

Miracles beyond doubt.  
Quests for meaning and processes of  
sanctification in Orson Scott Card's  
*Cruel Miracles*

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Why does the sacred persist in our otherwise secular lives ? This paper proposes one possible answer to this puzzle, by analyzing the short stories comprising science fiction writer Orson Scott Card's collection *Cruel Miracles*<sup>1</sup>. As I will show in this paper, Card<sup>2</sup> accords us with an intriguing answer to this puzzle, by situating the workings of the sacred within the greater context of meaning-production in our lives.

The need for meaning is central to human life. We all want to know that our lives are worth living, that they have a point and a purpose. We all want to be able to make sense of, and attribute value to events that occur in our lives. To achieve this, society provides its members with an epistemological center. An epistemological center is a set of shared values and symbols that serve as sources of meaning for that society. Members of society draw on these sources to both fill their lives with worth, and fill their experience of the world with sense. Understanding a given society's sources of meaning is important for understanding that society. Orson Scott Card's fiction accords us an intriguing window into processes of meaning-production within society and the role of

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<sup>1</sup> This collection was reprinted, with a new introduction, in Card's much larger collection *Maps in a Mirror* (Card, 1990). References to page numbers only are to this reprint.

<sup>2</sup> An avowedly religious (a practicing Latter Day Saint Mormon) writer writing to a largely secular audience in a seemingly secular genre.

sacred in these processes. This paper seeks to open this window and see what can be gleaned through it<sup>3</sup>.

In the paper I will first discuss each of the *Cruel Miracles* stories, highlighting the quests for meaning and processes of sanctification at play in each of them. I will then bring these separate discussions together, drawing out of them an account of how meaning functions within society, and the role of the sacred within it. I will also discuss Card's criticism of meaning in contemporary society, and ask whether his general discussion of meaning can be separated from his criticism of contemporary society. This way I hope to see what we can learn from Card's peculiar vantage point towards understanding the puzzle of the sacred.

### **Meaning and Sanctification in the *Cruel Miracles* Stories**

#### *Mortal Gods*

*Mortal Gods* is set in the near future. Aliens have landed on earth and set up temples on it. The protagonist, Wilbur Crane, an old, widowed, Vietnam War veteran, visits one of these temples and questions the aliens about their motive in coming to earth. The aliens' motive turns out to be worship : the immortal aliens have come to earth to worship the only mortal race in the galaxy — humans. Crane, enraged by the aliens' reverence of mortality, returns to the temple as he is about to die to show the aliens how ugly death is. From the aliens' point of view, however, Crane has bestowed upon them the greatest gift imaginable : an opportunity to behold, first hand, the marvel of finitude.

The aliens' worship of mortality is a mirror image of the mortal humans' worship of immortality, objectified among other things into immortal gods (p. 443)<sup>4</sup>. The aliens sanctify the artifacts of

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<sup>3</sup> In this paper I am interested, specifically, in what Card's secular audience can learn from him (which may be different from what a religious audience would learn from him). I therefore took care to read Card as a secular layman reader, with no recourse to Mormon texts or other secondary sources as interpretive tools.

<sup>4</sup> Humans are « a race that builds for the sheer joy of building, that creates beauty, that writes books, that invents the lives of never-known people to delight others who know they are being lied to, a race that devises immortal gods to worship and celebrates its own mortality with immense pomp and glory » (p. 443). This is how humans are collectively trying to transcend their individual mortality.

humanity (p. 440-441), the mortal humans themselves, and even the moment of death<sup>5</sup>, which for them is the epitome of their pilgrimage across space.

The temples, however, draw not only the aliens. Many humans visit them and converse with the aliens. Through these conversations, the value of each person's interests and work is reaffirmed and they leave the temples happy and content (p. 440). These visits give a sense of worth and meaning to the humans' lives. But significantly, this is not any grand meaning upon which their lives are to be centered. Rather, they find reassurance that what they have already centered their lives around is meaningful enough. But why were humans initially not content with their lives?

