CONCLUSION

The idea of nuclear weapons—a recurrent image in Vonnegut’s work is that of the massive cataclysm which annihilates human life. In *Cat’s Cradle* it is the destruction of the world by Ice-nine. In *Galapagos* the near extinction of humanity occurs as a result of stock market crash leading to starvation and war. In *Deadeye Dick* it is the neutron bombing of Midland city, Ohio, while in *Slaughterhouse-Five* it is the firebombing of Dresden. In Vonnegut’s works, though, the central issue is not so much the horrible event itself, but the effects of it—and even more important, the degree to which one can assign blame to the humans who are agents for its coming about: in other words, the theme of guilt.

Saint Paul expressed the guilt like this:

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would, I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me (Romans 7: 18-20).

Throughout the books of Vonnegut we see this same feeling of guilt manifesting itself. In Vonnegut’s case, though—unlike that of Saint Paul—the origin seems to have been a historical event, the firebombing of Dresden.
The city of Dresden, Germany, attacked by saturation bombing, burned to the ground with a total loss of life greater than the more famous atomic bombing of Hiroshima in 1945. A young American soldier, a prisoner of war who survived because his unit was housed in a slaughterhouse deep beneath the city—that was Vonnegut. The experience shattered his life to such an extent that in most of his works there is an echo, at least, of that distant holocaust.

Vonnegut is guilty for he feels that he was the only one to benefit from the slaughter:

only one person on the entire planet benefited from the raid, which must have cost tens of thousands of dollars. The raid did not shorten the war by half a second, did not weaken a German defence or attack anywhere, did not free a single person from a death camp, only one person benefited—not two or five or ten. Just one—Me. I got three dollars for each person killed. Imagine that (Palm Sunday 94).

The feelings described here in Vonnegut's usual ironic way are quite common to survivors of some great disaster—feelings which are complex and difficult to describe but which certainly involve an element of guilt: his profiting, if only to the extent of three dollars per corpse, from the event. Although Vonnegut planned to write this Dresden book the moment he returned from the war, the fact that its completion required over twenty years suggests the conflicting attitudes involved in its creation.
Vonnegut’s view of human depravity, as it develops throughout his novels, moves to the notion that although humans are capable of doing great harm to others, they are ultimately too much victims themselves to be held accountable for the disasters which they inflict on others.

The key issue, then, is this: to what extent can the innocence of an individual be compromised by the person’s role in a system which does loathsome deeds? Vonnegut himself appears to have grappled with this, not so much in the firebombing of Dresden, as in his reaction to the threat of nuclear annihilation in the post-war period, a reaction, which he terms ‘losing faith’ in his religion. The religion of which he speaks, though is the faith in technology: “An enthusiasm for technological cures for almost all forms of human discontent was the only religion of my family during the great Depression when I first got to know that family well. It was religion enough for me” (Palm Sunday 69).

The effect of this change was devastating to Vonnegut’s view of the world:

But the bombing of Hiroshima compelled me to trust in technology. Like all the other great religions of the world, it had to do with the human soul. I will bet you—that every one of the tales of lost innocence you receive, will embody not only the startling discovery of the human soul, but of how diseased it can be.
How sick was the soul revealed by the flash at Hiroshima? And I deny that it was a specifically American soul. It was the soul of every highly industrialised nation—whether at war or at peace. How sick was it? It was so sick that it did not want to live anymore. What sort of soul would create a new physics based on nightmares...? (Palm Sunday 70).

In *Cat's Cradle* Dr. Hoenikker's "new physics" is left in the hands of his children—a metaphor for the scientists who put their work into the hands of government officials and generals—into the hands of those whose moral attitude is just about as clear, uncomplicated and egocentric as that of children.

The motives of the scientist might be purely practical. What he does not see, though is the long-range consequences stemming from the interconnectedness of all things. In such a case, then, as the earlier quotation from Saint Paul suggests, the concept of guilt is not applicable because guilt requires both knowledge of consequences of the act and the ability to choose. And in Vonnegut's view humans are severely limited both in what they know and in what degree of freedom of choice they have.

Both *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Deadeye Dick* are concerned with the destruction of cities by bombing. And although the results are horrible in both cases, Vonnegut finds that the issue of blame is meaningless. Or as he himself puts it when discussing his work in the University of Chicago's Department of Anthropology: "Another thing they taught me was that
nobody was ridiculous or bad or disgusting. Shortly before my father died, he said to me. "You know—you never wrote a story with a villain in it." I told him that was one of the things I learned in college after the war" (*S-Five* 8).

Why is the concept of guilt inapplicable? Because, as is suggested in the concept of time held by the Tralfamadorians who kidnap Billy Pilgrim, the concept of guilt involves choice. But both "*Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Deadeye Dick*" argue that humans are so much at the mercy of more powerful forces that the concept of choice—of free will—does not enter in.

The Tralfamadorians even know how the universe will end—it is destroyed by a Tralfamadorian test pilot experimenting with new fuels. And this conversation ensues: "'If you knew this,' said Billy, 'is not there some way you can prevent it? Can't you keep the pilot from pressing the button?' 'He has always pressed it, and he always will. We always let him, and we always will let him. The moment is structured that way'" (*S-Five* 117).

In such a world, there is little wonder that in the face of the immense destruction of an entire city, only one man is singled out for punishment: Edgar Derby, a gentle school teacher, the oldest man in his unit—shot by a firing squad. His crime? He is guilty of stealing a teapot from the ruins of Dresden. Admittedly, he is guilty of the act, Vonnegut never denies the fact. However, Derby's crime is so minuscule in comparison with the larger crime of destroying an undefended city that if death is the proper punishment for
his action, what punishment should be given to those responsible for burning Dresden?

In *Deadeye Dick* there is massive catastrophe, the destruction of Midland city, for which no one is punished—whereas a smaller event is punished severely: Rudy Waltz’s accidental shooting of Eloise Metzger. Rudy’s random shot kills a pregnant woman on Mother’s Day. Rudy points out “It is too easy, when alive, to make perfectly horrible mistakes.” The opening line of the narrative is “To the as-yet-unborn, to all innocent wisps of undifferentiated nothingness: watch out for life.” The father, although he had no way of knowing his son’s intent, takes all the guilt for his seemingly innocuous action.

But when Midland city is destroyed by an accident involving a neutron bomb—which the newspapers ironically call “a friendly bomb”—no one is held to blame, even though the novel suggests that the “accident” might have been more sinister:

The American Government had to find out for certain whether the neutron bomb was as harmless as it was supposed to be. So it set one off in a small city which nobody cared about, where people weren’t doing much with their lives anyway, where business was going under or moving away. The Government couldn’t test a bomb on a foreign city, after all, without running the risk of starting World War Three (*Deadeye Dick* 234).
“Accident,” “Mistake”—words like these appear frequently in Vonnegut’s work. In a sense, he seems to say, we are all as much victims as villains. For Vonnegut the villain is society.

In *Galapagos* Vonnegut finds another villain: the human brain, which he suggests has become too large. The brain is too overly developed to be an efficient instrument of survival: “This was a very innocent planet, except for those great big brains” (*Galapagos* 8-9). It is appropriate that Vonnegut, the master of bitter irony, sees as the essential paradox of our time that people are equipped with such large brains that they have become extremely stupid when it comes to foreseeing the consequences of their action. Vonnegut’s remarks on the world view of the radio comedians Bob and Ray are enlightening in this context. In an introduction to their collected works, Vonnegut wrote: “Man is not evil, they seem to say. He is simply too hilariously stupid to survive” (*Palm Sunday* 142).

