

Blish's CASE OF CONSCIENCE

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 02 Jun 1999

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Nicholas Gevers — 02 Jun 1999, 03:47

There's been a degree of controversy in the last couple of years about the influence of Blish on later writers - Mary Doria Russell has been accused of rehashing A CASE OF CONSCIENCE in her novels THE SPARROW and CHILDREN OF GOD. But she's told me Blish played no such role.

//----- Nicholas Gevers potto at webmail.co.za

Michael Straight — 02 Jun 1999, 12:14 · follows Nicholas Gevers

SPOILERS for CASE OF CONSCIENCE here.

The central dilemma of Blish's book was hard for me to take seriously. Humanity discovers an alien race which seems to have no knowledge of God, yet also seems to be free of the sin which Catholics (and other Christians) believe is the reason humanity does not have complete communion with God. If they have no sin, why are they ignorant of God? Possible answers include:

A. There is no God.

B. The alien race is an illusion of Satan designed to deceive humanity. C. God exists, but his relationship to this alien race is something we don't understand.

Everyone in the book seems to think A and B are the only two possibilities. No one even considers C. C seems so obvious and B so far-fetched that I was unable to believe in the characters or their debates. I didn't for a moment think that the priest's exorcism would have been effectual. I had trouble believing he would even try such a thing[1].

The whole "this must be a trick of Satan to fool us" strikes me as arrogant and human-centric in a way that seems foreign to Wolfe. Wolfe's work has a kind of humility, a sense that the universe (a fortiori the Creator) is weirder and wilder than our schemes for explaining it all.

If Wolfe had written this story, he might have had characters who believed the dilemma, but I think he would have written the events such that they would undermine the "we understand how God works, and since this doesn't fit, it must be a satanic illusion" idea.

Blish's story has ambiguity, but it's only ambiguity between A and B.

Which reminds me of another question I have about Wolfe's Catholicism. There's a statement of his which gets quoted frequently, something like "I'm a practicing Catholic, but that probably tells you less about what I believe than you think." I wonder if he meant that he's not entirely orthodox in his beliefs, or that most people's ideas about what orthodox Catholics believe are wrong.

-Rostrum

[1] Ok, so yes, there have certainly been Catholics and other Christians who were arrogant and human-centric, and maybe that was part of Blish's point, but the Roman Catholic Church seems to have learned something from the past, and I'd like to think Jesuits and Popes in the future might be able to think a little better than the characters in Blish's story.

Damien Broderick — 04 Jun 1999, 14:26 · follows Michael Straight

From: "Nicholas Gevers" <potto at webmail.co.za>

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>

I've seen a comment of hers to that effect on the web, but still one has to wonder. Of all the Jesuits in all the cases of conscience in the galaxy, how come JB names his Father Ramon Ruiz-Sanchez and MDR names hers Father Emilio Sandoz? This is the political unconscious as Jung.

I'd blame the big-eyed greys, myself. (Has anyone tried exorcising *them*?)

Damen Broderick