



Vonnegut and Religion

“ Anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book either. ”



Religious Background

- Raised in a family of German Americans who had considered themselves “freethinkers” for generations
- From 1979 speech: “I am of course a skeptic about the divinity of Christ and a scorner of the notion that there is a God who cares how we are or what we do” (*Palm Sunday* 152)
- Called himself a “Christ-worshipping agnostic” (*Palm Sunday* 298)



Vonnegut's view of the Biblical Christ

- Vonnegut recognized that ordinary human beings need moral systems to help guide and shape their lives
- Professed love for Christ's message of mercy and redemption.
- Heartily admired the Sermon on the Mount
- Viewed Christ's alliance with the poor, the meek, the hungry, and the peacemakers of the world as tantamount to an early form of Socialism, since each doctrine "prescribes a society dedicated to the proposition that all men, women, and children are created equal and shall not starve" (*A Man* 11).

Problems with Traditional Christianity

- Believed civic law should come above “divine law”
- Appalled by what he saw as the militarism of traditional Christianity
- Wrote about the new, 1980s religious fervor tied to Jerry Falwell’s “Moral Majority”
- Claimed this group proposed two commandments: “Stop thinking” and “Obey” (*Fates* 158)
- Same as orders he had been taught as an infantry private during basic training.



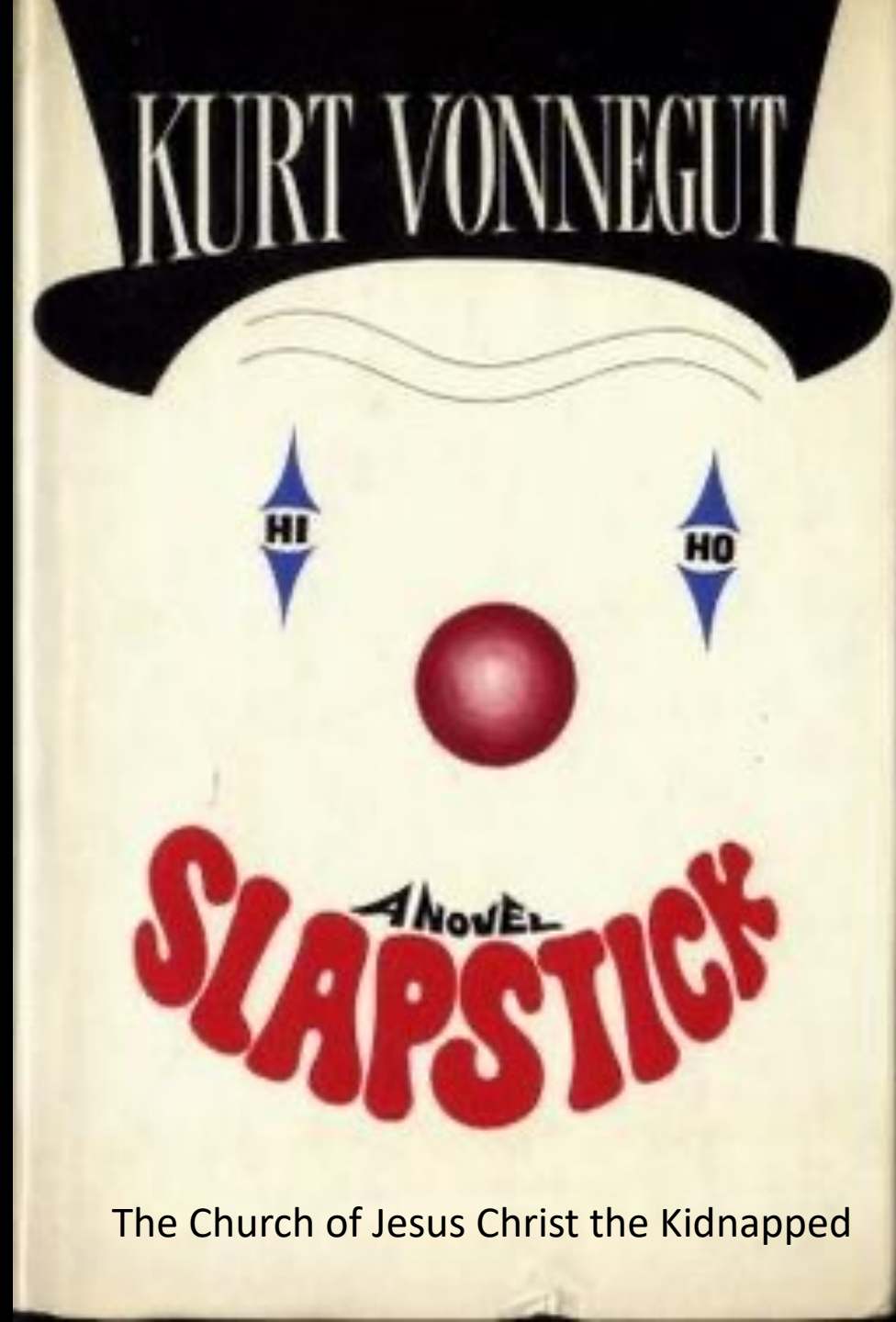


Yet, need for religion

- If organized religions, particularly Christianity, have caused so much trouble in the world, why not do away with them completely?
- Vonnegut recognized the human desire for ethical and moral guidance, peoples' need to believe in something larger than themselves
- Cited the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who argued that "only a person of great faith could afford to be a skeptic" (*Fates* 157).

New Religions?

- The fundamental dilemma we see over and over in Vonnegut's work: how to retain a sound ethical system, what he calls a "heartfelt moral code" (*Palm Sunday* 185), in a contemporary world where conventional religions are out of place and no longer offer people a sense of community or spiritual fulfillment.
