

# Priest, Professor, or Prophet: Discursive and Ethical Intersections in *A Canticle for Leibowitz*

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THE GREAT MAJORITY OF “AFTER-THE-BOMB” NOVELS MANY OF US READ when we were growing up were trite projections of humankind reduced to its savage, Hobbesian state, a kind of neo-caveman scenario with bear-skinned nomads eking out a meager and violent existence in the rubble of the postapocalyptic landscape. Such novels promised a cultural purpose despite their sometimes unsophisticated treatment of a highly speculative future because they forced us to consider the ramifications of our technological aggressiveness, yet most never reached their true potential. A novel that avoided the one-dimensional picture of human survival and provided the more compelling alternative that, while humankind might indeed return to an earlier state, it would certainly carry with it certain indispensable vestiges into the civilization it was trying to recreate, was Walter Miller’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. This manuscript had first appeared in serial form in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* throughout 1955 and 1956 before it was published as a novel in 1959 and is arguably the best “after-the-bomb” novel ever written (that separates it significantly from the more conventional brink and doomsday stories), mainly because of its careful crafting and conspicuous avoidance of nuclear war clichés. In his imaginative construction of postholocaust civilization, Miller manages to capture, with impressive craftsmanship, many of the key preoccupations inherent in questions about nuclear annihilation, especially those having to do with the mythic discourse that arises from the surrounding historical, scientific, and religious vocabulary.

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One intriguing feature of Miller's novel is that he skillfully paints in it images that are a collage of history, tradition, and myth while simultaneously transporting these archetypes to a setting that would have been both familiar and frightening to Americans during the early Cold War. Unlike the authors of other "doomsday" novels of the era, such as Nevil Shute's *On the Beach*, Miller is not as interested in the immediate after-effects of a nuclear conflict as he is in the implications of such a conflict for the future of humanity. He predicates humanity's socio-political state on the assumption that humans were fortunate enough to survive a nuclear cataclysm, and his conclusions are based in Catholic history, when the aftermath of another major transformation (the fall of Rome and the Barbarian control that ensued) led to revolution, pestilence, and mob rule. His idea seems plausible, perhaps because the images are framed in a history that is already familiar to the reader. The fall of one great civilization, like Rome, after all, led to the first Dark Ages of humanity, the proliferation of a new faith, and the eventual rebirth of knowledge (a knowledge actualized largely through science during the Renaissance). Miller asks the compelling question, "Is it possible, even likely, for this historical timeline to unfold more than once?"

As provocative as this question is, perhaps the most important feature of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* is that the usually assumed discord between scientific and religious ideologies is complicated, indicating, as Daniel Born says, "that ideologies rarely clash in a pure sense but usually through political, institutional channels" (265)—in this case, the Catholic Church, local government, and the scientific/scholarly community. While it could be argued that Miller's novel supports a religious source of values, with science as the fallen or flawed body of knowledge, Miller's apparent point seems to be that science conducted without a strong ethical framework is destined to end in disaster. That the characters of Miller's postapocalyptic world return to Catholicism as a basis for moral guidance does not necessarily mean that *this* is the best source for an ethical framework, however. It simply suggests an ethical and spiritual basis that has a long and surviving history, providing moral substance for a spiritually defunct world. Past criticism of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* has tended to overlook the idea that the interrelationship between science and religion is one that is manifested through the language of both Catholic and scientific institutions, suggesting that those who control the discursive apparatus of social

networks also necessarily control its people. In Miller's book, this discursive apparatus is shared, suggesting that the language of science and religion must coexist to construct the important ethical framework that will allow both bodies to thrive in a productive way. However, the blurring of scientific and religious ideological emphases also suggests that uncritical dogmatism in either realm is dangerous and self-destructive. The historical reconstruction of knowledge is bound to retain elements from all sources that profess to have ultimate knowledge, whether it is of a religious or a scientific origin. Examination of the coexistence of religious and scientific ideologies in *A Canticle for Leibowitz* paints a more complete and complex picture of the status of both institutions, indicating a discursive intersection that is both at odds with itself and necessary for societal and cultural development.

