The Many Faces of God: Christianity in Hispanic Caribbean Science Fiction

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> "Y digo que Vuestras Altezas no deben consentir que aquí trate ni faga pie ningund estrangero, salvo cathólicos cristianos, pues esto fue el fin y el comienço del propósito, que fue por acrecentamiento y gloria de la religión cristiana, no venir a estas partes ninguno que no sea cristiano."
>
> Cristóbal Colón, *Los cuatro viajes*

The relationship between religion and science fiction (SF) has been traced by many scholars back to the origins of the genre itself. Accordingly, Mark Rose writes in *Alien Encounters. Anatomy of Science Fiction* that religion and SF are connected because both are "concerned with the human in relation with the non human... or, more specifically,... the divine" (40). However, Rose even believes that, when talking about content, SF "may be understood as a displacement of religion" (40).

Other scholars, such as Alex Irvine, support the idea that SF can be considered the perfect genre for approaching and understanding religion by stating that "many of the common elements of science fiction—its utopian longings, its didactic tendencies, its visions of other worlds, and perhaps most importantly its continual investigation of 'that which cannot presently be known'—constitute it as a genre particularly suited to the exploration of religious questions" (25). Indeed, as part of the fantastic, SF is an excellent genre to observe the representation of religion, since over time it has been connected to issues of transcendence in the cosmos, either by supporting the existence of the divine, or in its relation to anticlericalism or atheism, due to its inherent scientific approach to the universe. In addition, the fantastic allows for the re-interpretation of myths and old texts in a way that challenges religious dogma and the *Bible* (Pippin and Aichele 1997, 113).

Perhaps this is why the presence of God and Christian symbolism in SF in general has a long tradition, as we can see in the works of British authors H. G. Wells (*Wonderful Visit*), and C. S. Lewis (*Out of the Silent Planet*), and North American writer Walter M. Miller, Jr. (*A Canticle for Leibowitz*), as well as many other novels with a God-like core or religious world such as Frank Herbert (*Dune*) or Arthur C. Clark (*2001: A Space Odyssey* and the short story *The Nine Billion Names of God*). Such traditions, as Rose argued, can even be traced to what is commonly considered the origin of modern SF, since Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a moral story of a doctor playing God, subsequently punished for his daring. In Hispanic SF, the figure of God and the debate over religion is also present, and as Andrea Bell and Yolanda Molina-Gavilán remind us, the use of Christian symbols is one of the three most relevant elements of SF written in Spanish and Portuguese (14). One of the main reasons for this relevance is that Christianity has historically been the predominant religion in the Hispanic part of the continent since shortly after the arrival of Cristobal Colón in 1492. Specifically, the interaction between Catholicism and literature has an extraordinary history in Hispanic letters that originates in medieval times and the Renaissance in Spain, with the works of, among others, Gonzalo de Berceo, Fray Luis de León, Santa Teresa de Cruz, and San Juan de la Cruz. This tradition was transferred from Spain to America during the colonial period, fostering a Latin American production of works influenced by religion, some of the works of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, for instance. Today, as Virginia Garrard-Burnett points out "... the vast majority of people who identify themselves as religious in Latin America also self-identify as Christians ..." (257).

The contact of Christianity with native and African religions propitiated the formation of new religious hybrids such as Voodoo, Santería, or Rastafari, with specific relevance and development in the Caribbean. This process of transculturation[i] has not always been acknowledged locally. Margarite Fernández Olmos states that while Cuba has made a great effort to incorporate an "alternative vision of official history that questions the limited, Hispanicized interpretations of cubanía and Caribbean cultures in general" (270), the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico have failed and a "... Hispanicist identity still predominates" (270) in both countries. The persistence of this Hispanicist discourse can be seen in the examples used for this article (even in those from Cuba), since only a Christian biblical discourse appears. It would be unrealistic to deny that there is no trace of other cultures or religions in the minds of these authors; however, their texts analyzed here focus exclusively on the alteration of the canonical Christian discourse, and it is precisely such alteration that makes the study of the texts so interesting, since the works of Cubans Daína Chaviano, Ángel Arango and F.

Mond, and Puerto Rican James Stevens-Arce,[ii] look at the Scriptures with new eyes and bring new interpretations to a debate that never ceases.[iii]

Hence, the focus of this article is on precisely this new way of looking at the canonical Christian texts and to observe how, in order to create a new perspective of the Scriptures, the above-mentioned Caribbean authors contrast original stories with new ones by altering events, dialogues and characters. Probably the most common way to achieve this process in SF is through the use of one of its most important literary tools and components: estrangement. According to Darko Suvin, estrangement in SF is produced by "confronting a set of narrative systems (...) with a point of view or look implying a new set of norms" (6). This "attitude," adds Suvin, "has grown into the formal framework of the genre" (7). In addition, and by using estrangement to look into the Scriptures, all the studied texts produce an effect of demythologization of the biblical accounts, which could ultimately be understood as a way of resisting the imposed dogma of the religious institutions down the years. The demythologization produced by these Caribbean texts point to two major topics which appear interwoven: the doubtful divine origin of Jesus and the power that Christian discourse invests in the Church, allowing it to be influential in Western societies.

