

A Limited Choice: Religious Belief in Simak's *A Choice of Gods*¹

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Korlátozott választás: A vallás megjelenési formái Simak *A Choice of Gods* című regényében.

Absztrakt: Bizonyos kontextusokban gyakran feltételezik, hogy az elmélet és a vallásos hit kölcsönösen kizárják egymást. Clifford D. Simak *A Choice of Gods (Istenek választása)* című műve azonban azt vizsgálja, ezek a területek hogyan keresztezik egymást a science fiction keretein belül. Ez a tanulmány megkérdőjelezi a hagyományos kritikai megközelítéseket azzal, hogy a vallási hitrendszerek episztemológiai elemzését szorgalmazza a tisztán szociológiai vagy antropológiai nézőpontok helyett. Az esszé Roy Clouser *The Myth of Religious Neutrality (A vallási semlegesség mítosza)* című művének isteni kategóriáira támaszkodva azt vizsgálja, Simak hogyan ábrázolja a spiritualitást és a hitet pogány szemszögből. Bár a regény a vallási hagyományok széles spektrumát mutatja be, az elemzés szerint Simak végül egy egységes pogány paradigma felé konvergál, amely a szereplőinek spirituális és episztemológiai pályáját alakítja. A szerzetesi robotok, őslakos figurák és más emberek — illetve a hit, az értelem és a misztikus tapasztalat iránti elkötelezettségük — elemzésével az esszé megvilágítja Simak intézményesített vallással szembeni kritikáját, továbbá annak felismerését, hogy a hit az ismeretlenre adott elkerülhetetlen válasz. Az *A Choice of Gods* így a vallás episztemikus funkciójáról és az emberi igazságkeresésről szóló spekulatív elmélkedésként jelenik meg az emberiség utáni jövőben.

Abstract

In certain contexts, it is often assumed that theory and religious belief are mutually exclusive. However, Clifford D. Simak's *A Choice of Gods* explores how these domains intersect within the framework of science fiction. This essay challenges conventional critical approaches by advocating for an epistemological analysis of religious belief systems rather than purely sociological or anthropological perspectives. Drawing on Roy Clouser's categories of the divine from *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*, the essay examines how Simak portrays spirituality and faith through a Pagan lens. While the novel presents a spectrum of religious traditions, the analysis argues that Simak ultimately converges on a unified Pagan paradigm that shapes the spiritual and epistemological trajectories of his characters. By analyzing monastic robots, Indigenous figures, and other humans — and their engagements with faith, reason, and mystical experience —, the essay elucidates Simak's critique of institutionalized religion and his recognition of faith as an inevitable response to the unknown. Thus, *A Choice of Gods* emerges as a speculative meditation on the epistemic function of religion and the human quest for truth in a post-human future.

I. Introduction

Clifford D. Simak (1904–1988) remains one of the most distinctive voices in 20th-century science fiction (abbreviated here as SF), often regarded as the father of pastoral SF. His career spanned over five decades, producing a body of work that continues to challenge readers and critics alike. Born and raised in rural Wisconsin, Simak's upbringing in the American Midwest profoundly shaped his literary imagination, with his work frequently

¹ The present paper is a shortened version of my MA thesis entitled *Religious Belief In Clifford Simak's A Choice Of Gods* (Pázmány Péter Catholic University, 2018).

reflecting a deep reverence for nature and a contemplative approach to technological progress and human evolution. Although Simak was not overtly religious, his writing frequently engaged with spiritual and existential questions, particularly at the intersections of faith, ethics, and cosmology.