The first section, "Fiat Homo," begins with the discovery of a fallout shelter by a young Catholic novice named Brother Francis Gerard of Utah six centuries after the "Flame Deluge" that wiped out most of earth's inhabitants. The monastery from which Francis hails is one of the few oases on an otherwise barren planet that is sparsely populated with loosely organized tribes of herdsman and nomads, and it is constantly under threat from mutants and advocates of the "Great Simplification" that was undertaken following the nuclear holocaust. The most significant detail of the fallout shelter discovered by Francis is that he believes it to be an earlier residence of his monastery's patron, I. E. Leibowitz, apparently a twentieth-century engineer who is considered by the monastery to be the beatified founder of the abbey. The abbey had been petitioning for some time for the Pope to ordain Leibowitz a saint, and it seemed as if the discovery of the fallout shelter and the documents it contained (ostensibly penned by Leibowitz himself) might help accomplish that goal. The Elders of the Order are, however, suspicious of Francis and his discovery, and wish to be politic about how ambitious they seem to the Church elders who are in a position to grant their founder sainthood. After years of investigation, the Pope grants Leibowitz sainthood, Francis is killed by mutant highway robbers as he is returning from the ordination ceremony, and the first section comes to a close.

The discursive junctures apparent in this section involve a collision of language rather than a comprehensive vocabulary of both science and religion. Scientific discourse is mystified, foreign, and impenetrable, but it is not unfamiliar. Francis has heard of "fallouts," for example, but

they have been demonized to represent not radioactive residue, but a malicious creature of awful power. He fears them as he has been taught, and here Miller's exploration of myth is especially acute because Francis's reaction is appropriate on at least one level: He should fear fallout, but not for the reasons he believes. The myth, therefore, is not a simple falsehood from the reader's vantage point, but a hybrid of religious legend and scientific language that materializes as a corporeal being in Francis's mind. While Francis believes in the literal existence of fallouts, the function of the myth parallels contemporary public understanding of scientific knowledge—it is, in other words, a metaphor, much like the “branching” metaphor used to describe evolution today. The idea of a corporeal fallout is loosely accurate in the sense that it is deadly, and perhaps this is all that anyone in Francis's position really needs to know.

The idea that so dull an individual as Francis should find documents of a scientific nature in Leibowitz's fallout shelter further indicates that he is representative of a scientifically aware but scientifically illiterate public. The document that Francis finds is, specifically, a blueprint for a “Transistorized Control System for Unit Six-B,” clearly (from the reader's perspective) a schematic for a circuit board belonging to a larger device. By itself, the document is rather trivial, especially because neither Francis nor anyone else at the abbey have the slightest idea what it represents. At one point, Francis speculates that perhaps the “diagram represents an abstract concept, rather than a concrete *thing*. Perhaps the ancients had a systematic method for depicting pure thought. It's clearly not a recognizable picture of an object” (71). Francis's willingness to bestow upon his ancestors such abilities is central to the ideology of the religious civilization that arises out of the ashes of the Flame Deluge. Even if Francis knew what a “transistorized control system” was, he would be unlikely to trivialize it; he is much more likely to deify the finding to represent a notion of incorporeal power, because this is what one does to mythologize his ancestors. Miller convincingly posits a theory for the development of religious aggrandizement, especially that which relates to the human dimension of a coveted “enlightenment” age. The entire sainthood process (in Catholic doctrine, at least) is a process of attributing supernatural abilities to otherwise normal—but highly pious—people. That “the Ancients” might somehow have systematized philosophical ideas to represent more “heavenly” concepts fits snugly within the training and

expectations of a religious order, and that the unit is of course a technological “thing” that Francis mistakes for an abstraction is perhaps the first concrete point of scientific and religious discursive intermingling. Francis may be slow, but he has been carefully conditioned to think of the past and its people in predetermined ways. This cognitive blindness is far from being mere ignorance: it acts as custodian for dogmatic acceptance of orthodox thinking and helps preserve the current power structure, much as it did in the “original” Middle Ages.

Again, this naive understanding of the workings of ancient (although technologically advanced) thought may be seen as equivalent to the general understanding of scientific knowledge by the society in which it surfaces. The blueprint is held in reverence and awe by Francis, despite the fact that he has no understanding of its significance; he finds the document impressive largely because of a cultural conditioning that breeds the respect he has for the ancients and the artifact/relics they produced. It is a discovery of rare importance that must be recorded and reproduced, but his ignorance of the artifact’s true nature is so complete that he painstakingly transcribes not only the lines and symbols of the blueprint, but also colors the background blue, thinking this is an important detail. When he later discovers that blueprinting was simply a cheap method of reproduction, he is understandably embarrassed, but that much more convinced that the ways of his ancestors were as extraordinary as they were inscrutable.

