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The American Fremmen

Not long after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, US soldiers captured an American citizen in Afghanistan carrying a weapon and wearing the dress of a Taliban soldier. Heralded by the news media as the "American Taliban," he became a spectacle, bound, gagged, naked and blindfolded on a stretcher in a photo taken soon after his capture.

The story of how the homeschooled twenty-year-old from a middle-class Northern California family became an enemy combatant in the Afghani desert piqued the popular imagination. After converting to Islam, he went to Yemen, learned Arabic, returned home and then left again to attend a madrassa (Islamic religious school) before receiving training at an Al-Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan. Some Americans reacted to the young man's story with wonder; others with loathing.

How did this youth stray from the values that most Americans hold dear? In fact, he didn't. Similar to Paul Muad'Dib who, at the end of *Dune Messiah*, wandered into the desert a blind holy man, the American Taliban had acted in accordance with values that most Americans prize: self-reliance, ingenuity, spirituality, and practical know-how. It's widely believed that the Fremmen culture derives from their religion, *Zensunni*, an imaginative blending of Zen Buddhism and Sunni Muslim beliefs. However, a closer look reveals that the Fremmen (similar to the American Taliban) were shockingly American in their core values.

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The Weirdness of Dune's Fremmen

"The Fremmen are civil, educated and ignorant," Scytale said. "They're not mad. They're trained to believe, not to know. Belief can be manipulated. Only knowledge is dangerous."

—*Dune Messiah*

The weirdness of Dune, its man-eating sandworms, water-starved environs, and hostile colonizers (who cultivate the prized spice or melange), explains the weirdness and wildness of its indigenous desert population, the Fremmen. The prologue to *Dune Messiah*, titled "The Weird of Dune," begins with a short description of the planet and its original inhabitants:

Dune is the planet Arrakis, an arid world of great deserts where life survives against terrifying odds. The semi-nomadic Fremmen of Dune base all their customs on water scarcity and face the deserts in stillsuits which recover all moisture. Gigantic sand worms and savage storms are a constant menace to them. Dune's only resource is the melange, an addictive drug produced by the worm.

Subject to Dune's harsh conditions, the Fremmen had to adapt to their environment if they wished to survive. They wear special water-recycling clothing (stillsuits), fight with immense ferocity against their rivals, and ride the great sandworms across wide expanses of the open desert. Thus, it's unsurprising that they would become the hardened and brutal shock-troops for Paul Muad'Dib, the prophet who would inspire them to fight in the jihad to subjugate the known universe and prepare the way for the God-Emperor.

What is the Fremmen religion? The Indigenous people of Arrakis revere the sandworm, Maker, or Shai-Hulud as a deity. The Fremmen acolytes become Reverend Mothers by drinking the poisonous "Water of Life," the spice essence or concentrated melange produced by the sandworm's lifecycle. They thereby render it harmless and access the memories of previous Reverend Mothers.

According to one source, "Dune mentions the religion of the Zensunni, presumably a combination of 'Zen' [Buddhism] and 'Sunni' [Islam]" (Moongadget). Following this widely-accepted view, the Fremmen have a syncretic religion (that is, a product of synthesizing two other religions). The Fremmen would have adopted elements of both in their wanderings from planet to planet (indeed,

they were originally called "Zensunni Wanderers"): i. as slaves taken to the planet Poritrin (where they revolted and escaped); ii. to Salusa Secundus (where they were also enslaved); iii. to Bela Tegeuse, their "third stopping place"; iv-v. two other planets that are unmentioned; vi; Harmonthep, the "sixth stop"; and vii. finally, to Arrakis, Dune, desert planet ("Terminology of the Imperium," *Dune*). While the *Zensunni* faith shares much in common with the mysticism of Zen Buddhism and Sunni Islam, this isn't the entire story.

Neither Sunni Islam nor Zen Buddhism embodies a liberation theology. Neither would have inspired the beliefs of a long enslaved people. Orthodox Islam condones slavery (though the Qur'an allows a slave-holder to release slaves as a way to atone for a sin). Buddhism doesn't explicitly ban slavery (though it would seem to violate the Eightfold Path's prohibition against human trafficking).