Crane is said to be content, but bored (p. 441). Why is Crane bored? Because, like humanity, he has nothing left to strive for. This is implicit in a point that seems incidental to the story, the fact that the aliens « had conclusive proof that faster-than-light [space] travel was utterly impossible » (p. 440). As long as transcending the boundaries of our solar system was thought possible, humans were always driven to transcend it. Once the impossibility of attaining this goal was proven, they had to contend with their own simple happiness. But the striving for transcendence still remained, impossible to fulfill, creating dissonance and discontent within them, making their happiness seem. Crane, driven to go to the temple by the realization that « Happiness is boring as hell » (p. 441) exemplifies this problem. The aliens, on the other hand, do not try to transcend their mortality. Rather, they seek merely to complete themselves, by coming as close as they can to the impossible, knowing full well its impossibility for them (p. 445).

### *Saving Grace*

*Saving Grace* is the story of Billy, a young child being raised by a low income single mother in contemporary United States. He is an avid believer in faith healing and « religious television<sup>6</sup> » (p. 531), especially TV healer Bucky Fay. After paralyzing himself,

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<sup>5</sup> The aliens solemnly gather at the temple to watch Crane die (p. 445).

<sup>6</sup> The term, as Card uses it in the afterword to the story, encompasses both Televangelism and faith healing shows. Card, in this afterword, treats the two as aspects of the same phenomena.

Billy is taken to Bucky Fay's show and realizes the fraudulence of TV faith healing. However, some months later, Billy discovers that he has the true gift of healing himself. Word of him spreads around, and eventually Bucky Fay himself arrives at Billy's house, only to exploit Billy for show business value again. Billy's and his mother's lives settle into a routine of healing those who still come to their door. Years later, the first person whom Billy had healed (Madeleine), moves in with Billy and Mother<sup>7</sup>.

This story identifies the centrality of religious television for contemporary American society. For Billy, as for many other American Christians, religious television is the objectification of the religious in their lives. For Card, however, « the faith healing business [is] rife with fakery and fraud » (p. 531), and indeed, Billy's faith in it leads to his paralysis<sup>8</sup>, and also seems to weaken Mother's faith (p. 446-447).

But Billy's faith also leads to Billy's being granted the gift of healing, as a result of Billy's not losing faith despite realizing the fraudulence of faith healing (p. 450). By doing this, Billy has regained his priorities — it is the faith that gives power to healing. Neither healing nor faith are at fault in Billy's adversities. Rather, the fault lies with the world of religious television, in which faith becomes means, not end or purpose, and in which the means, rather than the purpose, is sanctified.

But this still does not make Billy's life good. Only at the end of the story, upon Madeleine's arrival to join Billy and Mother, is Billy's life said to be good (p. 455). Why wasn't Billy's life good until then? The story is essentially a succession of failed attempts by Billy's to complete himself, to make himself whole<sup>9</sup>. But these

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<sup>7</sup> Mother is never named in the story, but the word is always used with the « M » capitalized, as if a name.

<sup>8</sup> Billy's paralysis was caused when he jumped off a roof to break his leg, so that he could be healed.

<sup>9</sup> When physically whole, he felt his faith would be incomplete without the experience of being saved, which resulted in his paralysis (p. 447). When paralyzed, he sought to be made physically whole through faith healing (p. 447), only to realize the faith-healer's fraudulence (p. 449-450). After discovering his own healing power, Billy unsuccessfully tries to heal himself (p. 452). When Fay came knocking at his door, he sees an opportunity for the vengeance he had longed for, but « instead he has forgiven » (p. 454). That made him feel good, for after that « he felt *holy* » (p. 454, italics in original), but even this holiness

attempts were intentional, stemming from discontent with his own life. Only when he welcomes, without prior intent or interest, the aid of another (Madeleine), does he fulfill his quest for meaning. Only when he accepts, rather than try and transcend, the limitations of his own life<sup>10</sup>, does he achieve wholeness.

### *Eye For Eye*

*Eye For Eye* is the story of Mick Winger, a teenager in contemporary rural North Carolina, who upon getting mad can emit a bolt of concentrated bio-electrical energy that gives its recipient cancer. He realizes that he is the cause of the many deaths around him, and then tries to learn how to control his gift. Initially raised in an orphanage, he gets involved in a feud between two related clans of people who share his gift, discovering he was originally born to one of the clans.

This story is the tale of Mick's moral quest for meaning. It is a quest to make sense of his ability. It is also a quest to learn to live with the knowledge of having had killed, however unknowingly, many people, some of which he cared deeply about, in the past. In essence, his quest is to find out why such a life as his had been so far is morally worth living. Unfortunately, he finds himself ill equipped for this quest. He knows that it is morally wrong to kill, but he has come to this realization all on his own (p. 457). Neither his Christian education (p. 456) nor his socialization among his contemporaries has equipped him with this realization.

