A Case of Conscience Short Guide

A Case of Conscience by James Blish

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Contents

Characters

Although somewhat humorless, Father Ruiz-Sanchez is one of the more engaging protagonists in the science fiction of the 1950s, perhaps because the genre literature of that era contains so few sincere portrayals of characters who are both intelligent and religious. Despite James Blish's insistence that their moral code is too close to that of Christianity for coincidence, the Lithians are a nicely developed alien race and the one normal Lithian readers meet, Chtexa, the father of Egtverchi, comes across as a believable but distinctly alien individual, something much more than merely another human being in a funny costume. In Egtverchi, Blish attempts something particularly difficult, a sort of intellectual half breed. Egtverchi, although raised by humans, cannot, because of his genetic heritage, be fully human and, moreover, does not want to be. An absolute outsider, estranged from both Lithia and Humanity, he swings rather schizophrenically, but quite believably, from manic buffoon to bitter social critic. That the Lithian is a danger both to Earth and to his home planet seems clear. That he has also suffered from Earth's abuse, has been stunted in both mind and body, is also evident. The moral dilemma which Blish has placed on both his readers and Ruiz-Sanchez requires him to develop a character who can be read as either half-mad victim or skilled manipulator and, in Egtverchi, he succeeds brilliantly.

Social Concerns

Like virtually all science fiction novels in which humanity contacts and exploits a less advanced alien civilization, A Case of Conscience can be read as a critique of the West's attitude towards the Third World. The Lithia Commission's very serious purpose is to decide the fate of Human-Lithian relations for decades to come, and they have supposedly been carefully chosen to make that decision. Readers quickly discover, however, that at least two of the four Commissioners are out and out bigots who refuse even to learn the Lithian language and whose primary interest appears to be the discovery of ways in which Earth can exploit the planet. Further, all four men are scientists by training. The exclusion of even one commission member trained in diplomacy, anthropology, or sociology — since it is implied that Ruiz-Sanchez's priesthood is incidental to his choice as Commission biologist — is indicative of Earth's attitude toward Lithia.

In part two of the novel, which is set on Earth, Blish returns, with more sophistication, to a subject he explored in the early volumes of the Cities in Flight series, the near-future deterioration of civilization on Earth. Blish postulates that the Russian-American nuclear weapons race under way in the 1950s will reach a point of decreasing returns something along the lines of the current Mutually Assured Destruction theory (MAD) of the 1980s, and will be replaced by a Shelter Race whose logical end will be to force most of western civilization into city-sized fallout shelters. The extrapolation of the current high-pressure urban sprawl into gigantic near-future — often underground — cities which put humanity under enormous psychological tension is common in science fiction and Blish's handling of the scenario is one of the better ones. Perhaps the most interesting things about it are his description of how abandoned and decaying surface buildings are adapted to the pleasures of the rich and decadent and his portrayal of what is essentially television (Blish calls his holographic medium "3-V") as a tool for world-wide demagoguery.

Techniques

Blish uses the standard techniques of the science fiction of his day but to those techniques he adds an erudition which cannot be found elsewhere in the genre. Off and on throughout the novel, for example, Father Ruiz-Sanchez reads from and meditates upon an extremely convoluted and difficult novel which readers are told has been put on the Index because of the moral ambiguity which is at its heart. The book, which readers only later learn is James Joyce's Finnegans Wake, involves a series of incredibly confusing moral issues, or cases of conscience. An enormous number of characters are implicated in a series of crimes and errors (all of which interrelate with each other) and Ruiz-Sanchez's purpose in reading the book seems to be to analyze the situation and demonstrate logically the exact state of each character's moral involvement. The complexities of Finnegans Wake (1939), of course, mirror the complexities of the Lithian situation as Ruiz-Sanchez must weigh his own motives, those of his diverse fellow Commissioners, the Lithians, and, perhaps, even Satan, and come to terms with his own case of conscience, his own moral involvement with Lithia, his own responsibility and culpability for the events of the novel.

Themes

The social concerns, which are central to dozens, perhaps hundreds of science fiction works of the period, are actually secondary to Blish's main purpose in A Case of Conscience. Their role is merely to provide supporting evidence. What Blish is really interested in, and this was to become the theme of much of his major fiction in the years to come, was the problem of evil and, more specifically, the relationship between evil and secular knowledge. Blish was a trained scientist and a technocrat by inclination, but, over the years, he became increasingly dubious of the value of scientific research. In the Cities in Flight series technology made possible the salvation of humanity. In A Case of Conscience, however, it is very definitely a double-edged sword.