As Rose indicates, many of the scientific advancements that challenged the Church's control over knowledge did not really fall too far from religion itself before the 19th century; from Galileo to Newton, they all believed that their theories remained true within a larger religious understanding of reality (50-52). Yet, all these new theories made the powerful position of Christianity deteriorate in the Western World in general, and, consequently, in the Hispanic Caribbean as well. As a result, Christianity stopped being the only referent of moral values, religious life, and credo in the 20th century. Unfortunately, the Christian authorities have traditionally defended themselves by all possible means, including the use of such repressive methods as the Inquisition or witch trials, and by repressive dogmatization, both through private schools and from the pulpits. A good example of this is the 18th century short story written in pre-independent Mexico "Sizigias y cuadraturas lunares" by the monk Manuel Antonio de Rivas, who used Newtonian theories to explain his trip to the Moon and, at the same time, criticize "los vicios de las autoridades eclesiásticas de su provincial, quienes, encabezadas por el provincial, intentaron infructuosamente abrirle juicio ante la Inquisición, entre otros cargos, por haber escrito 'Sizigias y cuadraturas lunares', revelando sus creencia en ciertas herejías" (Fernandez Delgado 7). Cases like this one, far from helping, have caused the Christian image to deteriorate even further in the Hispanic world. It does not come as a surprise, then, that modern SF in Spanish

had shown a "(...) tendency to utilize Christian motives and iconography (...) and to portray their reconstruction and subversion through science fiction's power to demystify religious beliefs by opposing reason and faith" (Bell 15).

The process of demythologizing the Gospels is not, however, unique or original to SF. In the field of Religious Studies, the debate over mythology in the Gospels is a topic that was re-energized in the 20th century when the German scholar Rudolf Bultmann gave a series of lectures in the Fifties, which he finally compiled in a short book called *Jesus Christ and Mythology*. In it, Bultmann argued for updating the New Testament to a modern understanding by separating the mythical components of the Gospels from the real message of mystery and transcendence of God.[iv] For Bultmann, the difference between *modern* thinking and *biblical* thinking lies in their different hermeneutics, since the former thinks scientifically and the latter does so mythologically (38). He asks for the rejection of the world view of the Bible, "which is the world view of a past epoch" (35), and supports the idea that the modern person cannot believe in miracles, because they are incomprehensible "within the framework of the rational order of the universe" (37). Bultmann also supported the idea that "[t]he whole conception of the world which is presupposed in the preaching of Jesus as in the New Testament generally is mythological" (15). Consequently, if Jesus belonged to such a Jewish culture and time, and he thought himself to be the messiah, "[He] understood himself in the light of mythology" (16). The stories attributed to Jesus were already part of the Jewish tradition and can be found in the Gnostic doctrine of redemption, "particularly the conception of the pre-existent Son of God who descended in human guise into the world to redeem mankind" (17).

Some years later, Burton H. Throckmorton, Jr. in *The New Testament and Mythology*, defended Bultmann by saying, "... we should define the New Testament myths as dramatic stories in symbolic language, about God and his relation to man and the world, which demands of man a decision and a commitment" (89). Throckmorton's book makes a more detailed analysis of some of these possible myths, and among them is the conception of Jesus as the result of a divine intervention. In the case of Mary's virginity, Throckmorton states that such story "... may be described as legend[s]" (176), since the real meaning of such myths must be understood as "rather, a mythological statement of faith asserting the entrance of the divine into human history in Jesus Christ, and science knows nothing of the truth or falsity of such an event" (177).

The idea of the Virgin Mary as myth is also assumed by Ursula K. LeGuin in "Myth and Archetype in Science Fiction". LeGuin acknowledges the virginity of Mary as

myth, but one that is still alive, and tries to conciliate science and mythology, stating that a myth is a way of understanding the world that is not directly opposed to science. Science cannot destroy a myth; on the contrary, when a myth is observed with attention, it grows in meaning, "... the more you look, the more they [myths] are there. And the more you think, the more they mean" (81).

Most interpretations of the origin of Jesus in Hispanic Caribbean SF also leave the divine aside, and, in a more appropriately SF style, coincide in extraterrestrial intervention as a necessary explanation for the otherwise accepted, superior qualities (powers) of the Jewish prophet. According to these texts, if Jesus of Nazareth is to be *special*, it is because he was a member or descendant of a more advanced civilization and because his technological capabilities were understood as miracles, since humans of that period would have been unable to make rational sense of such scientific advances. This is the main argument found in "La Anunciación" by Chaviano, "Un inesperado visitante" by Arango, and *Vida, pasión y suerte* by Mond.

"La Anunciación.", published originally in the collection of short stories ***Amoroso Planeta*** in Cuba in 1983, challenges the myth of the Virgin Mary's miraculous conception of Jesus, transforming the divine encounter of Mary and the archangel Gabriel as it is told in the Gospel according to Luke into a more mundane relationship between a humanoid alien and a human woman.