Nor do religion and science in general accord Mick with an answer. At the center of each of the two communities in the story stands one of these two alternative attempts at understanding the phenomena. One attributes it to God's choosing of the individual(s) who possess this ability. The other attempts to study the phenomenon scientifically so as to be able to explain it without recourse to divine preference. Both modes of explanation, however, treat the ability to kill as a tool, thereby detaching it from morality. But this is the opposite of Mick's Quest. His is an attempt to

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was only false wholeness, as it hinged on the assumption that Fay had truly repented, an assumption proven to be false (p. 454).

<sup>10</sup> When Madeleine's appears in his home, Billy simply accepts her into the family. At the end of the story, when Madeleine asks him whether he is God, Billy replies « God ain't no cripple » (p. 455).

understand why his life, as a moral agent rather than an instrument, is worth living.

The story does not explicitly state the answer Mick has found, but it is implicit in the change Mick undergoes. Initially, Mick had a clear death wish (p. 458). But towards the end he is relieved that the scientific clan has decided not to kill him (p. 490). Two explicit factors contributed to this change. First, he discovers that whatever gives him the ability to kill may also give him the ability to heal (p. 488). Second, he discovers that people in whose judgment he trusts have chosen not to kill him even though they had the opportunity to do so (p. 489).

But the decision not to kill Mick was also contingent on another factor : Mick has shown that he sees the value of, and (potentially) is able to, control his gift (p. 459). This intricately ties up his quest to find meaning and worth for his life with a quest to master and control his gift, to self-impose limits on his own use of it. His encounters with both clans allow him to experience when he should use his gift and how it can be used. This shows him his own limits, and in controlling himself allows him to make sure he can fulfill himself to the limit, without striving for more.

Significantly, only the religious clan is involved in any overt sanctification. They construct from the bible, through creative exegesis, a myth that explains their ability to kill as the sign of having been chosen by God<sup>11</sup>. This myth entails the sanctification of the gift of death, and of its most potent bearers. Mick reacts quite strongly against this sanctification<sup>12</sup>. Why is this sanctification so inimical to Mick's quest for meaning ?

This is implied when Mick discovers that the potency of one's ability does not translate into political power within the religious clan (p. 474). By sanctifying the gift of death and its bearers rather than elevating them, the gift-bearer and the gift are separated from the source of power, and effectively put under the control of political power. In other words, sanctification has put control over the use of the gift in the hands of the one person whose authority it is to interpret the clan's guiding myth (the patriarch). By this it has

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<sup>11</sup> The story creates an analogy between the use of a narrative to explain the phenomena by both clans. The « myth » in the case of the scientific clan is science — a scientific book researching the phenomena.

<sup>12</sup> It seems repugnant to Mick to give glory to God for his ability to kill, because it is a gross misunderstanding of the true nature of God (p. 471).

accorded an incentive for other gift-bearers to self-control the use of their gift through deference to his authority, at the price of detaching this self-control from morality. For Mick this is simultaneously morally repugnant and destructive of his quest for genuine self-control.

In the scientific clan Mick also encounters a similar attempt to detach the use of the gift from morality, and thus wrest control over it to themselves. Mick, conceding the merit of their justification for this<sup>13</sup>, nonetheless makes them accept the limits he sets : he will let them study him, but « I'm not going to kill nobody for you » (p. 489). In doing that, Mick has, finally, wrested control over himself to himself, finding a balance between the use and misuse of his gift.

#### *St. Amy's Tale*

*St. Amy's Tale* alternates between two settings and two narratives. One tells the story of a group of Wreckers, humans who in a near future following a bacteriological catastrophe, are erasing all traces of technology on earth. The other tells what happened to the leader of this group, Elouise, in the post-destruction world, through a series of recollections by her daughter, Amy (an infant at the time of destruction, now an old woman).

The new society is centered around a broadly non-denominational Christian epistemological center (p. 499). It has encoded the recent world-destruction into a foundation myth parallel to, and understood in terms drawn equally from, the biblical stories of the Flood and the Tower of Babel (p. 491 ; p. 494). The destruction of the world is understood as a recurring event (p. 493), casting human history in cyclical terms. The only way to break the cycle is through faith and repentance (p. 493). Thus, the story of world-destruction is recast as a story of foundation, and is sanctified as such<sup>14</sup>. This act of sanctification

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<sup>13</sup> They point out both his potential ability to heal and his own morality to justify this (p. 488-490).