Simak's importance is evident by his distinction as the third author to be awarded the title of Grand Master by the Science Fiction Writers of America in 1977, a prestigious honor that recognizes his significant and lasting contributions to the genre. His work often eschews the grandiose in favor of the intimate, emphasizing the ethical and philosophical dimensions of humanity's encounter with the unknown. Published in 1972, *A Choice of Gods* exemplifies Simak's contemplative approach to SF, offering an exploration of human identity, autonomy, and the divine in a future where Earth is largely abandoned by humanity. The novel centers on a mysterious event known as the Disappearance, which leaves Earth nearly deserted, compelling the remaining humans and sentient robots to grapple with the enigmatic Principle — an ancient cosmic entity at the center of the universe and the cause of the Disappearance — as they explore the themes of spirituality, technology, and cosmology.

In Lomax's analysis, *A Choice of Gods* is characterized as one of Simak's most "didactic" novels (Lomax, 1989, 137). Moreover, Simak himself explicitly designated it as his "final statement of values" (Ewald, 2006, 99). However, conventional critical approaches to religion in SF often focus on its sociological dimensions, neglecting the epistemological underpinnings that animate works like *A Choice of Gods*. Studies of religion in SF, such as those by Hrotic (2014) and Mendlesohn (2003), while valuable for their exploration of religion's external dimensions, inadvertently obscure the crucial epistemological elements. Similarly, Nahin's focus on Christian and theological themes neglects the broader spectrum of spiritual and other religious perspectives woven into the genre's fabric (Nahin, 2014).

Examining only the sociological aspects of religion — such as rituals and explicit doctrinal claims — risks oversimplifying the portrayal of religious belief in *A Choice of Gods* as merely a depiction of three distinct religions. While Simak appears to differentiate these religious traditions through varying rituals and beliefs, a closer analysis reveals a fundamental epistemological convergence. The characters, despite their different spiritual frameworks, share a common divinity belief. This suggests that, despite surface distinctions, the novel ultimately portrays a singular, multifaceted belief system — Paganism — which may inadvertently undermine the intended depiction of diverse religions.

This essay shifts from the conventional sociological approach often employed in critiques of religion in SF, adopting instead an epistemological perspective to explore the novel's treatment of the relationship between human knowledge, faith, and the divine. Utilizing Roy Clouser's concept of the divine from *The Myth of Religious Neutrality* (2005), this analysis critically examines the epistemological foundations of various belief systems, ultimately arguing that the novel portrays Paganism as the sole religious framework for interpreting cosmic mysteries.

2. The Divine

In *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*, Roy Clouser argues that understanding and explaining the world is inherently shaped by presuppositions that are fundamentally religious; there is no religiously neutral way of interpreting reality (Clouser, 2005, 13). He contends that religious belief across all traditions revolves around the acceptance of the divine, which he defines as any reality that exists independently and upon which everything else depends — a non-dependent reality (Clouser, 2005, 28).

Different religions ascribe divinity to various entities, such as deities, numbers, matter, the cosmos, or any perceived non-dependent reality. Clouser further posits that every theory-making process is influenced by an underlying assumption about what is considered divine per se (Clouser, 2005, 2). Consequently, even scholars who claim their theories are non-religious are, in effect, influenced by some form of religious belief. Essentially, everyone attributes divine status to something; the differences between religious beliefs lie in the specific entity granted this status. A thorough examination of Clouser's definitions of religious beliefs is essential for their subsequent application to Simak's novel. Clouser identifies three predominant types of religious belief based on how the divine is perceived in relation to the non-divine: Pagan, pantheist, and biblical.

Pagan belief views the divine as a part, aspect, force, or principle of the universe, often discerned through ordinary experience and reason. Even ostensibly secular beliefs, such as steady-state theory and Marxism, exhibit pagan elements by attributing divinity to aspects of the natural world, such as matter (Clouser, 2005, 58–61). Paganism, therefore, “allows the divine to be manifested in and as the material, whatever else it may be. But Paganism eschews any true hierarchy between the temporal and permanent, between the physical and spiritual, or between this world and the otherworld” (York, 2005, 162). In Paganism, the divine is viewed as an integral component or subset of the larger, continuous reality.