Just as it would be wrong to see Vonnegut’s science fiction as a prediction of the future rather than a hyperbolic description of the present, so it would be wrong to approach Vonnegut as a philosopher with final answers to the meaning and nature of our world. In fact, his greatest service in terms of workaday philosophy may be his insistence in facing the anxieties of the inexplicable and the incongruous.

Nevertheless, Vonnegut presents a coherent description of our world, one of which may not explain the grand design but which does offer some answers and assist our understanding. This vision could be loosely described
as existential, in that within it existence generally precedes essence and that no identifiable meaning or purpose to existence is presumed. The workings of the cosmos remain inscrutable. Where man comes from, why he is here, where he goes to, remain unanswerables. So man continues self-consciously alone, reluctant to accept the fact of his being, without knowing why, anxious to find reason, purpose and order in the universe and in his relationship to it, but seeing instead only that things happen, unpredictably, pointlessly and often cruelly. Furthermore, efforts to change what happens, to make things go in an ordered way, generally prove futile; things “just happen” anyway. To describe this, Vonnegut frequently falls back on seeming explanations which fit the conditions he depicts and which are often presented in the novels from the outside perspective of extra-terrestrial beings. Thus we see Rumfoord learning about fixed patterns of time from his chrono-synclastic infundibulum, Tralfamadorians speaking of events occurring because the moment simply is structured that way, and Bokonon saying “as it was meant to happen” of all random occurrences. Again, this is description, not explanation: the ironically advanced philosophy in each case serves primarily to emphasise the characteristics of existence as Vonnegut sees them. In short, the world according to Vonnegut appears absurd, and life within it generally seems ultimately meaningless.

Space and time-travel, war and madness become the appropriate vehicles for describing such a condition. By viewing contemporary life on Earth from a distant time or planet, or in the context of wide ranges of time
and space, or through the eyes of an alien observer, Vonnegut can create at least the impression of a detached perspective on the human lot. Given the fact that human beings tend not to view their affairs with such remove, and that the outsider’s perspective actually may be rather idiosyncratic, the result and portrayal is likely to abound in preposterousness, incongruity and irrationality. War provides the ultimate measure of man’s folly, his inhumanity, his inability to match means and ends, and his incapacity to maintain an ordered control over his destiny. Few institutions provide more literal examples of the absurd than an army, and seldom are purposelessness, meaninglessness and the arbitrary workings of inscrutable forces more obviously manifest than in wartime. Madness, neurosis and eccentricity characterise with greater and lesser exaggeration, both the irrationality of such human social behaviour and how society tends to view deviant but perhaps more rational and moral individual acts. They also serve to indicate the human consequences of living in a universe and a society which men find so cryptic, purposeless and frequently adverse. Physical maladies often join with the emotional ones to emphasise the stresses such a world places on its inhabitants.

Vonnegut’s rendering of this world in immediate social terms defies summary in its extensiveness. His profuse satire touches on so many aspects of modern society, and of the American scene in particular, that one hardly knows where to begin, short of retelling the stories themselves. Some targets stand out as the ones selected for the most devastating and frequent
attacks—the military establishment, big business, capitalism generally, war, automation, politics, nationalism—while others are treated repeatedly but with more mixed feelings—man’s search for an answer outside of himself, art, sex, religion, even the shocks of childhood and the pains of old age.

Sometimes his intent seems to be simply the factual exposure of the often neglected, at other times he speaks with indignation of the sufferings, foibles and injustices he observes.

There are also frequent references to public figures—the Kennedys, Roy Cohen, Martin Luther King and to topical events. The effect is to create a literary world which comments broadly on the real world. This fictional setting gains significance and verisimilitude by its contemporary social allusions, so that even its fantasy affects reality, while its contemporaneity is set in the context of history (historical references are frequent in Vonnegut) and of the timeless patterns of human behaviour.

Whatever powers there be, move in rather too ‘mysterious ways, their wonders to perform’—leaving most men troubled. This condition breeds anxiety, which the majority of Vonnegut’s characters busily try to smoke, drink, fornicate, daydream, fantasise or psychosomaticise away. Anxiety stimulates the two reactions seen everywhere among Vonnegut’s people: neurosis and nostalgia. Both are consequences of anxiety, and simultaneously attempt to avoid it. When the consciousness reaches the point of being unable to endure the pains of an unalterable condition, it simply bolts down and “oubliette” away from reality into a world of illusion.
Sylvia Rosewater’s "Samaratrophia" is a classic example, Billy Pilgrim’s coming “unstuck in time” might be an extreme one.

The widespread nostalgia in the novels seems to arise from the pervasive feeling that things are bad and likely to get worse, so that the past appears inviting. Partly because there are no escapes within the bounds of normalcy in the real world of the present, Vonnegut’s characters frequently talk and act as though they were prisoners. Their being subject to incomprehensible forces in general, and to a social and economic structure which appears overbearing and unresponsive, also contributes to their sense of imprisonment. Cells, small rooms, oubliettes, fences and prisons abound in the novels, underlining the air of confinement. And besides feeling himself a prisoner, this version of contemporary man tends to see himself as being used.

Yet Vonnegut also cautions against the wrong kind of turning inward. It should not become an escape from reality nor an evasion of our responsibilities to others. True knowledge of self and of the relationship of self to exterior reality avoids both deluding self-absorption and dogmatic faith in programmatic conceptions of existence. In avoiding those twin distortions of perception, lies man’s best hope for behaving toward his fellows with respect, compassion and understanding. That, perhaps is what Vonnegut tries to show when he presents no villains and no heroes, but rather men muddling through as best as they can, some a little better than others as they learn to love. And that is perhaps why he appears to place
considerable emphasis on the necessity of never placing ends before means, of never treating other people brutally in the name of abstract causes or personal obsession. If men could live by this creed, life might be better. When they do, he shows, they survive the blows of their incomprehensible universe with more serenity and some joy.

Some critics have complained about the portrait of man that has been drawn by the contemporary American novelist. It shows, an ignominious insect, cowering and helpless without his old God; or it shows a sensitive creature too delicate for this world, plunged in a melancholy gloom of “alienation,” “estrangement,” “angst,” “despair.” Certainly, no one can deny that these words and this criticism do have some validity. Contemporary literature does seem to depict man in, to use the commonplace, a “crisis of identity.” But to go no further is to distort facts. Such criticism implies that the human being can have value only when he can refer to some antecedent absolute which confers upon man his purpose and his meaning. Lacking a belief in deity, the argument goes, man can only subside into the hopelessness that comes from being purposeless. That the contemporary American novel does frequently depict loneliness and hopelessness is true. We shall argue against the judgement of pessimism and disgust with the human condition. On the contrary it can be interpreted as affirming the human condition.

Man is a creature whose very essence is the open decision. This phrase implies that to be human is our highest good. It states that to be
human is to be open to possibilities, to be condemned to choose from those possibilities and to suffer the consequences of those choices. To be human is to be aware of this freedom and, paradoxically, the limitations which it imposes.

The human being says “No” to nature, to the lower drives and the world in which these drives are most comfortable, and in doing so he sublimates them and appropriates their energy for the activities of his essential being.

When man says “No” he affirms his own existence by differentiating himself from “stream of existence,” by pointing to himself as an intelligible and self-recognisable creature.