- Continuously depicts attempts to establish new religions in his novels



The Church of Jesus Christ the Kidnapped



Failed utopias

- Ironically, almost all of these invented religions are doomed to failure, subject to the same kind of cruelties and absurdities that plague the more traditional religions that Vonnegut frequently railed against
- Nevertheless, Vonnegut admires these attempts to live moral lives, however mistaken they might ultimately be
- Our belief in our ability to change ourselves, to shape our lives for the better, even if these beliefs finally prove futile or illusory, is what makes us fully human.



Advice to young people

- Thought that young people just graduating from college should develop new theories about life that everyone can believe in: “we need a new religion” (*Palm Sunday* 181).
- Proposed a simple code that would not need elaboration or interpretation by priests or theologians: “anything which wounds the planet is evil, and anything which preserves it or heals it is good” (*Palm Sunday* 185).



Anthropology Training

- Vonnegut's thinking in this speech was heavily influenced by his studies in cultural anthropology at the University of Chicago in the mid-1940s.
- Even a "first grader," he stresses, "should understand that his culture isn't a rational invention; that there are thousands of other cultures and they all work pretty well; that all cultures function on faith rather than truth; there are lots of alternatives to our own society" (*Wampeters* 279).



Dr. Robert Redfield

- Vonnegut fascinated by the folk societies studied by Dr. Robert Redfield, one of his teachers at Chicago, who argued that such societies provided their members of sense of belonging and self-worth.
- Vonnegut contended that humans are chemically programmed to live in such folk societies
- The reason that modern humans “feel lousy all the time” (*Wampeters* 180) is because they are profoundly lonely.
- The nuclear family and the geographical mobility prized by contemporary Americans do not offer the stability, large kinship ties, or the unified spiritual vision that would give them a sense of belonging in the world.