Though this essay centers on Paganism, a concise exposition of the other two predominant religious paradigms is beneficial before engaging in a deeper analysis of the novel. Pantheism, in contrast to Paganism, posits that all reality is a subdivision of the divine, which is infinite and all-encompassing. Traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism exemplify this belief, where the divine essence permeates all things, despite the illusory appearance of a non-divine reality. In these traditions, scripture serves not merely as a repository of truth but as a guide to mystical experiences that reveal the oneness of all things, allowing individuals to perceive the divine reality behind the veil of illusion.

The third form of religious belief identified by Clouser is the biblical type, characterized by a clear distinction between God and the universe he created. This monotheistic belief, rooted in Judaism and prevalent in Christianity and Islam, asserts a fundamental discontinuity between the Creator and his creation. Unlike Paganism, where the divine is immanent within the universe, or pantheism, where the universe is an extension of the divine, the biblical framework posits that God transcends the

universe. Consequently, knowledge of God is not attained through exploration of the universe or mystical experiences. While reason and experience play a role, understanding God primarily relies on divine revelation — specifically through scripture, such as the Bible — which elucidates God’s relationship with the world.

Examining what the novel’s characters deem unconditionally trustworthy reveals their chosen gods — those entities they regard as divine. Additionally, the epistemological hierarchies shaped by these beliefs, whether grounded in reason and empirical experience, mystical experience, or scriptural revelation, guide the characters’ understandings of truth.

3. Robot Religion

At first glance, Hezekiah’s character might appear to contradict the argument that all religious beliefs depicted in *A Choice of Gods* are fundamentally Pagan. As a robot-abbot adopting a Benedictine form of monasticism, one might initially categorize his beliefs under the biblical framework. However, the novel’s concluding line reveals the true nature of the robot-monks’ religion, describing God as a “kindly old [human] gentleman with a long, white, flowing beard” (Simak, 1977, 176). This depiction is not merely metaphorical or artistic, but rather a simulacrum of Hezekiah’s idealized image of humanity. This thoroughly immanent and anthropomorphic portrayal of God contradicts the biblical notion of a transcendent deity, situating Hezekiah’s beliefs firmly within the Pagan framework, where humanity is an integral part of the natural world. Contrary to certain interpretations, such as Ewald’s suggestion that Hezekiah critiques Christianity (Ewald, 2006, 101), it is more plausible to regard Hezekiah as a commentary on the dangers of irrational belief — a theme that extends beyond Christianity — since Hezekiah himself is not a Christian and does not represent any form of biblical theism.

Hezekiah’s religious beliefs and way of life are natural extensions of his conviction that God is human. The *raison d’être* of robots is to serve humans, as he states: “our function is to serve” (Simak, 1977, 90). This belief in the absolute superiority of humanity over robots is so ingrained that Hezekiah accuses himself of pride whenever he contemplates the possibility that robots might serve as spiritual substitutes for humans; to do so would elevate robots to the level of (human) God. Moreover, Hezekiah’s repeated use of the term “aping” to describe the imitation of humans by robots emphasizes the perceived evolutionary and hierarchical gap between the two species (Simak, 1977, 55, 87).

An analysis of Hezekiah’s use of the three epistemological methods — reason, mystical experience, and scripture — reveals the sources of his internal confusion. Although a robot would be expected to excel in logical reasoning, Hezekiah’s adherence to a belief that contradicts reason triggers his internal turmoil. Simak explores the concept of faith as belief without proof, rooted in experience yet not contrary to reason.

