A Teaching Review of *Dune*: Religion is the Spice of Life

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Frank Herbert’s 1965 science fiction masterpiece contains so many of the themes and tropes we know from the study of religion that it is almost too much to handle. Everything from a deep-rooted skepticism to an exploration of fanaticism, ontology to apocalyptic vision, plus the essence and interrelatedness of sacred time and space, the dynamic between religion and ecology—they all infuse this story. The role of economic motives, and the use and misuse of religious power, as well as the role and influence of religious specialists (of gendered abilities and formidable powers), abound. Physical and mental transformations are informed by prophecy; messianism and chosen-ness, in their relationship to exile, is explored; sacrifice, death and resurrection, occur in all their meaning and value. Sacred texts of contested authenticity appear alongside oral traditions of questionable authority. The role of entheogens to expand consciousness is here as is a profound understanding of the role of myth and ritual. Indeed in a way, the book is a primer on the range of questions and issues that characterize our discipline.

As Rudy Busto has said, science fiction’s distinguishing feature is to “make strange” that which is embedded and familiar, to utilize the plurality of the universe (or universes) that has been revealed by science in order to challenge assumptions of uniqueness. From an attitude of “fixed imagination,” we are moved to the limitlessness of space, opening up an infinite realm of possibilities to imagine, however disquieting they may be. Of course, we know not what actually is out there, but the serious science fiction creators have used what we do know in order to project, extrapolate and invent what may be. In terms of religion, what may be is inevitably
a extrapolation from what is, but the lenses used to envision it come in
a wide variety of densities, curvatures and refinements. Sometimes the
image produced is blurry, requires adjustment, necessitates reorientation.
When produced with skill, it can provide clarity, and perhaps a whole new
way of seeing.

As his son, Brian Herbert, has noted, Frank Herbert drew themes from
Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism, but he paid particular
attention to Islam, with an emphasis on Sufi mysticism (Dune, Afterward,
523). In 1965, we in the west knew little of, and paid less attention to, the
study of Islam, and it is fascinating to see how the author utilized, as well
as reinterpreted, its essence for his purposes: that would provide a whole
study in itself. Suffice it to say that there is much Arabic vocabulary here,
and of course it is the story of a desert people, alienated from the outside
powers that have used their planet to feed their greed for and addiction to
a substance that their planet alone can provide, subduing and manipulat­
ing them for many generations. Their religion has also been infused with
outside influence, but it has evolved in particular ways to fit their needs,
in the way that all religions, for all time, have morphed into the particular
phenomena they are, to address the demands of history, geography, climate
and human need.

I am currently teaching a course in which Dune is a required reading.
Herbert's original volume was followed by several sequels, some written by
him, others by his son. For the purposes of my course and this essay, I am
utilizing the original volume only. Certainly there is enough rich content
in the original to keep us busy. Not only does Herbert interrogate Reli­
gion; by implication, he interrogates our discipline of Religious Studies as
well. In part, it is a scathing critique of religion as a system; yet it simulta­
nceously provides insight into the powerful and transformative power that
religion offers. The complexity of this content is challenging and compel­
ing. Its most salient feature is paradox.

Here are some examples of the themes I have chosen to pursue, sug­
gested by the questions the text raises, which are part of my pedagogy
when teaching Dune.

What does it mean to create a world, and how are its qualities defined?
What are the essential features and the necessary dynamics of, and what
should be added in order to form, a coherent worldview? If religion is to
be present, what makes religion workable? The world of Dune is 20,000
years in the future, and is made up of a feudal system of ruling Houses who

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control all aspects of life on the planets they rule. The religious system is central to the worldview, but itself is a compilation of ancient Terran belief systems, codified and annotated in an attempt to dispel and prohibit conflict that would be detrimental to the economic and political welfare of the many governing Houses and planets under the rule of a presiding Emperor.

**What does it mean to be human?**

In *Dune*, the answer is clearly given: it is the ability to use reason and intellect in order to transcend instinct. There is a test administered by a religious specialist, to determine the humanity of the book's primary character. It is a test of pain. It is rarely administered to males. There are gender issues imbedded in this theme that complicate this question, as well as furthering Herbert's plot structure. The privileged status of "Human" is also a response to the prehistory of the book, and involves a strong tension between artificial intelligence and the perceptible advantages of human ability. In the past, overdependence upon technology had led to bitter conflict (a well-known theme in Science Fiction).

**What kinds of tools do religious specialists have at their disposal, and what is their purpose?**

In Herbert's conceit, the role of the religious specialist is critical: she (and it is predominantly females who serve this function) presides over the dogma, teaching, evangelistic and proselytizing functions of religion. She has formidable tools of control and highly specialized mental facilities, all designed to further the political goals of the Missionaria Protectiva: an organization whose primary goal is the genetic manipulation of the species towards the goal of producing the Chosen One, the Kwizatz Haderach, he (and note that the gender is male) who, like the original figure of the Hassidic Kefitzat Haderach from which the term is derived, shortens the way; in this case, the universal super-being. This group of religious specialists is a startling composite of political expediency, scientific imperialism, and mysticism.

