

Science Fiction as a Church

I exhort you to meditate with me on the subject of science fiction considered as a religious experience and as a church. This is Easter Sunday; we are gathered here to celebrate our peculiar rites; and so I'm going to begin the service now.

The first time I tried to deliver this talk was in Minneapolis, in the spring of 1973, when I went to a very small science fiction convention (it must have been around Easter time). Two or three people were delivering their message, their testimony, before I spoke. As they were talking, it dawned on me that this was a religious meeting, something I'd never understood about conventions till then. It didn't closely resemble the Catholicism I was brought up in (I'd grown up in the period of the Latin Mass), but there were great similarities between the convention in Minneapolis and certain Pentecostal services that I had seen in Guatemala.

Now that I have the hook in, I'll digress to tell you about my experiences in Guatemala. I was traveling through with Tony Clark, a professional con man who sold solid gold watches from his van, and the van got stuck in the mud. The only way to get where I was going was to take a plane that for political reasons stopped at the border of British Honduras and would go no further. There was no public transportation from the border to the only city, Belize. So I started hitchhiking, and there's not much traffic far inland in British Honduras. When finally a Land Rover came along and picked me up the driver was very friendly, and I was very friendly too. It turned out that he was there as a Pentecostal gospel missionary to the people of British Honduras, and he realized that Divine Providence had placed me there on the highway for him to pick up. I could not very well gainsay that. He took me to his home, and to his services. They were very nice services. They sang and they danced and they were exhorted to consider their own specialness: the fact that, of the few people of the human race who were going to be saved in times to come, this enclave right here in central British Honduras were among the privileged who wouldn't go to hell and would instead go to heaven.

That is the parallel that I observed in Minneapolis. Blessed was the text they preached; blessed are those who read sf for they shall inherit the

future. There were also hints of secret powers that some few people possess, and hints that these secret mental powers of various sorts are observably related to one's reading of science fiction. Such powers are not uncommonly associated with religious experience. There is also the promise made to Noah. Like Noah, many sf writers and their fans feel they have the inside track on the approaching catastrophe, whatever it may be, and they're counting on being among the happy few who survive it. Need I cite chapter and verse?

Then there is the matter of healing—and here I will indulge in another digression. The very first science fiction “do” on a large scale that I went to was the Milford Writers’ Conference in 1964. I hadn’t known anybody in Milford beforehand and no one there, literally, had ever heard of me, because I was invited there as Dobbin Thorpe. Dobbin had published one story in *Amazing*. Damon Knight had liked the story, and so Dobbin was invited and wrote back saying he’d be happy to come. I was billeted with Walt and Leigh Richmond, who owned the Red Fox Inn about ten miles outside of Milford, in the country. After the first day at the Anchorage, where the Knights were, I arrived at the Red Fox and met Walt and Leigh Richmond. I entered on a scene that was to me unfamiliar. Walt Richmond was examining a young sf writer who had also been invited there. He had a malady that was focused in his knee, but it related to a childhood trauma that Walt was investigating. It turned out that this fellow had had all sorts of unresolved problems with his father, and they were all concentrated in engrams in his knee. I didn’t know the theory behind all of this very well, but I was impressed with the fact that they both understood what they were doing and that they expected me to do it too. I was shy and I didn’t let Walt get at my engrams.

But I have to tell the story because the Richmonds were among the people who possess psychic powers of a strange sort. They were collaborators on several books, and Leigh explained the method of their collaboration at one of the writing sessions. Often when you collaborate other people want to know how you actually do it. Walt and Leigh had found a very unusual and effective technique. He would think of what they were going to write and he would project it to her psychically. She would sit down at the typewriter and write the story that he had projected to her. They never had to exchange a word!

This was as near as I got to the inner arcana of the temple of True Believing in science fiction. The Richmonds understood all sorts of things about Atlantis. They’d written books about it, books that were visions of things that had actually happened. They were a little miffed when people regarded the books as fiction, because they knew they

weren't. But on the other hand they had to make a living, and so they published them as fiction.