However, the novel underscores a significant tension between faith and truth within Hezekiah's belief system:

"Faith was something else; through the years their faith had deepened and been strengthened by their work, but the deepening of faith had not led the way to truth. Could it be possible, Hezekiah asked himself, that there was no room for both the faith and truth, that they were mutually exclusive qualities that could not coexist? Must faith be exactly that, the willingness and ability to believe in the face of a lack of evidence? If one could find the evidence, would then the faith be dead?" (Simak, 1977, 52)

The monastic robots' faith did not correspond with an increased understanding of truth, likely due to the nature of their work: "they had sat thus for years, dedicated to the task of collating and condensing down to elemental truths all that the creature, man, had written, all that he had thought and reasoned and speculated in the spiritual sense" (Simak, 1977, 88). This selective focus on spiritual knowledge, used to reinforce their humanized conception of God, impedes the monastic robots' pursuit of truth. The irrationality inherent in their anthropomorphic conception of God introduces distortions into their subsequent theories.

The fear of fanaticism, rooted in a lack of objectivity and the tension between faith and reason, was anticipated by Grandfather Whitney, the original keeper of the journal that forms the basis of *A Choice of Gods'* epistolary structure. When Hezekiah's community first requested the use of the old monastery, Whitney warned: "I greatly fear that if they continue at it (they have been at it, at the time of this writing, almost thirty years), they will not be able to maintain an objective attitude and may develop unthinking religious fanaticism" (Simak, 1977, 92). The monastic robots are hindered in their quest for truth and genuine knowledge because their faith stands in opposition to reason; they lack the objectivity necessary to reconcile their beliefs with reality. Hezekiah's religious belief, founded on the assumption that God is an old man, leads him to a crisis of faith whenever confronted with information that contradicts this assumption, leaving him riddled with doubt.

This fear of fanaticism, foreshadowed by the lack of objectivity and the tension between faith and reason, manifests in Hezekiah's internal conflicts as his beliefs begin to waver. As his rigid assumptions about the divine are challenged, the tension between doubt and faith intensifies, particularly during his mystical contemplations. Notably, Hezekiah's "flights of fancy" frequently coincide with moments of doubt, revealing a pattern in which his doubts are directly linked to an increase in these imaginative episodes. Reflecting on his contemplation of clouds and heaven, Hezekiah chastises himself for succumbing to romanticism, expressing puzzlement and shame at these recurrent daydreams: "He was puzzled and ashamed at these flights of fancy, at this romanticism, which he should have conquered long ago, but which, in the last few years (or so it seemed) had come welling more often to the surface" (Simak, 1977, 51). While

remarkable for a robot, these flights of fancy may represent the nascent stages of potential mystical experiences rather than mere aberrant daydreams. However, Hezekiah consistently severs himself from these sources of inspiration that could offer glimpses of truth. His deliberate disconnection from nature, symbolizing a denial of reality and a descent into fanaticism, contrasts with the later example of Evening Star, where the greatest potency emerges from unity with nature.

With reason and mystical experience explored as key epistemic methods in *A Choice of Gods*, attention must now turn to the third method: scripture. Although scripture, specifically religious texts like the Bible, is not prominently featured in the novel, its limited presence provides insight into the novel's treatment of belief systems. In fact, the Bible is mentioned only once, at a funeral (Simak, 1977, 136). In this instance, the reading of the Bible serves a customary and ritualistic function rather than a religious one rooted in belief. When examining the religious beliefs of John and the Indigenous characters, it becomes evident that the act of reading a variety of texts (including the journal) as sources of information and commentary functions epistemically as scripture, reinforcing their Pagan beliefs.

Despite his monastic habit and lifestyle, Hezekiah, in contrast to traditional biblical beliefs, does not rely on scripture to discern truths or revelations about God. Instead, his religious belief aligns with Paganism, centering on the personification of God as an elderly man. Hezekiah constructs a comprehensive belief system based on the flawed premise that the creator and sustainer of the cosmos is an old man with a white beard. Consequently, he struggles to reconcile other aspects of reality with this singular, anthropomorphic belief, including accommodating divergent human perspectives on the divine. His unwavering ignorance, bordering on the comical, functions less as a direct critique of Christianity and more as a cautionary tale, employing satire to warn against religious convictions that deviate from reason or empirical experience.

