

Gnostic Wolfe

The Urth list — 36 messages, 12 voices, 10 Oct 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3481>

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.

DSG20001 — 10 Oct 2002, 23:57

In a message dated 10/10/2002 9:43:11 AM Pacific Daylight Time, straight at email.unc.edu writes:

If Whorl=Garden and Pas=God, then Outsider=???

The view that religion and politics aren't subjects for polite conversation doesn't appear to be a view Gene Wolfe fans can casually adopt. (Which may account for a great deal of his appeal.)

I don't know nearly enough about the various Gnostic doctrines, but the more I do learn about them, the more affinities I notice between certain of those doctrines and the BotLS.

I suppose readers must take Wolfe at his word when he confesses that he's an orthodox Catholic--while keeping in mind that at least some elements of his theology are decidedly nonorthodox. For example, his belief in the (prior?) existence of pagan gods and goddesses.

I'll leave to the theologians on this remarkable list the question of whether Wolfe's additions lean toward the heretical or merely the eccentric. But in appraising his works, particularly the BotLS, it might be useful to pursue in a little more depth what appear--at first blush, anyway--to be striking similarities between Wolfe and Gnostic thought.

The online Gnostic Library (<http://www.webcom.com/~gnosis/library.html>) includes an introductory page written by a Gnostic Bishop. The above speculation, "Whorl=Garden and Pas=God, then the Outsider=???" is addressed there in a remarkable fashion: Whorl=Garden and Pas=the God of all Creation, the God of the material world, the God outlined in the Old Testament, then the Outsider=the Unknown God who is the true focus of Gnostic revelation.

From the introduction:

"The blame for the world's failings lies not with humans, but with the creator. Since -- especially in the monotheistic religions -- the creator is God, this Gnostic position appears blasphemous, and is often viewed with dismay even by non-believers."

A fairly lengthy excerpt from the intro page is particularly tantalizing in light of Patera Silk's "enlightenment" by the Outsider--and in light of Wolfe's own attitude toward "true myths" in his work:

"GNOSTICISM IS THE TEACHING based on Gnosis, the knowledge of transcendence arrived at by way of interior, intuitive means. Although Gnosticism thus rests on personal religious experience, it is a mistake to assume all such experience results in Gnostic recognitions.

"It is nearer the truth to say that Gnosticism expresses a specific religious experience, an experience that does not lend itself to the language of theology or philosophy, but which is

instead closely affinitized to, and expresses itself through, the medium of myth. Indeed, one finds that most Gnostic scriptures take the forms of myths. The term 'myth' should not here be taken to mean 'stories that are not true,' but rather, that the truths embodied in these myths are of a different order from the dogmas of theology or the statements of philosophy...The True God of transcendence is unknown in this world, in fact He is often called the Unknown Father. It is thus obvious that revelation from on High is needed to bring about salvation.

"The indwelling spark must be awakened from its terrestrial slumber by the saving knowledge that comes 'from without'...in the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, Jesus answered that human beings must come by Gnosis to know the ineffable, divine reality from whence they have originated, and whither they will return. This transcendental knowledge must come to them while they are still embodied on earth."

As to the myriad "intermediate deific beings" that inhabit Wolfe's universe:

"The basic Gnostic myth has many variations, but all of these refer to Aeons, intermediate deific beings who exist between the ultimate, True God and ourselves. They, together with the True God, comprise the realm of Fullness (Pleroma) wherein the potency of divinity operates fully."

I'll be puzzling over these affinities for some time and would certainly appreciate "enlightenment" from those more familiar with Gnosticism than myself.

Dan

<HTML>In a message dated 10/10/2002 9:43:11 AM Pacific Daylight Time, straight at email.unc.edu writes:

If Whorl=Garden and Pas=God, then Outsider=???

The view that religion and politics aren't subjects for polite conversation doesn't appear to be a view Gene Wolfe fans can casually adopt. (Which may account for a great deal of his appeal.)

I don't know nearly enough about the various Gnostic doctrines, but the more I do learn about them, the more affinities I notice between certain of those doctrines and the BotLS.

I suppose readers must take Wolfe at his word when he confesses that he's an orthodox Catholic--while keeping in mind that at least some elements of his theology are decidedly nonorthodox. For example, his belief in the (prior?) existence of pagan gods and goddesses.

I'll leave to the theologians on this remarkable list the question of whether Wolfe's additions lean toward the heretical or merely the eccentric. But in appraising his works, particularly the BotLS, it might be useful to pursue in a little more depth what appear--at first blush, anyway--to be striking similarities between Wolfe and Gnostic thought.

The online Gnostic Library (<http://www.webcom.com/~gnosis/library.html>) includes an introductory page written by a Gnostic Bishop. The above speculation, "Whorl=Garden and Pas=God, then the Outsider=???" is addressed there in a remarkable fashion: Whorl=Garden and Pas=the God of all Creation, the God of the material world, the God outlined in the Old Testament, then the Outsider=the Unknown God who is the true focus of Gnostic revelation.

From the introduction:

"The blame for the world's failings lies not with humans, but with the creator. Since -- especially in the monotheistic religions -- the creator is God, this Gnostic position appears blasphemous, and is often viewed with dismay even by non-believers."

A fairly lengthy excerpt from the intro page is particularly tantalizing in light of Patera Silk's "enlightenment" by the Outsider--and in light of Wolfe's own attitude toward "true myths" in his work:

"GNOSTICISM IS THE TEACHING based on Gnosis, the knowledge of transcendence arrived at by way of interior, intuitive means. Although Gnosticism thus rests on personal religious experience, it is a mistake to assume all such experience results in Gnostic recognitions.

"It is nearer the truth to say that Gnosticism expresses a specific religious experience, an experience that does not lend itself to the language of theology or philosophy, but which is instead closely affinitized to, and expresses itself through, the medium of myth. Indeed, one finds that most Gnostic scriptures take the forms of myths. The term 'myth' should

not here be taken to mean 'stories that are not true,' but rather, that the truths embodied in these myths are of a different order from the dogmas of theology or the statements of philosophy...The True God of transcendence is unknown in this world, in fact He is often called the Unknown Father. It is thus obvious that revelation from on High is needed to bring about salvation.

"The indwelling spark must be awakened from its terrestrial slumber by the saving knowledge that comes 'from without'...in the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, Jesus answered that human beings must come by Gnosis to know the ineffable, divine reality from whence they have originated, and whither they will return. This transcendental knowledge must come to them while they are still embodied on earth."

As to the myriad "intermediate deific beings" that inhabit Wolfe's universe:

"The basic Gnostic myth has many variations, but all of these refer to Aeons, intermediate deific beings who exist between the ultimate, True God and ourselves. They, together with the True God, comprise the realm of Fullness (Pleroma) wherein the potency of divinity operates fully."

I'll be puzzling over these affinities for some time and would certainly appreciate "enlightenment" from those more familiar with Gnosticism than myself.

Dan</HTML>

Josh Geller — 11 Oct 2002, 00:46 · follows DSG20001

On Thu, 10 Oct 2002 DSG20001 at aol.com wrote:

In a message dated 10/10/2002 9:43:11 AM Pacific Daylight Time, straight at email.unc.edu writes:

If Whorl=Garden and Pas=God,

Pas == Demiourgos

then Outsider=???

Outsider == God

The view that religion and politics aren't subjects for polite conversation doesn't appear to be a view Gene Wolfe fans can casually adopt. (Which may account for a great deal of his appeal.)

I don't know nearly enough about the various Gnostic doctrines, but the more I do learn about them, the more affinities I notice between certain of those doctrines and the BotLS.

I suppose readers must take Wolfe at his word when he confesses that he's an orthodox Catholic--while keeping in mind that at least some elements of his theology are decidedly nonorthodox. For example, his belief in the (prior?) existence of pagan gods and goddesses.

That's in the Bible.

'Prior', that's a loaded term. We're working with two entirely different ways of looking at Time.

I'll leave to the theologians on this remarkable list the question of whether Wolfe's additions lean toward the heretical or merely the eccentric.

Wolfe's orthodox.

He communicates, you know?

He's learned. He knows many of the more poorly documented features of the religion and the picture of the World associated with it.

But in appraising his works, particularly the BotLS, it might be useful to pursue in a little more depth what appear--at first blush, anyway--to be striking similarities between Wolfe and Gnostic thought.

Wolfe's gnostic only in the sense that Catholic or Orthodox Christianity is a subset of gnosticism.

But in fact the name and concept of gnosticism was invented by the Orthodox ("correct-believing") to separate themselves from the heterodox ("different-believing").

Before what became the Orthodox church got into bed with the Roman state, there were just different kinds of Christians and such arguing amongst each other.

After the 330's, the Orthodox owned the cops, and enthusiastically employed them suppressing everyone who 'believed different'.

The online Gnostic Library (<http://www.webcom.com/~gnosis/library.html>)

www.enemies.com is my favorite.

.

