

Severian as Christian (?)

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 25 Jun 1997

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Jim Jordan — 25 Jun 1997, 01:30

Discussion transferred from Whorl list.

Slimey Alga wrote:

Ratty,

I define a Christian as someone who believes that he or she will attain eternal salvation through Jesus Christ. Severian has never heard of Jesus Christ, and he himself has brought salvation (through destruction) to Urth.

Whoa! Agia refers to the Theanthropos in 1:21. Also, in that chapter the woman missionary (Marie - Mary) is reading from the Urth equivalent of Deuteronomy 34. (1:21 = Shadow, ch. 21).

How does that make him a Christian (please don't cite Wolfe's interview since he isn't here to defend what he actually meant, and I think we'd agree that he is tricky)? Perhaps you are using Christian in the old-fashioned sense of being a good person, or "one of us." I can't accept that, having known many good people of other faiths (or none). I can accept Severian as a Christ avatar, however.

I can't, but see below. Christians are "little Christs," and Severian is such.

Kevin writes:

I would argue (respectfully, of course) that regardless of Wolfe's intentionality, Severian is for my money, a Christ figure, without being a Christian (in the sense of modern christianity). Not to belabour the point, but Severian healed the sick, raised the dead (and for good measure saves humanity entirely by restarting the red sun) and, like the Fisher King, was lame. Obviously there is no direct correspondence between all Severian's actions and those of Christ - I think Wolfe is writing much more than a mere allegory.

Nutria: I agree that Severian's story is not an allegory of Christ's life and work. Rather, Severian is Christ-like in the way Christians are, except that in the case of Severian, Wolfe is painting a very large canvas.

Kevin: Silk, on the other hand, is much farther removed from the miraculous tradition that Severian embodies. Silk strikes me as a penitent and truthful man who gradually discovers that the tradition he followed is not the embodiment of goodness that he had taken it to be, and must discover a new path of enlightenment (or perhaps have one thrust upon him, by revelation) - perhaps more similar to Paul than Christ.

Nutria: Quite so, but as I pointed out in my first posting to Whorl list, the story of Silk IS allegorically based on the life and work of Jesus. Thus, Severian and Silk are each Christlike, but in quite different ways.

Kevin: Mythologically inclined folks might want to comment that just as Severian is a Christ figure, he also represents (ala Joe Campbell) a heroic tradition that is far broader and older than

Christianity proper, and I have no problem with that.

Nutria: No problem from me here. Both Silk and Severian include other elements also.

Rock wrote:

With respect, I flat-out don't understand how it can be so. A Christian is, by definition, a follower of Jesus Christ. (This is the minimum criterion, you can pile on as much theological baggage as you wish.) Christ is unknown in Severian's universe, so Severian cannot follow him. Therefore, Severian is not a Christian.

Nutria: Nope. See the reference to the Theanthropos above, and the entirety of 1:21. Now, we certainly aren't told by Severian much of anything about his religious beliefs, and he certainly has a long way to go in his own personal life -- but Wolfe routinely conceals some of the most important stuff. We do see Severian offer the occasional prayer to the Increate/Pancreator (God), and we do know that there is a God-man Savior in the history of Urth, and we do know that there were once missionaries proclaiming the gospel. Now, is there some point in the narrative at which Severian has a conversion experience? If there is, it is as well concealed as the identity of his mother. And even if no such experience can be discerned in the narrative, that does not mean Severian did not know about the Christ of the Urth universe.

Rock: There is, perhaps, some ambiguity in what Wolfe told you. Perhaps he meant that though Severian is in no way meant to _be_ Christ or someone like Christ (this would make the New Sun books heretical, after all), he is trying to live a Christ-like life. You don't have to be a Christian to do this--you don't even have to know who Christ is. But if you are doing it, then you may be said to have a "Christian character".

Nutria: I think he meant more. We did discuss it at some length. He means that the Original Holy Life lived by Jesus Christ is being extended in Severian's own life in the same way it is extended in the lives of Christians. Severian is a man who is in the process of learning what it means to trust God and do right things.

Rostrum writes:

Others have pointed out that Severian seems to fill the "Christ figure" definition in several ways (working miracles, saving the world), but the things that most often cause a character to be compared to Christ are sacrificial death or suffering for others and some form of death, burial, and resurrection. Using those two criteria, I'd say Silk (ObWhorl!) fits the bill for "Christ figure" more than Severian, and neither one fits as well as, say, Tom Joad in _The Grapes of Wrath_ (trying to dredge up a "Christ figure" from high school English classes and probably getting the name wrong) or Tolkein's Aragorn.

Nutria: I agree. Silk's life actually tracks the life of Jesus, while Severian's does not. Now, another dimension of that may be that Silk is a cleric, while Severian is not.

Rostrum: Wolfe may also be thinking that, to be a "Christ figure" in the Urth multiverse, one would have to literally be the Increate (aka the Outsider) Incarnate. Maybe, as a Christian, Wolfe dislikes the idea of any character but Jesus being called a "Christ figure".

Nutria: I agree.

To Mantis and others interested:

Along the lines of the possibility of the Spaceport's also being a perverse Cathedral, note:

Witches Keep as perverse Convent of nuns.

Bear Tower as perverse Franciscans (Francis and the animals).

So, does St. Catherine play an important role in any of the monastic orders?

Also, notice 1:21, sixth paragraph, where Severian says that the missionary church hut is the bright equivalent of his own dark tower.

Finally, a possible subtlety: Both Father Inire and the Isangoma (1:20 & 21) are looking for a fish. The word "fish" is capitalized in the first story. Both stories are about people other than the narrator. The Fish is a symbol of Christ and the Church. Father Inire is calling the Fish into existence from nothingness, implying that the Church is a reflection of Nothing. This would clearly be a counterfeit. Isangoma's nephew looks for a fish, thinks he sees the Fisher King, and then sees a woman's face superimposed on it. The Fisher King is Christ, and the woman's face is the face of Christ in the world through the Church. Isangoma, however, is not ready to convert. He worships the Proud One, not the Humble One (the Theanthropos). It is immediately after Isangoma refers to Numen, the Proud One, that Agia refers to the Theanthropos. The noumenal is the beyond, the ineffable and unknowable. In Christ (the God-man), the Noumenal is made tangible and is revealed, but not as Proud, rather as Humble. BTW, I very much enjoyed your fine essay on the Garden of Endless Sleep. All I would add, by way of asking what you think, is that this Garden would be the Garden of Eden, and the avern (from another world) would be the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which threatens to kill.

I was not persuaded by the other two essays in the same collection, though I do think he is on to something.

Just some grist for our collective Mill.

Nutria