4. John's Religion

In *A Choice of Gods*, John Whitney, the grandson of the journal's initiator who departs Earth to explore space, embodies a rationalist/empiricist approach to religious belief. Aligned with Clouser's assessment that reason serves as the primary epistemological method within the Pagan paradigm — particularly evident in the Ancient Greek tradition (Clouser, 2005, 49) — John endeavors to use reason and empirical knowledge to comprehend his experiences. However, his encounter with the Principle, an enigmatic entity at the universe's center, challenges the limits of rational explanation, compelling him to rely on mystical experience and alternative forms of "scripture" to substantiate his understanding.

John describes the Principle as "a creature or an entity. It is simply something. A mass of intelligence, perhaps" (Simak, 1977, 66). The repeated use of "perhaps"

underscores the ambiguity and ineffability of the Principle's true nature. Lacking empirical corroboration, John engages in speculative reasoning about its origin and essence, suggesting that the Principle could be an ancient civilization that "managed to survive and that its intelligence evolved into the Principle" (Simak, 1977, 67). He further hypothesizes that the Principle functions not as the universe's creator but as its organizer, positing that a steady-state universe provides the necessary temporal framework for such an evolution: "Before it came into being the universe may have been chaotic. The Principle may be the engineering force that put it all to right" (Simak, 1977, 68). In this construction, chaos and matter preexist the Principle, situating the entity as an emergent part of natural reality rather than a transcendent creator, thereby aligning John's belief with the Pagan framework where the cosmos or matter itself is the ultimate, non-dependent reality.

While John's rational and intellectual faculties are prominent, his experiences with the Principle transcend logical and empirical boundaries, illustrating the inherent religious basis of his theorizing. Simak writes that John "sensed, scented, become aware of from far off, it has the smell of evil" (Simak, 1977, 64), employing sensory and paradoxical language to convey encounters beyond conventional perception and articulation. The phrase "smell of evil" is particularly noteworthy, as it conveys an intuitive, almost mystical apprehension or moral judgment rather than a literal sensory experience, highlighting the limitations of reason and language in capturing profound, transcendent phenomena.

John acknowledges the supra-rational nature of his belief, admitting, "I've had time to think of it, and I put it all together... Not a shred of proof, but it's fastened in my mind and I can't shake it free" (Simak, 1977, 68). This conviction, formed without empirical evidence or direct divine interaction, exemplifies a form of faith that arises from personal, transformative experience. His attempts to rationalize this understanding as external influence prove inadequate, revealing that his belief is deeply rooted in mystical experience.

Moreover, John's parapsychic abilities — to travel through space — serve as a crucial complement to his rational inquiries, acting as a conduit to heightened spiritual awareness rather than detracting from his logical reasoning. Unlike Hezekiah's blind faith predicated on unexamined acceptance, John's belief system emerges from an integrative process that encompasses both analytical thought and profound personal experience. This interplay of epistemological methods underscores Simak's nuanced exploration of belief, illustrating its complexity and resisting simplistic binaries between faith and reason.

In lieu of traditional sacred texts, John turns to writings that function analogously to scripture by providing trusted insights supporting his religious beliefs. Foremost among these is the journal initiated by his grandfather and continued by his brother Jason. Despite the Whitney family's atheistic lineage, the journal becomes an unex-

pected source of spiritual guidance and validation in their engagement with the Principle. Though devoid of conventional scriptural authority, this personal record assumes a quasi-sacred status, informing and reinforcing their emergent Pagan belief system.

Ironically, the journal's original intent to objectively document the phenomenon known as "the Disappearance" inadvertently contributes to the construction of new myths centered around the Principle (Simak, 1977, 73–74). Grandfather Whitney's speculative reflections and accounts of developing psychic abilities coalesce into foundational tenets for their nascent faith as the chosen ones "left behind" (Simak, 1977, 47). This development underscores the inherent human propensity to derive meaning and construct belief systems even from ostensibly empirical and rational endeavors, revealing the limitations of pure reason when confronted with extraordinary experiences.