<sup>14</sup> This sanctification is not explicit in the story, but is implied in it, through the reverence accorded to the act of destruction/foundation — The Wreckers are regarded as angels of God (p. 491) ; Amy, as the child of a wrecker, is called a saint (p. 491) ; the townsfolk « could not stay away » from the later public execution of Elouise (p. 503) ; the largely non religious Wreckers themselves

simultaneously achieves a triple purpose : it enshrines this monumental and traumatic event into collective memory ; it renders this event intelligible ; and it transforms this event into a source for purpose-in-action and sense-in-the-world.

Viewed within this context, the significance of the erasure of technology becomes clear. By erasing technology, the Wreckers have essentially erased the idea of linear history as a source of meaning. Each of the three purposes just noted above fills a need for meaning created within the people by the erasure of technology : a need to know ; a need to understand (explain) ; and a need to make sense (find purpose). These three new needs correspond to three different levels in which history serves us as a source of meaning : it is our repository of knowledge ; it is a source of example, explanation and understanding ; and through the assumption of linear progress it is a way to give us a sense of direction and purpose. This is the epistemological center of our contemporary society.

The eradication of the current epistemological center creates a gap of meaning that has to be filled, through recourse to some other epistemological center. The need is immediate, so this other epistemological center has to be readily available, fairly entrenched, and commonly comprehensible. This explains the recourse to a non-denominational form of Christianity within which context orally transmitted myths about the recent world-destruction gain explanatory power.

This enshrinement of the moment of destruction into a foundation myth still, however, amounts to a sanctification of a historical event and thus to a way to remember, and learn from, history. How is this different from the use of history that had just been eradicated ? The previous use of history was dedicated to, and predicated on, the discovery of factual truth. The new use enshrines history in the context of a greater myth, whose claim to validity is through faith, not factual proof. Card, then, juxtaposes two different ways to claim truthfulness : the truth of fact and the truth of faith.

Why, then, is the truth of faith seen as superior ? One explanation is that it is useful for the new society, in which it serves as a sort of platonic noble lie. This is undoubtedly how some,

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refer to their celebration marking the final act of destruction as « A benediction » (p. 494).

including Elouise, see it. But Elouise is a relic of a now dead era, who was « incapable of blending in » among the townsfolk (p. 499)<sup>15</sup>. For most others, especially Amy, the real explanation for the superiority of the truth of faith, lies elsewhere.

The real superiority of the truth of faith emerges from Elouise's own reasons for destroying and preserving history. When she confronts her husband, Charlie, about his attempt to save a chronicle of history, he justifies it as an attempt to allow future generations to learn from humanity's previous mistakes. Elouise's counter is that, « [h]istory was not a way of preventing the repetition of mistakes. It was a way of guaranteeing them » (p. 501). Later, however, she dictates to Amy a set of myths and stories dealing with the erased period of history. These are reworkings of historical facts, purposive rewritings of history. They are geared towards leaving an exemplar of positive human behavior, recast in the terms and « language » of the new epistemological center (p. 501).

This is Elouise's attempt at a compromise between Charlie's position and her own : history will be preserved, but recast within the context of a larger framework that distinguishes right from wrong. This is what will prevent the perpetuation of past mistakes. Simply following history, as was done in the pre-destruction world, guarantees mistakes because it is in itself neutral to the morality of past actions. Put within a moral context that marks out the boundaries of the use, and usefulness, of history, learning from past examples becomes illuminating and even invaluable.

The failure of history as a source of meaning, Card thus tells us, lies in its inability to tell us how we should make use of the knowledge it has helped us accumulate. This de-idealizes fact-finding, to allow the new, non-factual half-truths to become valid in, and for, the new society. This transformation is incomplete with Elouise, for whom these myth are lies (p. 501). It is completed with Amy, for whom these myths are truths (p. 501), not because of their factuality, but because of their instructiveness to the lives of all. This is why, even though this is the story of Elouise, it is truly and profoundly *St. Amy's Tale*.

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<sup>15</sup> Elouise herself was an atheist, and Amy is certain, against popular opinion, that she hadn't converted (p. 503).

