

INVENTING A RELIGION: FICTIONAL RELIGIONS IN CREATIVE WRITING

1. INTRODUCTION

Who am I?

I am a god.

I am a god because I am a fiction writer.

Fiction writers bring universes and worlds and people into existence. Fiction writers give them life, help them grow, nurture their talents, exploit their desires. Sometimes, we destroy them. The majority of our painstakingly created worlds are ephemeral, living only in the consciousness of readers, in the print on a page, or the digital representations of an e-reader. On occasion however, a writer's creation breaks free from the constraints of the page and fiction is elevated by readers into something they believe to be sacred. At this point, the writer is no longer merely a god of her own imaginative world, but an actual god, for she has written a text which is the foundation of a real-world religion.

In this presentation, I shall explore why this might happen – why it is that some works of fiction are the foundations for religions, finding disciples that they weren't even looking for. I shall use as my primary example Octavia Butler's Parables novels: *Parable of the Sower*¹ (1993) and *Parable of the Talents*² (1998) which, since publication have been the source of at least three real-world religions.

2. DETERMINING A SACRED TEXT

The elevation of material which on the face of it is not sacred to the status of scripture is not a recent innovation. For every modern-day example, such as the Parable series, or Robert Heinlein's novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961),³ which inspired the establishment of The Church of All Worlds, one can find traditional religions venerating material that was never originally intended to be considered as scripture. Paul, when writing his letters of advice, interpretation and argument to the Corinthians did not believe himself to be writing sacred

¹ Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (United States of America: Hachette, 1993)

² Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Talents* (United States of America: Hachette, 1998)

³ Robert Heinlein, *Stranger in a Strange Land* (Kindle e-book: Hodder & Stoughton, 2014)

text. His letters were only classified as scripture by the decision to include them in the Bible almost four centuries later.⁴

As John Lofland observed in his pioneering study in the early 1960s, American converts to the Divine Precepts religion - the forerunner of the Unification Church, or the Moonies - received newsletters from Young Oon Kim, Reverend Moon's first missionary to the United States. These newsletters were unremarkable, containing exhortations to work, news from Korea and translations of prayers. The converts would pour over them, reading them multiple times, finding inspiration and motivation in them, to all intents and purposes treating the mundane and poorly-produced newsletters as sacred texts.⁵

The scripture of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is contained in The Book of Mormon (1830).⁶ When Joseph Smith was writing The Book of Mormon, we can assume he had one of two things in mind: he either genuinely believed that he was translating the sacred text that Mormon himself had transcribed from the Plates of Nephi; or he was writing fiction which he intended his readers to believe to be sacred. Regardless of Smith's own state of mind, the Book of Mormon is elevated to the status of sacred only for as long as Mormons continue to believe that Smith's book defines their doctrines and structures their ritual life. If, therefore, a reader has the power to determine which texts they hold sacred, then I would argue that it follows that there is no reason why any work of fiction may not be elevated to the position of sacred text simply by virtue of readers saying, 'I believe' and assuming the role and performing the actions of believers.

However, does a reader really have the right to transform into a sacred text that which an author has explicitly intended to be read as fiction? Literary theory abounds with idea that the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author. Writers routinely wade in on the debate. Italian author Elena Ferrante has said of her novels: 'I believe that books, once they are written, have no need of their authors'.⁷ In other words, Ferrante believes that once a book is published it is for the readers to, as she puts it, ensure that the book *maintains an intense life of its own*. By contrast, Ray Bradbury, author of *Fahrenheit 451*, was once giving a college lecture about his novel in which he mentioned it was about the dangers of

⁴ Karen Armstrong, *The Bible - The Biography* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007) p. 61

⁵ John Lofland, *Doomsday Cult A Study of Conversion, Proselytization, and Maintenance of Faith* (New York: Irvington Publishers, Inc, 1977) pp. 234-238

⁶ Joseph Smith, *The Book of Mormon* (United States: Pacific Publishing Studio, 2010)

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/06/elena-ferrante-frantumaglia-extract-books-no-need-authors> [accessed 6 March 2019]

television. His students disagreed with him, insisting that it was about censorship. In the end, apparently, Ray Bradbury stormed out of the classroom in frustration. As far as he was concerned, it was his book, and consequently only his interpretation could possibly be valid. Whichever side of the fence an author may be on, there is no doubt that once their fiction is published, readers can and do exercise their right and their freedom to interpret it in any way they wish. One only has to spend time at any book club to see first-hand the disagreements that ensue when one person's heroine is another person's villain.

