

Pelagianism

The Urth list — 11 messages, 7 voices, 19 May 2000

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Alice Turner — 19 May 2000, 10:20

We've never discussed this, have we?

In CLAW, just before they dine on baked Thecla, Vodalus gives a flint-like object to Sev to give to his "agent" at the House Absolute (the autarch). The agent will identify himself with the phrase, "The pelagic argosy sights land." Later, if he should give Sev a further message, the recipient will use the phrase, "I am from the quercine penetralia," i.e. the heart of the oak--which is truer than Vodalus knows.

Pelagic, as a simple adjective, means oceanic, deep-sea. But there is a Christian heresy named after Pelagius, a strong rival to Augustine of Hippo (who nailed down a great deal of Christian doctrine, including some of the most intractable). The position of Pelagius was that the doctrine of Grace, as taught by Augustine, was in opposition to the doctrine of Free Will, and ultimately was productive of moral laxity. Pelagius was condemned several times (usually by a narrow margin), but in practice, Western Christianity has wavered between his side and Augustine's ever since.

The basic points were a rejection of Original Sin (Adam was merely a bad example); thus there is no need for salvation through Christ as it can be achieved by one's own efforts (Christ was merely a good example). Man, not God, is responsible for man's depravity (and Pelagius found plenty of depravity in Rome), and it is entirely possible for a man, even before Christ, to be sinless--we can choose our path. Infant baptism, one of Augustine's most controversial stands (unbaptized babies were damned, which, to some of us, seems like an extraordinarily perverse superstition) was rejected. You can check all this out at length in the online Catholic Encyclopedia.

Taking the position that Wolfe does not use words, especially unusual words with a religious slant, lightly or accidentally, how does this pertain to the Vodalus position?

-alga

Alex David Groce — 19 May 2000, 11:50 · follows Alice Turner

It would make considerable sense as an intentional linkage. Vodalus, for one thing, is an ally of the Ascians. Ascia is, among other things, Wolfe's version of a Communist state. The idea that Communism is a kind of radical Christian heresy, sometimes considered an extension of a particularly extreme Pelagianism, is well-known. In this case, also, the rejection of the doctrine of Original Sin can probably be fruitfully compared to Vodalus' goals of returning to the stars and empire--never mind those interfering "holy slave" busybodies, reclaiming man's lost glory.

Chesterton's HERETICS probably wasn't the first place where the identification (not a main point of the book) of modern non-Christian ideologies with old and still-kicking Christian heresies was made, but I'll bet Wolfe's read it, along with a number of other writers who've taken this approach (after all, Wolfe says his political views were once well-described by the phrase

"Buckley conservative", and Buckley can't mention Communism without saying "immanentize the eschaton" at least twice). More generally, beyond Pelagianism, Wolfe certainly (in New Sun) allies all his players with faiths, true or false--and marks the false ones as such by indicating that their "line to the Increate" is broken. Certainly Baldanders is not the (I think Wolfe would say mythical) rational scientist, but a follower of a rigorous doctrine (his action with the Claw, for instance). All of these doctrines, though, even in Long Sun, where they more clearly are based in part on other religions, and even the "witch-doctors" of the jungle, are, in Wolfe's world, derived from and broken off in reaction against the Increate/Outsider, and thus heresies rather than true, free-standing systems.

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

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Greene, Carlton — 19 May 2000, 12:36 · follows Alex David Groce

Perhaps Severian is Pelagic in the sense that mankind's savoir achieves salvation for himself and Urth by an act of free will -- renouncing the life of cruelty and decadence represented by his guild and choosing mercy. This is apparent in the test of Yesod as well, which turns not on faith in the Increate, but one man's personal spiritual accomplishments during his lifetime.

Given the other meaning of Pelagic, perhaps it is no surprise that some of the moments when Sev fights internal moral battles over what kind of person he will be take place in deep water (I am referring in particular to his colloquies with the undines in books 1 and 4 (I think)).

Carlton

works

akt — 19 May 2000, 20:04 · follows Greene, Carlton

I'm hoping this is the beginning of an interesting discussion, not making positional points of my own.

Alex,

The idea that Communism

is a kind of radical Christian heresy, sometimes considered an extension of a particularly extreme Pelagianism, is well-known.

I find it difficult to understand how such a doctrinaire belief as Communism could endorse a radical embracement of Free Will. Could you explain a bit?

In this case, also, the rejection of the doctrine of Original Sin can

probably be fruitfully compared to Vodalus' goals of returning to the stars and empire--never mind those interfering "holy slave" busybodies, reclaiming man's lost glory.

I don't get your reasoning here, either, though it seems interesting.