*Kingsmeat*

*Kingsmeat* is the story of a human colony that has been subjugated by a pair of technologically superior aliens who eat human flesh. The colonists are not killed, but their limbs are painlessly harvested for the aliens by one of the colonists, known as « the shepherd ». When the aliens are undone by a human spaceship, a trial ensues in which the shepherd is acquitted. The villagers enact their revenge while keeping within the letter of the verdict : they cut off the shepherd's limbs to the point of rendering him immobile, but still fully alive ; and place him so that he will have to view the rest of the people. Once a year they take their children to his house bringing him food and gifts, to pay homage to him.

As with *St. Amy's Tale*, this story also tells of the destruction and re-birth of a human community. But the humans here do not attempt to make sense of their subjugation by the aliens. Instead, they treat it as a given and unchangeable situation. The question the villagers, as well as the shepherd, need to answer for themselves is why bother going on living given their situation<sup>16</sup>.

The shepherd continues living, though he longs to die, because he is the only means for saving the rest of the colonists from death (p. 510). What gives the shepherd's existence worth, ironically, is a sense of altruism, for which he sacrifices himself, though not his life. The villagers continue living for revenge, driven by their hatred (p. 509). Hatred gives them a sense of purpose that allows them to carry on forward instead of wallowing in their limbleness.

On the surface level, the salvation of the colony had fulfilled the shepherd's drive, while their ultimate act of vengeance fulfills the villager's drive. But the yearly ritual centered around honoring the shepherd<sup>17</sup>, has also created a way to keep the memory of the traumatic past events alive, constantly replenishing for the colony's new generations the source of their shared values. Thus, in an odd and twisted way, through his own sanctification, the shepherd is

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<sup>16</sup> The aliens, once they realize they are defeated, do commit suicide (p. 507)

<sup>17</sup> This yearly ritual takes the essential form of a pilgrimage to a sacred shrine. The shepherd never speaks, and his existence is one of immobility. He is a live statue, and serves, in a twisted way, as a quasi-religious icon for the villagers (p. 511).

still fulfilling his drive — he is still sacrificing himself to keep his community alive.

This act of sanctification is seen as necessary for, indeed at the heart of, the re-birth of the humans' community. Ironically, it is enacted through a subversion of the meaning, though not the letter, of the judgment of law. The shepherd's trial, conducted in optimal conditions<sup>18</sup>, yielded a result that seemed just, but was easily subverted and rather short sighted. This failure highlights the inability of the trial as a fact-finding process to make sense of events : even without the distortion of perspective factuality serves not to render things intelligible, but to enable the casting of blame. The latter, Card tells us in this story, falls severely short of the former.

### *Holy*

*Holy* takes place on an alien world in which a war between local tribes, in a pre-metal civilization, is raging. The unnamed protagonist/narrator is a representative of an interstellar, technologically advanced trading company with a policy of non-interference in local wars. The protagonist joins the leader of one of the tribes on a scouting expedition, during which the leader is killed. Unwittingly, the protagonist joins the survivors of the expedition on a trek to an altar on the highest peak in the region, where their religion requires them to ritually bid their leading figures' souls farewell. After his companions are killed, the protagonist chooses to complete the ritual himself.

The protagonist is a generic modern human — secular, rational, law abiding, good employee, a man of both science and action<sup>19</sup>. At first, he seems content with his life, performing his duties to his employers, superiors and scientific legacy. He genuinely believes in the superiority of secularism over religion, which he sees as mere superstition (p. 522). The pilgrimage he gets caught up in makes him to realize that something is, indeed, missing in his life, and shows him how faith helps fill this lack.

This realization comes to him when he observes the devotion and esteem his companions display towards their dead leader. They

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<sup>18</sup> The trial makes use of technology that telepathically allows all participants to view the events from all participants' points of view.

<sup>19</sup> He is both a trained Anthropologist and a military man (p. 513).

are readily willing to die in order to do him his final honor (p. 527), as well as in order to keep their promise to him to save the protagonist, whom they personally dislike (p. 526). The protagonist correctly recognizes both to stem from the natives' religiously based notions of duty and honor. Even though these notions seem alien and wholly irrational to him, he is deeply impressed by them (p. 526-527).