He is condemned to exist within the limitations imposed. But in that existence he is absolute in himself, the centre of his universe, the originator of his actions, and the creator of his identity and purpose. In him lies reality and in reality lies value. As he becomes more vividly aware, he becomes more “real.” He stands out against the world, intensely aware of his past, of the moment to which that past brings him and of the community in which he has his existence. He is “estranged” and “alienated.” He does feel “angst” and “despair.” He is inescapably isolated. In the clash between the individualistic id and the internalised laws of parent and society, when the internalised laws gain ascendancy, the individual is thwarted.
According to Vonnegut, the human being is most human—and most praiseworthy—when he lives wholeheartedly in his natural condition, working in the open, doing joyfully and spontaneously for his own support, loving other life, and being loved. Human worth—and hence significance—resides in the being of the human. The self is its own reason for being; its being is its own guarantee of its value. The more conscious one is of this being, the more individual one is and the firmer is one’s guarantee.

For Vonnegut, one of the defining characteristics of authentic human life is physical labour. It is a magic time. Work establishes a high intensity of individual satisfaction simply because it is an individual act that supports itself. This, as Reverend Lasher says in Player Piano, provides the feeling of participation, the feeling of being needed on Earth—dignity.

The act of loving also confers high value, upon the lover and the loved. Such love is the basis of Vonnegut’s conception of morality, and it rises from the metaphysical assumption in the “open decision” that there can be no individual identity or satisfaction without ties with others, without a relationship with other actual entities. In relativity, for example, there can be no motion—or entity—without other bodies. For Vonnegut love is the foundation of satisfaction.

Eliot Rosewater comes to feel it is his destiny to find a way “to love people who have no use.” Those who are out of work have been rendered not only poor but useless. They are so unattractive that they cannot even
care for themselves, and they become “ugly, stupid, boring.” Eliot
determines to make them useful by caring for them.

Love and work are the bases of human satisfaction; they are what the
human being is uniquely capable of. His moral relationship to others—to
society—is founded upon those attributes. They are virtues because they
intensify the reality of the highest good, the individual.

Vonnegut attacks with his bitterest satire the institutions that men have
built which turn men aside from their proper activities to pursue the
dehumanising goals of empty material wealth and technological success.

The location of meaning and worth, as the prerequisite of moral
behaviour, is one of Vonnegut’s main preoccupations. He deals with it most
fully in “The Sirens of Titan.” Humans, says the narrator of that novel,
assume that purpose is like some planet in the external world, to be searched
for and discovered.

The futility of Rumfoord’s search is demonstrated through Salo, a
creature from the planet Tralfamadore in another galaxy. Two hundred
thousand years before Rumfoord first lands on Titan, Salo had developed
spaceship trouble and landed on Saturn’s ninth moon to await replacement
for a part. Unknown to him, Rumfoord is instrumental in getting that part to
Salo. But he is only a small element in a much larger plan, the two thousand
years of Solar system history. Rumfoord’s “purpose” had thus been to make
it possible for Salo to continue his journey. Learning this, Rumfoord decides
that the main point of this Solar system episode must have been the message Salo was carrying from Tralfamadore. The message, however, is simply “Greetings.” It reduces Rumfoord’s expectations of meaning to an absurdity, but it contains the meaning that Vonnegut expressed in the novel. The purpose of life and the central force in the universe is the affirmation of that life, which comes with the communication between conscious creatures through the experience of love and work.

Similarly, in his acquaintance with Rumfoord, Salo originally a machine on Tralfamadore, becomes more human and thereby acquires a capacity for a higher intensity of satisfaction. He develops a mind which fizzes and overheats with thoughts of love, honour, dignity, rights, accomplishments, integrity, independence.

The automated society of contemporary America, depicted in God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, is reinforced by a deep-rooted morality of capitalism and free enterprise. Vonnegut implies that this morality is a rhetorical construction built on false premises, premises he attacks in all his novels and which are designed to justify the wealthy and indict the poor. The first premise is that wealth is a sign of industry and poverty a sign of laziness and hence deserved deprivation. Eliot Rosewater insists, to the contrary, that wealth is a matter of chance, an accident of birth.

The second false premise of this morality is that free enterprise encourages incentive through competition, by which men better themselves. Eliot protests that competition neither ennobles nor dignifies. It degrades and
shames. The real incentive that drives men to struggle for money, he says, is "fright"—fright about not getting enough to eat, about not being able to pay the doctor, about not being able to give your family nice clothes, a safe, cheerful, comfortable place to live in, a decent education and a few good times.

When Vonnegut despairs over man's absurdity he does so because he cannot quite let go of the hope for some ultimate set of rules conferred on us by a higher deity, even though in novel after novel he disavows such a possibility and desire. Bokonon does not despair so much over the innocent evil of the world's Hoenikkers as he does over the enigma with which existence confronts him.

Vonnegut cites human stupidity and the human condition as the two chief obstacles to the achievement of the highest good. The human condition makes it impossible by definition to arrive at any completely satisfactory fulfilment.

Human stupidity leads men to kill and cheat and steal, impinging upon the freedom of men to work out their own ends. For Vonnegut the symbol of human stupidity in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is war in general and Dresden in particular. War makes animals out of the defeated and cruel tyrants out of the triumphant.

It is difficult for any Earthling to reinvent his universe because he is so severely limited by his conception of time. As one of the Tralfamadorians
explains, the Earthling is like a man strapped to a railroad car in such a way that his vision is limited to what he can see through a long narrow pipe—a "little dot." The car goes up and down hills, across flatlands, around curves. But the Earthling knows nothing of this, only that little dot at the end of the pipe which he takes to be reality. Whatever the Earthling sees he has no choice but to say to himself, "That's life." The Tralfamadorian, on the other hand, can see the rail-road car, the Earthling strapped on it, and the plains and mountains and curves over which the car travels. The reason for this is that Tralfamadorians understand that time is not sequential, that cause and effect are Earthling misconstructions and distortions.

Does this promise of new life counter despair? Does Vonnegut mean that life, in its insistent intensity, refuses to die? Does he mean that a good moment is coming? That it has not been so bad after all? Or does he mean that the spring that the leaves and the birds represent the ignominious human who in his folly does not know when he is beaten, that the Tralfamadorian myth is a ridiculous and illusory alternative to what man has wrought and is given no other alternative than to face it?

Vonnegut is concerned fundamentally with problems of value: self-awareness, self-realisation, self-fulfilment; the nature and destiny of man.

Modern man has been dislocated by what might be called "The Copernican Effect," the realisation (with all its psychological, emotional and social implication) that he is no longer the image of God, the centre of the universe. But given the Copernican Effect, man is left with the most basic
existential question: what makes a worthwhile life in a meaningless, arbitrary, contingent universe? Each of Vonnegut's works embodies in its character a response to his predicament, from Paul Proteus to Wilbur Daffodil-II Swain, Salo, Bokonon, Eliot Rosewater, Billy Pilgrim and others.

The visitors from space might say by way of farewell what Charles Darwin seemed to say to us, and we might write his words in stone, all in capital letters. The winners are at war with the losers, and the fix is on. The prospects for peace are awful. The points are essentially the same: our golden rule is clearly to do unto others before they are able to do unto us.

The dark, tough apocalyptic quality of Vonnegut's vision results from his hard minded recognition that we do commit sins against ourselves which need to be exorcised. But he dresses that perception in the fable's soft fabric, moral fibres and all, because he sees love as the proper instrument of exorcism and the fable as the proper form for the expression of the artist's love.¹

While many of Vonnegut's essays have illustrated his attitude toward war, he has also written substantially about his concern for ecology and about his awareness of the loneliness and the despair that cloud the lives of millions of Americans. In an essay entitled "Exelsior! We Were Going to the Moon, Exelsior!" he informed readers of the New York Magazine that the

space programme was a colossal waste that was worthwhile only to a few scientists like Arthur C. Clarke and to the countless engineers employed in the projects. In many ways, the maximum effort America made to reach the moon is viewed by Vonnegut as a deliberate attempt to avoid the far more difficult problems on and of Earth. Earth is such a pretty blue and pink and white pearl in the pictures sent by NASA. It looks so clean. You cannot see all the hungry, angry earthlings down there—and the smoke and the sewage and trash and the sophisticated weaponry. Because of such problems, Vonnegut agreed with Isaac Asimov that American science fiction had passed through adventure and technology phases but that it was now concerned primarily with sociology.