That Francis and his abbey have extended religious meaning to the ancients and their learning is analogous to the admiration Medieval society had given to Greek and Roman civilization and seems also to parallel the homage that modern society pays to science. Francis’s postulation that the diagram represents a graphic image of actual thought demonstrates an awe that celebrates the superior wisdom of the scientist/prophet, but also seems to be typical of the rhetorical tropes that science often invokes when explaining complex technical concepts to an uninitiated public. Just as the laity is awe-struck by the scientist who can master the knowledge necessary to grasp and harness natural phenomenon, and just as, when speaking publicly, they rhetorically project that knowledge in terms most people can understand, so too is Francis an audience in receptive admiration of the wonders of the ancients. Scientists are the prophets and the venerable priests who function as the mouthpieces of God. Without them, the masses would be ignorant, unaware of their errors, and damned to a life of brutish

materialism. But Miller's message suggests that when we hold in disproportionate esteem the knowledge of the scientist, and if we treat science and the scientist as a liaison between heavenly knowledge and earthly activity, we distort the function of both religion and science, giving science sanction to commit great acts of hubris. This can be a dangerous belief, because it can lead, as Miller suggests later in the novel, to a cyclical recurrence of historical events. The novel ends in another nuclear war.

It is important here to point out that the institution of the Church has control over the discourse of the first "flame deluge," and through a combination of ignorance, superstition, doctrine, dogma, and authority, can instill a controlling fear in those who associate such language with the evils of the past, allowing maintenance of the institution through control of the discourse that gives history its meaning. Francis is frightened because he has been taught to be; fear is a useful tool of domination. It is also a surrogate form of surveillance, because it is unnecessary to conduct ongoing scrutiny of the institution's subordinates when the presence of simple symbolic representation can bewitch its members adequately to induce desired behavior. This is an important consideration, because the discursive intersection of science and religion constructs a language of power that focuses both the domination of the Church and the knowledge of science into one overwhelming act of social subterfuge.

But such a statement implies a willfulness on the part of the Church to screen the truth and use it as an obscure means of institutional supremacy over its physical and spiritual charges. Such does not appear to be the case. Rather, Miller's Church is as acquiescent to the myths it embraces as it is complicit in their maintenance. It has interpreted the past through a scholarly process that necessarily deals with fragmentary evidence and information, filling in the gaps through the lenses of scripture, education, dogma, and faith, and Miller's skill in capturing the mythologizing of historical events represents how easily a logical, if mistaken, conclusion can be drawn from the existing evidence. His is an especially apt comment on scholarly endeavors that are tainted by such myths, but he also illustrates the axiom that a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, particularly when the person drawing the conclusions is guided by his own prejudices and erroneous beliefs. For example, one response to the "flame deluge" by later survivors, who are described as mutant versions of Dark Age barbaric hordes, was the

Great Simplification, a reactionary countermeasure to what these mobs viewed as an overemphasis on the technological knowledge that was the reason for the holocaust. The hordes of this period burned books and even whole libraries, attacked monasteries where learning was practiced, and murdered those who were considered intellectuals, all in an attempt to purge the earth of people who would resurrect the knowledge that destroyed the earlier civilization.

Literacy was considered by these hordes to be a sign of evil, and was to be utterly suspected, not unlike the general anti-intellectualism of our own American society. While Miller clearly reviles such activity as intellectual heresy, it is in part because of the activities of The Great Simplification that the myths have been formed at all. The parallel of The Great Simplification to the earlier historical moments when barbaric clans destroyed significant collections of knowledge means that the producers of scientific learning became the martyrs of intellectual advancement, much as the Greeks had centuries before. The *Memorabilia*, a textual supplement to the Biblical Canon used by the Church to describe the flame deluge, states that through “the confusion of tongues, the intermingling of the remnants of many nations, from fear, the hate was born” (59), giving the *Memorabilia* scriptural credence that describes events similar to those that took place at the Tower of Babel. The hate found its outward manifestation in the slaughter of all men of learning, for it was because of them that the Earth lay in ruins. Illiteracy was, therefore, not only prevalent, it was almost a prerequisite for survival; if one’s literacy was discovered, he would be killed. So re-emerged the need for the sanctuary of the monastery, as this was the dusk of a new Dark Ages. Martyrdom, by definition, makes heroes of its victims, and when religious institutionalization is folded into the mix, saints are born. Oddly, the martyrs of the mid-twentieth century did not, in fact, die for Christianity or even for their intellectual convictions, at least not in any direct way; they died because they contributed to knowledge that allowed the wrong people to make use of the technology they had produced. The historical *mélange* of political power, scientific and technological supremacy, geographical dominance, and a failure of education to make an ethical intersection between humanistic knowledge and scientific progress all conspired to destroy civilization. This tragic fate of an earlier generation is not faithfully reproduced by the surviving Catholic Church. Rather, it is faithfully rewritten to make saints of the sinners, as if the need to

glorify the past and its key players were critical to the reconstruction of civilization. Scientists did not destroy humanity, it is written in *The Memorabilia*; they cleansed the earth in order to make way for the righteous.