Alice K. Turner — 12 Oct 2002, 01:24 · follows Josh Geller

----- Original Message -----

From: "Josh Geller" <dclxvi@dclxvi.best.vwh.net>

quoting Rostrum::

The online Gnostic Library (<http://www.webcom.com/~gnosis/library.html>)

www.enemies.com is my favorite.

No, the graphics are fun there, but the information is flip and sophomoric; for instance, there seems to be no awareness of the central Sophia myth. The Gnostic Library is the place to browse. Or an elementary printed text is Hans Jonas's "The Gnostic Religion: the Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity."

-alga

Josh Geller — 12 Oct 2002, 03:04 · follows Alice K. Turner

On Fri, 11 Oct 2002, Alice K. Turner wrote:

From: "Josh Geller" <dclxvi@dclxvi.best.vwh.net>

quoting Rostrum::

The online Gnostic Library (<http://www.webcom.com/~gnosis/library.html>)

www.enemies.com is my favorite.

^^

No, the graphics are fun there, but the information is flip and sophomoric; for instance, there seems to be no awareness of the central Sophia myth. The Gnostic Library is the place to browse. Or an elementary printed text is Hans Jonas's "The Gnostic Religion: the Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity."

So it's not your favorite.

So nu?

I lied, actually, it's not really my favorite.

.

Kevin J. Maroney — 23 Oct 2002, 00:54 · follows Josh Geller

<delurk>

Alga Alice just encouraged me to post this observation I made to her off-list:

It's pretty clear to me that Wolfe didn't have the Short Sun in mind when he started Long Sun, but that he did by the time he finished Long Sun. Pas as demiurge is such a clear image that it's hard to believe that he

didn't intend for the work to function, in part at least, as an attack on Gnosticism; he may have teased the ideas out further as he composed the later novels.

My biggest metaquestion about Return to the Whorl was "why is there so much narrative effort devoted to burying Scylla's shade?"; if she somehow represents Sophia, then it makes more sense. But it's hard to see how she would be Sophia. The adult Scylla is about as vile a character as Wolfe has limned, and the child is pretty passive.

Here's a connection I've never teased out before: Silk is (in part) St. Francis of Assisi, who lived from 1181 to 1226, in Umbria; his mother is believed to have been Provencal. The Albigensians flourished in Provence in the 12th and 13th centuries; the Albigensians were quasi-Gnostic. The Catholic Encyclopedia doesn't say anything about Francis opposing the Albigensians, but the temporal overlap is striking.

</delurk>

Wombat, a. k. a. Kevin J. Maroney kjm at panix.com
New York Review of Science Fiction: <<http://www.nyrsf.com>>

--

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 23 Oct 2002, 15:38 · follows Kevin J. Maroney

Here's a connection I've never teased out before: Silk is (in part) St. Francis of Assisi, who lived from 1181 to 1226, in Umbria;

Yes ... his preaching to animals (and birds in particular) should make that clear.

He's also part Father Brown, I think.

The Catholic Encyclopedia doesn't say anything about Francis opposing the Albigensians, but the temporal overlap is striking.

...yes, particularly given the other observations in your post. Nicely done.

Is the Chapter, then, inherently Gnostic? Interestingly, it does not seem to be -- though "enlightenment" has some aspects of _gnosis_, it partakes quite as much of the prophetic trance, and the "prayer of union" spoken of by St. Teresa of Avila; and there is nothing about the teachings or acts of the Chapter that makes me think "Gnosticism." Rather, it is a reasonably orthodox sort of middle-Eastern polytheism -- the sort which preceded and developed into monotheistic Judaism -- which, however, happens to exist in a pocket universe whose nature is, in fact, Gnostic; which in turn exists in a larger universe whose nature is what one might expect from the teachings of orthodox Catholicism...

I don't know why people think Wolfe is complicated. 8*)

Andy Robertson — 23 Oct 2002, 15:47 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

----- Original Message -----

From: "Dan'l Danehy-Oakes" <ddanehy at siebel.com>
that makes me think "Gnosticism." Rather, it is a reasonably
orthodox sort of middle-Eastern polytheism -- the sort which
preceded and developed into monothestic Judaism

Rather Hellenic or Nordic than Middle Eastern, I think.

The enfolding of the impulse to address the divine (which Silk feels and expresses in his *false* religion) by the real divinity of the Outsider mirrors the "baptising" of european native pantheism by invading monotheistic Christianity

hartshorn

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 23 Oct 2002, 16:00 · follows Andy Robertson

I wrote:
that makes me think "Gnosticism." Rather, it is a
reasonably orthodox sort of middle-Eastern
polytheism -- the sort which preceded and developed
into monothestic Judaism

And hartshorn responded:

Rather Hellenic or Nordic than Middle Eastern, I think.

The enfolding of the impulse to address the divine (which
Silk feels and expresses in his *false* religion) by the real
divinity of the Outsider mirrors the "baptising" of european
native pantheism by invading monotheistic Christianity

I see your point, and even agree with it -- there is a certain feel to the Whorlly pantheon that does remind one of (especially) the Greek gods; and naturally so, since they are to some not-insignificant extent patterned after them.

But I was not speaking of the pantheon (which is, more or less, universal to the Whorl) but of the Chapter; and the forms and rituals of the Chapter (and especially that of the sacrificial rite) very much resemble those of the Middle East.

Kevin J. Maroney — 23 Oct 2002, 19:14 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

At 12:00 PM 10/23/02, Blattid wrote:
But I was not speaking of the pantheon (which is, more or
less, universal to the Whorl) but of the Chapter; and the
forms and rituals of the Chapter (and especially that of
the sacrificial rite) very much resemble those of the
Middle East.

What do you feel is specifically Middle Eastern about them rather than Hellenic?

Wombat, aka Kevin J. Maroney | kjm at panix.com

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 23 Oct 2002, 19:22 · follows Kevin J. Maroney

But I was not speaking of the pantheon (which is, more or less, universal to the Whorl) but of the Chapter; and the forms and rituals of the Chapter (and especially that of the sacrificial rite) very much resemble those of the Middle East.

What do you feel is specifically Middle Eastern about them rather than Hellenic?

The description of the sacrificial rite is very reminiscent of what is known of the rites of sacrifice in the temple at Jerusalem, including the business about splashing the blood on the altar, the regulations about what gets burned and what gets eaten ... I'm admittedly making the assumption that the Jerusalem sacrifice was typical of the Middle East; much of Hebrew religion was, though repurposed for monotheism.

If these things are typical of Greek sacrifice, then I'm simply wrong.

Alice K. Turner — 24 Oct 2002, 00:25 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Not answering anyone completely because it's just too hard to do multiple answers on the Digest now (hi, Ranjit!) but Wombat asked why Middle Eastern mythology rather than Hellenic or Norse? An easy answer would be that neither ever had a goddess as fierce and treacherous as Inanna/Ishtar could be, and that we meet in the series. (Though indeed the Celts had some.) But, aha, that is a canard. The mythology, as Typhon/Pas planned it, is indeed Hellenic. In Greek mythology nearly all monsters are female, though there's an occasional male with eye problems, like the Cyclops or Argus--or Typhon himself, whose problems were explosive rather than ocular. I think Wolfe probably read Gilgamesh, if not other Middle Eastern myths, and got some input into vengeful female deities. He certainly used the Gnostic Demiurge, who was Middle Eastern, in another tradition. And the shorter works point to some interest in Native American myth. But the Plan of Pas wrt the Family is based strongly on Greek myth, particularly on Hesiod's account of who begat whom: the children of Echidna and Typhon, with a borrowing or two from here and there. There's a nasty sense of humor at work in the Plan of Pas as his uploaded offspring act out their assumed roles, as if in a charade. Wolfe is in no way sympathetic to Pas as Demiurge.

So: Sophia. Wombat and I puzzled over the extended and rather out-of-whack fictionally, baby Scylla sequence in the last SS novel, wondering if this could be a last-ditch attempt to drag a Sophia figure in (sorry, Wombat, I am paraphrasing, and possibly mis-phrasing). But, as he says, it seems rather strained, whether or not this is true. And perhaps that is what is meant by an anti-Gnostic view--because in my own view Sophia is an extraordinarily sympathetic, if terribly mistaken, figure. And that is not what Wolfe has given us, in either aspect of his Scylla.

Finally, interesting that this St. Francis's job is the slaughter of animals.

-alga

Adam Stephanides — 25 Oct 2002, 15:47 · follows Alice K. Turner

Perhaps I'm being dense, and it's been several years since I last read TBOTLS; but I don't see any particular connection between the Long Sun books and Gnosticism, either positive and negative. I don't see anything that Pas has in common with the Demiurge that he doesn't have in common with pagan "high gods" such as Zeus, who are the obvious models. Unlike the

Demiurge, Pas didn't really create anything. And Typhon himself only "created" the Whorl in the sense that Rockefeller created Standard Oil; it may have been an act of sinful pride, but it had no cosmic significance that I'm aware of. Still less do I see how the Long Sun books are a criticism of Gnosticism (unless, as mantis said, one assumes that Gnostics worshipped the Demiurge, which afaik they never did). But, as I say, perhaps I'm just missing something.