A key question raised by Vonnegut concerns the constitution of reality. If traditional cultural systems have lost their perspicuity, what does man do for a sense of purpose of life. If he is a Vonnegut, he reinvents himself with his universe. With Tralfamadorean logic he dispenses with why in favour of what.

In our century, particularly in the past two decades, the self as a verifiable, definable, even possible, entity has vanished in the ironic acceptance of a world without metaphysical centre, one fragmented into multiple realities. Nor does the astounding advance in phenomenal knowledge of the universe offer us as yet an alternative set of beliefs. Rather, the sciences tend increasingly to answer our request for understanding of our world in terms untranslatable into words. Consequently, our disorientation
now includes the additional anxiety for man as—verbal—animal of silence, toward which Beckett has been tentatively exploring his way for decades, and in which Salinger seems already to have settled. We live in a world, the scientific descriptions of which are no longer communicable with verbal counters. The result is that “we seem to be confronting a reality that is totally mysterious or devoid of meaning.”

The implications for artists—writers, painters, sculptors, composers—of this loss of faith in the meaningful reality of the self and the world have been evocative of new artistic thrusts into areas of random and serial form, considered by older aesthetics to be inartistic.

To make it meaningful, the world must be reinvented. Science-fiction time-travel is Vonnegut’s metaphor, but behind this device stands man’s greatest power, what separates him from other living creatures—the ability to imagine that anything, even he himself, is different from what is. Turn things around, make them different. Overcome the trouble, in one’s mind to start with. The horrors of war, our complex machines of destruction: why not reinvent them, as they would be reinvented when we take a war movie and run it backward:

American planes, full of holes and wounded men and corpses, took off backwards from an airfield in England. Over France, a few German fighter planes flew at them backwards, sucked bullets and shell fragments from some of the planes and crewmen. They did the same for wrecked American bombers
on the ground, and those planes flew up backwards to join the formation.

The formation flew backwards over a German city that was in flames. The bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted a miraculous magnetism which struck the fires, gathered them into cylindrical steel containers, and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes. The containers were stored neatly in racks. The Germans had miraculous devices of their own, which were long steel tubes. They used them to suck more fragments from the crewmen and planes. But there were still a few wounded Americans though and some of the bombers were in bad repair. Over France, though, German fighters came up again and made everything as good as new.

When the bombers got back to their base, the steel cylinders were taken from the racks and shipped back to America, where factories were operating night and day, dismantling the cylinders, separating the dangerous contents into minerals; touchingly, it was mainly women who did this work. The minerals were then shipped to specialists in remote areas. It was their business to put them into the ground, to hide them cleverly, so they would never hurt anybody ever again (S-Five 63).
And so Vonnegut turns to a reconstruction of reality, to the human imagination, to art. Such radical use of the imagination to build a new freedom and dignity for man is part of Vonnegut’s appeal to youth.

As if in celebration of the feat of Slaughterhouse-Five, the NET production gathered the bits and pieces of Vonnegut’s twenty-year world and presented them as a cosmic Yoknapatawpha: the Chrono-synclastic infundibulum of pure imaginative freedom when a poet is launched into space and his responses measured back on Earth. What does the show mean? Vonnegut considered, having the record of his literary career placed so handily before him.

Well it means, for one thing, that we will never get very far from this planet, no matter how much money we spend. So we had better stop treating this planet as though it were a disposable item to be used up and thrown away. It means, too, that, no matter how far we may travel, we can never get out of our heads.2

In a Darwinian sense, it is man’s wish to improve himself, that is in control. Darwin’s ideas make people crueler. When anybody is sick Darwin feels that they deserve to be sick, that people who are in trouble must deserve to be in trouble. When anybody dies, cruel Darwinists imagine we

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2 MS Comments on production by Kurt Vonnegut, owned by the author. Quoted with the permission of Vonnegut. (Original draft of a preface for Between Time and Timbuktu).
are obviously improving ourselves in some way. Any man who's on the top is there because he is a superior animal. That's the social Darwinism of the last century, and it continues to boom.

Vonnegut realises that there are people who are in terrible trouble and cannot get out. He is impatient with those who think that it is easy for people to get out of trouble. He worries about stupid and dumb people and feels that somebody has to take care of them.

We are accustomed to arguing problems away, and most of the problems we are facing now are so stringently biological, so primitive really, that they can't be solved with rhetoric.

Vonnegut is a dervish of paradox as he suggests in his extended fables that we must learn to maintain happy illusions over villainous ones, that the best truth is a comforting lie, and that if there is any purpose to human history, it is best understood as a joke—at our expense.

Vonnegut suggests and knows that the world is absurd; he emphasises the importance of humanitarian moral values, especially the value of uncritical love and a sense of family, a sense of belonging somewhere. At the same time he proclaims the impossibility of belief, he asks us to believe in the most ridiculous superstition of all: that humanity is at the centre of the universe, the fulfiller or the frustrator of the grandest dream of God Almighty.

Through his novel God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, Vonnegut posits the overwhelming need for love in a technological age, which increasingly
relegates humans to an obsolescent category, substituting efficient machines for defective individuals. It suggests that Christ's consort with publicans and prostitutes has taken on fresh meaning with the growing number of humans rendered useless by our computerised civilisation. And it indicts an obsession with wealth, which has undermined the American experiment, vitiating the American pioneering independence of action and judgement, until wealth has become identified with sloth (Stewart Buntline), lesbianism (Amanita Buntline), homosexuality (Bunny Weeks), drunkenness (Caroline Rosewater), pornography (Liba Buntline) and death (Fred Rosewater, who sells insurance with the philosophy that the values of life cease in the worth of death). In short, the novel acridly maintains that the American dream of a new Eden with a new Adam, possible in the virgin wilderness of a new land, has materialised into a junkyard by the way of the glories of technology. In support of its Samaritan thesis, it holds up Eliot Rosewater as the ideal of the millionaire turned Do-Gooder, a modern re-enactment of Christ-like commitment.

Yet, in its characterisation of Eliot Rosewater, in its description of his Indiana Utopia, in its parodies, its imagery and symbolism, its tone and structure, the novel asks us to question its moral stance. Even the title is a stand-off, with the first half (God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater) reminding us of Christ's teaching on love, and the second half (Or Pearls Before Swine) reiterating the Sermon on the Mount's warning against wasting the gift of the kingdom of Heaven on those who will not enter it.
The tone of infra dig is pronounced in the Biblical allusions, which one would expect to confirm the Samaritan theme but which contrariwise work as often as not to cast doubt on its validity and to cast jibes at the idea of Jesus redivivus. Eliot's parody of the Biblical "begats" in his history of the Rosewater family points up the inadequacy of the American dream of equality, fraternity and trust in God. The genealogy of the Rosewater males, from Noah is a dreary litany of how puritanical industry and capitalistic democracy realised not a utopia under one God and one President, but an aristocracy of the wealthy committed humourlessly, in non-working hours to the exploitive patronage of the arts and the "spiritual elevation of the poor—on Sundays" (God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater 19-21).