This cycle of create and destroy is important to the formation of new Christian institutions and seems to take on the flavor of eastern religions, thus adding yet another layer to the discursive tapestry. Leibowitz and other scientists, like Noah before them, were commanded by God to create “great engines of war such as had never before been upon the Earth” (58) so that the world might once again be purged of evil, which explains why the monasteries retain faith in the ancient scientists while the barbarians hold them in utter contempt. Further, “God had suffered these magi to place the weapons in the hands of princes, and to say to each prince: ‘Only because the enemies have such a thing have we devised this for thee, in order that they may know that thou hast it also, and fear to strike’” (58). This fusion of technological endowment, historical policy, and religious myth again points to trends regarding nuclear power—trends that were prevalent in the 1950s and reflected the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction, the idea that technology was the tool of salvation from our enemies that enabled the Arms Race, which found its pinnacle in the 1980s. Miller’s description reflects in many ways the imprint of the Cold War public consciousness: an amalgamation of myth, religion, history, tradition, science, and technology that created a quagmire of iconoclastic images, ideas, and ideologies.

The myth is further revealed so that we may understand the situation in which Francis lives. After the Flame Deluge, the usual picture of postapocalyptic mayhem is described: cities reduced to huge craters, bodies of people and animals littering the countryside, great clouds of poisonous radiation gruesomely killing those “fortunate” enough to survive the initial explosions, deserts where fertile land once was. This led to a new exodus, because humanity had scattered and fled from the known areas of contamination:

In all parts of the world men fled from one place to other places, and there was a confusion of tongues. Much wrath was kindled against the princes and the servants of the princes and against the magi who devised the weapons. Years passed, and yet the Earth was not cleansed. So it was clearly recorded in the *Memorabilia*. (59)



If we tie this myth into the social context of the early Cold War, Miller's message begins to make sense. Where certain inheritors of the Cold War felt that scientists were the bane of civilization, meddling with mysteries of nature that they only vaguely understood, others saw science as the savior of humanity, uncovering these same mysteries and thus making science seem like an unrestricted avenue to God. Both feelings are reflected in Miller's novel in extreme ways: the Simpletons hate science so much that they extend the object of their fear to *all* learning; The Church reveres the knowledge of the ancients so much that they canonize the very men who helped devise the mechanism of global destruction, seeing these men not as devils but as instruments of God's mandated purgation. In a very compelling way, Miller has constructed a possible future for humanity based on already existing social and historical conditions, using his present as a focal point that becomes incidental to the main narrative. While contemporary experiences necessarily provide the defining point of reference in this timeline (i.e., a nuclear war), this point is viewed from the past, present, and future simultaneously, giving the reader elements of familiarity from history and current events in a setting that is projected into the future. This technique allows Miller the freedom to construct contingencies in the direction of human destiny through the lens of many events that have already transpired, giving the reader a feeling of acquaintance with something that has not yet occurred.

Is it difficult to tell, however, where Miller's allegiance lies, and this is probably deliberate, although some critics, like Daniel Born, feel that "undoubtedly Miller wishes to impress the reader with a favorable view of the Church as opposed to runaway science" (263). However, while many of the characters, especially the Church elders, assume a role of oppression and indignant righteousness, their posturing sometimes leads to fallacious decisions. On the other hand, the mob-civilians are treated with no greater sympathy, and the implicit condemnation of active ignorance is apparent. The moral ambiguity that Miller posits for both religion and science suggests that neither science nor religion gains ethical primacy in Miller's mind. Ignorance leads to error, and in some cases, crimes against humanity, but ignorance is here carefully placed on a sliding scale of degree. The Simpletons are, obviously, the product of self-inflicted ignorance, but the Church is more learned only insofar as they value the products and texts of humanity's past (and have certain scholarly tools with which to

interpret them) in a form of ancestor-worship that leads them to even greater errors than those of the Simpletons. Not all things ancient, Miller seems to say, harken back to a “Golden Age,” nor do they necessarily reflect an enlightened perspective. While the ancients had more “knowledge” in the strict engineering sense, they had no more moral fortitude than the Simpletons. The Simpletons, it might be argued, do what they do out of a misguided sense of moral preservation, killing a few in utilitarian fashion so that the many may survive. Is the Church morally superior because they have the apparent sanction of God? Are scientists more noble because the Church has erroneously lent them the empowerment of martyrdom? Miller complicates the simple dichotomy of good and evil, ignorance and enlightenment, progress and stagnation, science vs. religion to suggest something more provocative than an outright censure of science or religion: that power comes in many forms—spiritual and technological being two of the most potent—and that the burden of how power should be wielded is a *human* problem, not a strictly epistemological one. In fact, he suggests at the end of the book, the merger of scientific and religious power is perhaps the most dangerous of all.