--Adam

James Wynn — 25 Oct 2002, 16:12 · follows Adam Stephanides

Adam Stephanides said:

Perhaps I'm being dense, and it's been several years since I last read TBOTLS; but I don't see any particular connection between the Long Sun books and Gnosticism, either positive and negative...But, as I say, perhaps I'm just missing something.

Well, like the "New Age", Gnoticism adopted so many elements from so many places and ideas that it's difficult to say in anything theological without it suggesting Gnostic influence. Still, there is this quote from the Catholic Encyclopedia which seems to be a source to which Wolfe frequently returns:

"Although the origins of Gnosticism are still largely enveloped in obscurity, so much light has been shed on the problem by the combined labours of many scholars that it is possible to give the following tentative solution: Although Gnosticism may at first sight appear a mere thoughtless syncretism of well nigh all religious systems in antiquity, it has in reality one deep root-principle, which assimilated in every soil what is needed for its life and growth; this principle is philosophical and religious pessimism. The Gnostics, it is true, borrowed their terminology almost entirely from existing religions, but they only used it to illustrate their great idea of the essential evil of this present existence and the duty to escape it by the help of magic spells and a superhuman Saviour. Whatever they borrowed, this pessimism they did not borrow -- not from Greek thought, which was a joyous acknowledgment of and homage to the beautiful and noble in this world, with a studied disregard of the element of sorrow; not from Egyptian thought, which did not allow its elaborate speculations on retribution and judgment in the netherworld to cast a gloom on this present existence, but considered the universe created or evolved under the presiding wisdom of Thoth; not from Iranian thought, which held to the absolute supremacy of Ahura Mazda and only allowed Ahriman a subordinate share in the creation, or rather counter-creation, of the world; not from Indian Brahminic thought, which was Pantheism pure and simple, or God dwelling in, nay identified with, the universe, rather than the Universe existing as the contradictory of God; not, lastly, from Semitic thought, for Semitic religions were strangely reticent as to the fate of the soul after death, and saw all practical wisdom in the worship of Baal, or Marduk, or Assur, or Hadad, that they might live long on this earth. This utter pessimism, bemoaning the existence of the whole universe as a corruption and a calamity, with a feverish craving to be freed from the body of this death and a mad hope that, if we only knew, we could by some mystic words undo the cursed spell of this existence -- this is the foundation of all Gnostic thought. It has the same parent-soil as Buddhism; but Buddhism is ethical, it endeavours to obtain its end by the extinction of all desire; Gnosticism is pseudo-intellectual, and trusts exclusively to magical knowledge. Moreover, Gnosticism, placed in other historical surroundings, developed from the first on other lines than Buddhism."

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06592a.htm>

Well consider Silk's speech at on the airship after he attempted to kill himself. Doesn't it suggest a Gnostic attitude? Doesn't Silk reject this outlook in the end?

-- Crush

tom — 25 Oct 2002, 17:40 · follows James Wynn

Adam Stephanides wrote:

I don't see any particular connection between the Long Sun books and Gnosticism, either positive and negative.

Silk holds the "primary" Gnostic belief - that the god(s) of this world/Whorl are false, and that the true God exists outside in some sense.

I don't see anything that Pas has in common with the Demiurge that he doesn't have in common with pagan "high gods" such as Zeus, who are the obvious models.

Zeus, in the standard Greek model, was exactly who he claimed to be - father of the gods and head honcho. The Demiurge is exactly not what he claims to be - the one God. Pas/Typhon is in that boat. He's set himself up as a god, but really isn't.

Still less do I see how the Long Sun books are a criticism of Gnosticism

I think he's sort of re-purposing Gnosticism.

The danger Gnosticism poses to Christianity (and Catholicism in particular) is that it pulls the same trick on Christianity that Christianity pulled on the pagans. To be short, the Christian God was set up as the God of the pagan Gods; in the same manner the Gnostic God was set up as the superior of the Christian God. This is the "old" sense of Gnosticism, and is obviously unacceptable to Wolfe.

In the Long Sun Whorl, however, being Gnostic is the only correct way to be. As opposed to the "real" world, the Whorl really is run by a mad god, and the only escape is through belief in a god "outside".

In the book, then, Wolfe draws a parallel between the current situation in the "real" world and the Whorl - trapped in a decaying hulk, people worship exactly what got them into this mess in the first place: technology. Wolfe wants the reader to recognize how tech is made a god, and to become a (new, improved) Gnostic by finding the real God outside of the world. This is the "new" sense of being a Gnostic.

In this new sense (not the bad old sense) being a Gnostic is ok. Wolfe has simultaneously criticized Gnosticism (after all, when Silk meets the Creator, that's it - he's found the Source) while reinvigorating it (by using it as a model for how we should relate to the modern world).

James Wynn quotes the Catholic Encyclopedia:

"Gnosticism ... has in reality one deep root-principle, which assimilated in every soil what is needed for its life and growth; this principle is philosophical and religious pessimism... This utter pessimism, bemoaning the existence of the whole universe as a corruption and a calamity, with a feverish craving to be freed from the body of this death and a mad hope that, if we only knew, we could by some mystic words undo the cursed spell of this existence -- this is the foundation of all Gnostic thought."

Gnostics (as far as we know) weren't all that pessimistic, really. Compared to doctrines like Sheol and predestination, Gnostics were positively euphoric.

It's best to read this entire entry as an outdated (almost 100 year old) polemic by an ancient enemy of the Gnostics, rather than a serious analysis.

Adam Stephanides — 29 Oct 2002, 15:03 · follows tom

on 10/25/02 12:40 PM, tom at tom at bitterman.net wrote:

Adam Stephanides wrote:

I don't see any particular connection between the Long Sun books and Gnosticism, either positive and negative.

Silk holds the "primary" Gnostic belief - that the god(s) of this world/Whorl are false,

But this is not specific to Gnosticism, but true for any monotheist in a polytheistic world--like Silk.

and that the true God exists outside in some sense.

And the Outsider isn't really "outside"; that's just the role assigned him in Pas's mythology. In reality he's just as much inside as outside; the Whorl is no less a part of his creation than anything else is.

I don't see anything that Pas has in common with the Demiurge that he doesn't have in common with pagan "high gods" such as Zeus, who are the obvious models.

Zeus, in the standard Greek model, was exactly who he claimed to be - father of the gods and head honcho.

But not in Wolfe's reported beliefs (or in the beliefs of the early Christians), in which the pagan gods existed, but were not really gods. Just like Pas.

In the Long Sun Whorl, however, being Gnostic is the only correct way to be. As opposed to the "real" world, the Whorl really is run by a mad god, and the only escape is through belief in a god "outside".

How does this square with the fact that Pas wants "his" people to leave the Whorl?

on 10/25/02 11:12 AM, James Wynn at crushtv at HotPOP.com wrote (quoting the Catholic encyclopedia):

Although Gnosticism may at first sight appear a mere thoughtless syncretism of well nigh all religious systems in antiquity, it has in reality one deep root-principle, which assimilated in every soil what is needed for its life and growth; this principle is philosophical and religious pessimism.

[snip]

This utter pessimism, bemoaning the existence of the whole universe as a corruption and a calamity, with a feverish craving to be freed from the body of this death and a mad hope that, if we only knew, we could by some mystic words undo the cursed spell of this existence -- this is the foundation of all Gnostic thought.

[snip]

Well consider Silk's speech at on the airship after he attempted to kill himself. Doesn't it suggest a Gnostic attitude? Doesn't Silk reject this outlook in the end?

Pessimism isn't peculiar to Gnosticism; and in several of Wolfe's other books, in which nobody has (yet) suggested Gnostic influence afaik, the protagonists are at times in similar states of

despair. And Silk seems to have been reacting to the evil that "lurks in the hearts of men" rather than any cosmic evil: e. g. "instead of focusing on the evil in myself, as I should have, I gave my attention to the evil in others." (345, EXODUS hc)

Incidentally, unless I'm overlooking something, Silk did not attempt to kill himself on the airship; he was contemplating suicide when Horn appeared and distracted him.

--Adam

Josh Geller — 29 Oct 2002, 15:20 · follows Adam Stephanides

On Tue, 29 Oct 2002, Adam Stephanides wrote:

But not in Wolfe's reported beliefs (or in the beliefs of the early Christians), in which the pagan gods existed, but were not really gods.

They are really gods, but they are not really God.

Just like Pas.

A deified ruler.

Like many (most?) historical gods.

.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 29 Oct 2002, 17:36 · follows Josh Geller

Adam and Tom exchanging ...

I don't see any particular connection between the Long Sun books and Gnosticism, either positive and negative.

Silk holds the "primary" Gnostic belief - that the god(s) of this world/Whorl are false,

But this is not specific to Gnosticism, but true for any monotheist in a polytheistic world--like Silk.

