

Theological Science Fiction (Was: Silk for calde blog: Wolfe thesis)

The Urth list — 5 messages, 5 voices, 22 Sep 2009

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5492>

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Kieran Mullen — 22 Sep 2009, 20:34

As a Catholic research physicist, theological science fiction has long been an interest of mine. I have toyed with teaching a course on the topic but am not sure if I am competent to do so (I have only an undergraduate major in theology and no graduate training in literature or theology).

I wouldn't quite go with the two choices you select for priests in SF (affirmation/debunking). When I think about it, I first think about the "author's cosmology" first -

- (1) There is a transcendent being/reality.
 - (a) It agrees to some degree with the character's religious views.
 - (b) It contradicts the character's religious views.
- (2) There is no transcendent being.
 - (a) The protagonist goes through some sort of spiritual crisis.
 - (b) The protagonist struggles against those who mistakenly think there is.
- (3) The author leaves it ambiguous.

Stories of the 1a variety are not always happy - James Blish's "Black Easter," for example. One of my favorite type (3)'s is Blish's "A Case of Conscience." An example of 1b is Phillip Farmer's "Mask of Chaos," in which the characters vie for influence on a sort of universe-consciousness that is only starting to come to sentience.

Anyway, I have a lot of collections/novels in this vein. Has anyone organized a course around such ideas?

Kieran Mullen

Adam Thornton — 22 Sep 2009, 21:07 · in reply to Kieran Mullen

On Sep 22, 2009, at 3:34 PM, Kieran Mullen wrote:

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I don't think A Case of Conscience is at ALL ambiguous.

I also think it started out promising and then went in precisely the least interesting direction it could have gone. Not a fan. Russ Allbery has put it well here: <http://www.eyrie.org/~eagle/reviews/books/0-345-24480-X.html>

Adam

David Duffy — 22 Sep 2009, 21:41 · in reply to Kieran Mullen

On Tue, 22 Sep 2009, Kieran Mullen wrote:
Conscience." An example of 1b is Phillip Farmer's "Mask of Chaos,"

A nice nosology. Except PJF's Night of Light is 1a and 1b, isn't it?

There *is* one stereotypic story, of course: aliens martyr missionary because they think this is the kindest thing to do. I was recently reading Lem's version of this in The Star Diaries.

Cheers, David Duffy.

Russ Allbery — 23 Sep 2009, 00:04 · in reply to Adam Thornton

Adam Thornton <adam at io.com> writes:

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To be fair, I should note that I read that book in complete isolation of the surrounding context, and a recent NYRSF contains a cogent argument that I should have read it in context with Dr. Mirabilis, Black Easter, and The Day After Judgement. Based on that essay (the author of which I don't recall and don't have with me, alas), I'm at least open to the possibility I could have seen a lot more in it.

It remains the case, however, that I thought (and think) the writing is mechanically poor, which is a big impediment to enjoying it.

I'll second the recommendation for Mary Doria Russell's The Sparrow, which I thought was an excellent treatment of the interaction between religious faith and first contact with respectful treatment of the capabilities of religion, although that one is definitely in the crisis of faith category. (There's a sequel, Children of God, which I have not yet read.)

Russ Allbery (rra at stanford.edu) <<http://www.eyrie.org/~eagle/>>

James Crossley — 23 Sep 2009, 00:43 · in reply to Russ Allbery

On 9/22/09 5:04 PM, "Russ Allbery" <rra at stanford.edu> wrote:
Adam Thornton <adam at io.com> writes:

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Just wanted to throw out a mention of an anthology many of you might already know, A Cross of Centuries: Twenty-five Imaginative Tales about the Christ, edited by Michael Bishop. Seemed relevant.

James