Not even the latter-day Samaritan Eliot Rosewater, however, escapes the scornful lash of the parody. Unlike the generation of the sons of the Biblical Noah, which culminate in the patriarch Abraham, the generations of the sons of the Indiana Noah end with Eliot, "a drunkard, a Utopian dreamer, a tin-horn, an aimless fool," which begat "not a soul" (God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater 22-23). In the generations of the Rosewaters, the humanitarian motives of the good Samaritan have transmigrated to the Americas, turned inside out and diagnosed as a neurotic illness, Samaritrophia, "hysterical indifference to the troubles of those less fortunate than oneself," which is cured by arousing "Enlightened Self-interest" (God Bless You Mr. Rosewater 54). Eliot appears as both a Jesus and a Jonah Figure. Like Christ, who consorted with publicans and prostitutes, Eliot
chooses to befriend misfits and drunks. He also manages to practice the New Testament injunction against cleaving to father and mother and family. But Eliot’s neglect of his wife, leading to her nervous breakdown, plus his unconcern for her plight, remakes him less in the image of Christ than in the antic witlessness of Diana Moon Glampers, one of the unloved whom he succours. His sublimely mad efforts to “save” a country economically ravaged by his forebears are repeatedly presented in terms that could be judged both inadequate and disreputable—ludicrously so. To cite one of many instances—the innocent correspondent in a paternity suit, he orders his lawyer to draw up papers

that will legally acknowledge that every child in Rosewater Country said to be mine (all told, there are fifty seven claimants) is mine, regardless of blood type. Let them all have full rights of inheritance as my sons and daughters—And tell them that their father loves them, no matter what they may turn out to be—And tell them—to be fruitful and multiply (God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater 217).

Eliot’s directive here to the recipients of his charity is almost obscene in the context of the current crisis of overpopulation, which the novel explicitly brings to our attention in its concern for the growing numbers of useless people on the earth. The identification of Eliot with God and God’s directive to man to people the earth is rendered by Eliot’s impotency.
Eliot's love (caritas) for mankind is slyly laughed at in other ways. Eliot's capacity for self-sacrifice is ironically deflated by the pun on his aroused sexuality, the deflation intensified by our subsequently learning of his impotency. The emotional bankruptcy of Eliot's effort to love all men indiscriminately is succinctly articulated by his father:

Eliot did to the word love what the Russians did to the word democracy. If Eliot is going to love everybody, no matter what they are, no matter what they do, then those of us who love particular people for particular reasons had better find ourselves a new word. He looked up at an oil painting of his deceased wife. For instance—I loved her more than I loved our garbage collector, which makes me guilty of the most unspeakable of modern crimes: Discrimination (God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater 79).

Senator Rosewater, is confusing Eros with Caritas, still, the Senator's complaint carries conviction, for to love everybody willy-nilly is to love no one in reality.

Eliot as humanitarian is also downgraded through the parallel with his second cousin, Fred Rosewater. Like Eliot, Fred sees himself in the business of saving souls. He creates “sizeable estates” for widows and orphans by selling life insurance policies. Grateful women address him as they do Eliot, in the heartfelt terms “God bless you, Mr. Rosewater” (God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater 122). If Eliot works his miracles sitting on a toilet in an
abandoned office, Fred conducts his business on a stool, at the coffee counter of a news-stand. The cash nexus of both men’s philanthropy, played down in the references to Eliot but confirmed by his considering the recipients of his charity to be his “clients,” becomes pervasively evident in Fred’s comings and goings. Indeed, Eliot’s ministry to the cast offs, drunkards and misfits of Rosewater County is invariably calculated in small sums of money, euphemistically entered in a ledger as Fellowships. When compared to Christ’s personal ministry, Eliot’s utopian experiment appears gratuitously impersonal and capricious. He solicits the indigent in hit-and-miss fashion with stickers, “Don’t kill Yourself. Call the Rosewater Foundation” (*God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* 90), pasted in every phone booth in the country and on the cars of the volunteer firemen, and he mostly communicates with the needy over the telephone. The useless types to whom he has become patron saint include such unsavoury criminals and mental defectives as a psychotic wife-killer and a demented nazi—hardly characteristic instances of technological obsolescence. His dispensation of “grace” to the Rosewater community takes such bizarre forms as his purchasing for the town fire station, “the main air-raid siren of Berlin during the Second World War—To the best of Eliot’s knowledge—the loudest alarm in the Western Hemisphere” (*God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* 92).

One of the most telling arguments against our accepting Eliot’s “Christ-like” actions at face value is the psychological explanation given for his love of mankind. On one level of the novel’s statement, Eliot is portrayed
as a man in desperate need of electric shock treatment. His mental afflictions range from hypochondria to paranoia. His medicine cabinet is “crammed with vitamins and headache remedies and haemorrhoid salves and laxatives and sedatives” (God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater 63). When Mary Moody, a Rosewater country resident dependent on Eliot’s philanthropy, erroneously phones him on the fire department hot line, he screams, “God damn you for calling this number. You should go to jail and rot! Stupid sons of bitches who make personal calls on a fire department line you should go to hell and fry forever!” (God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater 172). A few seconds later, the sobbing Mary Moody calls back on the Rosewater Foundation phone. All sweetness and light Eliot asks, “what on earth is the trouble, dear?” And Vonnegut adds: “He honestly didn’t know. He was ready to kill whoever had made her cry” (God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater 172). The saintly fool of Dostoevsky’s fiction has deteriorated badly.

Eliot is obsessed with the belief that firemen are “the only examples of enthusiastic unselfishness to be seen in this land” (God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater 211). They are associated with his childhood happiness, when he was mascot of a Fire Department; but firemen also arouse strong guilt feelings in him, because he had mistakenly killed three unarmed German firemen during the war. He was subsequently hospitalised for combat fatigue. Linked in his mind with this guilt is his responsibility for the death of his mother. Although an expert sailor, he jibbed unexpectedly one day when he had taken her for “a sail,” the “slashing boom” knocking her
overboard whereupon she "sank like a stone" (*God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* 38). To escape his mental demons, Oresteian and otherwise, he has become a drunkard and patron of firemen as well as a celibate. He is "deeply touched by the idea of an inhabited planet with an atmosphere that was eager to combine violently with almost everything the inhabitants held dear. He was speaking of Earth and the element oxygen." Firemen loom large for him, therefore, as a "band of brothers" joined in the humane thing "of keeping our food, shelter, clothing and loved ones from combining with oxygen" (*God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* 31-32).

To offer "a booze problem" and sexual delusion as the psychological rationale for Eliot's emulation of the Good Samaritan is to contradict the narrative affirmation of the novel. To define Eliot's altruism in such aberrative terms is to compromise his Christian motives, and, ultimately, to question the validity of three thousand years of Judeo-Christian assumptions. No less under a cloud of suspicion is the theme of social and economic utopia that is developed in conjunction with the Christian theme of brotherly love in the novel.

When properly understood, religions are imaginative systems too, capable of changing the world, as is done in *The Sirens of Titan* by the founding of Vonnegut's new Church. "Any man who would change the World in a significant way must have showmanship, a genial willingness to shed other people's blood, and a plausible new religion to introduce during the brief period of repentance and horror that usually follows bloodshed"
(The Sirans of Titan 174). And that is the plot of Vonnegut's novel—again after demonstrating that the truth of our existence was not what we absolutely thought it was anyway.