For clarity:

The "Gnostic model" of the Long Sun books is this:

In Wolfe's "major" works, he presents settings in an orthodox Catholic universe in which "other" religious traditions can be literalized.

tBotNS portrays a world in which Kabbala is literally true; the "Soldier" books portray a world in which paganism -- sc. Greek myth -- is literally true. And in the Long Sun books, he is portraying a world, set against a larger, orthodox Catholic universe, in which Gnosticism (or at least one form of it) is literally true.

To summarize how a form of Gnosticism is literalized in the Long Sun books:

All things (the whole larger universe in which the "Sun" books are, overall, set) emanate from the one True God (Silk's Outsider). From those "emanations," a Demiurge (Pas), with the help of other "Archons" (Pas' family and the lesser gods) have made a false, material world (the Whorl). In such a world, the only way in which humans and the True God can approach each other is by an act of Gnosis (Silk's enlightenment), for which a human may and must prepare himself (Silk's discipline and religious training), but which is still ultimately an act of the True God.

Zat make sense?

Adam Stephanides — 31 Oct 2002, 17:46 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

on 10/29/02 11:36 AM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes at ddanehy at siebel.com wrote:
For clarity:

The "Gnostic model" of the Long Sun books is this:

In Wolfe's "major" works, he presents settings in an orthodox Catholic universe in which "other" religious traditions can be literalized.

tBotNS portrays a world in which Kabbala is literally true;

I don't know much about Kabbalah (just what I've read in Gershom Scholem), and don't recall much of the discussions on this list of the topic; but based on what little I do know, I doubt that this is the case, despite Wolfe borrowing of Kabbalistic terminology.

the "Soldier" books portray a world in which paganism -- sc.
Greek myth -- is literally true.

They reflect Wolfe's own beliefs that the pagan "gods" really existed; this is different from his writing as if a world-view he believes false were true.

And in the Long Sun books,
he is portraying a world, set against a larger, orthodox
Catholic universe, in which Gnosticism (or at least one form
of it) is literally true.

To summarize how a form of Gnosticism is literalized in the
Long Sun books:

All things (the whole larger universe in which the "Sun"
books are, overall, set) emanate from the one True God
(Silk's Outsider).

We aren't told whether the Outsider created the universe actively a la Genesis, or whether it "emanated" from him Gnostic-style.

From those "emanations," a Demiurge
(Pas), with the help of other "Archons" (Pas' family and
the lesser gods) have made a false, material world (the
Whorl).

Except that, as I said before, Pas created nothing; Typhon did. And the relationship between Pas and the other gods is much more like that of a polytheistic high god to other gods, than that of the Demiurge to the Archons, afaik. And while the Whorl is artificial, it isn't "false" in the sense that the material universe is false in Gnosticism, just artificial. While the story its inhabitants are told about its creation is false, the Whorl itself is no less directly part of the Outsider's creation than anything else.

In such a world, the only way in which humans and
the True God can approach each other is by an act of Gnosis
(Silk's enlightenment),

But afaik, "gnosis" in ancient Gnosticism (which, given Wolfe's general interest in the ancient world, is more likely to be what he had in mind than any of the modern varieties, if indeed he had any sort of Gnosticism in mind) refers not to a sudden, mystical enlightenment, but to the

learning of a body of esoteric doctrine.

for which a human may and must
prepare himself (Silk's discipline and religious training),
but which is still ultimately an act of the True God.

Zat make sense?

I grant that there are parallels between Gnosticism and the universe of TBOTLS. But most of them apply as well or better to monotheism vs. polytheism, as I've said before. The only thing which suggests Gnosticism specifically is the "artificial world" nature of the Whorl, and even that is not a "literal" transposition of Gnosticism. Absent any explicit indication that Wolfe had Gnosticism in mind, I remain unconvinced.

--Adam

James Wynn — 01 Nov 2002, 16:24 · follows Adam Stephanides

Adam said

We aren't told whether the Outsider created the universe actively a la Genesis, or whether it "emanated" from him Gnostic-style.

Crush interjects

Well, we do know that in the Long Sun, the Outsider is the acknowledged creator of humans (from mud) in the Chrasmmological Writings (I think this is in LS 2). This suggests that Typhon may not be a true Demiurge Gnostic-style, but a pretender to Demi-urge status - some one who has kidnapped the Outsider's creations into his Gnostic creation.

-- Crush

James Jordan — 02 Nov 2002, 15:27 · follows James Wynn

I've been out of the country for this discussion, and have skimmed the posts. A few comments:

1. Gnosticism is just "philosophy + myth." Philosophy, whether Greek or Buddhist, held that the "world" is corrupt in some essential way, and that the wise man "escapes" from the world through contemplation, contemplating his way out of the "cave." Gnosticism popularized this notion, adding myths, and various ritual and esoteric ways of escape (though esotericism is all over Plato, Aristotle, and Pythagoras, if you read them aright). The prophets of Israel preached against all escape, and called the people to involve themselves with the plight of the poor, the oppressed, etc.; and Jesus and the (best) of the Church follows this. Christianity, with its sacraments of water, oil, bread, and wine, and with its central doctrine of physical resurrection, is very "this-worldly," preaching redemption and activist good works, not escape into contemplation.
2. Judeo-Christianity teaches creation of the world "out of nothing" by a Creator. Gnosticism teaches that the present world is an emanation out of the "substance" of the "prime mover" (plug in other titles as well). Somewhere down the line, the Demiurge formed the present world out of part of what had emanated from the Prime Mover. The Demiurge might be "evil" and seeking to corrupt the emanation, or he might just be doing his "demurge thing" by forming and shaping it. Either way, the world is either evil and to be escaped, or else grossly inferior and to be transcended.
3. Typhon is, IMO, much like the Demiurge, in that he forms his Whorl out of preexisting matter. Pas rules this Whorl, so he is not a "demiurge" but merely a "god." But the Outsider, is just that: outside of it all. He is the Creator, not a Prime Mover, and the cosmos is not made out of his substance. He is outside of it, not the highest part of it. And, being outside of it all, He can also by His Spirit, be intimately "inside" of it, but as a personal "friend," not as some kind of "essential substance." The Outsider can stand behind Silk/Horn

and as a Friend encourage him to worship through bread and wine. Silk first comes to know the Outsider as "outside the Whorl" and above Pas, and then as "outside" the whole cosmos as Creator thereof.

4. The Outsider as a minor god in Typhon's pantheon is a play on the "Unknown God" of Acts chapter 17. He can be understood within the pantheon as "every other god we don't know about," but in reality He is the leftover awareness of the Creator. Hence, for Wolfe, as for orthodox Christianity, pagan religions are a mixture of awareness of the truth of an Outside Creator mingled and corrupted by a "scale of being" or "gnostic" or "emanation-hierarchical" view of reality. Thus, Chapter religion has some of both in it. But what is happening is not a "baptizing" of prior paganism, but an extrication from it. It is a mistake to read early and even medieval Christianity as "baptizing" pagan forms. Rather, the leaders sought, with varying degrees of success, to substitute Christian notions for pagan ones, Christmas for the feast of Sol, saints for gods, etc.

5. Alga: yes there is a fierce bloodthirsty goddess among the semites: Anath, roughly like Diana or Artemis. (Maybe I misread you here.) Astarte/Ashteroth is more like Venus/Aphrodite -- though as always there is overlap.

6. Greco-Roman gods and myths were not much different from Semitic/Canaanite ones, and really, Nordic ones were not much different either. I don't think sacrificial rituals were much different either. I don't think we have to debate much "which" of these myths Wolfe is using. He's probably combining all of them, with the Greco-Roman pantheon most prominent in the Whorl and something like Old Testament animal sacrifices most prominent in the local Chapter rituals. Remember, Wolfe is also playing with the transition from Old Testament to New, with Typhon's pantheon being like the Roman rulers of Palestine, and Chapter religion being like the religion of the Jews at the time of Christ (that is, the time of Silk).

7. Wolfe did use Qabbalah some in New Sun: Yesodh and Briahh; though there he merely picked up some words to use in connection with an essentially "Catholic" universe. Given that gnosticism was not much different from either philosophy or earlier polytheism, but was a kind of new "late and decayed-pessimistic" version of both, it is no surprise that what Silk is growing out of has resemblances to all three (Marcus Aurelius in the Chasmological writings, a pantheon of gods, a gnostic view of reality, etc.).

8. The first time I read the New Sun, I thought Wolfe had just set up a Gnostic universe and was playing with it. Not so, he says. And to some extent, I think the Long Sun was a way of making that clear. If I might put words in his mouth, I would suggest that he is saying that some kind of gnostic/polytheistic understanding of the universe is what everybody naturally thinks until or unless they come to a Christian "creational" view of the universe; and that the psychological process of moving from the former to the latter does not happen overnight, but takes time. Hence, a gnostic/polytheistic world is "real" to people who have not been "enlightened" like Silk. But Silk's "enlightenment" does not mean he is moving "up" a gnostic hierarchy into transcendence, but that he is moving "out" of a gnostic view of reality altogether, and can now see these "gods" for what they really are: mere creatures, even if powerful ones. To a lesser extent, and much less clearly, Severian is moving in the same direction.