As the usually assumed discord between scientific and religious ideologies is problematized, the novel examines the idea that political and institutional factors come to bear on these very knowledge systems, complicating an already eclectic worldview. In the second section, “Fiat Lux,” which takes place some six hundred years after the first, the world is on the brink of another Renaissance. The definitive event of this second Renaissance is the invention and successful testing of an electrically powered light source, essentially a huge lamp. The inventor, a monk named Brother Kornhoer, had developed the idea from the ancient texts, and a “secular scholar” (i.e., the amoral scientist, in an interesting contrast to Leibowitz, whom the Church recognizes as neither secular nor amoral) named Thon Taddeo is called upon to examine the invention and the source texts to determine the authenticity and value of both. A demonstration is staged for the scholar, and it is a ringing success (perhaps, it is implied, *too* successful). This inspires the scholar to frantically re-examine the twentieth-century texts to see if other riches of scientific information might be gleaned from them. The Abbot of the monastery, Dom Paulo, is worried about keeping the invention out of the hands of the despotic king who employs Thon Taddeo for fear that the secular application of the invention could lead

to another calamity, hence introducing the political interest that corrupts the purer, more noble scientific and religious motives.

The breakthrough invention is clearly meant to make a metaphoric transition from ignorance to enlightenment at this point in the story, another indication of the historically cyclic nature of knowledge acquisition. This creates what Born refers to as “a texture of intersecting ideologies” (263) comprised of the spiritual and the positivist strains that have been stimulating this emerging society for some time. Science, at this point, however, materializes as an increasingly favored form of knowledge in the novel. Before the lamp is tested, the issue of where it should be kept is raised. Kornhoer suggests an area in an alcove of the library that is currently occupied by a crucifix. Symbolically, Kornhoer requests that the crucifix be removed to make room for the lamp, a suggestion that inspires rage in the abbey’s elderly librarian, Brother Armbruster. He accuses Kornhoer of blasphemy and of worshiping pagan idols, a scene which drives home the full enormity of the threat the lamp represents to the Catholic faith. The difficult negotiation Kornhoer and his superiors must strike between scientific advancement and religious tradition is here carefully forged by Miller: Dom Paulo grants Kornhoer’s requests, arguing that the library is not a church and that images are “optional” (152). In another discussion between Dom Paulo and Kornhoer, the latter asks if the abbot thinks that the ancients used such lamps to illuminate their workspaces instead of candles. The answer from Dom Paulo is a resounding “no,” dismissing the idea as both preposterous and a bit inappropriate. In both Armbruster’s and Dom Paulo’s reactions to Kornhoer, we see the sort of defensive posture typical of human nature when confronted with ideas that challenge age-old epistemologies. Ideologically, if one commits himself to a life in the pursuit of God’s work, any defiance to that commitment necessarily provokes fear and anger.

Philosophically, however, the character of Dom Paulo suggests a degree of wisdom that his subordinates do not possess. Armbruster’s reaction to Kornhoer is just that: reactionary. He is too old to realign his orientation to meet with the emerging scientific evidence, and he is especially distraught at Kornhoer’s physical replacement of a symbol of God with a vain instrument of man. Dom Paulo, however, understands that the issue is more complicated than that. If God’s work means advancement of knowledge in the service of mankind for achieving the goals of God, then the lamp is a good thing; if, however, the lamp

represents another instance of mankind pushing his technical skill beyond his moral capacity to keep it under control, the event is much more serious. Dom Paulo knows the history, and while it has been thoroughly mythologized, it is perhaps the very allegorical nature of his historical knowledge that makes him leery. Finally, Dom Paulo has political considerations to keep in mind. He is in the tenuous position of acquiring sanction from the Church to have his abbey's patron canonized. Any hint of impropriety could easily jeopardize this goal, and Thon Taddeo would certainly use the invention for self-serving and destructive ends. Much like the Cold War society in which the novel was written, the circumstances surrounding the introduction of this new and frightening technology provoked awe, suspicion, and uncertainty in the people whom it affects.