3. WHY MIGHT READERS MIGHT LOOK TO FICTION FOR RELIGION?

Here are two quotations:

Every human society is an enterprise of world-building... we are the creators of our world, but we are in turn shaped by our creation and become one of its objects, in part because we are not fully aware of our own creativity.

(Peter Berger)⁸

A novel examines not reality but existence. And existence is not what has occurred, existence is the realm of human possibilities, everything that man can become, everything he's capable of.

(Milan Kundera)⁹

The first is a quote from a sociologist and theologian about religion; the second is a quote from an author about fiction writing. Each quotation, however, could apply to both religion and fiction writing, and that is because the reading of fiction, and the practice of religion, demand very similar activities. The act of reading fiction constantly challenges the boundaries of fact and fiction, truth and lies. Writers rely on their readers to suspend disbelief and experience their fictional worlds as a reality, whereas religion asserts its reality and assumes a suspension of disbelief by its believers. The difference between what is required of readers and what is required of believers is merely a matter of emphasis. So, with regards to the question *why might readers look to fiction for religion*, the answer may be, at least in part,

⁸ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (United States: Anchor Books, 1990) p3

⁹ Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (Great Britain: Faber and Faber Limited, 2005), p. 43

because to some people, the act of ‘believing’ fiction and the act of ‘believing’ religion will feel very similar, if not identical.

Good fiction paints vivid pictures and draws a reader into a world that feels real. Reading can be a highly emotional and emotive experience, one that can leave a reader feeling permanently different about themselves and the world they live in. Some readers, then, may find themselves harnessing this and looking to fiction in search of texts that are relevant to them, their lives and their problems. New religious movements born of fiction can offer arresting new versions of past and future, a journey to somewhere they want to go, and a read-made text to show them the way.

With the remaining time, I’d like to move away from the theoretical, and turn instead to the actual by looking at Earthseed, the fictitious religion created by the author Octavia Butler in her novels *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*.

4. THE TRANSFORMATION OF EARTHSEED INTO A REAL-WORLD RELIGION

a. The Accessibility and Inclusivity of Earthseed

Butler’s framing of issues facing the inhabitants of a near-future world

The *Parable* books were written in 1993 and 1998 respectively. With remarkable prescience, Butler placed her characters in an America of the 2020s that is fractured in multiple ways: climate change has resulted in catastrophic ecological disaster; drinkable water is scarce and most of the population is constantly on the verge of dying of thirst; hurricanes routinely sweep up from the Gulf of Mexico, killing hundreds at a time; communities are gated – going outside is to risk death from the gangs of armed drug addicts roaming the streets; huge conglomerates are buying up entire towns, offering security in return for a lifetime of debt-slavery. Texas Senator Andrew Steele Jarret is elected as President on a platform informed by an uncompromising right-wing Protestantism which incites his supporters to burn at the stake anyone they consider different to themselves. Jarret condemns the burnings, but ‘does so in such mild language that his people are free to hear what they want to hear’ (Talents, 19). And, I kid you not, his election slogan is ‘Help us to make America great again’ (Talents, 20).

Given the similarities between Butler's characters' fictitious issues and the real-world issues faced by many in the twenty-first century, it is hardly surprising that some readers have wondered if they can apply Butler's fictitious solutions to their real-world situations. The key solution in the Parables novel is Earthseed: a religion founded by Butler's main protagonist, Lauren Oya Olamina, in direct response to the damaged and dangerous world in which she is living. Lauren's new religion is expressed in a series of verses presented as extracts from a publication called *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*. Lauren's unique idea is that God is Change which she embodies in verses such as this one:

All that you touch
You Change.

All that you Change
Changes you.

The only lasting truth
Is Change.

God
Is Change.
(Sower, 3)

One of the significant appeals of Earthseed, for both Lauren's fictional believers, but also, I argue, real-world believers of Earthseed, is its accessibility and inclusivity. In *Parable of the Talents*, Lauren's husband, Bankole says 'Earthseed is a network of truths that she has simply recognised' (Talents, 45) and Lauren herself says, 'I wasn't looking for mythology or mysticism or magic' (Sower, 217). She does not possess esoteric knowledge, she does not know things that are beyond the reach of others and there is no mystery behind Earthseed, it is accessible to all. Earthseed is a clear, straightforward, democratic framework of beliefs, which can, without any special expertise, be applied by anyone, fictional or real, to their own life.