**What is the nature of prophecy, and what is prescience?**

In *Dune*, the character of the One is both plagued and informed by the ability to see time and space as a flow of potentialities, in dreams and visions. It is what enables him to transform worlds, claim ultimate political power, and launch a *Jihad*, a holy war. It also tortures him with his inability to know precisely which path he is on, to question and resist his destiny, to fear what he cannot control. This is a tortured prophet, who must sacrifice

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what is most important to him, in order to fulfill what is called his “terrible purpose.” One is sympathetic to his struggle, while appalled by its results, as Herbert intends. His narrator, the Princess Irulan, writes:

Prophecy and prescience—How can they be put to the test in the face of the unanswered question? Consider: How much is actual prediction of the "wave form"...and how much is the prophet shaping the future to fit the prophecy? Does the prophet see the future or does he see a line of weakness, a fault or cleavage that he may shatter with words or decisions as a diamond-cutter shatters his gem with a blow of a knife? (271)

What is the role of physical environment in religion?

Herbert was, in 1965, acutely aware of the importance of environmental movements. He presents this knowledge in the close study of the indigenous culture of the planet Arrakis, whose Fremen live in complete knowledge and understanding of their desert. Their spiritual bond with the planet is so complete, and its sacrality so beyond question, that its most terrifying qualities, its unforgiving climate, its total lack of water and the gigantic sandworms that they understand so well and worship, form the integrated system that give their lives meaning, even as they quest to transform it.

Through Herbert’s lens, we might say that religion is always both more and less than what it is perceived to be. Religion has the ability to inspire both hope and despair, peace and war, love and loathing, mystery and transparency. At its root lies paradox. Power and control are its stock in trade, liberation is its fantasy. Manipulation is its tool, yet its goal is transcendence. It forms, directs and channels thought through its adherents, but in doing so it limits both itself and them.

There are subtleties in the psychological dynamic that are complex; where does the truth lie? Outside the human psyche or within it? The prophet Paul Muad’Dib ultimately knows that his powers are considerable and formidable, but limited. Is there a God in Dune? There is one that is un-named, undefined, invoked and yet removed from the action entirely—not a personal, historical divinity. Immanence is reserved for the religious specialists, the women who form and embody the Bene Gesserit agenda, and the prophet. It is also reserved for the environment and its most compelling manifestations, the desert and the worms.

In the end, what Herbert provides is a highly refined and close exploration of religious phenomena, a multi-dimensional analytical diagnostic. It may be utilized in so many ways. What I have observed, teaching *Dune,*
may be summarized as follows:

- Students find *Dune* challenging to read. Herbert incorporates foreign words and invents vocabulary; fortunately, he also provides a Glossary. Some of my students have utilized audio readings of the text to help them read effectively; the *sound* of the names and terms aids them in following the written text.

- Students find this book engaging; it is not a classic work for nothing. They find the concepts compelling, and the nature of science fiction works effectively here: the distancing provided by altered time and place allows them to explore difficult concepts more comfortably, because they perceive it as fantasy. In my work with them, it helps occasionally to ask if particular thematic elements sound familiar, and to help them think of parallels with religious traditions, religious movements and religious imagery that are closer to home.

- Teaching *Dune* in the context of a course that examines an assortment of theoretical approaches in the Academic Study of Religion has successfully provided them with context and structures of thinking that are useful. They can build bridges between the theory and the phenomena described by Herbert to develop working analytical models.

- The culminating project in this course is for student groups to develop, present and write about particular thematic elements. I have provided them with a series of discussion topics throughout the course of the semester to help them focus. The groups have chosen the following topics to explore:
  - The nature of religious narrative, how it is formed, and what it communicates about the community that embraces it.
  - Religious ritual, its life passage components as well as its initiatory elements, and the ways in which water, in particular, is ritualized in *Dune*.
  - Issues of religion and science, how each is defined and whether they are mutually exclusive categories of thought and experience.
  - The connection between nature and religion, including the religious implications of humanity's ability to alter and control nature.
  - The ways in which both religion and science may be manipulated as forms of political and social control.
If what we seek in our labors is to explore and articulate the essential components of religions, the realm of imagination is an appropriate location for such an inquiry. Both religion and science fiction owe much to the power of imagination. Rudy Busto used the phrases “the poetics of infinite possibilities” and “the plurality of worlds” in his proposal for this panel. *Dune* certainly qualifies as a purveyor of both possibility and plurality. In space, we are all strangers in a strange land, and while the familiar may be made strange, it is also possible for the strange to become familiar.