

Yes he is! No he isn't! Yes he is...

The Urth list — 6 messages, 5 voices, 19 Jan 2003

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3773>

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Nigel Price — 19 Jan 2003, 15:29

Also Sprach Zibethicus:

Notwithstanding this, I think that my
point about retaining a cautious distinction
between theological and fictional intentions
is still, possibly, a partially valid one.

I've always been fascinated by the perplexing business of what Wolfe actually believes and what he puts into his stories simply because he happens to find it interesting.

When I first encountered his books and before I knew anything about Wolfe the man, I remember thinking, "Gosh, I wonder whether the person who wrote this is a Christian?" Looking at the evidence as I read first TBotNS and then FLF and various other volumes, I was alternately going to myself, "Yes, he must be!" and "No! He can't be!"

I know a little more about Wolfe now, but I still don't think I've got to the bottom of the matter. It's complicated. He genuinely seems to like playing about with odd theological ideas that he's come across, teasing out their implications and extrapolating them very much in the way that more traditional SF authors treat speculative scientific and technological ideas. As a typically uptight and repressed Protestant Evangelical, Wolfe's dabbling with speculative philosophical and theological ideas makes my (admittedly scant) hair stand on end. =:O)> Of course, just because Wolfe puts an idea in one of his stories doesn't necessarily mean that he thinks that it's true.

But then again, he just might. By his own account, Wolfe is not entirely orthodox in his Catholicism. I know about some of his individual quirks and eccentricities, but by no means all. Contributors to this list sometimes say, "Wolfe is a Catholic and therefore he believes such and such," or "Wolfe is a Christian and therefore believes this thing and that." When I read such assertions, I'm usually sitting there mumbling, "Maybe," and "Possibly!"

For the record, my guess is that "Westwind" and "The Detective of Dreams" are among the most explicit fictional expressions of Wolfe's personal faith. But I could be wrong...

Nigel

James Jordan — 20 Jan 2003, 18:30 · follows Nigel Price

At 09:29 AM 1/19/2003, you wrote:

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Nigel

Well, since my interview and conversations around that time centered on Wolfe's religious beliefs, I can chime in a bit. Wolfe sees himself as a thoroughly orthodox RC, but with a bit more thrown in. He has said things in interviews like, "I'm an RC, but don't think you know what that means"

-- which is certainly true enough these days. It does not mean "I'm RC, but on a quasi-heretical fringe." It just means most people don't really know much about RC.

I think he's a kind of post-Vatican II conservative. That is, not a reactionary, but not a liberal at all either. He's happy to say that protestants like you and me are true brothers, not hellbound apostates. And he holds to theistic evolution, of a Lamarkian sort. He's read Aquinas, but I think the main religious influences on him are probably C.S.Lewis and Chesterton. He's a fan of both, and claims to have read everything by them. That's pretty "mainstream Christian."

"Westwind" and "Detective" often come up on short lists of his personal favorites. And they're very orthodox.

Where Wolfe might be "off" from Catholicism, in general, would be in secondary areas, such as his belief in the reality of ghosts. But when he writes a story about Lilith as Adam's first wife, it's pure fiction. Wolfe's Catholicism lets him toy with a (created) neoplatonic universe, as in the Urth cycles, but as a Calvinist I can also toy with that worldview in fiction also. How much such toying reflects what Wolfe actually thinks might be so is another question.

But I don't think Wolfe strays far from the tradition in his personal beliefs.

FWIW.

Nutria

Ryan Thistlethwaite — 20 Jan 2003, 21:47 · follows James Jordan

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

From: "Nigel Price" <nigel.a.price at virgin.net>

To: <urth at urth.net>

Sent: Monday, January 20, 2003 2:29 AM

Subject: (urth) Yes he is! No he isn't! Yes he is...

