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GEORGE ZEBROWSKI

Heathen God

GEORGE ZEBROWSKI was born December 28, 1945, in Villach, Austria, of Polish parents. He grew up in England, Manhattan, the Bronx and Miami, and he is one of an extremely small group of authors who have achieved literary success in a second language. He attended Harpur College and the State University of New York at Binghamton, majoring in philosophy, and he brings his interest in this field to his writing-several of his science fiction stories utilize philosophical concepts.

He is a member of the World Future Society, Science Fiction Writers of America, and the SFWA Speakers' Bureau. He has reviewed books for Gray dadsly, Science Fiction Review and Riverside Quarterly ; has been a reader for Dell Books; has sold fiction to The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, If, Infinity and to several forthcoming collections of original stories. Currently he lectures in science fiction at SUNY-Binghamton, edits the SFWA Bulletin and writes. His two forthcoming novels are The Omega Point and Macrolife.

The story "Heathen God" was a 1973 Nebula Award finalist.
. . . every heathen deity has its place in the flow of existence.”

The isolation station and preserve for alien flora and fauna on Antares IV had only one prisoner, a three-foot-tall gnome like biped with skin like crested leather and eyes like great glass globes. His hair was silky white and reached down to his shoulders, and he usually went about the great natural park naked. He lived in a small white cell located in one of the huge. black like administration modules. There was a small bed in the cell, and a small observatory which led out to the park. A hundred feet away from the door there was a small pool, one of many scattered throughout the park. It reflected the deep-blue color of the sky.

The gnome was very old, but no one had yet determined quite how old. And there seemed to be no way to find out. The gnome himself had never volunteered any information about his past. In the one hundred years of his imprisonment he had never asked the caretaker for anything. It was nutured among the small staff of Earthmen and humanoids that the gnome was mad. Generally they avoided him. Sometimes they would watch his small figure standing under the deep blue sky, looking up at the giant disk of Antares hanging blood red on the horizon, just above the well pruned trees of the park, and they would wonder what he might be thinking.

The majority of Earthmen spread over twelve star systems did not even know of the gnome's existence, much less his importance. A few knew, but they were mostly scholarly and political figures, and a few theologians. The most important fact about the alien was that sometime in the remote past he had been responsible for the construction of the solar system and the emergence of intelligent life on Earth.

The secret had been well kept for over a, century.

In the one hundred and fourth year of the alien's captivity two men set out for Antares to visit him. The first man's motives were practical: the toppling of an old regime; the other man's goal was

to ask questions. The first man's political enemies had helped him undertake this journey, seeing that it would give them the chance to destroy him. The importance of gaining definitive information about the alien was in itself enough reason to send a mission, but combined with what they knew about the motives of the man they feared, this mission would provide for them the perfect occasion to resolve both matters at the same time. In any case, the second man would bring back anything of value that they might learn about the gnome.

Everything had been planned down to the last detail. The first ship carrying the two unexpecting men was almost ready to come out of hyperspace near Antares. Two hours behind it in the warp was a military vessel-a small troop ship. As the first vessel came out of nothingness into the brilliance of the great star, the commander of the small force ship opened his sealed orders.

As he came down the shuttle ramp with his two companions, Father Louis Chavez tried to mentally prepare himself for what he would find here. It was still difficult to believe what his superiors had told him about the alien who was a prisoner here. The morning air of Antares IV was fresh, and the immediate impression was one of stepping out into a warm botanical garden. At his left Sister Guinevere carried his small attache-case. On his right walked Benedict Compton, linguist, cultural anthropologist, and as everyone took for granted, eventual candidate for first secretary of Earth's Northern Hemisphere. Compton was potentially a religious man, but the kind who always demanded an advance guarantee before committing himself to anything. Chavez felt suspicious of him; in fact he felt wary about this entire visit to Antares IV.

On Earth the religio-philosophic system was a blend of evolutionary Chauvinism and Christianity, an imposing intellectual structure that had been dominant for some two hundred years now. The political structure leaned to legitimacy and continuing policies on it. Compton, from what he had learned, had frightened
some high authorities with the claim that the gnome creature here on Antares IV was a potential threat to the beliefs of mankind. This, combined with what was already known about the alien's past, was seemingly enough to send this fact-finding mission. Only a few men knew about it, and Chavez remembered the fear he had sensed in them when he had been briefed. There greatest fear was that somehow the gnome's history would become public knowledge. Compton, despite his motives, had found a few more political friends. But Chavez suspected that Compton wanted power not for himself, but to do something about the quality of life on Earth. He was sure the man was sincere. How little of the thought in our official faith filters out into actual policy, Chavez thought. And what would the government do if an unorganized Earth-a heresy in the old sense-were to result from this meeting between Compton and the alien? Then he remembered how Compton had nodded this whole visit. He wondered just how far a man like Compton would go to have his way in the world.