The protagonist thus essentially discovers how inadequate his own notions of duty and honor are compared to the strength of those of the natives. He realizes the poverty of his own sources of meaning and duty (science, the military, and the workplace) compared to the richness of the natives' sources of meaning and duty. All of his notions of duty and honor come from a secular context, within which he knows, rationally (but not emotively), the usefulness of duty and obedience. This secular context has displaced religion, rendering it mere superstition<sup>20</sup>. However, it has not replaced it with any other moral content that can affectively create a sense of duty within the individual.

Significantly, though, the protagonist does not convert to the native religion (p. 527). The religion, then, is not in itself the source of the richness of the natives' lives. This richness stems from the sense of belonging to the community that this religion, functioning as a source of shared meanings, ties together. This bond is secured by the sacred rite the heroes of the story must perform, a rite of consequence for both the individuals performing it<sup>21</sup> and for the community as a whole. It is through this belonging, and the duties it bestows upon the members of the community, concrete persons of worth of their own, that the worth of one's life is affirmed<sup>22</sup>. In moving beyond moral content into moral neutrality, secularism has de-personalized duty and honor, and as such has rendered them empty.

This modern move beyond moral content — the move to transcend the idea of a particular moral content — was essentially the culmination of the secularizing progress we have already met in

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<sup>20</sup> The story never refutes the claim that this religion is, indeed, mere superstition.

<sup>21</sup> Whoever carries it out and lives, will have the same rite performed for them when they die (p. 530).

<sup>22</sup> « It is not the hope of a life after death — I have no such hope. It is the hope that at my death honorable men will go to some trouble to bid me farewell » (p. 530).

*St. Amy's Tale*. Ultimately, Card tells us here, the drive to transcend will lead to emptiness, because once everything has been transcended, nothing remains. But this is not an unavoidable drive. As in *St. Amy's Tale*, the community can set for itself the bounds beyond which it refuses to transcend, because transcending beyond them would essentially undo the fabric of community<sup>23</sup>. It is faith in shared values rather than the potential truthfulness of those values that holds the community together.

### **Card on Contemporary Meaning**

All of the six stories in *Cruel Miracles* essentially deal with, or reflect on, contemporary existence. Two (*Saving Grace* ; *Eye For Eye*) are set in the contemporary world ; two (*Mortal Gods* ; *St. Amy's Tale*) are set in a near future world, and tell of characters that lived for most of their lives in the contemporary world ; and the remaining two (*Kingsmeat* ; *Holy*), set in a future setting on another planet, present generic human protagonists who are in no physical, mental or epistemological way different than us. As such, all these stories give us characters to which we can relate as similar to us, and thus representative of us.

The first thing that strikes us about these characters is that they all have something missing, or not working out well, in their lives. Most — the humans in *Mortal Gods*, Billy in *Saving Grace*, Mick Wagner in *Eye For Eye*, the Wreckers in *St. Amy's Tale*, the villagers rebuilding their society at the end of *Kingsmeat* — are aware of this and take action to fill this lack. The unnamed protagonist of *Holy* realizes his lack as the story progresses. Wilbur Crane in *Mortal Gods* realizes that a lack exists, but fails to see what this lack really is. Card, therefore, highlights for us that contemporary life lacks something important in it, something that needs to be filled.

Furthermore, according to Card, our contemporary sources of meaning are insufficient to fill this gap in our lives. All of the stories problematize our current sources of meaning. In *Mortal Gods*, the drive to explore and transcend is seen to create a dissonance in humans rather than resolve it. In *Saving Grace* the

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<sup>23</sup> For example, the aliens were aware of the existence of flying machines long before the humans' arrival, but chose not to use them to carry out their rite with more ease (p. 523).

objectification of religion into religious television perverts the true experience of faith. In *Eye For Eye* Christian education, secular socialization, and religion and science in general, fail to equip an individual faced with profound moral self-doubt with the necessary tools to deal with his situation. In *St. Amy's Tale* progress and technology equip us with enormous power, but offers no moral guidance as to its use. In *Kingsmeat*, law and fact-finding fail to grasp and therefore resolve a particular legal situation, let alone facilitate the healing and rebuilding of a society. Finally, in *Holy*, notions of duty that stem from scientific and military training, and from the value of neutrality, de-personalize the experience of duty. This detaches the individual from other individuals as well as from community in general.