Earthseed's dialogue with traditional religion

Earthseed's accessibility is equalled by its inclusivity. Butler invented a religion with a uniquely broad appeal to both traditionally-religious and not-traditionally-religious people. Lauren acknowledges the influence that her father's Baptist faith has on the development of Earthseed and overtly positions the relationship between Baptism and Earthseed as a dialogic one. While always careful to assert that Earthseed is the 'literal truth' (Sower, 25) and that it is something new, and most definitely not an incarnation of Christianity, she nevertheless acknowledges that Earthseed grew from her Baptist roots. For putative believers raised in a Christian tradition who may be seeking an alternative religion, this provides several access points, for example: 'I was a Christian, looking for something less traditional and Earthseed is a welcome step-change'; 'I'm comfortable with Earthseed because of its link to traditional religion'; or 'I'm looking for something new, and the concept of 'God is Change' is sufficiently original to appeal to me'.

Earthseed's embrace of science

Moreover, for readers who either don't approach Earthseed with a background of religion, or who are seeking something altogether different, Earthseed wholeheartedly embraces science. Earthseed's explicit destiny is to take root among the stars (Sower, 77). As Lauren graphically explains, 'It's a destiny we better pursue if we hope to be anything other than smooth-skinned dinosaurs – here today, gone tomorrow, our bones mixed with the bones and ashes of our cities...' (Sower, 222). One consequence of this is an absolute focus among the fictional Earthseed community on learning and teaching because they recognise that it is only by acquiring and sharing knowledge that they can possibly hope to develop the skills necessary to leave Earth.

Lauren's husband says: 'Some of the faces of her god are biological evolution, chaos theory, relativity theory, the uncertainty principle, and, of course, the second law of thermodynamics' (Talents, 46) and for anyone seeking a religion that embraces science, they need look no further than Earthseed. This is a religion that has evolved beyond creation myths, beyond deities handing down their judgement upon the world. A religion which values learning, teaching and scientific advancement above all else. This is a religion which Butler invented to address the fictional problems of a fictional twenty-first century, yet which appears ideally

suited to address the real-world problems of the real-world twenty-first century. Hardly surprising that some readers have felt impelled to reach for the solution that Earthseed offers.

b. Earthseed's fulfilment of sociological criteria applicable to religion

Butler's hyper-realistic portrait of a broken world proposes as a solution a religion which is accessible to people with religious, non-religious and scientific imperatives. However, although these factors are enough to make the fictional Earthseed religion plausible, to be considered a religion in the real-world, Earthseed must fulfil criteria recognised by sociologists and theologians as necessarily present for a 'movement' to be classified as a religion. In other words, it is one thing for a reader to know that Earthseed *feels* like it could be a genuine religion, but without fulfilling certain sociological criteria it cannot actually *be* a religion in the real-world.

In analysing fictional Earthseed against these criteria, it is striking how closely it fulfils them. Lack of time prevents me discussing this in detail, so I shall mention just two, which are prominent in Walter Burkert's summary of the similarities common to religious phenomena world-wide.

They include formalised ritualised behaviour appropriate for veneration: the practice of offerings, sacrifices, vows and prayers with reference to superior beings; and songs, tales, teachings and explanations about these things and the worship they demand.¹⁰

In other words, ritual and sacred text.

Ritual

The significance of establishing ritual practices and the need to ritualise belief did not escape Butler and in the first few chapters of *Parable of the Talents* Lauren places significant emphasis on rituals: the community plants oak seedlings to remember the dead (Talents, 56); they speak ritual verses at funerals (Talents, 58), hold meals of welcome (Talents, 64) at

¹⁰ Walter Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred - Tracks of Biology in Early Religions* (London: Harvard University Press, 1998) p.4

which specific ‘words of welcome are spoken’ (Talents, 66) and new members of the community choose people to ‘stand with them’ (Talents 64), later acknowledging one another as ‘Change-sister[s]’ and ‘Change-aunt[s]’ (Talent, 161). Each month there is a Gathering Day, on which the community eats only what ‘we’ve raised and prepared’ (Talents, 73).

In this way, Butler mirrors religion’s ritualization of mundane activities, elevating them into significant actions that brings communities together, setting them apart from those who are not believers.

Sacred Text

The Earthseed verses published in the fictitious publication *Earthseed: Books of the Living* are a vital tool to aid readers wishing to adopt Earthseed as a real-world religion. From the outset, the verses are framed so as to perform multiple functions and for both the fictitious Earthseed community and for real-world Earthseed believers, they serve as prophecy, scripture, mantra, interpretation and explanation. The verses enable believers to contextualise events in their lives, so as to understand what is happening and how they should deal with them. Lauren demonstrates this by quoting ones of her own verses after their gated community is firebombed: ‘We’ll adapt. We’ll have to. God is Change’ (Sower, 147).