Once Paul Muad'Dib became Emperor of Dune, the Fremmen religion commingled with Catholicism, thereby becoming another syncretic faith: "Zensunni Catholicism." Catholicism is a liberation theology typically embraced by former slaves and colonized peoples. Citing the Fremmen ritual of recalling their enslaved condition ("We will never forgive and we will never forget"), Julia List argues that the values of the Fremmen are similar to those of Protestants in 1960s American society (p. 40). Therefore, it's likely that, from its very beginning, the *Zensunni* faith more closely resembled Catholicism or Protestantism than Sunni Islam or Zen Buddhism. Indeed, the Orange Catholic Bible, created shortly after the war between humans and thinking machines, is the authoritative religious text for Zensunni Catholics.

The problems apparent in the widely-held view impart a critically important lesson: it's best to avoid conceiving the Fremmen way of life, culture, and beliefs as solely derived from the Fremmen religion. The values of the Fremmen come from many other sources, including their history as an enslaved people and the harsh environment they endured on Arrakis. In reacting and adapting to demanding conditions, the Fremmen outlook imitates the frontier mentality and values that manifested in the American psyche during the nineteenth-century: resourceful, self-reliant, spiritual and pragmatic.

Imagine having grown up in a stretch in a rocky outcropping of the desert world Dune, hardened by the harsh conditions that you have known your entire life. Every day you walk into the desert,

wearing a stillsuit that recycles your bodily moisture (a permanent mark beside your mouth and beard formed from the stillsuit drinking tube), riding the massive worms over the wide expanses of desert, praying to Shai-Hulud, and awaiting the prophet's coming. Since the most standing water you have ever seen is contained within a cistern, the thought of an ocean, water as far as the eye can see, is unimaginable. Yet, when the prophet Paul Muad'Dib arrives and calls you to fight in the off-world jihad, you take your crysknife and lasgun, board a heighliner space-ship, and fight for years in the service of your God-Empire on fantastic ocean-covered planets. Such an extended period of time away from your home world causes you to reflect: Who are you? Why are you here? What principles form your character? What beliefs are at the core of your very being, your soul? Two American philosophers can provide guidance in the quest to define Fremmen character and values.

Emerson's Self-Reliance

In his essay "Self-Reliance" (1841), the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) characterized the virtue, or excellence of character, of self-reliance. For Emerson, self-reliance means, not only material, but also spiritual self-sufficiency. It's the ability to follow one's own instincts and avoid dull conformity; to be a leader and not a follower. The self-reliant person steers his own course, sees his own ideas as universal truths, rejects soulless logic, and embraces a liberating spirituality that transcends earthly experience. In Emerson's words,

Every true man is a cause, a country, and an age; requires infinite spaces and numbers and time fully to accomplish his design;—and posterity seem to follow his steps as a train of clients. All history resolves itself very easily into the biography of a few stout and earnest persons. (p. 61)

Self-reliance also entails that a person trusts herself or himself as having the wisdom to make good choices, to project their spirituality within to the world without. Americans tend to be among the "few stout and earnest persons" who exemplify the virtue of self-reliance. Those who possess it in the highest degree are poets and prophets; in the least, politicians and bureaucrats.

Self-reliance is a virtue familiar to the Fremmen people. Though the Fremmen are a nomadic people—mostly scavengers, hired spice harvesters, and soldiers—they have a deep-seated spirituality (faith in Shai-Hulud, the Maker), a cause (to follow their prophet, convert Dune into a green paradise, and spread the jihad to other worlds), a country (Arrakis), and an uncompromising belief that they're the chosen people of their age. Formed by the harsh conditions of Dune, the character of the Fremmen people epitomizes the spiritual self-sufficiency that Emerson so eloquently praised in the American people.

In "Self-Reliance," he writes: "A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within" (p. 62). Peculiar to the Fremmen is this self-reliant capacity to find and project one's internal strength, one's (in Emerson's words) "gleam of light." Furthermore, self-reliance involves practicing tremendous self-control. According to Princess Irulan, "The Fremmen were supreme in that quality the ancients called 'Spannungsbogen'—which is the self-imposed delay between desire for a thing and the act of reaching out to grasp that thing" (*Dune*). Only a self-reliant people could survive prolonged enslavement, centuries of wandering the universe and, eventually, the process of adapting to the harsh desert conditions of Dune. The Fremmen ability to persevere in the face of extreme hardship is what makes them self-reliant—and American.