Now that doesn't at all exhaust the parallels between science fiction and religion. That's about as far as I got in Minneapolis, and it wasn't well received. But since, over the years, I have thought about all the ways in which the religious nature of sf fandom and its many conventions is a good thing—especially if one doesn't have other religions going for one. If you think about some of the purposes that religions serve for people, and try to think of how science fiction may serve those purposes for us, there is rather a large number.

The obvious side of it is the social life. Surely when Methodists get together and decide that they're going to bake cakes and sell them to each other and then sit down and eat them, they're not *really* thinking about salvation at that moment. They're enjoying coffee and cake with their friends. And it is good to have occasions to get together and have coffee and cake, even if you're Presbyterian, or Unitarian—or science fiction fans.

Then there's the question of pilgrimages. On the way up here to Leeds I realized that it was April and (you'll forgive my Middle English, I hope) "then longen folk to go on pilgrimages." I realized that I was this moment on a pilgrimage. We were in that queue (I expect there were others of you there with us, it got in the newspapers), ten miles of endless traffic jam on the M1 that just went on and on. Pilgrims, all of us. And as in Chaucer one of the purposes of making a pilgrimage isn't to get there, it's to trade stories along the way.

Then there's the aspect of what theologians call Agape, or communion—or, as it was practised by the Romans, drunken orgies. This is an important aspect of religion. People who have read about the history of religion will find that there's scarcely one recorded that does not make allowance for this at periodic intervals during the year when the pressure mounts up and people need a little break. And so we have holidays.

There's also the nationalistic aspect of religion. Nowadays it's considered quite unhip to even remember that we belong to nations, but like it or not, nationality is one of the chief ways people have of sorting themselves into groups. In the course of the different times I've been to conventions in England—the first one was at Bristol, and then it was at Buxton—I have seen an awful lot of England that I would not otherwise have seen. I kept thinking, "Well, that's me being a tourist." But if you're English you can't really think of yourself as a tourist in that way. Religions and the pilgrimage system provide one of the ways in which you get to know your nation, as it were, through direct experience. You visit other

cities and you see what they're like and you live there a while. With people converging from all over the same nation, you mix together and you hear other people's funny accents and you ask them to repeat themselves till you can understand what they're saying. After a while you actually have a sense of the larger social group. As a social unifying force, one of the functions of religion has always been to make you aware of the larger groups you belong to.

Those are what I think of as the really good things about "the convention system" in science fiction, in its religious aspect—things nobody can take exception to. If you don't have another religion accomplishing those purposes, then this is terrific. But it leaves out one thing, obviously. The central idea of religion is supposed to be about the human experience of our relationship to something else: God, the infinite, or however your own religion will put it. The question is, can the parallel continue to be extended? If there are all these other resemblances to religion, then won't science fiction reflect this central aspect of religion as well?

(There are very many science fiction stories about religion, and I will just recommend to you that worthy book *The Science Fiction Encyclopedia*, where Brian Stableford has written an absolutely definitive article on the subject. It's a long subject; there is a lot of it. But that's not quite what I am getting at here.)

What I have in mind is this. Every sf fan will tell you that the basic element that has to be there in sf is Sense of Wonder—or "sensawonda," as I've seen it printed recently. Sense of Wonder can easily be related to religion if I can give it a different name, Sublimity. There is a book I started lately called *Turner and the Sublime*. Sublimity is instantly recognizable in Turner's paintings, or John Martin's (if you've seen that magnificent painting of the Apocalypse in the Tate Gallery, with the lightning bolt striking the cliff side and the giant rock falling). Martin did deluges and catastrophes on a large scale, and there are a lot of Turner landscapes and seascapes, with storms at sea and vast swirling distances. Boundlessness is part of it, but also just size, the sense of looking into huge distances and losing yourself in awe. It's like stargazing in a way, but stargazing that involves a bit of thought. If you have no imagination, a black sky with little dots in it that blink could be construed as a kind of light show, a dome with lights shining through the punctured tin. When you begin to speculate about what the sky really is, how far away the stars are and how big each of them is, when you start getting lost in those ideas, that's when Sense of Wonder starts happening.