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Nigel

Not really a rivetting expose of a post I'm throwing in, but I felt a good "Hear, Hear!" was due for Nigel's post. Maybe you could say that the sum of the parts equals the whole, but the whole does not necessarily equal the sum of the parts. I have also been of the mind for a long time that an artist's(read: person's) work is not necessarily the living embodiment of their beliefs and thoughts... except in a round-a-bout philosophical way. "It's his so it must represent his thoughts even if not intended...." Sometimes we say things we regret. Sometimes we write things we don't believe. Sometimes we don't know what we believe. Sometimes we need 100 more words to finish a story, ANY 100. Sometimes something looks pretty so we use it. A bit vague I guess, but the point I'm trying to make as regards to Nigel's post is that the membership in an organisation of any type does not mean we agree or even think about the Dogma of that organisation. How many of you passionately agree with everything your company's employee handbook has to say... Oh look, 2 CEO's....

Peace

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 20 Jan 2003, 23:25 · follows Ryan Thistlethwaite

Ryan writes ...

membership in an organisation of any type does not mean we agree or even think about the Dogma of that organisation. How many of you passionately agree with everything your company's employee handbook has to say... Oh look, 2 CEO's....

It seems to me that membership in an organization and belief in a religious faith are two quite different things. Obviously it is possible to be a Catholic and not believe in each and every dogma of the Catholic church -- indeed, it's obvious enough that there's a name for it: "Cafeteria Catholics," those who take the meat and potatoes

and dessert but not the yucky vegetables, as it were. "I'll have some of that and some of that, but none of _that_ please." Note that the term is considered disparaging within Catholic culture.

On the other hand, and this is the real point, what someone believes, deep down, will definitely have a powerful influence on their decision-making process -- including, but not limited to, their creative decisions. Those odd hundred words needed to finish the story -- well, assuming that Wolfe managed to get himself into a position where he needed to fill out a story by a hundred words, I think we can feel pretty certain he

wouldn't do it by adding a kung-fu scene where Satan opens a can of whup-ass on Jesus. If you see what I mean.

Alex David Groce — 21 Jan 2003, 00:31 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Ryan Thistlethwaite wrote:

A bit vague I guess, but the point I'm trying to make as regards to Nigel's post is that the membership in an organisation of any type does not mean we agree or even think about the Dogma of that organisation. How many of you passionately agree with everything your company's employee handbook has to say... Oh look, 2 CEO's....

True, but from his fiction it seems unlikely that Wolfe has the same relationship to the Catholic Church that most people have to their employers. Wolfe clearly does think about Dogma, and in temperament seems to me unlikely to find himself comfortable with being Catholic while disagreeing with much of Catholic dogma. On the other hand, orthodoxy on core points declared by the Church leaves a great deal of room for "oddity." Nutria's example of ghosts comes to mind--Russell Kirk and Gene Wolfe can believe in ghosts and be quite orthodox Catholics. As could G. K. Chesterton. And I suspect R. A. Lafferty was both about as orthodox as you get and believed what most people (and most Catholics) would call six impossible things before breakfast.

I'm rereading SHORT SUN now, by the way, but so far I have absolutely nothing to say to the list about it other than "I still like these books, and I still don't understand most of the things I didn't understand the first time."

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

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Alex David Groce (agroce+ at cs.cmu.edu)

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 21 Jan 2003, 16:18 · follows Alex David Groce

Alex David Groce wrote:

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[...etc...]

Yes: Chesterton once observed that -- paraphrasing from memory -- "Catholics agree about everything; it is only everything else we disagree about." A Catholic's approach to the dogmas of the Church is generally, well, dogmatic; however, despite what such fine minds as Jack Chick have "proven" over and over again, that still leaves a huge range of play for individual opinions

on a wide variety of topics ...

Wolfe has never, to the best of my knowledge, written anything that so much as suggests that he is anything but an orthodox Catholic. His approach to things like pagan gods, in books like "Doors" and "Soldier of Foo," seem to me reminiscent of -- and here's that C* F* thing again -- Tolkien's approach to the Valar: not in detail, but in the attitude of, "well, if the Universe we live in is _thus_, what room does it leave for these beings the ancients called 'gods?' How can I write about them, assuming their actual existence, without denying the truth of the faith?" Tolkien's answer was to make the Valar angelic beings; Wolfe seems to have answered the question in ... other ... ways.