According to Molina-Gavilán, the myth of the Annunciation belongs to a category of myths that need to be understood as "un relato clásico estereotipado que ha sido anclado en el inconsciente colectivo" (49). In effect, the collective unconscious is a key element in all these SF stories, since in Christian cultures everyone has heard of the immaculate conception of Jesus and, therefore, readers from such a culture can easily identify the main characteristics of the story and can even hear some of the sentences repeated in their heads as they read them—even if those in the SF stories are modified. Hence, the Annunciation is a myth/story that belongs in the Christian collective unconscious.

Playing with this cultural presumption, Chaviano begins her short story with the simple sentence "Era el sexto mes" (La Anunciación 202) (It was the sixth month), which sounds very similar to "En el sexto mes (...)" (1:26), words that we find in Luke.[v] However, Chaviano introduces some clues that make the reader step back for a moment and realize that the archangel Gabriel of this modern version of the biblical story is somewhat different. Our first clue comes when we see the way Gabriel is dressed through the eyes of Mary, since the description is very stereotypical and is also engraved in the collective unconscious of the modern

UFO-lover: "Llevaba la túnica ajustada al pecho con un cinturón de oro. Zapatos refulgentes como bronce bruñido, cubrían sus pies. Algo así como una esfera transparente, semejante a un halo, rodeaba su rostro" (116-117). It is easy for the modern reader to recognize Gabriel as a humanoid alien. Yet, Chaviano makes Mary believe that he is only a foreigner and so the reader believes Mary's (mis)interpretation of the scene. Furthermore, Gabriel speaks in the same biblical language as the angel in the Gospel according to Luke and, therefore, produces a convincing case of historical confusion— that is, that either the new story does not deny the mysterious encounter, or Mary believed the alien to be a real angel. This contrast makes the reader realize that Mary's inability to recognize a non-divine event might be what really triggered the miraculous story in the Gospel in its retelling over the years. The reader reaches such a conclusion through a process of estrangement, since the modern version makes the reader look at the traditional one from a different perspective. Once the process of estrangement has begun, the reader can assimilate the modern version of the Annunciation in a new light, which allows for Mary to become the real protagonist of the story and offer herself as a tool of rupture with one of the most traditional dogmas: the conception and annunciation of Jesus, and the perpetual virginity of Mary. According to Pepe Rodríguez, these principles have a long tradition of resistance within the Catholic Church itself by "padres de la Iglesia tan importantes como san Bernardo, san Agustín, san Pedro Lombardo, san Alberto el Grande, santo Tomás de Aquino, o papas como León I [440], Gelasio [492] o Inocencio III [1216]" (422). Rodríguez accuses the Church authorities of intentionally creating a new dogma around the purity of Mary that has no real foundation in the New Testament. The fact that only Matthew and Luke mention the story of the Annunciation, and that Peter and Paul did not write about it (423) makes Rodríguez question "¿Cómo es posible que Dios no inspirase la verdadera importancia y virtud de María a los redactores de los *Evangelios*?" (emphasis in the original) (422). Mary's stature has grown over the centuries, and has been charged with more and more supernatural relevance. Although she hardly appears in the Gospels, she was situated in a position of greater relevance than the holy saints, but only after the second council of Nicea in 789; later, she was accepted as being seated next to Jesus Christ and God the Father in Heaven, which created a vague but powerful example of a traditional family (424).[vi]

This new position as *Mater Dei* of the *semper virgo*—virginity that, by the way, was not officially decreed by the Catholic Church until 1854 by Pius IX (419)—has had an enormous consequence in the repression of women up until today, since women's existence has now been circumscribed by both Eve's guilt and penance and by Mary's pure, chaste, and exemplary life as a suffering mother and martyr.

Taking into account one of the two biblical stories that narrates the origin of women—the one that proclaims that God molded a woman from one of Adam's ribs—Sharon Magnarelli states that "women have been created, invented, unwittingly though it may be, by and for man" (13). Such a situation, which is found at the foundation of Western history, is where "lies the problem of the confusion" that takes woman to be a second class human (13). Giselle Halami in "La causa de las mujeres" directly points out the sexual oppression of women:

"Nuestra sexualidad es unidimensional: la reproducción de la especie. ¿Nuestros deseos? ¿Nuestro placer? En su jerarquía y sus textos fundamentales, la iglesia "no los conoce"—somos las tentadoras, las enviadas del Diablo, tal vez, y la condena es sin apelación (...). No es sorprendente que en las Escrituras la mujer sea alabada solamente como virgen o como madre" (25).

It is in this context of repression that Chaviano's "La Anunciación" becomes more relevant, since it introduces a possibility that breaks with the Christian tradition by making Mary experience an orgasm while having sex with Gabriel. Since Mary believes that Gabriel is an angel of the Lord and not a more mundane creature, she can only explain reaching a climax in divine words: "Cerca, muy cerca debía hallarse el reino de los cielos. Lo vio. Lo sintió llegar. Allí estaba, delante de ella" (122). Immediately before this, Mary, not recognizing her new sexual feelings, leads Gabriel to wonder if she is getting sick, but when the concerned alien asks, she answers: "Me siento tan bien que no sé cómo he podido vivir tantos años lejos de ti" (122). This fresh, but otherwise *heretical*, new version of the Annunciation represents the possibility of women's enjoyment of sex by making the most pious of women enjoy it. Gabriel, disguised as an alien, can be seen as a mere excuse to finish with centuries of absurd oppression of women's sex drive under religious rule. However, Gabriel also represents the ability and capacity of SF to approach a mythical story from a new angle, demythologizing it in the process. The goal of SF is not to provide the truth but rather to question the established version and propose a challenging new one through the effect of estrangement, and Chaviano's story achieves such a goal.

