

The Role of Religion in a Co-Evolving Future

Set in an environment marred by a seemingly insurmountable wealth gap, extreme climate change, and a renewed economic slavery, *Parable of the Sower* explores many of the societal issues that plagued the early 1990s and that continue to plague our society in the 2020s. Although the causes and effects of such severe social degradation are innumerable, Octavia Butler offers a potential way out: religion. Butler argues that Lauren's religion, Earthseed, serves the function of what religion ought to serve because it reclaims historical and religious narratives to provide a tangible and unifying purpose which is to be achieved through mutable means. When read through posthumanist and afrofuturist lenses, Earthseed is revealed to be a religion that recognizes the interconnectedness of all living creatures across multiple temporalities, and is thus endurable because it is adaptive. In understanding Earthseed through these critical approaches, we can understand the unifying and practical role that Butler believes religion should occupy in our contemporary lives.

As a child, Butler was intimately familiar with the Bible and with Christian religious life. In response to her strict religious upbringing—one that emphasized conformity—Butler “yearned for the open acceptance of her intellectual and religious curiosity” (Ruffin 89). Lacking other outlets for her religious exploration, Butler found a place for her curiosity when writing *Parable*. Early on in the novel, Lauren questions, “Is it a sin against God to be poor?” (15). Lauren's question stems from an examination of the victims of a natural disaster—a hurricane—and her observation that a majority of the people killed were the street poor. Embedded within this simple question is an understanding that God's treatment of a person—God in this context referring to “a big-daddy-God or big-cop-God or big-king-God” (15), or any other configuration of God which views God as some embodied force that meddles in the lives of those on Earth—is

disciples, but of reclaiming and redefining the practice to more specifically serve Lauren's contemporary environment. Through Lauren's refusal to rely upon the rigid (Christian) religions of the past, Butler argues that a religion must be tailored to one's context in order to be functional. Indeed, as with Mrs. Sims, who "believed in a literal acceptance of everything in the Bible" (23), rigidity in belief leads to self-destruction. Because Mrs. Sims could not reconcile her religion to her changing and demanding context, she could see no way forward, and chose eternal damnation over the burdens of life.

An integral component of the novel's changing context is technology. Guns and knives feature prominently throughout the text, and are instrumental for survival. However, Lauren and her group also rely upon water purification tablets, Bankole's cart, and a good pair of shoes. Always looking towards the future and set against the backdrop of astronauts dying on missions to Mars (17), Ruffin argues that, "For Lauren, scientific advancement—in this case, extraterrestrial human life—is dependent upon religion" (94). I would like to push Ruffin's thinking further. Scientific advancement is not dependent upon any one religion, but specifically a religion that inspires individuals to think beyond their limited human selves, a religion that cultivates and advocates for an environment in which humans are equipped to provide the means for such audacious advancement, a religion such as Earthseed. Only through Earthseed could Lauren's extrasolar gains manifest because only Earthseed fuses science and religion in such a fundamental way. With all her scripture designed to support the Destiny by prescribing mutable ways of being that all support the Destiny, Lauren's religion operates as Butler argues religions must: as a means to unite humanity in service of a common, achievable goal.

are not separate from their environments at all, but are co-evolving with the non-human forces around them.

These posthumanist notions are not present solely in Lauren scripture, however. When Lauren kills the dog her father thought he had killed, she writes, “Then I felt the dog die...I saw it die. I felt it die...Its life flared up, then went out. I went...numb” (45). Through her hyperempathy, Lauren bridges the imagined gap between the human and the non-human, de-centering the human experience by illustrating that life and death are common across all species. Her embodied experience at the moment of the dog’s death is completely focused on the animal, thus subverting the humanist hierarchy that places the human being above other forms of life by demonstrating the dominating and debilitating influence of an animal over a human. By de-centering the human experience, Butler is providing an opportunity for change to affect the most foundational aspects of the human identity. Had Butler held too tightly to humanist constructs of the human person, then the human being itself would have been rendered unchangeable, and thus at odds with the teachings of Earthseed. In taking a posthumanist approach, Butler suggests that the human can be changed in inconceivable ways: since the human is constitutive of their environment, an unimagined environment can cause unimagined change.

Posthumanism does not merely view the human creature as formed by other living creatures, however. The system of thought recognizes other systems as well, and the roles that such systems play in shaping the lives of human and non-human alike. Nayar writes, “Systems, including human ones, are in a state of emergence rather than in a state of being” (9), explaining that the very systems which are changing what they touch are being changed all the time. An example of these systems at play within the text comes when a fire is started in a community Lauren’s group is passing by, which results in its assault by the river of people walking the

be. Afrofuturism, as a cultural movement, centers around envisioning black futures that grow out of afrodiasporic pasts. As Dr. Kathy Brown defines it, afrofuturism is about “forward thinking as well as backward thinking. Having a distressing past, a distressing present, but still looking forward to thriving in the future.” The cultural movement melds temporalities in order to examine systems holistically, interrogating their roots to understand how their trajectories can be altered.

In this sense, afrofuturism synergizes well with posthumanism, which “interrogates the hierarchical ordering—and subsequently exploitation and even eradication—of life forms” (8-9). In prioritizing one form of life over another, posthumanists would argue that those life forms that are seen as “lesser” will inevitably be exploited or eradicated, whether those lifeforms be cattle or non-white non-male humans. Similar to how humanism’s exclusionary strategies of prioritizing the white male creature have subjugated women, racial and ethnic groups, animals, and slaves, afrofuturism closely examines how these exclusionary practices have shaped the afrodiasporic experience specifically to equip future generations with the tools needed to defeat the evils of the past. In her novel, Butler is unafraid to imagine aspects of an afrodiasporic past in her far-flung future. On the subject of Travis’ education, Lauren writes, “Slaves did that two hundred years ago. They sneaked around and educated themselves as best they could” (218). In fusing the historical legacy of slavery with her dystopian future, Butler reminds her readers that generational trauma cannot so easily be shaken, and that the perils of falling back into oppressive practices is ever-present.

And yet, Butler’s inclusion of a new iteration of economic slavery is also hopeful. If the twin evils of slavery and illiteracy could be defeated in the past, then they could be defeated again in the future. Indeed, as Lauren and co.’s Northward journey echoes the African American

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