9. Finally, since this came up, the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination (speaking as a Calvinistic theologian) is not much different from Augustine's and Aquinas's. Whoever described the "two eye" perspective

-- from within time and from outside of time -- pretty well described it. (Sorry, I can't remember who wrote what.) On all sides, the doctrine is regarded as a "mystery," since in order to "understand" it, you would have to be God Himself, and folks, we aren't God and we're never gonna be. So we leave it as a mystery. Somehow we are free and our actions do count, and yet God as Creator of time and of all "events" in time, "foreordained" it all. The Calvinistic confessions of faith state that this is a matter that should be handled very gingerly and carefully, since to try to think about it very much is to fall into the sin of playing god. Anyway, Wolfe is a conventional Thomist most of the time, so I imagine he would agree with this. The

debates between Catholics and Protestants really lie in other areas.

I don't know if all this helps the discussion, but I hope it helps a bit.

Patera Nutria

Andy Robertson — 02 Nov 2002, 16:47 · follows James Jordan

Boethius, AD 400, IIRC

hartshorn

----- Original Message -----

From: "James Jordan" <jbjordan4 at cox.net>

9. Finally, since this came up, the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination (speaking as a Calvinistic theologian) is not much different

from Augustine's and Aquinas's. Whoever described the "two eye"

perspective

-- from within time and from outside of time -- pretty well described it.
(Sorry, I can't remember who wrote what.)

Josh Geller — 02 Nov 2002, 17:16 · follows Andy Robertson

On Sat, 2 Nov 2002, James Jordan wrote:

I've been out of the country for this discussion, and have skimmed the posts. A few comments:

1. Gnosticism is just "philosophy + myth." Philosophy, whether Greek or Buddhist,

These are the only two kinds of philosophy?

held that the "world" is corrupt in some essential way,

The more I think about this, the less I am satisfied with it, and the less I think it is true, even if you limit it to Greek philosophy (what about Lucretius? what about Epicurus?) and Buddhist philosophy (what about Theravada? what about dhyana/Ch'an/Zen?).

What about all of these religious philosophers? They aren't really philosophers?

and that the wise man "escapes" from the world through contemplation, contemplating his way out of the "cave."

This is not at all consonant with my understanding of the Cave. Even after you've been outside of the Cave, you still have to go back inside and live there.

Gnosticism popularized this notion, adding myths, and various ritual and esoteric ways of escape (though esotericism is all over Plato, Aristotle, and Pythagoras, if you read them aright). The prophets of Israel preached against all escape, and called the people to involve themselves with the plight of the poor, the oppressed, etc.; and Jesus and the (best) of the Church follows this.

Sure.

Christianity, with its sacraments of water, oil, bread, and wine, and with its central doctrine of physical resurrection, is very "this-worldly,"

So does Plato.

Else why is he so concerned about politics?

preaching redemption and activistic good works, not escape into contemplation.

There's one big difference between the Jewish and the Christian way of looking at things. Judaism says, do the right thing because it is the right thing to do. Christianity doesn't really say do the right thing so that you will go to Heaven: salvation is a gift of grace, not the result of works. I guess when you really look at it a certain way Christianity does say the same thing as Judaism, if works are really inessential to salvation. Still, it is amazing how many people have the impression that people who do good things "go to Heaven" and people who do bad things "go to Hell".

I have to say that I think that this whole focus on Gnosticism in the Book Of The Long Sun is sort of a distraction from the really more interesting things that Gene Wolfe is doing with these books.

James Jordan — 02 Nov 2002, 19:04 · follows Josh Geller

At 11:16 AM 11/2/2002, Josh Geller wrote re: my post on Gnosticism:

I have to say that I think that this whole focus on Gnosticism in the Book Of The Long Sun is sort of a distraction from the really more interesting things that Gene Wolfe is doing with these books.

I tend to agree. So I'll refrain from commenting on the rest of your misgivings. They boil down mainly to detail questions arising from my too-cursury post's infelicities. And there's no great merit in getting into all that here.

Nutria

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 04 Nov 2002, 18:22 · follows James Jordan

Nutria,

It's good to hear your comments, and to the very large extent that we seem to be in agreement I take this as a point in favor of what I've been saying -- not merely because you are, as always, astute, but because you are this list's other vocally professing Christian; I think that our agreement suggests that what we are seeing may well be close to what Wolfe, also a vocally professing Christian, intends, in that we're coming from a similar world view to his.

1. Gnosticism is just "philosophy + myth."
Philosophy, whether Greek or Buddhist, held that the "world" is corrupt in some essential way, and that the wise man "escapes" from the world through contemplation, contemplating his way out of the "cave." Gnosticism popularized this notion, adding myths, and various ritual and esoteric ways of escape (though esotericism is all over Plato, Aristotle, and Pythagoras, if you read them aright).

Pythagoras and Plato, certainly; I'm not as sure about Aristotle, who leaned almost to empiricism at times, or at least this is the impression I get from my limited reading of his work (lecture notes, whatever you want to call it).

But the point that this kind of esotericism is deeply present in Gk philosophy is quite true ... Socrates, if I am not mistaken, was an initiate of the Mysteries; and all the Gk philosophers seem

clear that some people are fit for _sophia_ while the many are not ... an interesting contrast with the Hebrew Wisdom tradition, which arises from the Middle-eastern wisdom literature.

The latter was intended to educate court scribes and officials; this remains clear in especially the earlier Wisdom books of the Hebrew canon, like Proverbs, which have significant hunks of advice about how to behave around kings. But even in the earlier books, it's clear that "wisdom" is something offered to the common Israelite, and which should be sought by everyone ... while plainly stating that there are many individuals (generally referred to as "the fool") who will not.

The other unique aspect of the Hebrew wisdom books, vis-a-vis Gk philosophy and Middle-eastern wisdom literature, is its reliance on relationship with God -- "Fear of God is the beginning of wisdom" is one typical expression of this.

The prophets of Israel preached against all escape, and called the people to involve themselves with the plight of the poor, the oppressed, etc.;

The Law, the Prophets, and the Writings (which is mostly what we would call the wisdom literature) are quite univocal about this; it is the duty of those with enough to concern themselves with the plight of those who do not.

(An interesting take on this, dragging us back momentarily to contemporary fantasy literature and thus to something vaguely similar to the ostensive topic of this list, is Tolkien's "Leaf by Niggle," about a very Tolkien-like artist who wants nothing but to complete his Great Painting and is constantly bothered by his duty to his neighbors. Which, however grudgingly, he does, which ends up being the salvation of both himself and his painting. Grotesque summary, but...)

And actually reaching out to the list topic: Silk and the Narrator continually harp on the plight of the poor of first Viron, and then Blue. One sideline interpretation of one aspect of the Short books would be to consider the inhumani as a divinely-sent scourge, whose menace would be reduced to nuisance if the people would live according to the Law (loving one's neighbors, taking care of society's poor). I do not go so far as to say "Wolfe intended this," but it wouldn't _surprise_ me.

and Jesus and the (best) of the Church follows this. Christianity, with its sacraments of water, oil, bread, and wine, and with its central doctrine of physical resurrection, is very "this-worldly," preaching redemption and activist good works, not escape into contemplation.

Absolutely ... even Catholicism, with all its cloistered and contemplative orders, is tremendously insistent on the physical aspects of religion, which is often referred to as "incarnationalism." The RCC insists on the importance of both the physical substance of the Eucharistic Host, and the physical requirements of the poor. Indeed, I (as a Catholic) believe that it is only by that insistence that the contemplative orders are kept from becoming essentially Manicheeistic in their detachment from "worldly things" -- that, perhaps, is what was necessary when the majority of Protestant churches shucked off the concept of transubstantiation, it was necessary for them to shuck off also the monastic orders ... and vice versa. (I do not here intend to argue for one church over another.)

3. Typhon is, IMO, much like the Demiurge, in that he forms his Whorl out of preexisting matter. Pas rules this Whorl, so he is not a "demiurge" but

merely a "god."

Okay, this is a distinction I had failed to make ... somehow, I have this tendency to think of Typhon and Pas as one entity. My bad. With this distinction, the analogy/allegory becomes much clearer ...

But the Outsider, is just that: outside of it all.
He is the Creator, not a Prime Mover, and the cosmos is not made out of his substance. He is outside of it, not the highest part of it.

Part of the issue, of course, is that the Outsider is Outside because the gods of the Whorl deliberately shut him out -- tried to erase all memory of him when they reprogrammed the original Cargo. But memory of the "long sun Whorl" religion, in trace form, remained, and became part of the Writings, in the few references to the Outsider ... This implies, incidentally, that the Writings were not presented to the people of Viron already-written by Scylla or some other god, but were set down by them in the early days ... so that they are, in a way, roughly analogous to one Christian model of the Old Testament: "a collection of the written records of one people's experiences of God..." the "Book of Silk" taking, presumably, a role similar to that of the NT, something I claimed long ago in my comments that the search for the "facts" behind the BoS is roughly analogous to that of Christians trying to uncover the "facts" of the "historical" Jesus by looking at accounts written years later by people who may or may not have been present at the events. (Luke as much as confesses that he was not; John claims that he was. Matthew and Mark make no direct statements on the subject.)