Dewey's Democracy as a Way of Life

For another American philosopher, John Dewey, democracy resembles a method for realizing an ideal: social and political equality. Dewey writes: "Democracy is a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature" (*Later Works* 14, p. 226). One interpretation of this statement is that only in a democracy can citizens hope that the conditions of their individual and collective lives (political freedoms, economic opportunities, quality of life) will improve. While this is part of what Dewey means, it's only the proverbial tip of the iceberg. Still deeper is the idea that democratic citizens must genuinely believe that they and their fellow citizens are equal. Though they might not all be descriptively equal (having the same strength or I.Q.), they are morally equal in each other's eyes and formally equal before the law. Dewey writes:

Belief in the Common Man is a familiar article in the democratic creed. That belief is without basis and significance save as it means faith in the potentialities of human nature as that nature is exhibited in every human being irrespective of race, color, sex, birth and family, of material or cultural wealth. This faith may be enacted in statutes, but it is only on paper unless it is put in force in the attitudes which human beings display to one another in all the incidents and relations of daily life. (p. 226)

In other words, equality has a pseudo-religious quality in a democracy, a quality that permeates all spheres of social life, not merely the political. To realize democracy as a way of life, citizens must flatten hierarchical (social, political and economic) structures, work as equals to solve common problems and, thereby, generate "a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute" (p. 229).

Although the Fremens don't embrace political democracy, they do see each other as equals in the light of Shai-Hubud. One of the primary goals of the jihad is to liberate humanity from rule by the royal families and Great Houses. By undertaking the bloody twelve-year-long religious war, their prophet, Paul Muad'Dib, believed that the relations of humans would be cleansed and transformed into relations between relative equals, not masters and slaves.

However, *Dune's* creator, Frank Herbert, thought that the effort to democratize human experience was bound to turn out badly. "In fact, I believe attempts to create some abstract equalization create a morass of injustices that rebound on the equalizers. Equal justice and equal opportunity are ideals we should seek, but we should recognize that humans administer the ideals and that humans do not have equal ability" ("*Dune Genesis*"). Indeed, the eventual reign of the God-Emperor, Leto II, is no democratic utopia!

The Fremens as Pragmatic Americans

"Alia is right, Mother," Paul said, not looking at either his sister or Jessica. "While we manage the business of war, we are also in the business of creating a myth. It is the only way we can accomplish what is necessary. . . ."

"You are cynical, Usul," Chani sounded disturbed. . . .

"My brother is pragmatic," Alia countered.

—*Paul of Dune*

The power of myth-making is notorious. For instance, there's the myth that we, Americans, are a chosen people, exceptional, moral exemplars and world leaders. There's also the countervailing myth that America is an evil empire, jingoistic, imperialistic and exploitive of other nations and peoples. Myth-making is pragmatically valuable—it works! It brings people together around a common set of values and beliefs.

Indeed, Frank Herbert acknowledged that the observation of the human craving for myths informed his creation of the Duniiverse: "People tend to give over every decision-making capacity to any leader who can wrap himself in the myth fabric of the society" ("*Dune Genesis*"). Paul Muad'Dib's sister, Alia, correctly insisted that her brother "is pragmatic" in his use of a myth to motivate the Fremens. Similar to the American people, the Fremens saw themselves as an exceptional and chosen people, tasked to accomplish a special calling at a propitious time in human history. They were chosen to liberate humanity by fighting a jihad.

As Princess Irulan notes in her history of Paul Muad'Dib, "God created Arrakis to train the faithful" (*Dune*). One could add that God created the fanatical Fremens to successfully prosecute a war against the known universe. And one might even go so far as to say that God created Fremens in the image of a truly pragmatic and self-reliant people, that is, in the image of Americans.