Biblical Stories

- Frequently rewrote Biblical stories in his own work (as we'll see in *SI-5*)
- Contended that sloppy language itself sometimes responsible for cruelty of Christianity
- We must pay attention to how we tell stories
- metafiction



Reading and Writing

- Sometimes argued that reading and writing were “sacred” activities that can provide a kind of spiritual satisfaction
- Or maybe just the illusion of meaning and depth?
- Elsewhere, insisted that writing is simply a “trade” like any other



Pretending

- Writers, he argues, have only average IQs; they are “mediocre people” who are “patient and industrious enough to revise their stupidity, to edit themselves into something like intelligence” (*Wampeters xx*).
- By pretending to be clever and working hard, would-be writers can actually grow into their artistic aspirations
- For Vonnegut, pretending to be something one is not, holding onto illusions, is not necessarily a bad thing, though, as he writes in *Mother Night*, we have to be careful about what we pretend to be
- In *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater*, the novel immediately following *Cat’s Cradle*, we get a reversal of the warning in *MN*
- “Pretend to be good always, and even God will be fooled” (*God Bless You*, 255)

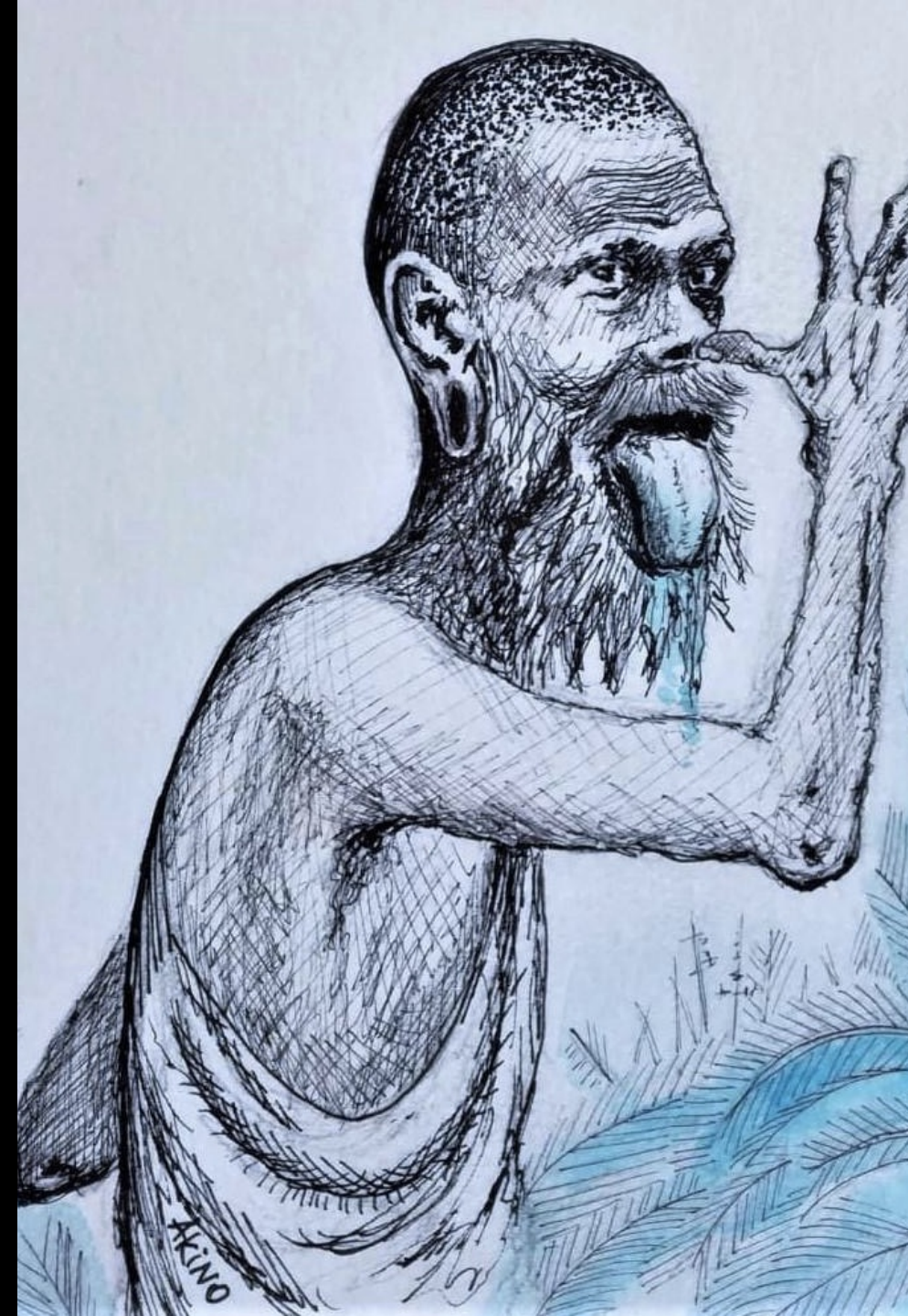
Excerpts from Vonnegut's Bennington College Graduation Speech (1970)