What, according to Card, is at the root of these failures ? The common thread to all of the six stories is the ongoing juxtaposition of transcendence and wholeness, of striving to make oneself whole and striving to transcend one's limitations. The basic thrust of all of the stories is the point that in order to have a happy, meaningful life, one must find out one's limits, acknowledge them as limits, strive to fulfill oneself to the limit, but refrain from overreaching by trying to transcend one's limits. A major part of these limits is a pre-given moral content to life, which bestows value upon the boundaries that we otherwise set for ourselves (individually or collectively).

The ill effects of the drive to transcendence are most apparent in *Mortal Gods*, *Saving Grace*, and *St. Amy's Tale*. In *Mortal Gods* it is what causes us discontent in our lives. In *Saving Grace* it distracted Billy's quest for meaning, and essentially rendered it ineffectual. In *St. Amy's Tale* it was (in the form of linear history and the drive to boundless progress) the root of what caused humanity to almost self-destruct, and thus what necessitated the destruction of civilization.

The drive to wholeness is at the center of *Saving Grace* and *Holy*. In *Saving Grace* Billy's quest for the good life is a quest to make his life whole. In *Holy* the pilgrimage to the mountaintop shrine becomes, for the unnamed protagonist, a quest to make himself whole. The worth of Wilbur Crane's death for the aliens in *Mortal Gods* is in the way it completes their life, and the same can be said of the respective drives of the shepherd and the villagers in *Kingsmeat*.

The need for finding, defining, and staying within, boundaries is most clear in *Eye For Eye*, *St. Amy's Tale*, *Kingsmeat* and *Holy*. Mick's quest in *Eye For Eye* is a quest to find the boundaries of his gift, and in wresting control over it to set the boundaries of his life. The sanctification of the acts of destruction turned foundation myths serves to set the epistemological boundaries of the respective communities in both *St. Amy's Tale* and *Kingsmeat*. The natives in *Holy* refuse to go outside of their epistemological center even when aspects of their faith do not coincide with what they know about the world. Of course, the importance of staying within one's limits is implicit in the criticism of attempts to transcend them in *Mortal Gods* and *Saving Grace* as well.

The importance of a prior morality within the context of which we can receive and fulfill meaning from our boundaries and actions is clearest in *Eye For Eye*, *St. Amy's Tale*, and *Holy*. In *Eye For Eye* the guidance of a prior morality is necessary to make both religion and science useful for Mick's quest for meaning. In *St. Amy's Tale* the meaning and instructiveness of myths and rituals hangs on the moral context within which they are made to work. The lack of such prior moral context resulted in the failure of progress to usefully restrain its own effects. In *Holy* it is this external moral context that gives meaning to notions of duty, in a way that the de-personalizing secular world cannot hope to achieve.

In all the stories, then, contemporary sources of meaning are inadequate because they prevent the individual from striving towards wholeness within one's limits. Instead these sources of meaning alternately obscure wholeness as necessary, obscure our limits or render them unsatisfying, or push us to try and transcend our boundaries, without giving us a prior moral content within which our striving can be framed.

### **Card on Meaning and the Sacred**

While not always at the center of each of the stories, processes of sanctification are an important part of each story. Holy rites are the epitome of characters' experience of living in *Mortal Gods* (Wilbur's death for the aliens), *Saving Grace* (salvation through ritual for Billy at the onset of the story), and *Holy* (the farewell rite). Such rites are a central aspect of what holds a community together in *Kingsmeat* (where it objectifies the origin of the community's values) and *Holy* (where it bestows meaning unto

shared notions of duty and honor). Sacred texts, books or myths are central both to the explanation of meaning for individuals, and to sustaining shared meanings for communities<sup>24</sup>, in *Eye For Eye*, *St. Amy's Tale*, *Holy*, and to a lesser extent *Saving Grace*.

In all of these stories, but most overtly in *Mortal Gods*, *St. Amy's Tale*, and *Holy*, these sanctifications are analogous to, or tied up with, the creation of myths and rituals in general. *Mortal Gods*, in which the aliens' sanctification of Crane's death is analogous in form<sup>25</sup> to the acts humans do for the glory of their immortal gods<sup>26</sup>, sets the stage for all stories. Sacred acts, phenomena, events or individuals are part of a larger system of rituals and myths, through which more abstract meaning is objectified, taught, and made useful for our individual quests for the worth and value of our lives. As Card himself notes in the afterword to *Holy*, « it is story and ritual that give meaning to our actions » (p. 535).