Vonnegut and Kilgore Trout share a view of a Humanistic Christianity, a religion in which man will consciously choose to love his brother. A number of theologians have attacked Vonnegut for trying to reject Christian theology but retain its ethics.

Vonnegut's books propose that absurdity lies at the heart of the cosmos, thus making any sort of moral statement, at the least, a little foolish. Still, paradoxically, he insists that man must be treated with kindness and respect, as though he were the centre of the universe and possessed of an eternal soul. Vonnegut retains belief in the worth of man as an article of faith, though it is a faith he cannot justify intellectually and which he sometimes only half-heartedly maintains.

Vonnegut has always attacked massive institutions whether they be political, social or religious on the ground that they tend to dehumanise people; and no matter how noble their goals, they eventually care more about their own survival than about the public welfare.

In Cat's Cradle the Catholic Church, conspires with a large corporation to enslave the entire island of San Lorenzo; and, in God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, the federal government strives to survive and to preserve the status quo by overlooking the immoral actions of the
unprincipled rich while simultaneously ignoring the impassioned cries of the poor. Fort Jeus in *Cat’s Cradle* and the innumerable children’s crusades throughout history suggest the destruction and carnage that people have tried to justify in the name of institutionalised religion. Since the Tralfamadorian robots tell Billy Pilgrim that time is not a linear movement toward Heaven, it becomes man’s responsibility to create a Heaven on Earth.

Billy and Montana appear as a sort of New Adam and Eve, who live in the confines of a perfect world, until Billy eats from the tree of knowledge, in effect, by learning the true nature of time and the place of conscious beings in the universe. He is expelled from his symbolic garden when the Tralfamadorians (for unexplained reasons) send him back to Earth. An enlightened Billy then begins his mission of preaching his new gospel to his fellowmen—who are sceptical about his claims.

If *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a combination of the traditional narrative and the Tralfamadorian novel, it is also a synthesis of Christian and Tralfamadorian morals.

If living in a nuclear age places special responsibilities and burdens on all of us, our literary artists may bear additional onus. Vonnegut talks about the stuff that Billy Graham won’t talk about: for instance—is it wrong to kill? And what’s God like? And stuff like that. People like to hear talk like that because they can’t get it from the minister. Vonnegut wants to show what
heaven is like. People want to know what happens after they die. That's a very popular subject and Vonnegut talks about it.

Vonnegut does not feel that he has corrupted anybody just because he talks to the young about heaven and God and the nature of life. Vonnegut feels he is giving them information that they need, and a philosophy which will be good, for they will certainly be kinder. People can give certain kinds of information that would make the youngsters extremely tough, (about what God wants and all that) but Vonnegut just makes up something that would tend to make them gentle.

Vonnegut says that his ancestors who came to the U.S. a little before the Civil War, were atheists. So he's not rebelling against organised religion. He never had any. He learned his outrageous opinions about organised religion at his mother's knee.

Can organised religion make anybody happier? Vonnegut says that lots of comforting lies are told in church. He wants preachers to lie more convincingly about how honest and brotherly we should be. Of course preachers never give sermons on the subject of gentleness or restraint. No preacher ever speaks out against cheating in business. Vonnegut says there are fifty-two Sundays in a year but none of these subjects comes up.

Vonnegut says that the religion of "Alcoholics Anonymous" is superior to any other. "Alcoholics Anonymous" gives you an extended family that's very close to a blood brotherhood because everyone has
endured the same catastrophe. Many people join who aren’t drunks, who pretend to be drunks because the social and spiritual benefits are so large. But they talk about real troubles, which are not spoken about in church, as a rule. The halfway houses for people out of prisons, or for people recovering from drug habits, have the same problems: people hanging around who just want companionship, the brotherhood or the sisterhood, who want the extended family.

Large and stable American families have in our own day become the exception rather than, the rule. The typical family is now nuclear, stripped down to essentials for economic mobility—a mobility that disperses these units away from their ancestral homes and keeps them continually moving at a rate of once every four years. All this constitutes a great loss, one that invades the entire tone of his work. Vonnegut explains that most of the unhappiness

—the indescribable malaise—that people are feeling these days is really a longing for a large permanent family. The ideal commune would be one in which the people have actually grown up together—that’s the sort of commune humans have lived in for most of their history on earth. Vonnegut feels that it is good to have bloodlines, but if that is not possible at least one can have a lot of people.¹

Vonnegut feels that marriage is collapsing because our families are too small. A man cannot be a whole society to a woman, and a woman cannot be a whole society to a man. We try, but it is scarcely surprising that so many of us go to pieces.

By its very name, the American 'middle' class suggests it can be measured from two directions, above or below. Hence Vonnegut's short stories from these years often alternate between two types of narrators: this figure is either 'a contact man for an investment counselling firm' who will call on potential clients (who, by his help, may climb up out of the middle class), or a tradesman in 'aluminium combination storm windows and screens', an honest workman and solid representative of the American middle class whose job sometimes takes him into the homes of the rich and famous. Whether seen from the first angle or the second, each type of story has a similar plot. The world of bourgeois stability is threatened with a disruption confounding the principles Vonnegut and his narrator hold dear; the narrator, however, manages to reshape the experience according to his own values, maintaining order for himself and for the world depicted in each story.

Vonnegut's ideal of the extended family is so functionally convincing, perhaps, because his own biography has seen both its disruption (in natural form) and its re-establishment (as artifice). The same is true for another important element in his fiction: its demonstration that reality is not absolute but is instead an arbitrary convention. As a child, just turning nine years old
and continuing through his teens, Vonnegut saw the social and economic ‘reality’ of his family change quite radically.

Vonnegut feels that all this is a longing for community. This is a lonesome society that’s been fragmented by the factory system. People move to places as jobs move, as prosperity leaves one area and appears somewhere else. People don’t live in communities permanently anymore. But Vonnegut feels they should because communities are very comforting to human beings. There are villagers who won’t leave a place, even though jobs are vanishing, because of the church-centred communities there and particularly because of the music. So they stay back, even though jobs are vanishing, because that’s home. And that’s intelligent. People should have homes. Vonnegut’s ancestors built a home in Indiana with the idea that it would be inhabited by several generations.

Of course people get used to it and even Vonnegut says he is used to the rootlessness that goes with his profession. But he would like people to be able to stay in one community for a lifetime, to travel away from it to see the world, but always to come home again, because that is comforting.

Vonnegut says that, until recent times, people had a permanent community of relatives. They had dozens of houses to go to. So when a couple had a fight, one or the other could go to a house and stay with a close relative until he was feeling tender again. Or, if a kid was fed up with his parents and he couldn’t stand it he could march over to his uncle’s for a while. Now this is no longer possible. Each family is locked into its little box.
The neighbours aren't relatives. There aren't other houses where people can go to and be cared for. The old values have all gone and we have become lonesome. We do not have enough friends or relatives any more. We would, if we lived in real communities.

Vonnegut has a sunny little dream of a happier mankind. He feels that alternate social structures such as communes, might work. In the community of strangers that are hammered together now, as young people take over firms and try to live communally, the founders are sure to have lots of differences. But their children, if the communes hold together long enough, will be comfortable together, will have more attitudes and experiences in common, will be like genuine relatives. Modern man has shoals of relatives, but scattered to hell and gone, and thinking in all kinds of crazy different ways.

Human beings will be happier—not when they cure cancer, or get to Mars or eliminate racial prejudice but when they find ways to inhabit primitive communities. That is Vonnegut's utopia—what he wants for himself.

