NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

The value of questions: Walker Percy's 'Lost in the Cosmos'

Chase Nordengren | Nov. 23, 2011

Walker Percy's *Lost in the Cosmos* is one of the funniest books I've ever read.

A parody of 1980s self-help books, *Cosmos*, published in 2000, is structured as a set of 20 questions and thought experiments, each revealing the absurdity of pat answers to the place of human beings in the universe. The book's humor is the segue to its thoughtfulness: Its questions force a laugh and lead a thought.

In one question, Percy asks his readers to explain why the talk show host Johnny Carson described himself as panicked at the prospect of one-on-one conversation at parties. The reader is provided options from the straightforward (the fear of boredom) to the absurd (the fear that an awkward silence will lead to global Armageddon) to the tragic (that someone's feelings are bound to get hurt) to the final, most existential option:

"That you will be exposed, that is, that the unique unformulability, the singular nought, which you secretly believe yourself to be, will be exposed at last, the one black hole among a billion other ordinary stars?"

As with each question, Percy follows with the note "(CHECK ONE)."

Percy was positioned to write a unique work. Most famous as a southern novelist and one of the most influential Catholic literary voices of the 20th century, Percy lost his father to suicide at 13 and his mother to a car accident two years later. In college, under the influence of the Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky, Percy began to express a skepticism in science's ability to answer his deepest questions by converting to Catholicism, embracing a religion full of mystery.

The author Paul Elie borrows Percy's own term -- "seeker" -- to situate him among his peers Dorothy Day (the reformer) and Thomas Merton (the rebel) at the point of his conversion: "There is no deadline for the inquiry, no finish line. To this point in the pilgrimage the reformer and the rebel have had much to say to each other; but from here it is the rebel and the searcher who will go forth side by side."

The essence of *Cosmos*, then, is a celebration of journey over destination. The answers to the book's "thought experiments" are, ironically, anything but: They are strawmen positions, designed to force the reader to dig deeper into his or her own psyche and come to understand the fundamental absurdity of some of the deepest questions.

Imagine my surprise to discover not everyone revels in this mystery. One of the first Google results for the book is a lecture by Boston College professor Peter Kreeft, a popular speaker and Catholic apologist.

The lecture, which calls *Cosmos* "*The Abolition of Man* in Late-Night Comedy Format," argues Percy's use of satire is an indirect form of theological instruction: Without heeding objective values, society will succumb to what C.S. Lewis called "the poison of subjectivism."

"Humor," Kreeft says, "works like a spy slipping through the city gates while his partner distracts the guard."

In Kreeft's eye, Percy's use of irony was not stylistic but strategic. Pushing against the citadel of modern hedonism, Percy saw himself as guardian of Church Militant, breaking into his reader's mind in dead of night.
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Cosmos ends with no grand reveal, no statement of theological principles in which Percy directs his diverse readership to the nearest Catholic confessional. Instead, it concludes with a "space odyssey," an extended meditation on a hypothetical encounter between human beings and morally advanced aliens. The aliens try, in vain, to force human beings to classify themselves by the state of their consciousness, whether they have transcended the notion of a singularly important self.

The aliens, it's clear, are skeptical of the unattached sex lives of Percy's future human beings. But the aliens equally fear the state, the atom bomb and human self-righteousness. In the aliens' eyes, human beings will never understand the totality of their own entrapment.
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There are, it seems, three ways to respond to the troubling realization that one can never be absolutely, without question, sure of the truth. The first, a retreat into formalism, a smug self-assurance of one's own correctness, shines through in Kreeft's lecture. The second, the belief that truth is irrelevant and absolutely unknowable, is what Percy critiques. The third, despite the existential crisis, is to soldier on. *Lost in the Cosmos* is a commemoration of soldiering on.

A note to readers: I discuss the work of A Reza Arasteh, a subject of my first column here,in a feature piece for the website Open Letters Monthly[1] this month. If you're interested, I hope you'll take a look and let me know what you think.

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