More often than not, the verses are framed as aphorisms and direct exhortations, and because the meaning is not obscured, a reader is easily able to apply them to their own life, receiving them as both instruction and guidance. By way of example, consider this verse:

Belief
Initiates and guides action-
Or it does nothing.
(Sower, 47)

This is typical of how the verses seeks to instruct, whilst simultaneously being a call to action. One could paraphrase the verse in this way: believe and you will find a way forward *and also* to be a believer, you must take action. The verses provide a toolset by which the concepts of Earthseed may be remembered, understood and applied.

So, one can begin to see that that there are multiple relevant factors when considering why fictional Earthseed proved so attractive that some readers adopted it as their own religion. By the end of the second novel, Butler has: (a) established the need for a new religion (and because of her prescience, she wrote fictional scenarios that some readers may believe are almost upon us); b) proposed a solution that is inclusive and democratic with broad appeal; c) satisfied real-world criteria which must be met for a movement to be considered a religion; d) provided the verses as a tool for believers wishing to adopt Earthseed into their lives; e) provided examples of how to use the verses to instruct and inform a believer; and f) indicated the beneficial long-term outcome of believing in Earthseed, which is taking life to other planets before humanity dies out.

c. Real-world Earthseed

So let's turn to how the real-world has adopted and adapted the fictional Earthseed. Certainly, it has inspired at least three real-world religions: Earthseed,¹¹ Solseed¹² and Terasem.¹³ They are all based in America and use social media to reach out to people around the world. The very fact of their existence, together with their acknowledgement that they were inspired by Butler's Earthseed is sufficient evidence that her fictional religion has 'broken free' of the pages of her novels, and I shall take a brief look in more detail at just one of these new religions.

As its name suggest, Earthseed the real-world religion, is closest in both form and content to Earthseed the fictional religion, and indeed, the homepage of their website acknowledges that 'Earthseed is a real religion inspired by the science fiction of Octavia Butler'.¹⁴ The website collects together the verses from *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*, which they describe as containing the 'basic theology, ethics, and vision of Earthseed'. Butler's fiction has indeed been elevated to the status of sacred text.

On other webpages, there are explorations and explanations of the *Earthseed: The Books of the Living* verses. There is some obvious paraphrasing and some direct copying of Lauren's own explanations, but Lauren herself is not mentioned. It is the verses that have been adopted

¹¹ <https://www.godischange.org/about/>

¹² <https://www.solseed.org>

¹³ <https://www.terasemmovementfoundation.com/>

¹⁴ <https://www.godischange.org/about/> [accessed 6 March 2019]

into the real-world religion, not the fictional character in whose mouth the verses were put. The website contains significant content in which the verses are contextualised in the real-world environment. By the act of interpreting, clarifying or expanding the fictional verses, real-world Earthseed believers have evolved from their status as fiction readers, to assume the status of disciples. Their creation of the Earthseed website and the content they have written is the 21st century equivalent of the itinerant disciple travelling far and wide to preach text that they have accepted as the truth, trying to persuade others of its sacred status.

5. CONCLUSION

Octavia Butler died in 2006. At that time there were few, if any, fully formed Earthseed religions, but in an interview less than a year before her death, Butler was asked what she thought of people taking up Earthseed as a living spiritual practice. She gave the idea scant credibility, saying she couldn't imagine Earthseed as a comforting religion. She felt strongly that the idea of a faceless god that was simply 'change itself' would not be useful for followers during times of stress and questioned how comfort would be found in the idea of change as the only constant. Butler may have invented Earthseed, but she only ever intended it be a fictitious religion; it was her readers who elevated the Earthseed verses to sacred text, thus transforming Earthseed into a real-world, living religion.¹⁵

I'd like to share one final quotation:

Mythology will only transform us if we follow its directives. A myth is essentially a guide: it tells us what we must do in order to live more richly. If we do not apply it to our own situation and make the myth a reality in our own lives, it will remain remote and incomprehensible.

A Short History of Myth – Karen Armstrong

As Earthseed demonstrates, breaking an invented religion out of the confines of a fictional narrative merely takes the act of readers choosing to accept the invented religion as their guide and applying it to their own situations, thus making the fiction a reality in their own lives and in so doing, bringing the remote and incomprehensible into sharp relief. To finish

¹⁵ <https://canadianart.ca/essays/octavia-butler-syrus-marcus-ware/> [accessed 5 March 2019]

as I began, I believe that any work of fiction may be elevated to the status of a sacred text and be transformed into a real religion in the real world simply by readers saying, 'I believe' and assuming the role and performing the actions of believers. And, since the transformation from fiction to reality is so relatively straightforward, perhaps the real question is not how does a fictitious religion leave the pages of a book, but why is it that more have not done so?