I used to think that science would save us, and science certainly tried. But we can't stand any more tremendous explosions, either for or against democracy. Only in superstition is there hope. If you want to become a friend of civilization, then become an enemy of truth and a fanatic for harmless balderdash. I know that millions of dollars have been spent to produce this splendid graduating class, and that the main hope of your teachers was, once they got through with you, that you would no longer be superstitious. I'm sorry--I have to undo that now. I beg you to believe in the most ridiculous superstition of all: that humanity is at the center of the universe, the fulfiller or the frustrater of the grandest dreams of God Almighty. If you can believe that, and make others believe it, then there might be hope for us. Human beings might stop treating each other like garbage, might begin to treasure and protect each other instead. Then it might be all right to have babies again. . . .

Which brings us to the arts, whose purpose, in common with astrology, is to use frauds in order to make human beings seem more wonderful than they really are. . . . The arts put man at the center of the universe, whether he belongs there or not. Military science, on the other hand, treats man as garbage--and his children, and his cities, too. Military science is probably right about the contemptibility of man in the vastness of the universe. Still--I deny that contemptibility, and I beg you to deny it, through the creation of appreciation of art.

Bokononism

- Vonnegut's own attitude toward his invented religions is difficult to untangle
- Are we meant to reject Bokonon as a charlatan, a false prophet who cruelly and blithely leads human beings to mass suicide at the end of the novel?
- Or are we to see him as a kindly and wise spiritual leader who provides people with the hope they need to survive their harsh and unforgiving lives?





A helpful or hurtful religion?

- The critic Lawrence Broer takes the first view, arguing that Bokonon's response to human suffering is fatalistic and morally corrupt and that John's main challenge in the novel is to learn to reject the comforting illusions of Bokononist thought.
- Peter Freese, on the other hand, insists that while Bokononism is system based on lies, it proves much more beneficial for human beings than its main opponent—natural science.

Question of Free Will

- Do Vonnegut's book offer a deterministic view of the universe, negating the possibility of human free will?
- Good Bokononists believe that God has a plan for their lives
- Through the use of the *vin-dit*, or "sudden, very personal shove in the direction of Bokononism" (*Cat's Cradle* 69), God makes sure these plans are fulfilled.
- Is Bokonon himself a fatalist?
- The Fourteenth Book of Bokonon, titled "What Can a Thoughtful Man Hope for Mankind on Earth, Given the Experience of the Past Million Years," consists of the single word "nothing" (245).





Bokononist Creation Story

- The very notion of man having a meaningful purpose in life, according to Bokonon, is invented by man, not by God
- In the Bokononist creation story, God creates the earth and then, in his “cosmic loneliness,” he creates man out of mud (265). When Man first sits up and asks what the purpose of life is, God is surprised by the idea that everything must have a purpose. “Then I leave it to you to think of one,” replies God, and he goes away (265).



Search for meaning

- Is Vonnegut then suggesting that it is a fool's errand to search for meaning in the universe, that humans should give up and resignedly accept their predetermined fates?
- Alternately, does he want readers to completely reject Bokononism as a morally corrupt philosophy that is presented satirically?

