

# Wolfe and Teilhard de Chardin

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 09 Jun 1999

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/1676>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

---

Nigel Price — 09 Jun 1999, 19:11

Following the recent discussion on the this list, I decided that it really was time I got round to reading the copy of James Blish's "A Case of Conscience" that has been sitting on my shelf for the last 25 years or so. I'm about two-thirds of the way through so far, and enjoying it very much, although I can't see much obvious thematic or stylistic connection with Wolfe at this stage.

Seeking a little background information on Blish and ACoC, I consulted the Grolier SF CD-ROM encyclopedia, where I found the following passage in the essay on "Religion":

The 1950s also saw a remarkable proliferation of images obviously allied to religious notions but shorn of their association with actual religious doctrine. Arthur C. Clarke has said that any religious symbolism or imagery in CHILDHOOD'S END (1950; exp 1953) is "entirely accidental", although the text itself refers to the climax as an "apotheosis" and the events described there are strikingly -- but coincidentally -- similar to Teilhard de Chardin's notion of the coming-together of displaced planetary "noospheres" at an apocalyptic "Omega Point". Clifford D. Simak's Time and Again (1951; vt First He Died) is similarly free of formal doctrine, although the alien symbionts which infest all living things are obviously analogous to souls (> ESCHATOLOGY). In later works by Simak -- particularly A Choice of Gods (1972) and Project Pope (1981)-religious ideas do become explicit, and here again there are strong echoes of a Teilhardian schema. Sf works explicitly based on Teilhard's ideas are George ZEBROWSKI's The Omega Point Trilogy (2 parts published 1972, 1977; omni, including 3rd part, 1983) and Gene WOLFE's The Book of the New Sun (1980-83) and The Urth of the New Sun (1987 UK). The syncretic approach of these stories, which blends the religious and scientific imaginations, contrasts with uncompromising stories using TIME TRAVEL and other facilitating devices directly to confront the central symbol of the Christian faith: the crucifixion.

I've never read any Teilhard de Chardin, so I can't really comment. (Though I borrowed one of his books from a friend this evening, and even managed to find out what a "noosphere" was. As far as I can understand, it is that aspect of the human mind, considered from a developmental point of view, which is devoted to the comprehension of abstract concepts. So there!)

Has his possible influence on Wolfe ever been discussed on the Urth list? If so, what conclusions

were reached? If not, is anyone sufficiently well read in this area to comment?

"A Case of Coscience" is an interesting, but strange book. As others have intimated on this list, Father Ramon's logic is more than a little odd when it comes to assessing the Lithians. It's partly that the book, though set long post-Vatican 2, was, of course, written very much before Vatican 2, so Blish's model of Catholicism, whilst it is intended to be futuristic, nevertheless comes over as somewhat dated and anachronistic. Other than that, I can't make up my mind whether it's a peculiar twist in Blish's own thinking, or the effect of the novel's technique, which is to set the main characters against each other in a sort of chiaroscuro dialectic, reminiscent in both its brilliance and its staginess of George Bernard Shaw at his most argumentative. (There are parts of the first book of ACoC which are actually set out as dramatic dialogue, as if written for a play.)

I like it, but it is odd. An elegant book, but maybe ever so slightly twisted.

Or is that just me?

Nigel Price

Minety, Wiltshire, England

<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/nigelprice1/>