In the case of F. Mond's *Vida, pasión y suerte*, (*Vida...*) the story of the conception of Jesus as divine intervention appears this time as a well planned hoax to prevent the good name of Mary from falling into disgrace. Mary is pregnant, and she is the only one who knows that the father is a merchant (an alien called Iílef) who visits her every night in her room and with whom she is in love. However, she cannot give such an explanation to her father, Joaquin, since it would be a dishonor to the family. Besides, she cannot fully understand how the merchant enters her room

since he remains invisible to her eyes. Her cousin, Esther, who approves of her love, comes up with divine intervention as a way of explanation:

> Todo esto es verdaderamente extraño. Pero estás embarazada y con espíritus de mercaderes no se resuelven las cosas. Por lo pronto, debemos buscar la forma de dorarle la píldora al viejo, y me parece que la historia del espíritu ese que te visita por las noches..., se podría adaptar un poco y ajustarla a cualquier historia de las escrituras... ¡El Mesías! (53).

Then, Mary and Esther tell the story to Joaquin, who believes them. Another important change to the biblical myth is that the *angel* appears only to Joseph, and never to Mary. In this new version of the Gospel, Iílef—while suspended in the air—talks to Joseph and convinces him to marry Mary and accept her pregnancy as a divine intervention. Joseph, confused by the strange event, needs more convincing words from the alien-angel, but Iílef, far from behaving like a solemn and divine being, uses more contentious than conciliatory language:

> Vamos José, déjate de remilgos. El Mesías tenía que llegar de un momento a otro, ¿no? Pues aquí está. Va a nacer de María igual que los otros niños; no se puede aparecer así como así..., de la nada, diciendo: yo soy el Mesías, y ya. Eso era antes. Los tiempos han cambiado mucho y Jahvé quiere que las cosas se hagan de acuerdo con las reglas establecidas" (55).

Since Joseph is still not completely convinced that he understands everything that the *angel* is telling him, and seems to be ready to ask more questions, Iílef commands him not to try to understand, but rather to simply accept things as they are (56). In addition, and as in the case of Mary in "La Anunciación," Joseph believes what his culture allows him to understand; hence, he convinces himself that the alien is an angel because the latter was flying, and even though he cannot see the wings, he tells himself that they were there anyway, since "Todo lo que vuela es que alas tiene" (54).

Like Chaviano, Mond's version pursues the reconsideration of the myth, and he uses SF to approach a new possibility, which, again, is far more mundane than the dogmatic one accepted and imposed by the religious authorities. This reconsideration is, in itself, a process of demythologization of the traditional accounts of Christianity.

Lastly, we look at a story by Ángel Arango, one of the forefathers of Cuban SF. Although Chaviano's and Mond's stories about the origin of Jesus appeared in 1983 and 1998, respectively, Ángel Arango had already published a story in 1969 that

presented Jesus as an alien, a story that had surely been read by both Chaviano and Mond. In "Un inesperado visitante", Arango gives the reader enough clues to identify the alien-protagonist as Jesus. Even if it is not the protagonist's intention to pass for a messiah, his actions force the humans to create a myth out of an encounter they could not understand; an element that we previously saw in "La Anunciación" and in *Vida*.... In "Un inesperado visitante" an alien has survived a space crash on Earth, and, as he waits for a rescue team, he wanders and meets some humans. He learns their language and begins to use his energy to help them. His actions, regarded as magic, attract the attention of the authorities. They see him as a threat and finally try to execute him, but near death, he is finally rescued by his fellow aliens.

The story seems to contain no religious emphasis**.** However, Arango situates the plot amidst actions and characters that again belong to the Christian collective unconscious. When the alien meets the first humans, they are a group of men in a river who "uno a uno fueron metiéndose en las aguas y se bañaron con alegría" (354) (This clearly alludes to John's baptisms in the river). When he is asked for his origin by their leader (John), he can only point to the sky, to "el punto del océano espacial por donde había llegado" (354). To save energy, he spends some thirty days in the desert (355) and when he comes out he helps some fishermen by attracting hundreds of fish with telepathic commands and then levitates over the ocean (355). Arango's alien never acknowledges any messianic attitude and always tries not to get involved in any significant way in human affairs. However, the authorities (described as "hombres que vestían de hierro y atravesaban a los nativos con sus lanzas" [355], that is, the Romans) capture him and kill him because the merchants see him as a menace to their business (356). Three days after *being killed*, he is rescued by other aliens and he is seen walking away with them and flying to their ship (363).