Antares was huge on-for horizon, a massive red disk against a deep blue sky. A slight breeze waired the trees around the landing square. The pathway which started at the north corner led to three block like administration buildings set on a neat lawn and surrounded by flowering shrubs and fruit-bearing trees. The buildings were a bright white color. The walk was pleasant.

Rufus Kade, the caretaker, met them at the front entrance to the main building. He showed them into the comfortable reception room. He was a tall, thin humanoid, who had taken the administrative post because it gave him the opportunity to be near exotic plants. Some of the flora came from worlds as much as one hundred light years away from Antares. After the introductions were over, Kade took the party to the enclosed garden which had a pool in its center, and where the gnome spent most of his time.

"Do you ever talk with him, Mr. Kade?" Father Chavez asked. The caretaker shook his head. "No," he said. "And now I hope you will all excuse me, I have work to do." He left them at the entrance to the garden path.

Compton turned to Father Chavez and said, "You are lucky; you're the only representative of any church ever to get a chance to meet what might be the central deity of that church." He smiled. "But I feel sorry for you-for whatever he is, he will not be what you expect, and most certainly he will not be what you want him to be."

"Let's wait and see," Chavez said. "I'm not a credulous man."

"You know, Chavez," Compton said in a more serious mood, "they let me come here too-easily. What I mean is they took my word for the danger involved with little or no question."

"Should they have not taken your word? You are an important man. You sound as if you didn't quite tell them everything."

They walked into the garden. On either side of them the plants were luxurious, with huge green leaves and strange-coloured flowers. The air was filled with rich scents, and the earth gave the sensation of being very moist and loosely packed. They came into the open area surrounding the pool. Sister Guinevere stood between the two men as they looked at the scene. The water was still, and the disk of Antares was high enough now in the morning sky to be reflected in it.

The gnome stood on the far side, watching them as they approached, as if he expected them at any moment to break into some words of greeting. Father Chavez knew that they would appear as giants next to the small figure. It would be awkward standing before a member of a race a million years older than mankind and towering over him. It would be aesthetically banal, Chavez thought.

As they came to the other side of the pool Compton said, "Let me start the conversation, Father."

"If you wish," Chavez said. Why am I afraid, and what does it matter who starts the conversation, he thought.

Compton walked up to the standing gnome and sat down cross-legged in front of him. It was a diplomatic gesture. Father Chavez felt relieved and followed the example, motioning Sister Guinevere to do the same. They all looked at the small alien.
His eyes were deep-set and large. his hair was white, thin and reached down to his shoulders. He had held his hands behind his back when they had approached, but now they were together in front of him. His shoulders were narrow and his arms were thin. He wore a one=piece coverall with short sleeves.
Chavez hoped they would be able to talk to him easily. The gnome looked at each of them in turn. After a few minutes of silence it became obvious that he expected them to start the conversation.
"We have come to talk with you," Compton said. "We have come to learn about your past, because it concerns us. We want to know about your past, because it concerns us."
Slowly the gnome nodded his head, but he did not act with them. There was more silence. Compton gave Chavez a questioning look.
"Could you tell us who you are?" Chavez asked. The gnome moved his head sharply to look at him. It's almost as if I interrupted him at something, Chavez thought. There was a sad look on the face now, as if in that one moment he had understood everything-why they were here and the part he would have to play.
Chavez felt his stomach grow tense. He felt as if he were being carefully examined. Next to him Compton was playing with a blade of grass. Sister Guinevere sat with her hands folded in her lap. Briefly he recalled the facts he knew about the alien-facts which only a few Earthmen had been given access to over the last century. Facts which demanded that some sort of official attitude be taken.
The best-kept secret of the past century was the fact that this small creature had initiated the events which led to the emergence of intelligent life on Earth. In the far past he had harnessed his powers of imagination to a vast machine, which had been built for another purpose, and had used it to create most of the life on Earth. He had been caught at his experiments in cosmology, and exiled. Long before men had gone out to the stars he had been a

wanderer in the galaxy, but in recent years he had been handed over to Earth authorities to keep at this extraterrestrial preserve. Apparently his people still feared his southern. This was all they had ever revealed to the few Earthmen who took charge of the station.
It was conjectured that the gnome's race was highly realistoteric; the gnome was the only member of it that had ever been seen by Earthmen. The opinion was also held that his culture feared contact with other intelligent life, and especially with this illegitimate creation. Of the few who knew about the case, only one or two had ever expressed any disbelief. It was after all, Chavez thought, enough to make any man uneasy. It seemed solre to ignore the matter most of the time.
Since that one contact with Earth, the gnome's race had never come back for him and had never offered further explanation. A century ago they had simply left him to Earth orbit, in a small vessel of undoubtly superior workmanship. A recorded message gave all the information they had wanted to reveal. There home world had never been found, and the gnome had remained silent. Benedict Compton had set up this meeting, and Chavez had been briefed by his superiors and instructed to go along as an observer.
Chavez remembered how the information had at first shaken and then puzzled him. The tension in his stomach grew worse. He wondered about Compton's motives; but he had not dared to question them openly. On Earth many scientists prized the alien as the only contact with a truly advanced culture, and he knew that more than one young student would do anything to unlock the secrets that must surely exist in the brain-if the small being now standing in front of him. He felt sure that Compton was hoping for some such thing.
Suddenly the small figure took a step back from them. A small breeze waired his long white hair. the stopped and his small, gaudy body took on a strange stature; his face was grief-stricken and his low voice was sad. It wavered as he spoke to them. "I made you to love-each other, and through yourselves, me. I needed that love.
No one can know how much I needed it, but it had to be freely given, so I had to permit the possibility of it being withheld. There was no other way, and there still is not.

