

EarthSeed: A Conversation about Religious Practice in Uncertain Times

Led by Rev. Dr. Bo Gordy-Stith – February 13, 2024

Version 3 - Updated February 22, 2024

Introduction

I stumbled across Octavia Butler's first book, *The Parable of the Sower*, among the library audiobooks available for immediate delivery in early December 2023. I had to put the second book, *Parable of the Talents*, on hold, but managed to acquire and read it the following month. From the outset, the pithy Earthseed quotes from *The Books of the Living* intrigued and fascinated me. I'm also a fan of dystopian novels because they act as a crucible for distilling the essence of what it means to be human. That such a story would be the context of a contemporary and thought-provoking articulation of religious understanding and practice proved irresistible to me.

So it was that I decided to create a different kind of Lenten study and reflection based on these two books. My aim goes much farther than simply juxtaposing Earthseed and Christian formulations of faith and religion. I'm more an aficionado of language study than a scholar, but the study of several languages foreign to my native tongue has given me a deeper appreciation for the nuances of my birth language. I hope the use of Earthseed verses and experiences will give you and me fruitful launching points for exploration and conversation.

More background about the Trilogy plan and beyond

As Butler describes her long-term plan in an interview: "I'm not interested in confronting them with natives. I've done that elsewhere. What I'm going to confront them with is just a nasty world. It's not violent, just nasty and dull and awful, and what they're going to have to deal with is themselves. There's no going home. Nobody will follow within their lifetimes. The real problem is dealing with themselves, surviving their promised land."

What Butler had ultimately hoped to do was write four Parables sequels: *Parable of the Trickster*, *Parable of the Teacher*, *Parable of Chaos*, and *Parable of Clay*. The titles suggest a shift from a Christian idiom (*Sower*, *Talents*, and *Trickster* all reference Biblical parables) to an Earthseed one (*Teacher*, *Chaos*, and *Clay* seem likely to be parables drawn from Olamina's life, not Christ's). In some of her imaginings it seems as though each of these stories might have taken place on four different Earthseed colonies, showing the diversity of thought Earthseed makes possible — but more commonly she imagines them taking place across the generations on the single world of Bow, as each generation confronts its own new crisis and Earthseed evolves to meet the needs of extrasolar humanity in each new historical moment.

...So of course we discover that achieving Earthseed's Destiny, despite Lauren Olamina's dreams, hasn't solved the problem of the human at all, only extended our confrontation with the very difficult problems that drove its development in the first place — only removed them to some other world where they can take some other form. The Destiny was essentially a hyperbolic delaying tactic, a strategy of avoidance; even achieved, it's worthless in its own terms. The fundamental problem is still how to make a better world with such bad building blocks as human beings.

["There's Nothing New / Under The Sun, / But There Are New Suns": Recovering Octavia E. Butler's Lost Parables | Los Angeles Review of Books \(lareviewofbooks.org\)](#)

Thank you for joining me Sundays at 11:15 on [Zoom](#).

Conversation Outline

1. Sunday, February 18, 2024 – God is Change

- a. Reckoning with the distance in our understanding of and relationship with God
- b. Spiritual realism and sustaining hope
- c. Change and Transformation - Thomas Cahill: The Gifts of the Jews (existence as a line not a circle)

**All that you touch
You Change.**

**All that you Change
Changes you.**

**The only lasting truth
Is Change.**

**God
Is Change.**

EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

Butler, Octavia E.. Parable of the Sower (p. 3). Grand Central Publishing. Kindle Edition.

“Change is ongoing. Everything changes in some way—size, position, composition, frequency, velocity, thinking, whatever. Every living thing, every bit of matter, all the energy in the universe changes in some way.” (Chapter 18, Page 224)

New member of the group Travis asks Lauren about Earthseed and how she can believe in such a thing that she invented. She explains that she was looking for God and found Change. Harry likens God to the second law of thermodynamics.

SuperSummary. Study Guide: Parable of the Sower by Octavia E. Butler (SuperSummary) (p. 55). Kindle Edition.

“There’s comfort in realizing that everyone and everything yields to God. There’s power in knowing that God can be focused, diverted, shaped by anyone at all.” (Chapter 18, Page 226)

Lauren explains her view of God being Change. She writes that Earthseed deals with reality, not anything supernatural. It is about action, not worship, because having strength and intelligence means nothing if you’re just waiting for God to fix things for you. She reasons the answer is for people to shape God themselves.

SuperSummary. Study Guide: Parable of the Sower by Octavia E. Butler (SuperSummary) (p. 56). Kindle Edition.