Simak's portrayal of John Whitney thus complicates the characterization of him as a pure rationalist. While John employs scientific theories such as evolution and the steady-state model to hypothesize about the Principle's origins, his ultimate belief transcends empirical substantiation, anchored instead in profound mystical experience and personal conviction. The journal serves not as empirical proof but as a foundational text that illustrates the creation of a new religion, even one grounded in Pagan beliefs. This highlights the complex and interdependent nature of the epistemological methods at play in John's spiritual journey, where reason, experience, and narrative intertwine to shape a belief system rooted in how he perceives the natural world.

5. Indigenous Religion

Simak presents Evening Star, the "Leech Lake" tribe, and their chief, Horace Red Cloud, as exemplars of Indigenous religion in *A Choice of Gods*. Martin contends that everyday life for pre-colonial Native Americans was imbued with deep religious significance (Martin, 2001, 7). While the Leech Lake tribe in the novel is not strictly Native American, they "represent the ideal of harmony with nature" (Ewald, 2006, 101). However, Simak suggests that the Indigenous characters in the novel have transcended the religiosity and ritualism of their ancestors, a claim that warrants critical examination.

Jason's observation that "only the robots have kept the idea of Christianity and religion alive" (Simak, 1977, 136) signifies a profound disillusionment with institutionalized religion. Jason finds solace in the more personal and fluid spirituality embraced by Horace Red Cloud's tribe, which he believes "probably makes for a better practice and more common sense than the empty formalizations that other religions had become" (Simak, 1977, 136). This statement underscores Simak's implicit critique of traditional religious structures and his preference for a spirituality that harmonizes the spiritual and natural worlds. Moreover, Jason's recognition of Red Cloud's people's "highly personal" religion (Simak, 1977, 136) highlights his appreciation for a spirituality rooted in individual experience and connection to nature. Nonetheless, the Leech Lake

tribe retains numerous Pagan taboos and customs, indicating that their religious beliefs have remained relatively unchanged.

Horace Red Cloud's reflexive cleansing of his hands with smoke following his encounter with the concept of "the Principle" exemplifies the persistence of ritualistic practices within the tribe's evolving beliefs. While Horace initially dismisses these actions as "senseless little gestures" rooted in his ancestors' misguided faith in magic (Simak, 1977, 96), his subconscious reenactment of this purification rite illustrates the deep-seated nature of religious traditions, even when their rationale is questioned. This behavior parallels Hezekiah's irrational "fanaticism."

Furthermore, the tribe's profound distrust of robots, which Horace characterizes as "unclean, something that is repulsively foul and alien" (Simak, 1977, 7), highlights the enduring influence of their religious beliefs. This aversion to technology, especially that associated with the colonizing "white man" (Simak, 1977, 7), reflects the tribe's rejection of the materialistic and mechanistic values linked to the vanished society. Their insistence on remaining "free from technology" (Simak, 1977, 7), exemplified by their swift removal of trespassing robots, demonstrates their view of nature's sacredness and the resilience of their religious convictions in shaping interactions in the post-Disappearance world.

The introduction of Evening Star, a young woman who maintains a personal connection with a guardian tree spirit she calls Grandfather Oak, further highlights the persistence and challenges to traditional beliefs within the tribe. Her reliance on a talismanic doll as a link to her spiritual guardian contradicts societal norms that exclude women from such connections, marking her as an outsider. Horace Red Cloud's observation of "a certain strangeness in her" (Simak, 1977, 28) underscores the tribe's perception of Evening Star's unconventional spirituality.

