may be very nice people, but are not Christians because they don't believe in Christ. The underlying pattern of salvation that I see is that human beings apparently chosen (or bred) for some purpose have been deposited by the Hieros on the planet after the original population has been exterminated. I certainly hope that this isn't a sign of the Christian God.

non-existence of an active Christianity reinforces the theological explanation of the BOTNS--if the heiros were devout Catholics they might have motives in making Severian's life analogous to Christ's, in arranging for him to imitate Peter by raising a woman named Dorcas, etc. But they don't seem to be.

So,

the patterning of Severian's life is best explained as the hand of the Increate, working through the physical world and, specifically, that rascal Severian.

Well, at least we can agree that Sev is a puppet of *somebody's*.

Where I don't see (whether it's our universe or not) it being absent-Long Sun seems to clearly (even more so than New Sun, where God's the only one remembering Christianity in a sense) indicate a human recollection of the Incarnation.

Why? Because of the voided crosses?

(re: Narnia)

Yeah, but I doubt many kids end up worshipping a talking lion.

You are incorrect. Studies have shown that children who read Narnia grow up to become adolescents who read Tolkien. Adolescents who read Tolkien become teenagers who listen to heavy metal music. Teenagers who listen to heavy metal music will inevitably fall under the spell of the leonine-maned Ted Nugent's "Cat Scratch Fever".

Increate's hands. Of course, if you think the ice future is better, and the New Sun is a Bad Thing, that's another matter, but from a material prospective, surely a new chance is better than Ragnarok?

A new chance for whom? 99.99% of the planet is dead! The choice between Ushas may be the lesser of two evils, but that shouldn't blind us to the fact that it *is* evil.

Ori Kowarsky — 30 Apr 1999, 00:18 · follows Ori Kowarsky

Actually, given Sev's career with war and women, plus the trajectory of his life taking him from out of nowhere and dropping him in the throne of a mighty empire at war, isn't Sev more of a Mohammed-analogue?

Ori