The story, narrated by an omniscient voice from the year 3,000, states as a conclusion that, after the alien's *resurrection*, the natives deformed the facts, creating literature from it and retelling this story "[a]un hoy, en el año 3.000" (363). Supporting this conclusion—that humans created a false myth out of an incomprehensible event—the narrator tells us that the alien, in trying to reach the minds of those humans with whom he entered in contact, "habló en metáfora" and lied to them, which made his stories appealing but ultimately caused future misunderstandings (357).

Arango's story goes further than Chaviano's and Mond's, since it questions the human existence of Jesus, making him not a hybrid of human and alien, but one

hundred per cent alien. The title of the story, with the adjective "unexpected", makes it impossible for this alien to be the Jewish messiah, since the latter was awaited. It invalidates the possibility of Jesus as a religious figure, and reduces him to a mere historical confusion that justified an ancient myth. However, the most interesting element of the changes in perspective posed by "Un inesperado visitante" is that the real motive for the execution of the alien-messiah is an economic one, that is, a consequence of class struggle.

Arango belongs to a generation that saw Cuba go from the Batista era of 1938-1959 to the socialist era of 1961. By 1969, when "Un inesperado visitante" was published, many of the socialist ideals from the Soviet Union and other socialist countries had penetrated Cuba.[vii] It is not unusual, then, to find such elements in a story from 1969. In addition, Arango has been a recognized defender of Cuban socialist SF and has published several novels that represent some of the best examples of socialist realism on the Island. Consequently, to support the idea that the alien-messiah was eliminated due to the intervention of the merchants' class struggle principle suits Arango's style:

> Los soldados no fueron quienes dieron el primer paso para destruirlo. Fueron los comerciantes que vendían la comida.
>
> —Ese hombre debe desaparecer.
>
> —Nos arruina.
>
> —Que muera. Que muera de una pedrada certera. (358)

Later, when the alien is brought to see the supreme authority of the city, there are no religious people anywhere to lobby for his death. It is again the merchants who plead for his execution:

> [El gobernador] se volvió a la multitud y les dijo que el hombre alto era inocente del cargo de conspiración.
>
> Pero en primera fila delante de la multitud estaban los comerciantes de quienes el extranjero se había defendido. Y éstos comenzaron a dar gritos de:
>
> —¡Muerte! ¡Muerte!
>
> Y la palabra asustó al gobernador, que lo entregó a la tropa. (361-62)

The change introduced by Arango translates into different but equally challenging consequences for the Christian dogma, as challenging as those of the normal (and even pleasurable) sexual life of Mary in Chaviano's and Mond's texts.

If the myth of the origin of Jesus is demythologized by making him the result of extraterrestrial intervention, the process of demythologizing is expanded to many more aspects of the Gospels in F. Mond's *Vida...* and in Puerto Rican James Stevens-Arce's *Soulsaver*. In these cases, and as I mentioned before, the focus of alteration of the original accounts is in the power that religious discourse embodies and how this power affects politics and society in general.

Although in *Vida...*, Kritx is clearly identified with the Jesus of the New Testament, his origin and purpose is not that of the Gospels. He is not even re-named on account of his death on the cross, but rather because of his alien paternity and his helper, the robot Larx, who comes up with the idea that the newborn should have a name made up of letters that reflect his three origins: Korad (KR), the Instituto de Xenogénsis (IX), and la Tierra (T), *et voilà*, Kritx (61).

Vida... tells the story of Jesús Kritx in the same temporal framework of the Scriptures, with the human characters and wording familiar to the Christian collective unconscious. However, the premise of *Vida...* is not messianic, and its tone and main drive are humoristic. Korad (native name of Mars) is going to be consumed by the Sun and the Koradians look into the possibility of moving to Earth. In order to test the viability of such a move, they decide to create a hybrid of human and Koradian. This new hybrid will be the result of a normal sexual relationship with a human and the alien Iílef (9). The experiment will be proclaimed successful only if the newborn reaches at least the age of thirty (9). As we saw before, things become intertwined with the myth of the messiah after Esther decides to save the honor of the pregnant Mary. Even so, Kritx will not assume the role of messiah untill the Koradians realize how convenient this could be and tell Kritx that his real mission on Earth will be "prepararnos el camino, Kritx, anunciarles nuestra llegada" (128). The Koradians ask Kritx to impersonate the messiah of the old myths but they proclaim him "un Mesías que dirá verdades" (129). *Vida...* ends with Kritx's *resurrection* and with the certainty that humans will create a myth of Kritx's life out of his inability to understand what really happened (311).

The process of demythologization in *Vida...*is enormous, since it tells the whole life of Jesus in parodical fashion. Some of the many examples that could be pointed out coincide with some of the demythologized events seen in Chaviano and Arango—such as the annunciation and conception of Jesus in Chaviano's and Mond's texts.

Arango's "Un inesperado visitante" and *Vida*...coincide at three points: the relevance of economic power in the death of *Jesus* (191), the inability of the humans to understand his words, and the consequent mythification of the real history of the events (310-11).