I guess the archetypal science fiction books are the ones that appeal directly to that feeling, and help you form a vision of the vastness of

space. There is Stapledon, and another that immediately comes to mind (that compares directly to a John Martin picture) is Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama*, where you have an artifact that is mysterious, explored at great length, totally awesome in its dimensions, and which disappears without having been explained—it is just contemplated. *Ringworld* is another obvious example of the satisfaction that contemplating a very large-scale phenomenon can give. On a smaller scale, I did a story about an elevator that just goes down forever, nonstop.

You can take it back all the way to the beginning of the gothic novel—not science fiction but one of our kissing-cousins. *The Castle of Otranto* is an absolutely silly book that I don't think anybody nowadays could read without giggling, but at one point it just knocks everybody out. The only thing that happens in it that's interesting or yields Sense of Wonder is that a giant helmet appears out of nowhere and lands in the middle of the city square, killing the intended bridegroom of the heroine. This happens on page 2. Nobody can explain it; it's a very large helmet. Later on other pieces of an entire suit of armor appear, similarly gigantic. There has to be something in the notion of *bigness* that is innately inspiring, that stirs the sense of awe and makes us all kneel down and pray.

All of this ties in with what Freud wrote about as “oceanic experience”—which is just religion without a theory, the feeling that you get on a starry night. But that's not all there is to the Sublime, because there is no system to that yet: one is just relating to the universe. Religions always look out at the universe and they discover gods. And gods invariably have a very human shape. It is in forming the idea of the human shape that gods should have that we get into the business of writing stories.

The scale of time is another aspect of Sublimity—the fact that you can look back in history the way you can look out in space; or you can look forward in history across vast dimensions, like Stapledon's huge projections through eras and eras of futurity. Wells was the first writer to begin a universal human history going back to the period of cavemen or even to the geological formation of the earth. It's the new sense of history we have, of the dimensions of time, that needs to be celebrated somehow, to be understood and grasped and thought about. So that's another aspect of Sublimity, historical Sublimity.

But there's still one more, and it's where the word really got into its stride. Before landscapes were considered Sublime (according to Reynolds) Michelangelo was credited with being the *great* Sublime painter. That also relates to what he was supposed to have that Raphael and other people didn't have: *terribilità*, which is a wonderful Italian

word. “Terribility” does not work in English the same way that “terribilità” works in Italian. It means that you look at a Michelangelo and you relate to the image that you’re seeing as you might relate to the Sense of Wonder you get out of the sky: a human image so powerful and so profoundly meaningful that you look at it and you sense something *beyond* the human in that human image, something God-like. And of course that’s what Michelangelo was busy painting: pictures of gods. Now, to paint a picture of a god well isn’t actually to tell fibs. You don’t even have to be a Christian to understand that the human image can be boundlessly significant for human beings, that it can condense everything that is meaningful and wonderful and soul-shattering in an image—or a tale.

The human Sublime can be found in literature as well as in painting. The artists Reynolds compared Michelangelo with weren’t other painters: they were Homer and Milton. Nowadays, novelists rarely write about gods as such; they seldom even write about heroes in the decorative sense of people wearing something appropriate for a fancy-dress ball. Aside from military heroes and cowboys, who each have their own uniform, heroes in modern novels tend to be ordinary folk.

There are also aspects of ritual observation connected with the evocation of extraordinary heroes in fancy-dress plots. Wagner’s *Parsifal* has more than a little in common with a High Mass in Latin. Or there’s the Society for Creative Anachronism, which organizes real jousts for those who crave rituals at a higher energy level. I have my own suggestion for a ritual observation that could be returned to and renovated for modern-day use: building pyramids. I feel that they’ve been neglected for a long time. I was once in a cathedral in Italy, and it looked so easy to do. It was a really early cathedral and not very well built. There wasn’t much that distinguished it as a work of architecture, and I couldn’t help thinking, “Hey, I could do that!” Then I thought maybe I couldn’t but I could surely do something. It must have been nice to live then and have one of those things going up in the town—and to help out. However, if you don’t have a religion you probably wouldn’t want to build a cathedral, because then you’d be locked into a whole system that you didn’t agree with. But if you built pyramids, you would have the satisfaction of building something without having to be a true believer. So I wrote an article proposing that they build pyramids in Minnesota, and it was published and very well received. I called for volunteers and got a whole lot of mail from people who wanted to build pyramids in Minnesota and were volunteering to be a sort of slave corps for the purpose. Unfortunately none of the people who wrote in were offering to fund it, and that’s where it bogged down. I

funked out really, because I should have got busy organizing a fund-raising drive. Then there would be pyramids in Minnesota today, and I wouldn't just be presenting a daydream.