Artists of different kinds constitute a sort of extended family. Artists usually understand one another fairly well. What, according to them, does blood relationship mean? Tom and Huck in *Tom Sawyer* conduct a brotherhood ceremony—they sign their oaths in blood. Vital substances are involved here. There are communes based on eating big bowls of rice or spaghetti every night. Those are also vital substances.
This longing for community may explain, at least in part, the Jesus-freak movement among young people. But why are they attracted to fundamentalist Christianity? Vonnegut explains that the care for an artificial extended family is fairly arbitrary. Christianity is commonplace and harmless and therefore good. In America, it is easy to form a community of people who know something about Christianity, since there has always been so much talk about Christianity around. It's nucleation, that is, it has to do with how big something has to be in order to grow rather than die out. There are big communities which thrive on race hatred. It's easy to make them grow, especially in a society as lonesome as this one.

Vonnegut says that it is a big mystery how Christianity spread when it was so much like other religions which were competing with it at the time—with the virgin birth and all that. Yet this religion so much like others already around, set that whole part of the world afire.

If someone is willing to take charge, he is very likely to get followers. There is a permanence there that people have not been able to get from their own parents.

Vonnegut uses Kilgore Trout as a fictitious science fiction writer in some of his novels. Trout has written a story about a time when the American government finally understands that it is not taking care of the people because it is too clumsy and slow. It wants to help people, but it cannot get anywhere in time. In India extended families have been the style since the beginning of time. Joint families take care of their own sick and
old. They take care of any relative in trouble. They do it right away and at no cost to the Government. The trouble with the U.S. is that nobody has enough relatives within shouting distance (Nobody can just yell for help). Everybody has to fill out forms.

Trout has an idea—he makes the President assign everybody thousands of relatives at random. You have to throw out whatever middle name you have and substitute whatever name the computers of Social Security Administration give you—names of goods, colours, flowers and animals etc. Anybody who comes new to the country, has to not only swear allegiance to the country, he also has to accept a middle name from the computers. Everyone gets a family directory, a subscription to the family’s monthly magazine and so on. Nobody would feel alone and anyone who needed some money for a week, or a babysitter for an hour or a trip to the hospital would get it. Nobody would be compelled by law but normally relatives would be glad to hear from you and help if they can.

In *Cat’s Cradle*, Vonnegut uses a false karass—a group that finds its identity in an irrelevant or artificial shared experience. Just like the drug among people. The fact that they use drugs gives them a community. You can pick up a set of friends you will see day after day. And one gets a community where one might not normally have one.

People realised that in order to get a nice house or a good job you must be very pleasant, good looking and well connected. If you lose, if you
do not rise in society you are going to live in the midst of ugliness. And you won't have friends you like or trust.

So a lot of people turned to drugs. It was a marvellous, resourceful and brave experiment. You can change your insides. Of course drugs have not been a solution for Vonnegut but he was puzzled that at times when he was depressed he could just take the little thing about the size of a pinhead and feel much better. Thus his mood could be changed by a pill when he responded to internal chemistry. Vonnegut used to have periods of depression but he got out of them by working at it.

_Palm Sunday_ could be called a series of Sermons. Perhaps Vonnegut sees himself in the Emersonian tradition of humanist preachers. Emerson was a Unitarian and so was Vonnegut. Emerson could not administer the sacrament in good conscience. So he left the Church. Vonnegut's ancestors also were Catholics but they left the Church in 1860. Probably Vonnegut inherited that tradition. The preachers within a Church say they have a warrant for their assertions—that they are not speaking on their own authority but on God's authority, through sacred texts. The Emersonian humanist is always left with his own voice, his own authority.

_Slaughterhouse-Five_ is a profoundly religious novel. The religious, mythical significance of the novel emerges in an analysis of the events of Billy's formative years. In the figure of his own father Billy had experienced the cruel tyranny of The God of This Universe and had learned to hate life in this Universe. The meaning of the gruesome crucifix—"Christ died
horribly”—is clear: one Father subjected his Son to a horrible death and rendered him pitiful (*S-Five* 33).

To be told that the Supreme Ruler of the Universe is the Utterly Indifferent God is one thing; it is another to experience at first hand as an impressionable child the depraved, or, at best, insensitive cruelty of a living God who should protect, comfort and guide.

Billy was ready to take to heart the message of another Trout novel wherein a time-traveller listened with the stethoscope to the body of Christ on the cross: “There was not a sound—The son of God was dead as a doornail” (*S-Five* 176).

The “Cosmic Katharis” restores our confidence in the finitude of life so as to see the “daily occasions of our earthbound career as being not irrelevant inconveniences but as possible roads into what is ultimately significant in life.”

Christ-illusions show Billy wandering in a wilderness, being falsely accused and made a scapegoat (by Weary, who blames Billy for his death), being reviled by the other inmates of the boxcar. Later, as he lies dozing in the cart after the Dresden raid, he hears voices which sound to him like the “tones used by the friends of Jesus when they took his ruined body down from his cross” (*S-Five* 169). Ironically, those tones are not meant for him but for the pathetic horses drawing the cart. Billy cries for those horses, and

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weeps often always silently. Vonnegut observes that “in that respect, at least, he resembled the Christ of the Carol: The Cattle are lowing. The Baby awakes. But the little Lord Jesus, No crying he makes” (S-Five 170). That Carol also provides the novel’s epigraph. Vonnegut’s saying “in that respect, at least,” implies his rather self-consciously putting a qualification on the Christ role of Billy, but that he definitely does intend Billy to be viewed thus in at least that one respect. The identification can be taken seriously, if not solemnly. At times, it becomes ludicrous—but that is exactly the point. Billy’s being moonishly bemused, utterly helpless, even ridiculous, fits him for the role of the persecuted child, of the babe born to die.

Vonnegut’s vision of life and history has several features in common with the world view that is called Paulinism. Paulinism first arose when Judaism as a natural faith was breaking up, when the holy land of Canaan had become only a part of the great empire of Rome, and it reappears in any period when individuals are estranged from their nation and its history.

One feature of Paulinism is its vision of the enslavement of the cosmos by powers which are hostile to or indifferent to man. A second feature of Paulinism is the problematic nature of the law: in Paul, the moral law revealed to man by God is recognised as opposed to the law of which God established in creation. Similarly in Slaughterhouse-Five Vonnegut tells us that Tralfamadorians, though they can foresee evils, particularly wars, are powerless to stop them; and that past, present and future are “among the things” which Billy can do nothing about.
A third feature is man's response to his condition of enslavement. In Paul it is conversion; and conversion is effected by belief in mediator and his action in history. In Vonnegut there is no mediator (unless he be the bringer of the message, Billy or Bokonon), and there is no action upon history, whose facts remain the same. But there is a conversion, a belief, which is a new perspective, or a new way of seeing things called Bokonism or Tralfamadorianism. Billy's job as spiritual optometrist is to provide the spectacles for a new, converted vision. Conversion to Bokonism and Tralfamadorianism brings results similar to Paul's conversion to Christianity: Bokonism gives a sense of purpose, Tralfamadorianism gives belief that we will all live forever, no matter how dead we may sometimes seem to be. And it provides Billy with an epitaph which is in its way as affirmative as Paul's "I have fought the good fight," though it is less militant: "Everything was beautiful and nothing hurt."

What is the "religion" of Vonnegut's work? It is Paulinism—more completely Pauline even than Paul's, in that it is still further removed from history. There is no literature without religion. In fact the voice of a literary work is a summons to belief.