The use of parody in Mond has to be understood in relation to the Cuban concept of *choteo*. At the beginning of the 20th century Jorge Mañach, one of the most relevant intellectuals of Cuba, published *Indagación sobre el choteo*, the essay in which he tried to define this type of Cuban humor. Mañach simply explained that *choteo* is a kind of humor that "no toma nada en serio" (13). Juan Antonio García Borrero also understands that "(...) el choteo no se las entiende con nadie: ni con el Poder, ni con la religión, ni con el idioma, ni con el matrimonio, ni con la tradición, ni con la alta cultura, ni con la muerte" (76). But Mañach saw in *choteo* a way of fighting reality as well, which is in general what humor does. For Mañach, *choteo*, in its more burlesque form, takes advantage of all the contradictions of the object of laughter: "Lo que diferencia a la burla de las demás formas de protesta y de prevención contra la autoridad es que se endereza contra lo que ésta tiene de cómico, es decir, de contradictorio consigo misma. Señalando esa contradicción, aspira a minar la autoridad que la exhibe" (20). This attitude allows the use of *choteo* as resistance against any established power. Again, García Borrero, "El choteo, culto o inculto, nunca es afirmativo, por lo que puede interpretarse como un síntoma más de la llamada *cultura de resistencia*" (79). What Mañach calls "contradiction" is called "incongruity" or "paradox" by Ignacio L. Götz (85), who believes that faith and humor have their paradoxical origins in common. For Götz, humor does not contradict faith and religion. On the contrary, he thinks that humor "does not betray the truth of faith or the irreconcilable nature of paradox. In fact, humor preserves paradox, since it is born out of it and leads its existence in total dependence on it" (106).

Together, Mañach's and Götz's theories represent the possibility of using humor to subvert the power of the Christian discourse without diminishing the truth that may lie beneath the surface of the mythical biblical account. As in the case of Bultmann, contradicting the myths defended by the dogma does not imply the denial of the mystery in religion. Mond, when asked about his *choteo* of Christian religion, denies any intentional condemnation, "Tampoco yo tuve la intención de desprestigiar al cristianismo, el héroe positivo en mi novela es Jesús y sus palabras y sus enseñanzas y su ética y su moral son las que aparecen en los Evangelios, lo cual quiere decir que yo soy partidario de esa ética, de sus enseñanzas y de sus palabras." In addition, Mond studied Theology, proving his passion for religious knowledge.

However, *Vida*...is not Mond's strongest example of subversion against power, either religious or political. In *Krónikas koradianas*, a parody of the Cold War,[viii] the creation of the *Pituitas* (a parodical name of Jesuits—*Jesuitas* in Spanish), the relationship between religious organization and the Mafia, and the representation of communism as a heavenly option, are represented in the chapter "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita..." (212). In this chapter, the *Pituitas* are given the name of their founder, Gimmasio de Escayola (a parody of San Ignacio de Loyola—*escayola* means *plaster*) because he accidentally healed his broken leg when he fell into a well of plaster that dried and set his leg in a cast for a month (189). Following the *miracle*, the *Pituitas*, conveniently, make Gimmasio the founder of the order, although it has already been founded (190).

The chapter recounts the journey to Heaven in a space craft of the *pituita* Jonathan J. Green. When he arrives, he thinks he has actually traveled to Hell by mistake, since he is welcomed by Virgil, who after being in Hell for many years, has been promoted to "guía celestial" (214). The fact that the chapter has as its title the first sentence of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* gives the reader a glimpse of the possibility that Virgil could appear later on, but the fact that he appears as a travel guide in Heaven is much more parodical. Equally provocative is the fact that God has established communism as the economic system of His kingdom:

> [Virgilio] - Entonces no acaba usted de comprender la política celestial. Por muy Dios que sea el Sumo, no tiene por qué dilapidar ni tan siquiera sus propios recursos, aunque le sobren. Piense que aquí van a seguir llegando almas eternamente y hay que satisfacer sus necesidades materiales y espirituales. ¿De dónde sale todo eso, de la nada? ¡Pues no! La riqueza material y espiritual que usted ve en cada rostro de los que aquí habitan, es producto del trabajo personal: cada alma aporta según su capacidad y recibe de acuerdo a su necesidad.
>
> [Green] -Pero... ¡Esa es la fórmula del comunismo!
>
> [Virgilio] -Acaba usted de caerse de la mata. (240)

However, Virgil as a travel guide represents a paradox that makes the reader wonder what Virgil's function is in such a position. The educated reader is assaulted by the estrangement produced by matching these two literary traditions (God-Heaven-Bible v. Dante-Virgil-Hell) in one. A possible interpretation would be to assume that Heaven is not such an *amazing* place, and, by extension, communism is not either. If we apply Mañach's concept of *choteo*, it seems plausible to understand Virgil's presence in Heaven as a burlesque tool used to

rebel against both the institutions of Religion and State in Cuba in the midst of the Cold War.

To give closure to the criticism of the power represented by religious organizations such as the *Pituitas*, Dr. Green is murdered as he returns to Earth, since the truth he brings from Heaven is not compatible with the dogma defended by the order. The keepers of Christianity are not ready to listen to anything that could challenge their power (257).