4. The Outsider as a minor god in Typhon's pantheon is a play on the "Unknown God" of Acts chapter 17.

D'oh! I can't believe I missed that.

... Hence, for Wolfe, as for orthodox Christianity, pagan religions are a mixture of awareness of the truth of an Outside Creator mingled and corrupted by a "scale of being" or "gnostic" or "emanation-hierarchical" view of reality. Thus, Chapter religion has some of both in it. But what is happening is not a "baptizing" of prior paganism, but an extrication from it. It is a mistake to read early and even medieval Christianity as "baptizing" pagan forms.

I think this is too sweeping a statement ... or, perhaps, one that depends on a specific interpretation of "baptizing," different from what many writers mean when they say that, e.g., Christmas "baptises" the Saturnalia. It does not, in the sense that it does not simply take the Saturnalia and substitute Christian names and concepts and otherwise keep the Saturnalia intact. It does, in the sense that baptism is in part an act of exorcism, in which the spirit of sin is driven from the baptised person, to be replaced in their heart by the Holy Spirit of God. In other words, if "baptism" is perceived (as, for example, Paul perceives it) as nothing less than a complete transformation -- a rebirth, a new creation -- then that is precisely what happens to the Saturnalia in the institution of the Feast of the Nativity.

6. Greco-Roman gods and myths were not much different from Semitic/Canaanite ones, and really, Nordic ones were not much different either.

There is so much "point of view" to be taken into account here ... if you take the point of view of someone like Graves or Campbell, you find all manner of similarity, and uncover the Deep Psychic Structures of "all" religions. If you take the point of view of someone like Lewis, you perceive that they are quite different in orientation -- that the Nordic myths, for example, are deeply pessimistic in a way that neither the Greek nor the Middle-eastern myths are. According

to the Norse myths, the monsters will win in the end, and heroism is simply a matter of dying well. Middle-eastern myth believed that the world was created well but became damaged or flawed in some ur-event; most Middle-eastern religious ritual was aimed at bringing back the prelapsarian time, or at least making the present more like it. (Israelite religion, as was usual for Israel, took up this theme and transformed it into something quite different -- yes, the world had Fallen, but no amount of ritual was going to undo that; you had to live in the world as it was. Religion was not aimed at bringing back the golden past but at present blessings.) I don't really see any of these attitudes in "classical" myth.

I don't think sacrificial rituals were much different either.

Again, the purpose seems to have a lot to do with it ... did the Greeks use sacrifice to foretell the future? Their oracular methodologies seemed to involve counting birds or listening to stoned/crazy/inspired (pick and choose) women in a cave. Scrying by entrails of a sacrificial victim is very Middle-eastern.

I don't think we have to debate much "which" of these myths Wolfe is using.

While I'm guilty of this, I suppose I agree.

7. Wolfe did use Qabbalah some in New Sun: Yesodh and Briahh; though there he merely picked up some words to use in connection with an essentially "Catholic" universe.

Well, there's a bit more to it than that, but you're essentially right ... NS literalizes Kabbalistic concepts in the context of a universe in which Catholic Christianity is true. What I've been arguing is that NS does the same for Gnosticism, though at much greater length, and in a way more central to the concerns of the book than Kabbalism is to NS.

If I might put words in his mouth, I would suggest that he is saying that some kind of gnostic/polytheistic understanding of the universe is what everybody naturally thinks until or unless they come to a Christian "creational" view of the universe; and that the psychological process of moving from the former to the latter does not happen overnight, but takes time.

Well said.

But Silk's "enlightenment" does not mean he is moving "up" a gnostic hierarchy into transcendence, but that he is moving "out" of a gnostic view of reality altogether, and can now see these "gods" for what they really are: mere creatures, even if powerful ones.

Yes/no: Silk's "enlightenment" is (I think) very much a gnosis, but one could make the same claim for the calls of Abram and Moses.

9. Finally, since this came up, the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination (speaking as a Calvinistic theologian) is not much different from Augustine's and Aquinas's. Whoever described the "two eye" perspective -- from within time and from outside of time -- pretty well described it.

'twas I. Thank you. (I tend to think that a lot of theological debates can be dissolved by remembering that God is infinite and eternal, and broadening the context of discussion accordingly ...)

The Calvinistic confessions of faith state that this is a matter that should be handled very gingerly and carefully, since to try to think about it very much is to fall into the

sin of playing god.

Whereas the Catholic church would say that theology is "faith seeking understanding" -- as long as we avoid the pride of thinking that we have ever plumbed the depths, that we have actually comprehended God's mind, the attempt to understand what we can is a worthy one.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 04 Nov 2002, 18:35 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Josh wrote:

There's one big difference between the Jewish and the Christian way of looking at things. Judaism says, do the right thing because it is the right thing to do.

Actually, a close reading of the Hebrew scriptures shows that from end to end, Law, Prophets, and Writings ("TaNaK") promise blessings for "doing the right thing," from caring for the widows-and-orphans to maintaining cultic purity, and curses for, well, not doing the right thing. The idea of Heaven-and-Hell do not enter into it (well, maybe a little, very late, in that the very latest Writings seem to suggest a belief that God has care and concern for the dead in Sheol); the blessings are land, prosperity, and descendents, while the curses are poverty, infertility, and death.

Interestingly, the religion of the Chapter is much more concerned with the afterlife than Temple Judaism ever was

-- Judaism, unlike almost all its neighbors, seems to have been almost unconcerned with the afterlife; Greeks, Egyptians, and most Middle-eastern religions all had plenty to say on the subject.

Christianity doesn't really say do the right thing so that you will go to Heaven: salvation is a gift of grace, not the result of works.

Yes/no: this is another of those distinctions that dissolves when the context is broadened. Faith, which is a gift ("gift of grace" is redundant ... look it up), is the one and only way of salvation. But "faith" is actually a very ill-defined term, and some of the NT writers make it clear that "faith" does not exist without works, that a real faith produces works in the faithful. One modern writer (alas, I have lost her name) summed it up in the aphorism: "We are saved by faith alone, but the faith by which we are saved is never alone."

Wolfe, I think, would agree; Silk's enlightenment leads to concrete actions, even if some of them are the result of his misunderstanding what the God wants from him.

I have to say that I think that this whole focus on Gnosticism in the Book Of The Long Sun is sort of a distraction from the really more interesting things that Gene Wolfe is doing with these books.

I don't know about them being more interesting, but they are interesting indeed and there are many, many more of them.

James Jordan — 04 Nov 2002, 19:43 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

At 12:22 PM 11/4/2002, Dan'l wrote:
Nutria,

It's good to hear your comments, and to the very large extent that we seem to be in agreement I take this as a point in favor of what I've been saying -- not merely because you are, as always, astute, but because you are this list's other

vocally professing Christian; I think that our agreement suggests that what we are seeing may well be close to what Wolfe, also a vocally professing Christian, intends, in that we're coming from a similar world view to his.

Thanks. Just a couple of quickies.

Pythagoras and Plato, certainly; I'm not as sure about Aristotle, who leaned almost to empiricism at times, or at least this is the impression I get from my limited reading of his work (lecture notes, whatever you want to call it).

To be sure. But I dimly recall from college days that Aristotle replied to a letter from one of his former students, who expressed concern, that none of the really deep and esoteric stuff had been put down in his lecture notes. All that good stuff had been preserved for the inner circle. But I'm going from ancient memory here.

I think this is too sweeping a statement ... or, perhaps, one that depends on a specific interpretation of "baptizing," different from what many writers mean when they say that, e.g., Christmas "baptises" the Saturnalia. It does not, in the sense that it does not simply take the Saturnalia and substitute Christian names and concepts and otherwise keep the Saturnalia intact. It does, in the sense that baptism is in part an act of exorcism,

Okay. I was not thinking in that particular sense, but in the popular and milder view of what "baptizing something" means. Point granted.

There is so much "point of view" to be taken into account here ... if you take the point of view of someone like Graves or Campbell, you find all manner of similarity, and uncover the Deep Psychic Structures of "all" religions. If you take the point of view of someone like Lewis, you perceive that they are quite different in orientation -- that the Nordic myths, for example, are deeply pessimistic in a way that neither the Greek nor the Middle-eastern myths are.

Right. My bad. Should have left the Nordics out of it.

Thanks.

Nutria

Jerry Friedman — 04 Nov 2002, 23:38 · follows James Jordan

--- Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <ddanehy at siebel.com> wrote:
Nutria,

...

3. Typhon is, IMO, much like the Demiurge, in that he forms his Whorl out of preexisting matter. Pas rules this Whorl, so he is not a "demiurge" but merely a "god."

Okay, this is a distinction I had failed to make ... somehow, I have this tendency to think of Typhon and Pas as one entity. My bad. With this distinction, the analogy/allegory becomes much clearer ...

So when they say "Pas made the whorl", they mean Typhon?