It is secular knowledge, after all, which created nuclear weapons and gave humanity the ability to destroy itself. In Blish's novel, technology is responsible for the hellish conditions of the Shelter society on Earth and it is also responsible for human presence on Lithia, a presence which will lead directly to Lithia's destruction while indirectly doing enormous damage to the Earth as well. Historically religion has had little place in science fiction; most writers have either ignored it or kept it carefully stored on the shelf reserved for such conventional pieties as motherhood and apple pie. Blish is one of the few science fiction writers to introduce it into the foreground of a work. Ruiz-Sanchez, the protagonist of A Case of Conscience, was appointed to the Lithian Commission as a biologist, but he is also a Jesuit priest and Lithia quickly becomes for him not merely a study in scientific development, but something much more basic. The Lithians, he realizes, have a moral philosophy which is virtually identical to that of Christianity and follow those moral beliefs to perfection but, paradoxically, they lack any religious belief whatsoever. Lithia, at first glance, seems Edenic, a planet lacking in original sin.

Soon, however, Ruiz-Sanchez begins to develop doubts and comes to a much darker conclusion.

The Lithians are not good because they choose to be. Despite their highly developed civilization and engaging personalities, their propensity for right action appears to be written on the gene, innate. In short, Ruiz-Sanchez decides, their apparent morality is a sham and they are little more than automatons. If one lives in a universe where one cannot help seeing the supernatural as underpinning everything, as Ruiz-Sanchez does, only one conclusion is possible: Lithia is a trap, designed by Satan, to ensnare humanity.

It is, to put Ruiz-Sanchez's dilemma in current terms, something very close to what fundamentalist Christianity sees as the trap of secular humanism, the belief that humanity can achieve greatness without divine aid.

Blish never allows Ruiz-Sanchez to discover for certain the truth behind Lithia. The priest is censured by the pope for falling into the heresy of Manicheanism, the belief that Satan is capable of creativity. Egtverchi, the reptilelike Lithian brought back to Earth in an embryonic state, who is called Snake by a number of characters in the book, may

specifically be "the" Snake in the garden. His being awarded citizenship on Earth (largely at the recommendation of Michaelis, the Commission member most clearly aligned with the secular humanist viewpoint), and his development into a popular 3-V demagogue, lead directly to what may be the complete collapse of Shelter society.

Conversely, however, Lithia might be Eden and humanity may itself be the snake sent to destroy paradise. At the end of the novel, just as Ruiz-Sanchez pronounces the rite of exorcism over Lithia, the planet blows up due to an out of control nuclear experiment conducted by Earthmen. Blish, again, leaves it entirely up in the air as to whether the nuclear accident was a result of the exorcism, and hence proof of Satan's presence in Lithian society, or a result of the Earth scientists' own hubris, and hence, perhaps, proof of Satan's presence in human society.

Blish's novel was written thirty years ago and, in its science, plotting, and character development, the book does show its age, but few more thematically challenging genre novels have ever been written. A Case of Conscience remains an important milestone of modern science fiction.

Key Questions

The story of the Fall from Grace is central to Western civilization. Adam and Eve, the serpent, the tree of forbidden knowledge, these are cultural icons of overwhelming significance. The Fall is so important that its power as a symbol is virtually divorced from any actual belief in the literal truth of the Bible. Since the Middle Ages, and especially since the Renaissance, many writers have considered the possibility that scientific knowledge might also be dangerous, might in fact provide a temptation to sin comparable to that found in the story of Eden. Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus and Mary Shelley's Frankenstein are two of the most famous such stories. Any discussion of James Blish's A Case of Conscience must occur within this context.

1.Unlike many of the major science fiction writers of his era, James Blish was sincerely religious. In A Case of Conscience, it seems possible that miraculous events have in fact occurred.

Ruiz-Sanchez ponders the possibility that the Lithians may indeed be unfallen. Alternately, he considers the possibility that they may be demonic. What do you think?

2. What is the significance of the fact that the Lithians have a moral philosophy virtually identical to that of Christianity, appear to practice their beliefs perfectly but, at the same time, have no religious beliefs?

3. How would the discovery of intelligent life on other planets affect the religions of Earth in general and Chris tianity specifically? How would it affect the beliefs of those — Christian, Moslem, Jew, Hindu — who take their scripture literally?

4. It has been suggested that stories in which actual miracles appear to occur cannot be true science fiction.

This claim has been applied to both A Case of Conscience and to Walter M. Miller's A Canticle for Leibowitz (1960).

How do you react to this idea?

5. To what extent can A Case of Conscience be read as an indictment of the West's exploitation of the Third World?

6. Consider Blish's depiction of future life on Earth in part two of the novel. How believable is it? To what extent is Blish's future a straightforward projection of the Cold War era?