Of course, not all stories and rituals are made sacred. Why are some of them sanctified, but others aren't ? The major object of sanctification in these stories seem extremely varied. What is sanctified may be that which is most unattainable (*Mortal Gods*) ; that which is least factual (*St. Amy's Tale* and to an extent *Holy*) ; that which is morally (*St. Amy's Tale* and *Kingsmeat*) or factually (*Eye For Eye*) incomprehensible ; or that which is most important for the creation and maintenance of a community (*Kingsmeat* and *Holy*). But one thing is common to all of these sanctifications : what is sanctified is that which needs to be put as much as possible beyond doubt.

This is, indeed, what Card has to tell us about the sacred and its persistence in contemporary life. When a society is building its

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<sup>24</sup> There is a streak running through all these stories regarding the importance, perhaps the necessity, of community for one's own completion. All individuals questing for meaning in the various stories discover that they need to rely on others in fulfilling their own quest. Community as a source of strength is central to *St. Amy's Tale*, *Kingsmeat*, *Holy* (and to an extent to *Eye For Eye*). I have attempted to highlight the importance of community and society to Card's understanding of meaning and sacredness. The introduction of, and stress on, community has significant implications that unfortunately go beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>25</sup> Though, because it embodies acceptance of boundaries rather than defiance of boundaries, it is not analogous in content.

<sup>26</sup> See note 4 above.

epistemological center, it must « translate » it from the abstract to the concrete by encoding it in a set of narratives and actions, stories and rituals. For the society to hold together, some values and meanings that are fundamental to this epistemological center need to be made common-sense truths, not subject to refutation and doubt. These epistemological hypotheses must not only be encoded, but sanctified, because the holier a thing, the less scrutiny most people would subject it to. Religions may have perhaps been the first to realize this, but this wisdom is not solely theirs. Any society needs some things to be sacred, and thus even in secular epistemological centers, the sacred persists.

This view of the roles of meaning and of the sacred in society is, of course, consistent with Card's explanation of what is lacking in current sources of meaning<sup>27</sup>. Setting up some truths as beyond doubt marks out borders for us that we cannot pass, within which we must strive for wholeness. In putting up a barrier before doubt, sanctification acts against a drive to transcend, because a drive to transcend is necessarily a drive to doubt<sup>28</sup>. These sanctified truths should, ideally, form the moral context within which our striving for wholeness bestows worth upon our lives.

However, the insight Card gives us into the functioning of meaning in society, and the role of the sacred in it, is not necessarily tied up with Card's particular criticism of contemporary sources of meaning. Even if we do not accept Card's preference for wholeness-within-limits over transcendence of boundaries as the epitome of a good, worthy life, we can still accept his insight into how meaning and the sacred work within society. That, in Card's case, the form of meaning-in-society and the content of it are consistent does not mean they are necessarily linked. One could

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<sup>27</sup> In fact, Card uses his preference for wholeness over transcendence to judge which sanctifications are good. He thus condemns religious television and faith healing (*Saving Grace*), and the sanctification of the ability to murder (*Eye For Eye*) for distracting people from a quest to wholeness. On the other hand, he does not condemn, within the given contexts, the sanctification of the destruction of civilization (*St. Amy's Tale*), death (*Mortal Gods*) and brutal maiming (*Kingsmeat*) when they serve wholeness while deterring transcendence.

<sup>28</sup> We can develop an intriguing critique of modernity out of this point. If a society must put some truths beyond doubt, an epistemological center built on a drive to doubt, such as modernity, becomes inherently self-destructive, incapable of sustaining community.

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conceive of an account of meaning-production that would prefer, or at least allow room for, transcendence of boundaries, and yet would give an account of the ways meaning and the sacred function in society quite similar to Card's account<sup>29</sup>. Even if we question Card's own preference for what good meaning (and correct sanctification) should be, we can still find his account of how meaning and the sacred work, and therefore why the sacred persists in secular life, thought provoking and illuminating.

### **Bibliography**

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<sup>29</sup> I will not develop such an account here, but I would like to point out one major potential source for it : Thomas Kuhn's famous account of the progress of science through history (Kuhn, 1962). If you consider his account, substituting for example « epistemological center » for his « paradigm » and « myths » for his « hypotheses », it would then seem very similar to Card's. Kuhn's account, of course, allows for the breaking out of, and eventually replacing of, scientific paradigms.