While religious doctrines and ways of life seem threatened in light of the new knowledge, religion does not relinquish its hold so easily. Religious images, if not religious morals, continue to season and explain the ways of science as the novel progresses. Some critics view the religious explanation of science as a feature unique to science fiction as a genre, and suggest that only in the disillusionment with science could such an outlook be born. Frank David Kievitt, for example, sees the historical context of post-World War II science fiction as an artistic opportunity to search for alternative belief systems. Kievitt contends that, because of Miller's technological and religious life (Miller was an engineer and a practicing Catholic) that a central theme of the novel is not a preference for *either* religion *or* science, but an assertion that the two are in fact necessarily compatible: "If man allows himself to be directed by his spiritual side and uses technology in accord with divine revelation, it is a good that must be both preserved and defended" (171). This may suggest that Miller saw a deficiency in the society of the mid-1950s—a society that had put the same fervor into technological advances that it had once placed in religious standards of conduct.

Miller seems to show how the distinction between science and religion is never clear-cut, but instead that each develops from a similar, uniquely human, goal: the pursuit of knowledge and the best means to use that knowledge as a signifier of our place in the world. Be that as it may, Miller's argument is one that focuses heavily on the notion of man's "Fall," suggesting, as Tom Woodman does, that the representation of science in the novel is as something that has been "given" to

us as a way of overcoming the effects of this spiritual lapse, although ironically, science itself *initiates* the second Fall (120). However, Woodman continues, “the Church cannot set herself against any real truth, for all truth bears some relationship to the Logos” (120). We are left, then, with the notion that science and religion, far from opposing one another, actually feed into the aspirations of each as distinct but philosophically compatible bodies of knowledge. We are motivated, that is, to create technology so that we might answer some of the earliest questions that have existed in our minds—questions that have at their core religious and metaphysical implications.

Since Miller’s critique, however, takes shape in the context of the Cold War, he neither ultimately condones nor condemns science, but he does appear to be reacting to an absence of spiritual tempering (if not institutionalized religion itself) that could have dire global consequences. Secular emphasis on scientific progress was never greater than it was during the postwar years, when the development of atomic energy was largely funded by governmentally sanctioned educational programs aimed at winning the Cold War (Spector 338). This single-minded pursuit of international competition was taking place, Miller implies, on an amoral playing field. If the goal of science and technology was simply to out-gun the Soviets without regard to the global ramifications, science was not being used in the morally conscientious manner that it was capable. He recognizes, furthermore, that the situation had as much to do with nonscientific institutions as it did with science itself. Could religion provide the necessary moral grounding to prevent indiscriminate and disastrous use of highly powerful technology? The answer, it seems, is no. While Miller returns again and again to the comfort zone of Catholic faith, he himself seems unconvinced that institutionalized religion has the moral fortitude to stave off humankind’s naturally aggressive and territorial impulses. The entrenchment of highly institutionalized religion itself may, in fact, suffer from the same human weaknesses, the same political objectives, and the same historical indifference that drive militaristic pursuits of power-enhancing technology.

Textually speaking, many dialogues in the novel are clearly meant to parallel the political scenario in 1955, where scientists, engineers, and technicians were enjoying unprecedented prosperity because their work was so important to “national security,” and, therefore, funded by government agencies. While Miller refrains from judging scientists on

the basis of the work they did, he obviously feels compelled to admonish scientists who allowed their work to be exploited by agencies and institutions that had little knowledge of the technology they wanted and even less ethical substance to use it correctly. The “natural philosopher” (i.e., scientist) Thon Taddeo might also be considered comic in the sense that the scholar is “mistaken,” even though the use of language is most efficacious given his audience if he invokes the use of “God-terms” from Catholic nomenclature to persuade his clerical audience. Such a tactic seems particularly appropriate given Miller’s criticism of the Cold War situation, when people of science and politics alike evoked religious imagery to sell the development of nuclear power (and weapons) to the American public. The Thon, addressing the monastery after the successful experiment and the perusal of the twentieth-century texts, reveals his scientific hubris by proclaiming that “[t]omorrow a new prince shall rule. Men of understanding, men of science shall stand behind his throne, and the universe will come to know his might. His name is Truth. His empire shall encompass the Earth. And the mastery of Man over Earth shall be renewed” (197). The God-term “Truth” here is rhetorically efficient because it implies that no thinking, conscientious individual would want to stand in the way of so noble and divinely sanctioned a venture.

