EARTHSEED: USES OF FICTION IN SPIRITUAL BELIEF AND PRACTICE

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OVERVIEW

- Two related concepts
  - Influence of fiction on spirituality
  - "Invented Religions"
- Personal and Academic
- Spiritual validity
- Clusters of interest

RELIGION

- Definition of Religion? Of a "Real Religion"?
- Religions defined as a distinct part of culture:
  - Awareness of non-Western belief systems
  - Process of secularization in 17th-18th centuries
  - Family resemblances model
- Assumed origins of "real religions":
  - Revealed Religions (origin in divine)
  - Ancient Religions (no identifiable origin)

BROADENING THE CATEGORY

- Cults, NRMs (New Religious Movements), quasi-religions, pseudo-religions, "spiritual but not religious," "Nones," etc.

- Natural Religion

  - Catherine Albanese: "religious movement that believes the natural world is an embodiment of divinity, sacredness or spiritual power"

  - Peter Beyer (1998): "[I]ncluded under the heading of nature religion would be modern witchcraft/Wicca and Neo-Paganism, various revitalised aboriginal spiritual traditions, movements that appropriate aspects of aboriginal spirituality but consist mostly of non-aboriginals, neo-shamanistic groups, various portions of environmental movements, some feminist movements, certain 'New Age' movements, and movement within traditional religions such as Christian creation spirituality. This list could vary somewhat and I certainly do not want to suggest that such classification is an unambiguous matter."

SCHOLARLY DEFINITIONS

- Emile Durkheim - "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things."

- Mircea Eliade – "As I doubt the value of beginning with a definition of the religious phenomenon, I am simply going to examine various 'hierophanies'—taking that term in its widest sense as anything that manifests the sacred."

- James Frazer - "a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct or control the course of nature and human life."

- William James - "the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto."

- Immanuel Kant - "the recognition of all our duties as divine commands."

- Karl Marx - "the self-conscious and self-feeling of man who has either not found himself or has already lost himself again"

- Rodney Stark - "any socially organized pattern of beliefs and practices concerning ultimate meaning that assumes the existence of the supernatural."

- Alfred North Whitehead - "what the individual does with his own solitariness."

- Paul Tillich - "Religious is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern"

SCHOLARLY DEFINITIONS

- Clifford Geertz: "A religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."

- Ninian Smart - "a set of institutionalized rituals identified with a tradition and expressing and/or evoking sacral sentiments directed at a divine or trans-divine focus seen in the context of the human phenomenological environment and at least partially described by myths or by myths and doctrines."

- Russell McCutcheon: "those beliefs, behaviors, and social institutions that have something to do with speculations on any, and all, of the following: the origin, end and significance of the universe; what happens after death; the existence and wishes of powerful, non-human beings such as spirits, ancestors, angels, demons and gods; and the manner in which all of this shapes human behavior."

DEFINING RELIGION

- Why is this so hard?

  - Approach has been to start with what we "know" are religions, and find common denominators

  - Family similarities model

- A practioners, or insiders, definition does not meet to match a scholars, or outsiders

INVENTED RELIGIONS

- Carole Cusack suggests the term "Invented religions" in a book of same title for religious based on fictional sources

  - Explicitly reject or disregard claims of revelation or historical authenticity

  - Openly appeal to fiction or acknowledge fictional status

  - Views parody, play, and the ludic as legitimate sources of meaning

INVENTED RELIGIONS

- UFO religions
  - Aetherius Society, Scientology, Heaven's Gate, Raëlism
- Church of All Worlds (incorporated 1968)
  - Oberon Zell-Ravenheart and Richard Lance Christie
  - Robert Heinlein, Stranger in a Strange Land
- Discordianism (1963)
  - Eris, Goddess of Chaos and Discord
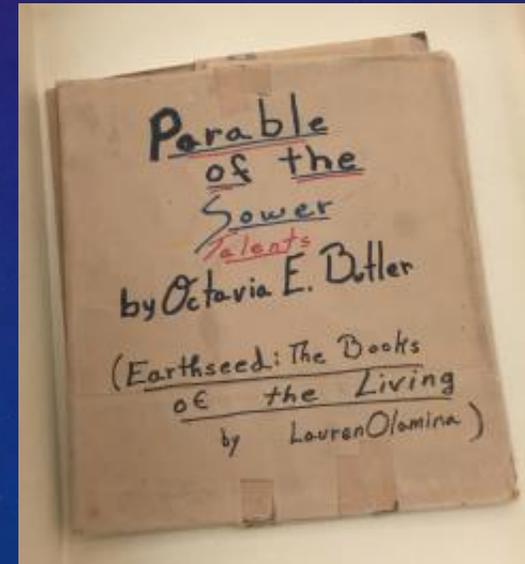 - Parody religion?