Like *Krónikas koradianas* and *Vida...*, James Stevens-Arce has also written a religious parody of Christian social and political power. However, Stevens-Arce situates Hell a little bit closer to us, in Puerto Rico. The novella version of *Soulsaver* won, *ex-aequo* with Robert J. Sawyer's *Psychospace*, the 1997 edition of the UPC, a prestigious international Spanish SF contest sponsored annually since 1991 by the Universitat Polytécnica de Catalunya. As is the custom, it was published in Spanish by Nova the following year in Spain. However, Stevens-Arce worked on the short novel for some more years and finally published it in English in 2000 and in French in 2006 with a great response from critics and readers in general.

Soulsaver tells the story of Juan Bautista Lorca in the year 2099. Juan works for the government in San Juan saving the souls of people who have committed suicide—or as it is called in the novel "self-inflicted death" (6). Suicide is illegal and the government has the right to bring any body back to life and try him/her for murdering a soul of God (17). Throughout the novel, Juan, a devout Christian who listens to the radio station W-G-O-D in his ambulance, realizes that the increased number of suicides is a paradox in the system, since the pious government of the US, controlled by the religious elite with its capital in Washington D(istrict of) C(hrist) (27), is preparing the world for the arrival of Revelation. This contradiction will lead Juan into the world of the government and will reveal to him that the religious elite is corrupt and, in a surprising twist at the end, that he is a chosen soul of God, even though he is the flesh-and-blood son of the Devil. All the religious references in the text are easily recognizable to the Christian reader.

Stevens-Arce portrays a society that has been taken over by the most orthodox section of Christianity. Religious morality is the law, and Christian dogma is the only one allowed. *Soulsaver* presents a dystopic world in which society is politically repressed, social differences are dramatic and the world suffers an ecological and population disaster. The power of the theocrats allows them to receive special treatment and, consequently, they have private beaches with "filtered" water (20), and their children have access to a better education and better dorms (29). The corruption of the Church has returned to old times and once again one can pay for

indulgences (51). The socio-economic structure presented in this society, highly pyramidal, produces a repressive state, and as in any repressive state, an organized resistance. The theocracy is ruled by the Shepherdess, whose repressive powers are shown when, feeling threatened by the resistance, known as the New Christer movement, she suspends the Bill of Rights (30). The government's repression of the population is so tight that every block has a priest assigned and he lives there to control the moral values of the neighborhood (10).[ix]

The idea of a society taken over by religion is not new or original, since historically, many countries throughout the world have been ruled by religious dogma, and nowadays many countries and peoples still recognize their religious authorities as head or leader of state (the Dalai Lama—in exile—, the Ayatollahs, even Queen Elizabeth to a minor degree). However, this is not supposed to happen in the US, where the Constitution addresses the separation of Church and State; but Stevens-Arce did not see this principle written in stone during the 1980s:

> I wrote *Soulsaver* because I was afraid.
>
> I had seen what happened in Ira[n] when that government was taken over by religious extremists—who could forget that wild and crazy guy, the Ayatollah Khomeini?—and I asked myself: What if something like that were to happen here? Don't be silly, I thought. This is America. We have separation of church and state. That could never happen here.
>
> Then along came the Reverend Jerry Falwell and that nice clean-cut young man, Richard Reed, and the so-called Moral Majority, all bent on forcing the rest of us to live our lives how they thought we should.
> Along came well-intentioned members of PTAs around the country trying to ban books like *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from libraries because they thought these books, and others like them, were somehow evil.
>
> And, in 1988, along came the Reverend Pat Robertson with the intention of becoming President of the United States.
>
> And that's when I wrote my book. (*The Wow Factor*)

Indeed the 1980s were an interesting time in politics in the US, and affected the development of a Christian Right message all over the country for the next two decades,[x] up until the 2000 and 2004 G. W. Bush administrations, when many talked about the Evangelical vote for the Republican party. During this time we observed Supreme Court decisions regarding the removal of the Ten

Commandments from government buildings, and the unconstitutionality of "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance. *Soulsaver* is one of these prescient SF novels of the style of *Nineteen Eighty Four* or *Brave New World*, where the present is, possibly, just the tip of the iceberg. The role of this type of SF is to debate the present through a leap to the possible future to which such a present seems to be leading us. *Soulsaver* takes us to the strange world of tomorrow in the US, where Puerto Rico is (finally?) another state of this theocratic union and we are forced to ponder the role of religious fanaticism in our present society.

In spite of this, Stevens-Arce, like Mond before, makes it clear that his intention is not anti-religious**:** "Now don't get me wrong. *Soulsaver* is in no way against religion. Quite the contrary, it contains, I believe, a very positive religious message. What *Soulsaver* warns against is the misuse of religion. What it asks is that we not confuse the messenger with the message" (*The Wow Factor*). Indeed, the end of the novel shows that Juan possesses divine powers and that the Devil really exists. In addition, Juan wins by overthrowing the theocratic government and freeing the people**,** and by rejecting the Devil's (his father) proposal to fight God, "No, father, I will not serve you" (262). The demythologizing process that we saw so clearly in Chaviano, Arango and F. Mond is not so convincing in *Soulsaver*, since the world presented in his pages is a hyperbolic one and not one that denies the Scriptures or his message. Yet, it contains a strong message against the self proclamation of leaders of the Church who use religion as a means to power.