I don't mean to suggest that the parallel I'm observing between science fiction and religion is always a good thing. There are aspects of religion that many people have had trouble with historically. For instance, there was the Inquisition, a time when if you had notions that could be considered heretical, it could be most unfortunate. Religion is often organized to make trouble for people who have the wrong ideas. This is true in science fiction as well. There are orthodox influences in the field that I have felt in my own experience, and others have felt as well. Like most heretics, I tend to think of Orthodoxy as being opposed to the free exercise of the imagination. The Orthodox themselves, of course, are defending The Truth.

I do think that when we're talking about art as against religion (if we're not considering religion a branch of art) the artistic imperative to make things new, to create an image that isn't just an echo of yesterday's success, is necessarily opposed to the *other* dictate, namely to do it again the same way. As a writer, what one often feels from editors, and sometimes from readers, is that one should do it again: it feels so good, do it like you did it the last time. This often is done; people do write what seems to me substantially the same book all over again. The process is called Orthodoxy, and the result can be a paperback novel or an icon.

Most orthodox paperback novels are based on a book called *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, by Joseph Campbell. Campbell shows how all myths can be boiled down into one all-purpose myth for all seasons. Moses is the same story as Theseus, and that's the same as every other famous story. So, since there really is only one story to tell, writers need only tell that one story. And what is that story? It's the questing adventure! Scratch any one of them, such as *Lord Silverberg's Castle*, and under its coat of new paint is a chassis straight out of *The Hero of a Thousand Pages*. Silverberg, of course, doesn't have the only copy of Campbell's book. My own "The Brave Little Toaster" is a questing tale with the same ur-plot. There's nothing necessarily wrong with questing tales—indeed everybody probably will write one some time or other, maybe without knowing it, because it's a pretty basic pattern—but it is not the *only* pattern for telling a story. Try and tell that to a painter of orthodox icons, though, and you'll only get a blank look.

There's another aspect of always telling one story, and that's not a question of the plot but of the moral of the story. It has sometimes been suggested that I am a nihilist, and I feel that's tantamount to saying a

heretic. Nihilists believe in nothing, and that means that there is therefore something to believe in, i.e., an orthodox position. What my nihilism seemed to boil down to among those who pointed it out was that I had written a book called *The Genocides* in which the earth is destroyed by alien invaders. I didn't mean to suggest in the book that the earth should be destroyed by alien invaders, or that it will in all likelihood be destroyed, or even that we *deserve* such a fate. I meant to write what you might call an epic tragedy, and while that may be a rather highfalutin' ambition for a slim book, the notion that one could write a tragedy was the error of my way, as I have been made to understand since. Not that I am recanting, mind you, but when the Grand Inquisitor had me down in the cellar he pointed out that problems don't exist in science fiction unless they're going to be solved, and that men can look toward a future of immortality and that it's quite possible that we will none of us ever die.

Though I remained unpersuaded, I don't object to the Grand Inquisitor, or others of his faith, publishing books expressing the orthodox, cheery view of mankind's destined immortality and the consequent irrelevance of tragic experience, but I think we heretics should be allowed to hand out our pamphlets and publish our novels too.

What all this boils down to is a plea for pluralism—and that seems to be a very English plea. Historically, England was the first country in which several religions learned to live side by side successfully. Indeed, they would even meet sometimes at ecumenical congresses, or, if not there, they would all live in the same village and sneer at each other's churches in a neighborly, peaceful, pluralistic spirit, the spirit of a good con.

So that seems to be my happy ending. Except—it occurred to me to wonder if I might on the basis of these ideas qualify as a religious thinker myself. And if so, whether I could solicit you to become members of my own congregation. The tax benefits to me would be simply amazing.