7. In his early fiction, particularly in the Cities in Flight series, it is clear that Blish sees technology and science in general as the key to humanity's salvation. In A Case of Conscience the essentially positive nature of technology is no longer so clear. What doubts about current technology are evident in the novel? To what extent is technology responsible for the awful situation that Blish's future Earth finds itself in?

8. For centuries philosophers and theologians have argued over a question which is frequently called the Problem of Evil. If God exists and is good, how can S/He allow the existence of evil in the world? This question is central to A Case of Conscience.

How would you describe Blish's attitude towards it? How do you yourself feel?

9. Does Blish seem to feel that there's a direct connection between technology and the problem of evil?

10. Although Ruiz-Sanchez is a priest, it is clear that this is a coincidence, at least so far as his employers are concerned. He's been sent to Lithia purely in his role as scientist. How believable is Ruiz-Sanchez as both priest and scientist? To what extent is he torn by his two roles?

11. A Case of Conscience is heavily imbued with religious symbolism.

What examples can you find? What is their significance?

Literary Precedents

Blish was well read in theology, philosophy, and literature, and the precedents for the moral and theological discourse which underlies A Case of Conscience may be sought in innumerable medieval and modern texts. A discussion of the background to the Manichean Heresy alone would take a fulllength article. The problem of the good nonbeliever has been a source of much agonized soul searching for the church since its earliest days. Much time was spent discussing whether or not such people could be saved, during their lifetimes or retroactively; Dante's use of Virgil in The Divine Comedy might serve as a useful gloss on this subject, as would the medieval Saint Erkenwald.

Serious discussion of religious issues is rare in science fiction but several memorable treatments can be mentioned, especially Arthur C. Clarke's "The Star" (1955), in which another priest-scientist, a member of a party exploring an ancient supernova discovers, not only that the nova was the Star of Bethlehem, but that its explosion wiped out a superior nonhuman civilization; Walter M. Miller's A Canticle for Leibowitz (short stories 1955-1957, book version 1960), in which the Catholic Church presides over the recovery of civilization following an atomic war; and Michael Moorcock's "Behold the Man" (1966), in which an alienated modern man goes back in time to disprove Christ's existence and ends up becoming Christ. Perhaps the leading contemporary author of science fiction on religious themes is Michael Bishop.

His A Little Knowledge (1977) describes the effect on a repressive fundamentalist-Christian America of the future when nonhumanoid, physically repulsive aliens visit the Earth and attempt to convert to Christianity.

Related Titles

The novels A Case of Conscience (1958; the original short story version appeared in 1953) and Doctor Mirabilis (1964), and the two novellas Black Easter, or, Faustus Aleph-Null (1968) and The Day After Judgment (1970; expanded 1971), which can be read together as one novel, form a work which Blish collectively called After Such Knowledge.

He labeled the series a "thematic trilogy" because, while there are no plot connections between the books (they don't even belong to the same genres), they all share Blish's central theme, the dangers of secular knowledge. Doctor Mirabilis, which Blish considered his best work (although it was not a commercial success and is today difficult to find), is a historical novel about Roger Bacon. A work of fiction on the life of such a legendary and demon-haunted figure would seem to lend itself to fantasy, but Blish chose instead to examine the historical Bacon, the inventor of gun powder, a true son of the middle ages, but a man, nonetheless, with a yen for secular knowledge. Black Easter and its sequel, however, are fantasies set in the near future. One of Blish's purposes in this work is to describe what the life of a modern sorcerer would really be like, a life steeped in ancient ritual, but stripped of the romantic, pseudo-medieval claptrap invented by modern writers. His answer, as presented in the person of Theron Ware, is something very like a research scientist. Ware is not an evil man, although he is perfectly willing to do evil in pursuit of either more knowledge or the money necessary to finance his studies.

In Black Easter he is approached by Baines, a wealthy American arms dealer who, bored with his trade, searches for some new thrill in the field of mass murder and who commissions Ware to loose a number of Hell's demons upon the world for one night. Things quickly get out of hand, of course. Once loosed, the demons refuse to be bound again and in the sequel, The Day After Judgment (1970), Blish treats his audience both to the literal death of God and to the spectacle of the U.S. Armed Forces fighting a war against demons.

Both books have a grim humor to them, witness Blish's decision to name the various good magician-monks who stand helplessly by and watch the cataclysm after fellow science fiction writers Robert A. Heinlein (Father Anson), Anthony Boucher, Jack Vance, and himself under his critical pseudonym (Father Atheling). Blish uses the unholy contract between Baines and Ware to emphasize, somewhat before such ideas became fashionable, the soullessness of the modern American Military-Industrial Complex and the scientists and businessmen who serve it. In these works his doubts about the morality of secular knowledge have brought Blish to a position very far from and much more complex than the simple, straightforward technocracy which he once espoused and in which many modern science fiction writers continue-to believe.

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