Chesterton's HERETICS probably wasn't the first place where the identification (not a main point of the book) of modern non-Christian ideologies with old and still-kicking Christian heresies was made, but I'll bet Wolfe's read it, along with a number of other writers who've

taken this approach (after all, Wolfe says his political views were once well-described by the phrase "Buckley conservative", and Buckley can't mention Communism without saying "immanentize the eschaton" at least twice). More generally, beyond Pelagianism, Wolfe certainly (in New Sun) allies all his players with faiths, true or false--and marks the false ones as such by indicating that their "line to the Increate" is broken. Certainly Baldanders is not the (I think Wolfe would say mythical) rational scientist, but a follower of a rigorous doctrine (his action with the Claw, for instance). All of these doctrines, though, even in Long Sun, where they more clearly are based in part on other religions, and even the "witch-doctors" of the jungle, are, in Wolfe's world, derived from and broken off in reaction against the Increate/Outsider, and thus heresies rather than true, free-standing systems.

If this is true in a parallel way--I don't think it is--I'd like to see a mantis-like chart equating one to another. I don't think it can be done, but I'd truly applaud the person who proves me wrong.

Carlton,

The Pelagic movement does not pertain to Sev but to Vodalus. It is Vodalus who gives the pass-phrase, and Vodalus to whom we must look for some meaning to the "heresy," if that is what it is.

Perhaps Severian is Pelagic in the sense that mankind's savoir achieves salvation for himself and Urth by an act of free will -- renouncing the life of cruelty and decadence represented by his guild and choosing mercy.

This

is apparent in the test of Yesod as well, which turns not on faith in the Increate, but one man's personal spiritual accomplishments during his lifetime.

Given the other meaning of Pelagic, perhaps it is no surprise that some of the moments when Sev fights internal moral battles over what kind of person he will be take place in deep water (I am referring in particular to his colloquies with the undines in books 1 and 4 (I think)).

-alga

Jim Jordan — 20 May 2000, 11:19 · follows akt

It's been a while since I read the Severian books, but as I recall there is an interlocked tension in the Commonwealth between the absolute power of the autarch and the anarchy advocated by Vodalus. Translate that into theological terms, and you have determinism on the one hand, and Pelagianism on the other. Between, or above, them is the Christian doctrine of predestination, which affirms both divine superintendence and human freedom together as a mystery (which is the better way of understanding the Augustinian position, even if there are infelicities in his own expression thereof -- Aug was not saying that everything is fixed and men are just robots). If I were going to run with this, I'd investigate whether Severian, as agent of the Increate, is providing an example of the Christian (Thomist, Wolfean) doctrine.

Nutria

Adam Stephanides — 21 May 2000, 09:17 · follows Jim Jordan

As I understand it, the orthodox, anti-Pelagian position does not deny the existence of free will, as Nutria points out; nor does it deny that the unsaved can perform virtuous acts (although these acts will always be tainted by sin); nor does it deny that good works can play a role in salvation (that was, after all, one of the major issues of the Reformation). Rather, it denies that humans can free themselves from sin, or attain salvation, by their own unaided efforts. And Severian's career illustrates this throughout. He never frees himself from sin, iirc (though it's been a while since I last read the books). He doesn't become the Conciliator, or bring the New Sun, through his own unaided efforts. And given that he is manipulated throughout his life by time-travellers who know his destiny, it is questionable how much free will he actually has (though I've never really understood this aspect of the books).

It has always seemed to me that the contrast between Loyal to the Group of Seventeen's story and Folia's story exemplifies the contrast between the Pelagian and orthodox views of salvation. The protagonist of Loyal to the Group of Seventeen's story succeeds through his own persistence; the protagonist of Folia's story "gains" the princess through the princess's free gift, though he has to be able to recognize this gift.

(As for the "trial" and "battle royal" on Yesod, I'm not sure how they fit in to this, because I find that whole aspect of the Hierogrammates' plan very obscure, as I've said before.)

--Adam

Alex David Groce — 21 May 2000, 13:30 · follows Adam Stephanides

Alga wrote:

I find it difficult to understand how such a doctrinaire belief as Communism could endorse a radical embracement of Free Will. Could you explain a bit?

The idea, as I understand it, isn't that Communism is Pelagianism, rather that it's a kind of secular adaptation of certain ideas with a Pelagian flavor. The key idea is that Pelagianism proposes that it is possible to attain perfection and/or the beatific vision without the aid of supernatural grace (which Aquinas claims was the Devil's actual rebellion--not to become God, because the Devil would know that was impossible, but to attain perfection sans divine grace). Communism offers a similar, although deterministic, vision of a purely human (and now purely materialistic) method of achieving utopia, of "immanentizing the eschaton." Communism, of course, is not a personal achievement of a state of perfection.

I'll give a better idea of what I mean about Original Sin/Vodalus' space program later (I don't have New Sun with me at the moment). Charting the origins/breakouts of what I say Wolfe means as "heresies"--I'll try to this for the ones I can, although I'm offering it more as a gut instinct of how things are portrayed than something I think is obvious from the text.