The difference between Vonnegut and Paul is partly one of content. Other differences are those appropriate to a primitive and a sophisticated age. Paul belongs to an age of myth, Vonnegut to an age of irony. There is a tension until the possible and the actual meet at infinity. Vonnegut feels that fiction is today's religion. Our attention is caught by the difference
between "this is" and "suppose this is." The voice of Vonnegut's fiction is not so much a summons to belief as an invitation to suspend disbelief. One entertains a faith, in Vonnegut's work, rather than submitting to it.

The artist risks less than the prophet, commits himself less fully. It is less dangerous to create than to reveal. If you took a bunch of people out into the desert and the world did not end, you would come home shame faced, says John Barth; but the persistence of an art form does not invalidate work created in the comparable apocalyptic ambience. That is one of the fringe benefits of being an artist instead of a prophet.

The artist's faith based on "as if" may be a necessary predecessor to the religious faith based on "must be." Vonnegut recently preached Bokonism and Tralfamadorianism to the college graduates of Bennington College. He said that they must believe in the most ridiculous superstition of all: that mankind is at the centre of the universe, the fullfiller or frustrator of the grandest dreams of God Almighty. This is Bokonism, saved from being prophecy only by the one word, "superstition."

Vonnegut's point is a simple one, but is important. Cruel deeds are done in the best of causes. It is as simple as that. The best writers of our time have been telling us with all their imaginative power that our problems are not in our institutions but in ourselves. Violence is not only as American as apple pie, it is as human as men. We like to hurt folks (in a good cause), we judge our pleasure by their pain. The most dangerous people in the world are those with an unshakeable certainty that they are right. "A man, certain
of his cause, will readily send a bunch of kids off to rescue his Holy Land. His rectitude will justify any crimes. Revolution, wars, crusades—these are all ways of justifying human cruelty." Vonnegut’s book keeps whispering in its quietest voice. Be kind. Don’t hurt. Death is coming for all of us anyway, and it is better to be Lot’s wife looking back through salty eyes than the Deity that destroyed those cities of the plain in order to save them.

Modern man, romantically placed at the centre of the universe and hence responsible for his own Salvation, cannot flee from evil, even into himself; for in himself he will find only evil’s deepest source. Vonnegut’s alternative in Bokonism is a recognition of the finite for what it is: an external repository of certain elements, some of which may be evil but none of which is egocentrically identified with Man.

The connection between Biblical act of God and the destruction of Dresden is not accidental. Vonnegut’s book is subtitled “The Children’s Crusade.” The point is a simple one, but it should serve to illustrate just where the gap opens between the “silent generation” and the present group of childish crusaders who are so vocal in preparing for a Holy Revolution.

The most important linear narrative underlying all is the Judeo-Christian Bible, which is itself a central motif in Slaughterhouse-Five. There, Time proceeds from the creation to man’s fall, to the birth, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, to the end of time with the Second Coming.

Giannonne suggests that the Gospels were an amalgamation of language forms that were available to early Christians to spread their good tidings, rather than a fixed ideal shape sent down out of the blue. . . . The old forms were inadequate to convey the momentous news, so primitive Christians made their own. Thus Vonnegut tries in *Slaughterhouse-Five* to do what the Gospel writers attempted to do in their time: construct a new form out of the fragments of old forms.

*The Gospel from Outer Space* is mentioned in *Slaughterhouse-Five* as the title of one of Kilgore Trout's novels. The novel is about a visitor from outer space. The visitor has seriously studied Christianity to learn why Christians find it so easy to be cruel. He decides that part of the trouble is "slip-shod story-telling" in the New Testament. The gospels, instead of teaching people to be merciful, "even to the lowest of the low," actually teach this: "before you kill somebody, make absolutely sure he isn't well connected." The flaw in Christ-stories says this visitor from outer space, is that Christ is actually the son of the most powerful being in the universe. When people finally nailed him to the cross they thought there couldn't possibly be any repercussions. And the reader would think that, too, "since the new gospel hammered home again and again what a nobody Jesus was." Then just before the Nobody died:

The heavens opened up and there was thunder and lightning. The voice of God came crashing down, He told the people that he was adopting the bum as his son, giving him the full
powers and privileges of The Son of the Creator of the Universe throughout all eternity. God said this: From this moment on. He will punish horribly anybody who torments a bum who has no connections (S-Five 79).

That Vonnegut found the Christian linear vision of time no longer adequate is apparent by his remarks in the novel. According to Trout, the traditional Gospels are flawed. In Trout’s revised version of the story rather than being the Son of God, “Jesus really was a nobody and a pain in the neck to a lot of people with better connections than he had. He still got to say all the lovely and puzzling things he said in the other Gospels” (S-Five 95).

In the course of the novel weak, hapless, clownishly dressed Billy Pilgrim is precisely this “bum who has no connections”—he is in effect a sort of a new Christ. “On his way to the Dresden camp, Billy suffers a sleepless agony, clinging to a cross-brace.” Such observations as the fact that Billy lay at an angle “self-crucified” (S-Five 69) make clear that this identification of Billy as a Christ-figure is Vonnegut’s conscious intention. Like Christ, Billy brings a new message to the world although it is a very different one from his predecessor’s. And like Jesus he is an innocent who accepts his death at the hands of an enemy who reviles and misunderstands him, as an opportunity to teach mankind the proper response to mortality. Both Billy and Jesus teach that one should face death calmly, because death is not the end. We see Billy as the latter-day Christ who spends three days entombed
in a slaughterhouse/bomb shelter. In the Christian vision the self after death proceeds forward in time eternally, either in heaven or hell. For Billy, however, “after” death the soul proceeds backwards in time, back into life. Billy learns this from the Tralfamadorians.

Vonnegut’s use of science-fiction as a form of substitute religion would explain why he has Trout take a sceptical view of Christ in two of his novels. In the first, a time-traveller seeks to verify the humanity as opposed to the divinity of Christ. The other Trout Story, “The Gospel from Outer Space,” derives from the conclusion of “a visitor from outer space, shaped very much like a Tralfamadorian” (S-Five 94), that what the Gospels imply is “Before you kill somebody, make absolutely certain he is not well connected” (S-Five 84)—a carte blanche to lynch people who are not well connected. The replacement, “outer-space gospel,” corrects this undemocratic teaching by making Christ a real nobody who is only adopted by God after he has been crucified, allowing God to draw this moral: “From this moment on, He will punish horribly anybody who torments a bum who has no connections!” (S-Five 95). This Trout tale reveals Vonnegut’s “Gospel from outer space” and seeks to identify the Karass association that structures his fictional universe.

Vonnegut does not believe in the divinity of Christ, yet he seems determined to assert many traditional Christian values. He cannot stand the theology of Christianity, but would have its ethics. His books propose that absurdity lies at the heart of
the cosmos and thus, making any sort of moral statement is at least a little foolish. Still, paradoxically, he insists that man must be treated with kindness and respect, as though he were the center of the universe and possessed of an eternal soul. In other words, Vonnegut has lost the faiths, has repudiated Christianity, its creeds and assorted institutions, but he has retained all the ethical reflexes, which sometimes embellish that religion, though they normally rest upon a theological foundation.⁴

Vonnegut's supposed nihilism is attributed to the psychological disorders of his era. Vonnegut reinvented his novel's form to accommodate the practice of discovery in a world that had made such a response all but impossible. Vonnegut's mission was a religious one, a dedicated act of witness to an event he felt the human race needed to understand in order to survive. Thus Vonnegut's book serves as a litmus test for critics' attitudes toward the nature of our times and the appropriate literary response within them.

⁴ Peter A. Scholl. "Vonnegut's Attack upon Christendom," Newsletter of the Conference in Christianity and Literature 22 (Fall 1972): 5 p. 11.