Simak's depiction of Evening Star's unique spiritual gifts challenges Horace's dismissal of religion as "delusion" and "senseless" rituals (Simak, 1977, 96–97). Despite his skepticism, Horace acknowledges that Evening Star possesses "a strange quiet strength" (Simak, 1977, 28), hinting at the potential power of spiritual beliefs that transcend societal expectations. Evening Star's exceptional spiritual abilities, particularly her capacity to communicate with animals and plants, set her apart from the tribe and allow her to form a deep connection with David Hunt, an outsider but a fellow seeker of spiritual enlightenment. Together, they embark on a profound mystical experience that redefines their understanding of humanity's potential and the interconnectedness of all beings.

Evening Star's and David's shared journey culminates in an extraordinary act of compassion, where they grant a soul to an initially repulsive alien creature known as the "can of worms" (Simak, 1977, 39). This creature, which repulses others for its strange, ugly appearance, becomes beautiful through their ministrations "with a holy light"

(Simak, 1977, 126). This act of empathy and transformation underscores the novel's exploration of the capacity to transcend ordinary perception.

This experience leaves an indelible mark on Evening Star, allowing her to momentarily transcend her limitations and glimpse the universe's profound beauty and incomprehensible meaning. This shared mystical insight marks a turning point in her relationship with David and serves as a beacon of hope for humanity's potential for spiritual growth, compassion, and evolution toward something akin to the Principle.

Like John, Evening Star possesses a voracious appetite for knowledge, seeking enlightenment through the consumption of books. Her extraordinary telepathic abilities grant her a unique privilege — she can converse with the very pages of books, engaging in profound dialogues with the minds of the authors. This remarkable ability transcends the boundaries between animate and inanimate objects, allowing her to perceive the authors' thoughts and meanings directly, rather than relying solely on the written word (Simak, 1977, 58). While Simak does not explicitly reveal the insights gained from these telepathic interactions, it is plausible to infer that Evening Star's spiritual growth, as evidenced by her ability to resolve conflicts with David, stems from these profound encounters with the vast repository of human knowledge within the Whitney family library.

The emphasis on the unifying effects of mystical experience in Evening Star's story might suggest a pantheistic form of religious belief. However, Evening Star is guided by the pursuit of knowledge about distinct entities, consistent with Paganism, rather than seeking to discover the illusion of distinctions or the oneness of being, as in pantheism. Although Evening Star does not explicitly claim that any natural element has a non-dependent status, i.e., divinity, her religion can be categorized as Pagan for several reasons: her search for knowledge reveals truths of reality rather than its illusory qualities; individuality is maintained in her mystical experiences, and nature and humans themselves are deified (York, 2005, 22).

The Leech Lake tribe in *A Choice of Gods* are among the most powerful characters in the novel. Although Simak describes their religion as evolving beyond the traditions of the past, they still adhere to many customs, taboos, and more that contradict this supposed new orthodoxy. While Simak suggests that Indigenous religion has become more individualized, the spiritual practices depicted remain communal, as evidenced by their adherence to traditional beliefs and the universal rejection of technology (Simak, 1977, 152). Simak may have intended to depict a new, polymorphic religion for the tribe, but it remains Pagan, communal, and formalized in nature.

6. Conclusion

In *A Choice of Gods*, Clifford D. Simak attempts to weave a complex tapestry of religious belief; however, Paganism emerges as the underlying framework across diverse characters and contexts. Through the epistemological exploration of reason, mystical experience, and scripture, Simak reveals how each character's spiritual journey, whether that of a robot-abbot, a rationalist explorer, or an Indigenous leader, ultimately converges on a Pagan understanding of the divine as immanent within the natural world. This novel challenges conventional distinctions between faith and reason, suggesting that the quest for truth, whether through technology, mysticism, or tradition, inevitably leads back to a reverence for the interconnectedness of all life. Simak's narrative invites readers to reconsider the boundaries of religious thought, proposing that the sacred is not confined to the transcendent but is instead rooted deeply in the material world, shaping human identity and our relationship with the cosmos. Simak utilizes this novel to interrogate concepts of epistemology and the unknown, revealing that within the very fabric of these inquiries lie implicit answers.

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