None of the texts analyzed above is an attack on Christian mystery or faith. We cannot find in these texts any explicit comment that intentionally denigrates, humiliates or insults Christians. The intention of these authors is to bring a different angle to the accounts and dogmas of the biblical corpus and the Church. As I pointed out before, the use of SF craft allows these authors to approach an established reality and belief from a different perspective, incurring a process of demythologization through estrangement. SF is the proper genre to assume a verisimilar alternative reality, a different past or future. The process of estrangement that these new realities produce in a corpus already assimilated by the cultural knowledge of millennia of Christianity creates the perfect contrast for the reader to question dogmas, principles, history, and even the process of construction of history.

In a way, all these Caribbean texts "preserve the paradox" as Götz stated, since by denying, laughing at, breaking dogmas, or demythologizing biblical accounts, they keep alive the debate over the *Bible* and the life of Jesus Christ. That does not preclude the reader of these literary works from creating a new conclusion or a new

understanding of the possibilities of the past, present and future of the Christian credo.

The stories of Chaviano, Arango, F. Mond, and Stevens-Arce studied here are another front in the process of resistance that results from the proclamation of any dogma as the only truth and the imposition of such on any given culture. Their relevance cannot be separated from such a process and has to be understood in the context of the specific evolution of Christianity in the Hispanic Caribbean.

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NOTES

[i] *Transculturation* is a sociological term that was coined by the Cuban Fernando Ortiz in his masterpiece *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* published in 1940. Ortiz proposed this term to better explain the process of construction of the Cuban social reality, one that was the result of the exchange and reciprocal transformation of every aspect of the culture of Europeans, Africans and native Indians on the Caribbean island, creating a new, unique reality.

[ii] It is important to mention that the Dominican Republic is left out of the main corpus of analysis of this essay. The reason for this is that Dominican Josefina de la Cruz is probably the only known author who has published a SF novel in her country, and although the

topics in *Una casa en el espacio* are related to God, the core of the book focuses mostly on the Akashic Chronicle and not on the *Bible* or any other Christian texts (for more information on the Akashic Chronicle, read Ervin Laszlo's *Science and the Akashic Field: an Integral Theory of Everything*, in work cited). In addition, when the novel was released, some critics received it with harsh words: "Uno debe preguntarse, en qué galaxia lejana y atormentada [y] por cuáles demonios cósmicos, escribió Josefina de la Cruz este texto tan abigarrado, insustancial y caótico. No nos ha sido posible, a pesar de múltiples intentos, descubrir los valores, la importancia, la solidez, de esta obra, cuya aparición estuvo precedida de análisis laudatorios de críticos no identificados" (De la Cruz 1986, 16). The reception of Cruz's work was so negatively severe that the author felt the necessity to publish an essay in 1986 explaining the content, plot and intention of the novel. These two elements made me decide that a more detailed study of De la Cruz's novel was not necessary.

[iii] In recent years, *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown has popularized the debate over the ideological formation of the Church and the social implication of selecting some of the many possible Gospels. However, Brown has just taken to the public sphere what some Religious Studies scholars, such as Elaine Pagels and Philip Jenkins, have been discussing since some of the Gnostic Gospels were accidentally found in Egypt in 1945.

[iv] Some of Bultmann's endeavors were already present in the Protestant tradition of Martin Luther. For more information: *Quodlibet Journal* (http://www.quodlibet.net/stephens-luther.shtml).

[v] Due to the many sentences whose structure and sound (in Spanish) are similar in Chaviano's text and in Luke's Gospel, it is obvious that the Cuban author used this Gospel as a reference for her own language, instead of Matthew's.

[vi] The Catholic Church did not officially accept that Mary had ascended to Heaven until 1950, when Pope Pius XII decreed it (Rodríguez 2003, 422).

[vii] For a more in depth account of Ángel Arango´s oeuvre and its relation to socialist realism in Cuba, read Juan Carlos Toledano Redondo's "Ángel Arango's Cuban Trilogy: Rationalism, Revolution and Evolution."

[viii] For more information on *Krónikas koradianas* see Juan C. Toledano Redondo´s doctoral dissertation *Ciencia-ficción cubana: el proyecto nacional del hombre nuevo socialista* (Chapter 4).

[ix] The implementation of repressive controls by governments in times of crisis is common. A good example of such control has existed in Cuba since 1961 in the form of the Comités

de Defensa de la Revolución (CDR). Castro established the CDR after the Bay of Pigs invasion, using the people's fear of another invasion. Here in the US, and after September 11th, President G. W. Bush tried to create a program called the Terrorism Information and Prevention System (TIPS) in 2002. This program envisioned the recruitment of regular citizens willing to spy for the government to prevent another terrorist attack. Fortunately, TIPS was never approved.

[x] For more information on the roots and development of the Christian right and its media power see M. Durham, *The Christian Right: the Far Right and the Boundaries of American Conservatism* and L. Kintz and J. Lesage *Media, Culture, and the Religious Right.*