

REVIEW OF A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ

...in a dark sea of centuries wherein nothing seemed to flow, a lifetime was only a brief eddy, even for the man who lived it.¹

That's a very evocative image of monastic life within a static society. But I have to say, "dark sea of centuries wherein nothing seemed to flow" is also what my time reading this book felt like. I feared it would never end. The novel's main message is that Catholicism is correct and secular worldviews are bad. I don't share that perspective and a lot of what Miller has to say does not resonate with me.

Rationalizing misfortune. When the monk Francis's multi-year labor of love—an intricately embellished copy of an ancient document—is stolen, he's supposed to see God's hand in the event because it prevented the theft of the priceless original. This reminds me of the that-traffic-jam-actually-saved-you-from-being-killed-in-a-car-accident variety of stories Christians sometimes like to tell. While there's a certain elegance to the one in the novel, I find these stories uninspiring. They make the universe sound like a giant Rube Goldberg machine where God tries to string together sequences of human misery in interesting ways. Can God really not think of ways to prevent terrible stuff from happening that don't involve other terrible stuff happening? The book does indicate how Miller might answer me:

...why don't you forgive God for allowing pain? If He didn't allow it, human courage, bravery, nobility, and self-sacrifice would all be meaningless things.²

Nobody would say that sort of thing if they weren't hell-bent on convincing themselves that all suffering happens for a good reason. Nobody's first thought upon seeing a child dying of cancer is: *how fortunate that the child has been given this opportunity to be courageous!* How can you contemplate the vast sea of unfathomable horrors that constitutes human history and conclude that the chance to exercise virtue is *so important* as to justify it all?

Euthanasia. Several pages are devoted to one priest's ostensibly-heroic opposition to euthanasia. When a mother plans to euthanize her baby to spare it a slow and painful death,

¹Walter M. Miller, ed., *A canticle for Leibowitz*, Bantam mass market reiss. [pbk. ed.], A Bantam spectra book (New York: Bantam Books, 2007), 82–83.

²Ibid., 332.

the priest heavily pressures her not to. I'm not sure what the best course of action in that awful situation would be; what I do find deeply misguided is the priest's total and briefly violent *certainty* that the baby must be allowed to suffer. He is utterly committed to following a rigid law without regard for context or impact. This rigidity makes sense only if you have extremely high confidence in the existence of a specific supernaturally-revealed law and a specific literal afterlife.

The priest does make an interesting point though when he condemns the government for having contingency plans (like a system in place to organize mass voluntary euthanasia) for if nuclear war happens, while not doing everything possible to prevent that war. Perhaps some events are so horrible that we should actively refuse to make preparations for them, lest we become less committed to preventing them. Thomas Schelling might have something to say on that subject.

Endurance. One theme that should be of interest to nonreligious readers is the contrast between the monastery's slow but reliable pursuit of its aims across centuries, versus the continual upheavals of the outside world. The monks' success as archivists depends on being able to recruit people who will accept a lifetime of serious sacrifice in order to promote the Order's long-term interests. Is that achievable without religion? Atheists can care about the long-term future, and can feel love and devotion toward an organization, but I think the fear that any given multi-century endeavor has a high chance of failing will make most people limit how much of their lives they're willing to invest in one. The monks, in contrast, can reassure themselves that God is watching over their organization and is unlikely to let their efforts be wasted.

Unrelatedly, here's another good quote:

But neither infinite power nor infinite wisdom could bestow godhood upon men. For that there would have to be infinite love as well.³

³Ibid., 238.