But the Outsider, is just that: outside of it all.
He is the Creator, not a Prime Mover, and the cosmos
is not made out of his substance. He is outside of
it, not the highest part of it.

Part of the issue, of course, is that the Outsider is
Outside because the gods of the Whorl deliberately
shut him out -- tried to erase all memory of him when
they reprogrammed the original Cargo. But memory of the
"long sun Whorl" religion, in trace form, remained, and
became part of the Writings, in the few references to
the Outsider ...

Is there textual evidence that that's the origin of the Outsider?

...

6. Greco-Roman gods and myths were not much different
from Semitic/Canaanite ones, and really, Nordic ones
were not much different either.

There is so much "point of view" to be taken into account
here ... if you take the point of view of someone like Graves
or Campbell, you find all manner of similarity, and uncover
the Deep Psychic Structures of "all" religions. If you take
the point of view of someone like Lewis, you perceive that
they are quite different in orientation -- that the Nordic
myths, for example, are deeply pessimistic in a way that
neither the Greek nor the Middle-eastern myths are. According
to the Norse myths, the monsters will win in the end, and
heroism is simply a matter of dying well.

That's not unknown in the Greek myths, though they don't have such a statement about the
fate of the world (as far as I know). There are similarities that they don't share with "all
religions": both the Greek and Norse pantheons are ruled by father gods, and both have
somewhat shadowy earlier gods (Titans and Vanir). And there are differences. It depends on
what's important to you.

Middle-eastern
myth believed that the world was created well but became
damaged or flawed in some ur-event; most Middle-eastern
religious ritual was aimed at bringing back the prelapsarian
time, or at least making the present more like it. (Israelite
religion, as was usual for Israel, took up this theme and
transformed it into something quite different -- yes, the
world had Fallen, but no amount of ritual was going to undo
that; you had to live in the world as it was. Religion was
not aimed at bringing back the golden past but at present
blessings.) I don't really see any of these attitudes in
"classical" myth.

I don't see a belief in Judaism that the world has fallen. Adam and Eve were punished, partly by
being expelled from Paradise, but the world wasn't changed. (Their descendants didn't become
sinful either.) And in the only other Middle Eastern myth I know, that of Gilgamesh, Paradise still
exists and is reachable by ship. ...

If I might put words in his
[Wolfe's]
mouth, I would suggest that he
is saying that some kind of gnostic/polytheistic

understanding of the universe is what everybody naturally thinks until or unless they come to a Christian "creational" view of the universe; and that the psychological process of moving from the former to the latter does not happen overnight, but takes time.

Well said.

I hope he doesn't believe that! Polytheistic, yes, but not gnostic. If we can guess what everyone "naturally" thinks, it would be animism. The animistic religions I have "a little learning" about, mostly those of the Navajo and Tewa, are far more this-world oriented than any kind of Christianity, and in this sense more or less the opposite of (most?) Gnosticism. ...

Jerry Friedman

Alice K. Turner — 05 Nov 2002, 01:50 · follows Jerry Friedman

Jerry F. responded to Dan'I and Nutria's debate:

mouth, I would suggest that he is saying that some kind of gnostic/polytheistic understanding of the universe is what everybody naturally thinks until or unless they come to a Christian "creational" view of the universe; and that the psychological process of moving from the former to the latter does not happen overnight, but takes time.

Well said.

I hope he doesn't believe that! Polytheistic, yes, but not gnostic. If we can guess what everyone "naturally" thinks, it would be animism. The animistic religions I have "a little learning" about, mostly those of the Navajo and Tewa, are far more this-world oriented than any kind of Christianity, and in this sense more or less the opposite of (most?) Gnosticism.

(This is so parenthetical that I'm putting it in parens, but two more that many know something about (there are hundreds of small ones, mostly tribal) are Rome before they adopted "Greek ways" in their drive to world dominance--but they always kept their household "lares and penates," which Latro dimly recalls--and Japanese Shinto, which was actively promoted in the 20th century as a way of keeping citizens loyal to the Emperor instead of some important--or imported--god. I would go along with that "this-world" guess, though I also think it is "natural" to be awed by the heavens and to have some "other-world" feeling that way.)

Gnostic feeling, however, is not polytheistic. The Alien God is definitely single; the archons stand in for angels, the Demiurge is specifically described as an abortion, or mistake, and certainly not to be worshiped; Sophia is not worshiped. What it has in common with other monotheistic religions is the "knowledge" of the Way, the Truth and the Life and that those who believe [in this] shall be saved. Tough on the rest of you. This is not the religion of the Whorls, which is based on Hellenism. The Neighbors\inhumi dichotomy in, I think, specifically taken from early syncretic Christianity. The notion that Wolfe has borrowed, quite successfully, from Gnosticism is that of the Demiurge (and I don't know why some of you are making a Typhon/Pas split--Wolfe doesn't in his interviews).

(Back in parens: Gnosticism is not monolithic, of course. The Mandaean version had a wonderful space-opera mythology that John Crowley paid tribute to in his invented comic-strip, "Little Enosh: Lost Among the Worlds.")

-alga

James Jordan — 05 Nov 2002, 12:33 · follows Alice K. Turner

At 07:50 PM 11/4/2002, Alga wrote:

(This is so parenthetical that I'm putting it in parens, but two more that many know something about (there are hundreds of small ones, mostly tribal) are Rome before they adopted "Greek ways" in their drive to world dominance--but they always kept their household "lares and penates," which Latro dimly recalls--and Japanese Shinto, which was actively promoted in the 20th century as a way of keeping citizens loyal to the Emperor instead of some important--or imported--god. I would go along with that "this-world" guess, though I also think it is "natural" to be awed by the heavens and to have some "other-world" feeling that way.)

What you tend to find in all "pagan" religions is something like this:

a. Nature gods of streams, woods, etc. Little local gods. Totem tribal spirits. b. Often these are linked with ancestors, who have become spirits somehow. Household gods. Lares and Penates. Totem poles and masks. c. Sky gods, associated with government. The big gods. And medium gods associated with particular cities. Vesta in Rome. d. Some kind of "god behind the gods" with whom we have no contact. (Though there are those who question how much the "great spirit" really exists for "pagan" people.)

In any culture, it becomes a matter of emphasis. Small tribes go mostly with local gods and ancestors. Large citified or imperial cultures move more into sky/government gods -- their horizon has been enlarged. But even the things in the sky are mostly animal constellations, though they get linked up with more humaniform gods "behind" them.

So, I agree that the Romans were influenced by the Greek pantheon, but I think it would not be completely correct to say that they did not have something pretty similar before they began to move out into the world.

Parenthetically yours,

Nutria

James Jordan — 05 Nov 2002, 12:39 · follows James Jordan

At 05:38 PM 11/4/2002, you wrote:

Middle-eastern

myth believed that the world was created well but became damaged or flawed in some ur-event; most Middle-eastern religious ritual was aimed at bringing back the prelapsarian time, or at least making the present more like it. (Israelite religion, as was usual for Israel, took up this theme and transformed it into something quite different -- yes, the world had Fallen, but no amount of ritual was going to undo that; you had to live in the world as it was. Religion was not aimed at bringing back the golden past but at present blessings.) I don't really see _any_ of these attitudes in "classical" myth.

I don't see a belief in Judaism that the world has fallen. Adam and Eve were punished, partly by being expelled from Paradise, but the world wasn't changed. (Their descendants didn't become sinful either.) And in the only other Middle Eastern myth I know, that of Gilgamesh, Paradise

still exists and is reachable by ship.

The world is not fallen in the sense of being sinful, but is it "under a curse for the sake of humanity" so that it does not cooperate with sinful humanity. Hence, only as humanity shapes up will the world return toward paradise. The issue in Middle Eastern religion can from this perspective be boiled down to this: Does the world get renewed as a result of bargaining with various gods, and/or as a result of doing rituals right, and/or as a result of searching for paradise; OR does the world get renewed as a result of the spiritual/moral renewal of humanity (the Jewish/Christian answer)?

I would suggest that as time went along, and thought matured, the former answer devolved into gnosticism: the world is cursed in itself, and thus a bad place. The early Church had to answer that the world is good in itself, and that "only man is vile." A "new earth" is coming, but only when humanity is redeemed and resurrected.

FWIW

Nutria

Adam Stephanides — 06 Nov 2002, 02:41 · follows James Jordan

on 11/4/02 7:50 PM, Alice K. Turner at aturner6 at nyc.rr.com wrote:
(and I don't know why
some of you are making a Typhon/Pas split--Wolfe doesn't in his interviews).

Whether or not he makes it in his interviews, it is clearly present in the books. Typhon is the ruler of Urth who built the Whorl; Pas is a copy of Typhon's personality that was downloaded into a computer. One could say that Pas is Typhon in the sense that Silk-in-Mainframe is Silk; but the entity that ordered the Whorl to be built was killed by Severian on Urth.