Morrissey sees Thon Taddeo’s motives as more sinister than might be implied in a more straightforward act of deliberative rhetoric. He claims that “[t]he Thon’s biblical cadence is the metrical serpent that betokens how far a man can fall in the quest for self-delusion. How can he serve a prince called truth when he sells his services to a power-mad political prince?” (207). The answer is a familiar one in the context of Cold War politics, and is in fact a rationale still used in various forms by scientists today: Clearly, science requires an endorser to thrive, and this usually goes to the highest bidder. In a society that requires capital to progress scientifically, it is not unreasonable to expect scientists to sell their wares to those who are willing to pay for them. However, such an arrangement precipitates the problems that arise in the novel and during the Cold War—the problem of moral accountability. Morrissey’s point is that given the rhetoric of the speech to the monastery, the subsequent rationalization that the Thon provides to defend his apparent allegiance to the prince appears to be an act of hypocrisy. On a linguistic level, what the Thon professes as a motive toward the discovery of truth is actually a self-serving desire to remain funded in his

projects. It is self-deluding to think that the prince will not use the technology that the scholar brings him for his own political purposes, but Thon Taddeo is so enthralled with his own scholarly endeavors that this becomes secondary.

This is, of course, a direct parallel to the political situation of the US during the early Cold War. Scientists were funded, recruited, and given some latitude in their projects so long as they produced what was expected of them. The public was sold on the benefits of atomic energy (and science in general) because, in most cases, it was the government that made great promises for the advancement of humanity. Scientists were simply there to reap the rewards of their popular status. The question, then, became less one of whether science was, as Carl Sagan put it much later, “a candle in the dark,” as one of ethical answerability. Who, Miller asks, will take responsibility for the actions of the past and the prospects of the future? Many scientists were not transparently concerned with whether their discoveries fell into the hands of the “right” people (although there are a few notable and influential exceptions—such as Robert Oppenheimer and Albert Einstein), and the general public of the greatest democracy on earth was supporting the government in nearly everything it did, largely because they firmly believed in the message they were receiving from their leaders: nuclear power was necessary for the survival of the nation.

Michael Alan Bennett sees the issue of ideological responsibility as the central theme in *A Canticle for Leibowitz*. According to him, Miller not only “continually returns to the conflicts between the scientist’s search for truth and the state’s power,” but also “the occasional clash between scientific speculation and religious doctrine” (484). The issue, as Bennett sees it, is that the responsibility falls on the shoulders of neither the scientist nor the state exclusively, but on the individual. Miller’s message, as revealed through Dom Paulo and the Methuselahesque Wandering Jew named Benjamin who appears in all three sections of the novel, is “that each individual man is responsible, not only for his own actions, but for the actions of all men” (487). This would place the criticism behind Miller’s story squarely on the shoulders of the public who allowed their civilization to be jeopardized through passivity, ignorance, and apathy.

This theme is also prevalent in the final section, “Fiat Voluntas Tua,” which takes place in a second atomic age some six-hundred years after “Fiat Lux.” One of the most prominent, and unabashedly derisive uses

of political rhetoric can be seen in the news conference that takes place at the beginning of the second atomic war. After two bombs have fallen, a reporter reminds the Defense Minister that two warlike treaty violations have occurred and asks whether the War Ministry is at all worried about it. To this the Defense Minister replies: "Madam, as you very well know, we do not have a *War* Ministry here; we have a *Defense* Ministry" (243). The semantic hair-splitting apparent in this response is a direct attack by Miller on such relatively recent title changes as Secretary of Defense and Defense Department from Secretary of War and War Department, a deliberate move on the part of the Eisenhower administration to suggest to the American public that we would never create nuclear weapons for aggressive purposes, but only for defensive ones. This, too, shifts the responsibility from the United States to the United Soviet Socialist Republic, suggesting that the ball is always in the enemy's court, and that we were participating in the arms race only to stave off the USSR's naturally aggressive proclivities.

As "a species which considered itself to be, basically, a race of divinely inspired toolmakers" (243), the human animal in Miller's account tapped into the sometimes insidious overlap between this tool-making predisposition and its tendency to be just as much "a race of impassioned after-dinner speech makers" (243). Kenneth Burke, in his "Definition of Man" (*Language As Symbolic Action*) would in fact make no such distinction; tool-making and speech-making are two abilities reciprocally reliant on each other. This and Miller's notation are important observations on the intersection between tools and language, especially the tools and language that are embedded in two other intersecting entities: religion and science. It is not difficult to understand, therefore, why authors such as Miller were alarmed: the military application of nuclear energy had taken priority over all else, and while certain segments of society enjoyed a "trickle-down" prosperity because of this, and the Eisenhower administration reassured the American public that peaceful uses of atomic energy would be doggedly pursued, it was clear that such prosperity would only reinforce the status quo of militarily designed nuclear escalation. The American public was frightened—for its security and for its future—and fear makes a powerful rhetorical tool. This is especially true when linked to the quantifiable positivism of science *and* the traditional faith-healing properties of religion. Rhetorically, this is an almost ideal situation.