Then she spoke. “If God is Change, then... then who loves us? Who cares about us? Who cares for us?” “We care for one another,” I said. “We care for ourselves and one another.” And I quoted, “Kindness eases Change. Love quiets fear.”

Butler, Octavia E.. Parable of the Talents (p. 346). Grand Central Publishing. Kindle Edition.

2. Sunday, February 25, 2024 - The Purpose of Religion

- a. Octavia E. Butler: *Parable of the Talents* (p. 393)

I know things will go wrong now and then. Religions are no more perfect than any other human institutions. But Earthseed will fulfill its **essential purpose. It will force us to become more than we might ever become without it.** And when it's successful, it will offer us a kind of **species life insurance.** I wish I could live to see that success. I wish I could be one of those who go out to take root among the stars. Whatever happens, as long as I'm alive, I won't stop working, preaching, aiming people toward the Destiny. I've always known that sharing Earthseed was my only true purpose.

Belief initiates and guides action—or it does nothing. *The Book of the Living*

- b. Karen Armstrong: *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions*

From [2006 NPR Interview](#):

Religion was about **behaving in a way that changed you** at a profound level, that **emptied you of your egotism.** Until this time, most religion had been essentially ritualistic in character, sort of magical. People felt that **by dethroning yourself from the center of your world and putting another there, you achieved transcendence.** And it was also important that you did not confine your love or your compassion to your own group, your own nation, your own people, congenial people.

- c. Jack Caputo: *Hoping Against Hope (Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim)*

The great theologian **Paul Tillich** said that **religion is a matter of "ultimate concern."** Religion, I would prefer to say, is a matter of **unconditional affirmation. Life is made all the more precious by its transient beauty, by its fleeting moment in the sun.** Life is life/death, living on, outliving death for a time, and **the "economy of salvation" is life's worst enemy.** Let us say that **religion is a way of being bound back to this cosmic smile,** not in the sense of creating an economic debt but **by way of returning its smile, with a joyous affirmation of the world** that greets a smile with a smile. Religion is a doxology of the glory of the smile.

- d. Greta Vosper: *With Or Without God: Why the Way We Live is More Important Than What We Believe*

When we have **constructed dogma**—demanded something be considered absolute and universal—**out of personal experiences of God or the spiritual realm and created rituals with which to relate to it,** we have called it "religion." There are, of course, many definitions of religion, some of which differ substantially. Some definitions require belief in the supernatural; others only in a **set of ultimate values that orient one's life.** By any definition though, religion seems to be mandated by our peculiar human **need to make sense of our world.**

- e. Yuval Noah Harari: *Sapiens*

Harari defines religion as a **set of values based on a belief in a superhuman order.** It goes beyond mere rituals and dogmas—it provides a **framework for understanding the world and our place in it.** Religion often involves faith in something beyond the physical realm, which can be a powerful force for social cohesion. Harari coins the term **"imagined orders"** to describe religions. These orders **provide rules for cooperation and are based on shared beliefs.** What made Homo sapiens successful was our ability to **believe in shared fictions.** These fictions include **religions, nations, and money.** They enable **collaboration and organization on a massive scale.**

3. Sunday, March 3, 2024 – How to Start (or sustain) a Religion

- a. Foundational encounter of founder – shared with initial disciples
- b. Live out model or spread the word (examples or evangelists?)
- c. Define/indoctrinate or leave room for interpretation?
- d. Underground or Public?

4. Sunday, March 10, 2024 – Racism and Social Inequality

- a. Economic slavery, government-corporate collusion, education and economics, the right to live
- b. Fighting injustice faithfully
- c. Responding to violence, control, and fear

“Whatever is the source of our intolerance, what can we do about it?” Butler asked. “Of course, we can resist acting on our nastier hierarchical tendencies. Most of us do that most of the time already. [...] Will this work? Well, it hasn’t so far. Too many people will not, perhaps cannot, do it. There is, unfortunately, satisfaction to be enjoyed in feeling superior to other people.”

She lists the basic human traits that catalyze our nasty tendencies into nasty behavior: ignorance, fear, disease, hunger, suspicion, hatred, war, greed, and vengeance.

[Now More than Ever, We Wish We Had These Lost Octavia Butler Novels - Electric Literature](#)

- d. Just War? (When in Rome... or [MLK’s thermostat vs. thermometer](#))

5. Sunday, March 17, 2024 – The Purpose of a Life

- a. Heaven and the stars – seeds from heaven; seeding the heavens
- b. Seeing beyond the myopia of self (humanity vs. being a human)
- c. Historical setting and purpose – for such a time as this

6. Sunday, March 24, 2024 – Who is My Family?

- a. Who is my brother?
- b. Who is my spouse?
- c. Who is my daughter?
- d. Who is my neighbor?