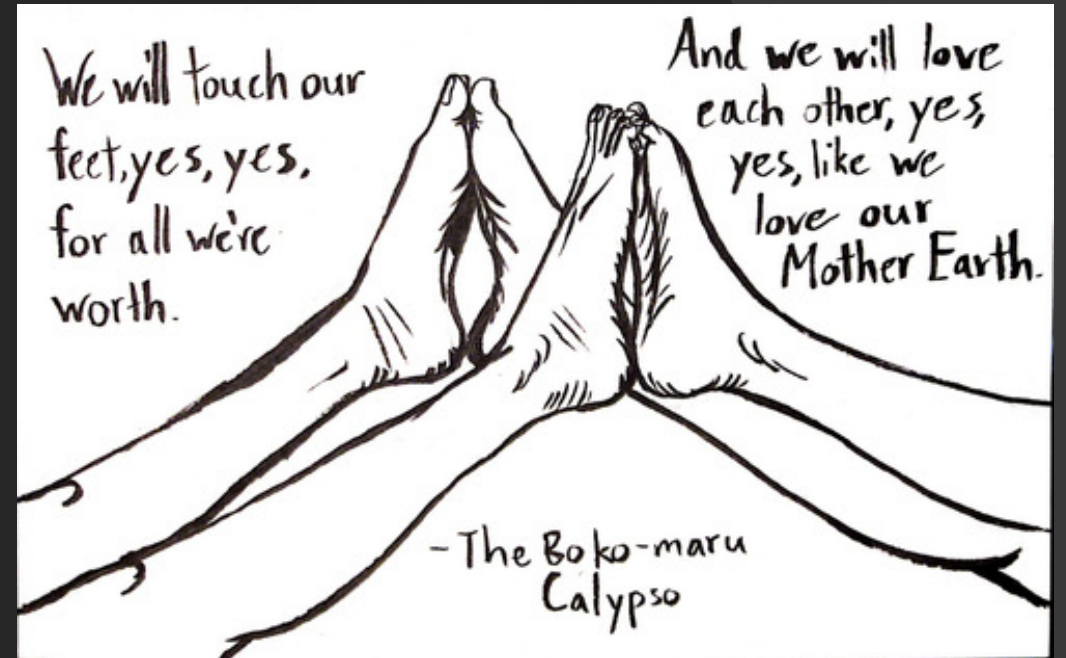


Life as art

- Neither of these possibilities is quite right?
- *Cat's Cradle* perhaps suggests that human beings have the ability to turn their lives into works of art in order to supply the meaning that is not inherent to human existence?
- Peter Freese, talking about the central symbol of the cat's cradle: The universe that people find themselves in is "an arbitrary and ever-changing system of meaningless strings," which people, through acts of "creative imagination" have to define as meaningful. If they cannot do that, if they prove unable to invent a meaning that cannot be discovered, they will succumb to the despair of nihilism.

San Lorenzo

- Johnson and McCabe fail to raise the standard of living on the island
- But, according to Julian Castle, they did increase the islanders' happiness by supplying them roles to play in an ongoing drama that pitted good against evil
- The islanders came to feel that they “were all employed full time as actors in a play they understood”; life on the island effectively “became a work of art” (174–175). And art is important:
 - Boku-maru, for instance, really works (171)?
 - Angela playing her clarinet (182)
 - Bokononist phrase, “It’s impossible to make a mistake” (2-3)
 - Dangers of a writer’s strike (231)



Reality vs. Illusion



- A very fine line separating illusion from reality?
- Pretenses invented by Bokonon have a way of coming true
- Both Johnson and McCabe grow into the false roles of prophet and tyrant that they originally adopt as guises
- Legend of the golden boat that “will sail again when the end of the world is near” (109) comes true as well
- Words, stories *shape* reality?



End of the book

- What are we left with in the end?
- Bokoron invents karasses to make people believe they are working with others to do god's will; he invents boko-maru to help people love each other; he declares that man is the only thing sacred....yet
- He advocates mass suicide at the end of the book?
- Importance of symbolic action?