The further emphasis on language and, more specifically, miscommunication, highlights the third segment of the novel and further reveals the hybrid ideological overlap between science and religion. The third section opens with Abbot Zerchi experiencing difficulty communicating with his superiors across the former United States which is divided, among other things, by a difference in language. The Abbot speaks Southwest, but his superiors speak Allegheny, he is not very fluent in Neo-Latin which is the language of the postwar Church, and his automatic translator (basically a very large and cumbersome computer) never works properly. This world on the brink of its fourth world war is another Tower of Babel, much the same as the world we ourselves inhabit (Morrissey 208). We are even left to assume that the global crisis that this world is experiencing is the result of failed negotiations that arise because of miscommunication. All the diplomats speak different languages, much like our own world, and everyone must struggle with the problems inherent in human communication. As Thomas Morrissey puts it, “[i]n Miller’s world not all those with tongues speak the truth and not all those with ears want to hear it” (208). The story ends with a journey to Alpha Centuri in a starship full of clergymen and the second coming of Christ represented by the sudden animation of the second head of a mutant bicephalous tomato woman, a bizarre image that may at once symbolize the duality of man and God and the precarious nature of the products of our dominant discourses. The intersection is one where we are of two minds: one rational, the other, spiritual. It is perhaps hasty, given this duality, to assume that one order of mind cancels out the other, but the results of this intersection can be devastating, even unnatural. Miller’s complication of the easy distinction we make between reason and faith can be seen as a message to never let one discursive body be overburdened with the responsibility of driving our ethical needs. We must, in other words, always temper both in a reciprocal valuing of the reality of physical living and the emotional and moral needs of the human condition.

If Morrissey is correct, it should come as no surprise that truth is the first casualty of war, and the reasons in Miller’s instance are as much the product of humanity’s oblique ability to abstract the physical as it is in making concrete the spiritual. All such abilities center on the ingenious use of language, and after-dinner speech or not, it is only through rhetorical acumen that scientific ideas are allowed a voice in a world

that has more often in our history been dominated by cultures of faith. When these linguistic forces are precariously aligned, we reach an ideological impasse that creates social instability ripe for destruction. It is timely to revisit Miller's tale if only to see how the fanaticism of religious conviction and the powers of technological machinery can combine to make the world a truly frightening place. Miller, neither a staunch advocate of blind faith nor a champion of mindless technological development, reminds us that the inflexible, self-satisfied, and unscrupulous defense of any knowledge system will tear down the fabric of civilization and return us to a state of nature—one that is solitary, nasty, brutish, and short.

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Canticle For Leibowitz. Most popular. Showing 20 of 60 results.Â Canticle. a hymn or chant, typically with a biblical text, forming a regular part of a church service. Bona fide. in good faith. Iota. a very small part or quantity. Preternatural. supernatural; beyond the normal use of nature.Â What historian wrote THE BOOK OF ROSES and became a horticulture professor at Harvard in 1871? Francis Parkman. Who traveled to Michigan in 1845 to collect information for the book, HISTORY OF THE CONSPIRACY OF PONTIAC? A Canticle for Leibowitz (self.printSF). submitted 1 year ago by BAA-RAM-EWE. I just wanted to say that I saw someone here say you shouldn't give up on a book until after 100 pages and that turned out to be super true for ACFL. The first part of the book was incredibly slow but the second half was amazing and I loved it. Thank you to whoever gave me that advice. A Canticle for Leibowitz - Dystopias and Apocalypses - Extra Sci Fi. A Canticle for Leibowitz - Dystopias and Apocalypses - Extra Sci Fi. Best Dystopian Novels Best Novels A Canticle For Leibowitz Mary Doria Russell Free Books Good Books Isaac Asimov Seriously Funny The Monks.Â Forty years after the classic A Canticle for Leibowitz, Walter Miller returnsto a world struggling to transcend a terrifying legacy of darkness, as one manundertakes an odyssey of adventure and discovery that promises to alter thedestiny of humankind . . . . Isolated in Leibowitz Abbey, Brother Blacktooth St. George suffers a crisis offaith, torn between his vows and his Nomad upbringing, between the Holy Virginand visions of the Wild Horse Woman of his people.