INVENTED RELIGIONS

- Jediism
  - 2001 census 390,000 UK and 90,000 Austrian citizens identified as "Jedi Knights"
  - 4th largest of religion in the UK
  - Temple of the Jedi Order
    - "We are a Jedi church and international ministry of the religion Jediism and the Jedi way of life. Jedi at this site are not the same as those portrayed within the Star Wars franchise. Star Wars Jedi are fictional characters that exist within a literary and cinematic universe. We are a recognized International Ministry and Public Charity."

PERSONAL INFLUENCES

- Bulfinch's Mythology

- Michael Moorcock

- J. R. R. Tolkien

- Star Trek

- Babylon 5

- Ursula Le Guin

- Octavia Butler

OCTAVIA BUTLER

- Parable of the Sower (1993)
  - Set in dystopian Los Angeles, Lauren Oya Olamina shapes her own faith into a religious community
  - Hyperempathy
- Butler calls Lauren her "super-me," the "me I wish I was."
- Earthseed: The Books of the Living
- Multiple sequels planned, but not written

EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

God is Power---
Infinite,
Irresistible,
Inexorable,
Indifferent.
And yet, God is Pliable---
Trickster,
Teacher,
Chaos,
Clay.
God exists to be shaped.
God is Change.

All that you touch
You Change.
All that you Change
Changes you.
The only lasting truth
Is Change.
God
Is Change.

Kindness eases change.

EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

We do not worship God.
We perceive and attend God.
We learn from God.
With forethought and work,
We shape God.
In the end, we yield to God.
We adapt and endure,
For we are Earthseed,
And God is Change.

The Destiny of Earthseed
Is to take root among the stars.

Civilization is to groups what intelligence is to individuals. It is a means of combining the intelligence of many to achieve ongoing group adaptation.

Civilization, like intelligence, may serve well, serve adequately, or fail to serve its adaptive function. When civilization fails to serve, it must disintegrate unless it is acted upon by unifying internal or external forces.

EARTHSEED-INSPIRED RELIGIONS

- Real World Religions and Movements
  - Terrasem Movement (terasemfaith.net)
    - A "transreligion" teaching "God is technological" and "death is optional"
  - Solseed Movement (solseed.org)
    - Describes itself as "quasi-religious"
  - Earthseed (godischange.org)
    - Humanistic Pagan

IS EARTHSEED "TRUE"?

- "But how do you know you're right?" he insisted. "How do you know Earthseed is true. Who says its true?"

- "You do, Dan." I let him chew on that for a while, then went on. "You learn, you think, you question. You question us and you question yourself. Then, if you find Earthseed to be true, you join us. You help us teach others… Wpend some time reading this book. The verses are short and they mean what they say, although that may not be all that they mean. Read them and think about them. Then you can begin asking questions."

- Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Talents*, 77

EXPERIENTIAL CROSSING

- 2017 Durham University study; of 1566 surveyed:

  - Over half reported visual or auditory experiences when reading

  - For 19%, "the experience of characters' voices (or thoughts) appeared to break across into new situations, outside of the immediate experience of reading."

  - "Experiential Crossing": fictional characters remaining active in the mind after closing the book, influencing thoughts in daily life

- Alderson-Daya, Berninib, Fernyhough, Uncharted features and dynamics of reading: Voices, characters, and crossing of experiences. Consciousness and Cognition 49 (March 2017)

IMAGINAL

- An in-between world;

  - Where invisible realities become visible and corporeal things are spiritualized

  - Distinct from imaginary; the imaginal is "a world as ontologically real as the world of the senses and the world of the intellect" (Henry Corbin)

- Perceived through the imagination as the physical world is perceived through the senses

- Meditation, Jungian active imagination, Sufi spiritual practice, dream state, Otherworld. Fiction?

May the force be with you

Live long and prosper

May God always stand between you and harm in all the empty places you must walk

God is Change. Shape God

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