Emerson's transcendentalism and Dewey's pragmatism equally capture the rich meaning of our uniquely American ideals. So it's no surprise that the Fremens would appear quintessentially American. Or do they? After all, the Fremens people were the foot-soldiers who spread violent holy war across the Imperium, not the freedom-loving American corpsmen who rushed the beaches of Normandy and Iwo Jima to make the world unsafe for tyranny. According to one historical account, "Muad'Dib's Quizarate missionaries carried their religious war across space in a jihad whose major impetus endured only twelve standard years, but in that time, religious colonialism brought all but a fraction of the human universe under one rule" (*Dune Messiah*). So, who were the Fremens? Were they the agents of religious tyranny? Or did they embody the American spirit?

The Jihadist Way of Life

He [Paul] remembered his earliest visions of the Jihad-to-be, the terror and revulsion he'd experienced. Now, of course, he knew visions of

greater terrors. He had lived with real violence. He had seen his Fremen, charged with mystical strength, sweep all before them in the religious war. The Jihad gained a new perspective. It was finite, of course, a brief spasm when measured against eternity, but beyond lay horrors to overshadow anything in the past.

—*Dune Messiah*

With the power of prescience, the prophet, Paul Muad'Dib, could foresee the terrible bloodshed of the jihad. Nevertheless, he led the heroic Fremen people to expand the religious war throughout the known universe, subduing those people and colonizing those worlds that opposed them. Jihad became a way of life, a method of razing the hierarchical structure of the Great Houses and reconstructing the relations of humans on a more equal basis. While the human race wouldn't become a race of Fremen (recall Emerson's remark that the self-reliant include only a "few stout and earnest persons"), such an exceptional people were needed to liberate the rest, to give them the gift of greater equality, first through force and then through a millennia-long peace under the rule of the prophet's son, the God-Emperor.

The American Taliban is strikingly similar to Dune's Fremen. Traveling from a Northern California suburb to Yemen to the desert battlefield of Afghanistan, his studies and conversion to Islam led him down the dangerous path to jihad, as well as eventual capture and imprisonment by US forces. Still, he was aptly named, for he's first and foremost an American and only secondarily an associate of the Taliban.

This isn't to state the trivially true point that his citizenship is American. Though most Americans didn't consider him a patriot (and some insisted that he should no longer be an American citizen), he showed himself to be enterprising, self-reliant, spiritual, pragmatic, and, therefore, quintessentially American in his values and character. In many ways, he was no different than Paul Muad'Dib, who in the conclusion of *Dune Messiah* is doubly transformed into a blind man, with eyes burnt out by an atomic weapon and his inner vision, his prescience, lost. Following the Fremen custom, Paul travels into the Arrakeen desert, walking without a trace upon his own holy path: "We say of Muad'Dib that he has gone on a journey into that land where we walk without footprints" (*Dune Messiah*).

Re-recorded by:

SHANE RALSTON

BENE GESSENT ARCHIVES
Reverend Mother Taraza
Date: 14929 A.G.

What's Wrong with Politics in the Diverse?

In the *Dune* saga, Frank Herbert relates a story about imperial instability. Throughout the several thousands of years depicted in the chronicle, characters use different strategies to gain and uphold power, and all ultimately fail. The Corrino rule ends with Paul Atreides's rise to the throne, but the first period of Atreides rule is war-ridden and increasingly brutal. As the God Emperor, Leto II warms with an iron fist for three and a half thousand years, creating a yearning for freedom that eventually leads to his assassination. Finally, the period following the reign of the God Emperor destabilizes, and the original series ends in uncertainty about what the future holds.

Frank Herbert, in his essay "Dune Genesis," suggests that he wrote *Dune* to show how our reliance on heroes makes us vulnerable and our societies politically unstable. We should trust, not heroes, but our own judgment. We don't believe that this is the main explanation for the instability and the political failures of the *Dune* societies. Instead, by looking at how stability relates to legitimacy, in particular to democratic legitimacy, we claim that the reason is that the rule-makers of the Diverse do not create the appropriate paths for the people in terms of political participation in rule-making.

The Politics of *Dune*

Politics consists of social relations involving power and authority. It commonly refers to a process by which a group of individuals makes decisions and regulates a political organization or society.