--Adam

Adam Stephanides — 06 Nov 2002, 02:41 · follows Adam Stephanides

on 11/1/02 10:24 AM, James Wynn at crushtv at HotPOP.com wrote:
Well, we do know that in the Long Sun, the Outsider is the acknowledged creator of humans (from mud) in the Chrasmmological Writings (I think this is in LS 2).

I'd forgotten this; which means that the analogy between Pas and the Demiurge, and the case for a gnostic influence on the Long Sun books, are even weaker than I thought. I see no reason not to regard the "cosmology" of the Long Sun as a product of Wolfe's views on the existence of pagan "gods" combined with the generation-starship trope, with any resemblance to Gnosticism being accidental.

--Adam

Jerry Friedman — 06 Nov 2002, 19:59 · follows Adam Stephanides

--- James Jordan <jbjordan4 at cox.net> wrote:

...

What you tend to find in all "pagan" religions is something like this:

a. Nature gods of streams, woods, etc. Little local gods. Totem tribal spirits.

- b. Often these are linked with ancestors, who have become spirits somehow.
Household gods. Lares and Penates. Totem poles and masks.
- c. Sky gods, associated with government. The big gods. And medium gods associated with particular cities. Vesta in Rome.
- d. Some kind of "god behind the gods" with whom we have no contact.

I think "all 'pagan' religions" is an exaggeration. Probably mostly civilized cultures have "big gods" associated with government.

(Though there are those who question how much the "great spirit" really exists for "pagan" people.)

I've talked with one Native American woman who was very strongly against the ideas of one God and one Truth, but I don't know whether that opposition was part of her tribe's traditions or more a response to the damage done to them by monotheists.

In any culture, it becomes a matter of emphasis. Small tribes go mostly with local gods and ancestors.

I agree, but I might say "only" rather than "mostly".

Large citified or imperial cultures move more into sky/government gods -- their horizon has been enlarged.

And subjugation, whether of foreigners or their own peasants, becomes more important to them. ...

Jerry Friedman

Adam Stephanides — 07 Nov 2002, 23:36 · follows Jerry Friedman

on 11/4/02 12:22 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes at ddanehy at siebel.com wrote:
Part of the issue, of course, is that the Outsider is Outside because the gods of the Whorl deliberately shut him out -- tried to erase all memory of him when they reprogrammed the original Cargo. But memory of the "long sun Whorl" religion, in trace form, remained, and became part of the Writings, in the few references to the Outsider ... This implies, incidentally, that the Writings were not presented to the people of Viron already-written by Scylla or some other god, but were set down by them in the early days ...

I see some problems with this:

- 1) Did Typhon, then, fail to provide scriptures for his invented religion? If so, why? If not, what happened to them?
- 2) Iirc, the Writings were a melange of quotes from a variety of sources; James Jordan mentioned "Marcus Aurelius in the Chrasomological writings" in another post. I could see Wolfe positing that traces of the true religion survived all efforts by Typhon to erase it; that he would have posited the same thing for Marcus Aurelius seems less likely.
- 3) Assuming that you are correct about the Writings' origin, if Pas et al did not want people to worship or remember the Outsider, why didn't they announce that the parts of the Writings

mentioning the Outsider were heretical and should be removed?

--Adam

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 08 Nov 2002, 00:55 · follows Adam Stephanides

-----Original Message-----

From: Adam Stephanides [mailto:adamsteph at earthlink.net]

Sent: Thursday, November 07, 2002 3:36 PM

To: urth at urth.net

Subject: Re: (urth) Gnostic Wolfe

on 11/4/02 12:22 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes at ddanehy at siebel.com wrote:

Part of the issue, of course, is that the Outsider is Outside because the gods of the Whorl deliberately shut him out -- tried to erase all memory of him when they reprogrammed the original Cargo. But memory of the "long sun Whorl" religion, in trace form, remained, and became part of the Writings, in the few references to the Outsider ...

This implies, incidentally, that the Writings were not presented to the people of Viron already-written by Scylla or some other god, but were set down by them in the early days ...

1) Did Typhon, then, fail to provide scriptures for his invented religion? If so, why? If not, what happened to them?

If he had, you'd think there would have been just the one religion, instead of the "Vironese Faith," the Islam-like faith of the -- oh, darn, I'm blanking on the city's name -- the Hindu-ish worship of Gaon, etc. Or are you suggesting that he provided a different religion for each and every city? I mean, sure, it's possible that he might have done so, but it doesn't seem like the way a megalomaniac does things.

OTOH, he does seem to have individualized the cities themselves somewhat.

I'm imagining the reprogrammed Cargo waking up on the _Whorl_, finding the Windows in whatever sort of temples or manteions or whatever their city has, and receiving The Revelation Of Pas in which he sets forth his, well, standing orders. Nobody writes them down right away, and the religion in each city tends to fall into the old patterns of its people, mingled with random badly-erased memories, etc., and eventually written down in the Writings and whatever each of the other cities write it down in.

2) Iirc, the Writings were a melange of quotes from a variety of sources; James Jordan mentioned "Marcus Aurelius in the Chasmological writings" in another post. I could see Wolfe positing that traces of the true religion survived all efforts by Typhon to erase it; that he would have posited the same thing for Marcus Aurelius seems less likely.

Yes, at least some of the quotes we have from the Writings are indeed from various sources. (I'm pretty sure I recall something from Isaiah, too.) But I'm not sure that we should read all that much into it -- there are at least two good reasons for it to be the way it is:

A) It is (or contains) remembered scraps -- as you say, a

melange -- of stuff that didn't get wiped properly; or,
B) Why should Wolfe, who doesn't bother to make up new words,
write a new Word when there's lots of good stuff lying
around in public domain that will sound ancient and holy?

3) Assuming that you are correct about the Writings' origin,
if Pas et al did not want people to worship or remember the
Outsider, why didn't they announce that the parts of the
Writings mentioning the Outsider were heretical and should
be removed?

I'll answer that question with two questions:

Why assume that he cares? The purpose _from Pas's point of view_ wasn't to shut out the One True God; he doesn't believe in any One True God. His purpose was to wipe out the memories of all other religions (which are equal in his eyes, in that they don't serve his purpose) so _he_ can be God. That wiping out works imperfectly, and results in all sorts of accretions to his "state religion," but the Outsider is -- to him -- just one more "minor god."

Why in the _Whorl_ do you imagine that Pas has ever bothered to _read_ the Chrasmmological Writings -- I rather doubt he has, I rather doubt he _cares_. He's getting worship and obedience (right up to the point where Echidna and the sprats off him); he's happy as a clam.

matthew.malthouse — 08 Nov 2002, 08:40 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

On 07/11/2002 23:36:17 Adam Stephanides wrote:
on 11/4/02 12:22 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes at ddanehy at siebel.com wrote:

Part of the issue, of course, is that the Outsider is
Outside because the gods of the Whorl deliberately
shut him out -- tried to erase all memory of him when
they reprogrammed the original Cargo. But memory of the
"long sun Whorl" religion, in trace form, remained, and
became part of the Writings, in the few references to
the Outsider ... This implies, incidentally, that the
Writings were not presented to the people of Viron
already-written by Scylla or some other god, but were
set down by them in the early days ...

I see some problems with this:

1) Did Typhon, then, fail to provide scriptures for his invented
religion?

If so, why? If not, what happened to them?

I can't see that the religious environment set up to support Pas and his family as gods of the Whorl could have worked in any fashion unless Pas did indeed provide the founding scripture.

Did the original inhabitants not have their memories adjusted to make it appear as if the Whorl were their proper home? To have memory of a religion without its support structure - scripture - would have left a hole very damaging to that preparation.

2) Iirc, the Writings were a melange of quotes from a variety of sources;
James Jordan mentioned "Marcus Aurelius in the Chrasmmological writings"

in

another post. I could see Wolfe positing that traces of the true
religion

survived all efforts by Typhon to erase it; that he would have posited the same thing for Marcus Aurelius seems less likely.

Religious writings that evolve retain traces of their precursors, often whole tranches verbatim. The same is generally true of attempts to create new things - viz almost any of the extant cults around the world. It seems to me that Pas/Typhon was constructing a tool for control as a pragmatic exercise not one of conviction. He, or those he set to the task, would be more likely than not to crib what existed where it seemed to serve the purpose. That traces of other things remained to be found should be no surprise.

3) Assuming that you are correct about the Writings' origin, if Pas et al did not want people to worship or remember the Outsider, why didn't they announce that the parts of the Writings mentioning the Outsider were heretical and should be removed?

I don't find it likely that Typhon believed in deity as the writings present it. He'd know of the galactic powers and possibly those that stand above them but would he give credence to some godhead such as the Outsider when in Typhon's world (personally and politically) I doubt he would admit to there being any power stronger than he.

Thus there would be no motive to remove possible references while preparing the writings and once the Whorl was running to have declared part of the sacred writings heretical would have allowed the entry of doubt, the possibility that other parts might not be as sacred or as necessary as the worshipers were supposed to believe. Such a move could potentially have been extremely damaging to what might perhaps be the gods of Manframe's most powerful tool of social control.

Matthew