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

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akt — 22 May 2000, 20:57 · follows Alex David Groce

From: Adam Stephanides <adamsteph at earthlink.net>

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Adam,

A good argument, but it doesn't take into account that it is Vodalus who is the Pelagian, not Sev, who doesn't even understand the pass-phrase. Sev never seems to be interested in the contrast in "views of salvation," or political stances between the autarchy and Vodalus's army. He's a man of action, not theory. Vodalus is also a man of action, but Wolfe throws this curious quasi-religious point in to puzzle us all.

From: Alex David Groce <Alex_Groce at gs246.sp.cs.cmu.edu>
Alga wrote:

I find it difficult to understand how such a doctrinaire belief as Communism could endorse a radical embracement of Free Will. Could you explain a bit?

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This doesn't seem to me to elucidate. Not your fault. I think we need to think about where Vodalus stands with regard to Ascianism--is he really a heartfelt ally, or just taking advantage of the fire-power? (Just the way we seem to be doing, economically, toward China recently.) I incline toward the latter. I can't believe Vodalus would buy the Ascian social line.

-alga

Adam Stephanides — 23 May 2000, 09:41 · follows akt

akt at attglobal.net wrote:

From: Adam Stephanides <adamsteph at earthlink.net>

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Adam,

A good argument, but it doesn't take into account that it is Vodalus who is the Pelagian, not Sev, who doesn't even understand the pass-phrase.

I'm confused. I don't see how my argument presupposed that Sev was the Pelagian. In fact, although I didn't say so explicitly, I was arguing against Carlton Greene's suggestion that Sev was Pelagian.

Vodalus is also a man of action, but Wolfe throws this curious quasi-religious point in to puzzle us all.

I don't think the Pelagian-orthodox contrast is just "thrown in." I think that the contrast between Urth returning to the stars through its own efforts (as Vodalus advocates), and Urth's relying on the help and guidance of the Hierodules--and, by analogy, between two different theories of salvation--is key to the book. That's one way in which URTH OF THE NEW SUN does "complete" the tetralogy, no matter how problematic it is in other respects. It makes it clear that, contrary to what Severian believes at the end of BotNS, Urth's redemption does not depend primarily upon Severian's "good works" as Autarch (I would argue for this regardless of how the "battle royal" scene is interpreted).

--Adam

Alex David Groce — 24 May 2000, 17:06 · follows Adam Stephanides

Alga said:

This doesn't seem to me to elucidate. Not your fault. I think we need to think about where Vodalus stands with regard to Ascianism--is he really a heartfelt ally, or just taking advantage of the fire-power? (Just the way we seem to be doing, economically, toward China recently.) I incline toward the latter. I can't believe Vodalus would buy the Ascian social line.

It certainly seems that Vodalus is at least as opportunistic as anything else--he seems more Nietzschean aristocrat than Ascian ideologue. On the other hand, he does reject the various hieros, which (the way I'm thinking of it) is somewhat analogous to the rejection of the need for Divine Grace. Maybe, trying to stick to this framework (however useful that may be) Vodalus is the other side of the pseudo-Pelagian coin--the Ascians seek a perfected society without the need of the Increate and Vodalus is seeking glory and individual perfection (and a new human empire, it appears) via the same means. Of course, Vodalus and the Ascians aren't really so much eschewing supra-human means as choosing supra-human sides--Abaia and Erebus are clearly the masks behind the human faces, and the uniting factor in the (otherwise) odd alliance of convenience.

As to the earlier comment about Vodalus's hope to return to space as analogous to the rejection of Original Sin, although I still don't have BOTNS on hand, all I was thinking was that Wolfe's vague references to our crimes in our galaxy-spanning days and the plan to keep us from returning to the stars until we are redeemed seems to have clear connections to the idea of being turned out of the garden after the Fall. After all, we're clearly in Milton territory here, justifying the ways of God to Man.

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

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Michael Straight — 25 May 2000, 08:36 · follows Alex David Groce

On Wed, 24 May 2000, Alex David Groce wrote:

As to the earlier comment about Vodalus's hope to return to space as analogous to the rejection of Original Sin, although I still don't have BOTNS on hand, all I was thinking was that Wolfe's vague references to our crimes in our galaxy-spanning days and the plan to keep us from returning to the stars until we are redeemed seems to have clear connections to the idea of being turned out of the garden after the Fall. After all, we're clearly in Milton territory here, justifying the ways of God to Man.

This reminds me of some of C.S. Lewis's poems and Out of the Silent Planet where he expresses horror at the thought of humanity colonizing the universe because it would bring the taint of sin to previously untainted worlds. A sentiment that seems related to the moment in the Lord of the Rings where, deep in the polluted lands of Mordor, Sam and Frodo catch a glimpse one night of the stars and take comfort that there are innumerable worlds that Sauron can never touch.

-Rostrum