Chavez looked at Compton for a reaction. The big man sat very still. Sister Guinevere was looking down at the grass in front of her feet. Chavez felt a stirring of fear and panic in his insides. It felt as if the alien was speaking only to him-as if he could relieve the thirst that lived behind those deep-set eyes in that small head.

He felt the other's need. he felt the deprivation that was visible on that face, and he felt that at any moment he would feel the awesome rage that would spill out onto them. This then, he thought, is the madness that his race had spoken about- All the power had been stripped from this being, and now he is a beggar

Instead of rage there was sadness. It was oppressive- It hung in the air around them. What was Compton trying to uncover here? How could all this benefit anyone? Chavez noticed that his left hand was shaking, and he gripped it with the other hand.

The gnome raised his eight hand and spoke again. Dear God, help me, Chavez prayed. Help me to see this clearly. "I fled from the free mind which my race was working toward," the gnome said in a louder voice than before. "They have achieved it. They are one entity now. What you see in this dwarfed body are only the essentials of myself-the feelings mostly. They wait for the day when the love in my children comes to fruition and they will unite, than recreating my former self which is now in them. Then I will leave my prison and return to them to become the completion of myself. This body will die then. My longing for that time is without limit, and I will make another century like this one and we-it through. Each time I will be the completion of a species and its moving spirit. And again they will give birth to me. Without this I am nothing."

There was a loud thunderclap overhead, the unmistakable sound of a shuttle coming through the atmosphere. But it was too early for the starship shuttle to be coming back for them, Chavez thought. Compton jumped up and turned to look toward the ad

ministration buildings. Chavez noticed that the gnome was looking at him. Do your people worship a supreme being? Chavez thought the question. Do they have the idea of such a being? Surely you know the meaning of .such a being.

I don't know any such thing, the thought spoke clearly in his head. Do you know him?

"It's a shuttle craft," Compton said. "Someone's coming to join us."

Chavez got to his feet and went over to Compton. Sister Guinevere struggled to her feet and joined them. "What is it?" she asked.

"I-I don't know- who it could be," Compton said. Chavez noticed the lack of confidence in the other's voice. Behind them the gnome stood perfectly still, unaffected by the interruption.

"They've landed by now," Compton said. "It could only be one thing. Father they've found out my plans for the gnome." Compton came up to him and spoke in a low voice. "Father, this is the only way to get a change on Earth-yes, it's what you think, a coup, with me as its head, but the cause is just. Join me now, Father!"

Then it's true, Chavez thought. He's planning to bypass the lawful candidacy. Then why did they let him come here?

There was a rumbling sound in the trees and shrubs around-the pool area. Suddenly they were surrounded by armed men. Twenty figures in full battle gear had stepped out from the trees and garden shrubs. They stood perfectly still, waiting.

Antares was directly overhead now, a dark-red circle of light covering twenty percent of the blue-dome that was the sky. Noontime.

Compton's voice shook as he shouted, "What is this? Who the devil are you?"

A tall man immediately on the other side of the pool from them appeared to be the commanding officer. He wore no gear and there were no weapons in his hands. Instead he held a small piece of paper which he had just taken out of a sealed-envelope.

"Stand away, Father, and you too, Sister!" the officer shouted. "This does not concern you." Then he looked down at the paper
"Benedict Compton, you are hereby arrested for treasonous conspiracy against the government of the Northern Hemisphere on Earth by unlawful means, and you have been tried and convicted by the high court of North America for this crime. The crime involves the use of an alien being as your cocoorperator to initiate a religious controversy through a personally financed campaign which would result in your becoming the leader of a subversive cult, whose aim would be to seize power through a carefully prepared ruse. You and your co-conspirator are being eliminated because you are both enemies of the state." The officer folded the paper and put it back in its envelope and placed it in his tunic.
Chavez noticed that Sister Guinevere was at his side, and he realized that she was afraid. Compton turned to Chavez.
"Father, protect the gnome, whatever he is. Use what authority you have. They won't touch you."
"The execution order is signed by Secretary McDiarmiteself!" the tall officer shouted.
Chavez was silent.
"Father, please!" Compton pleaded. "You can't let this happen." Chavez heard the words, but he was numb with surprise. The words had transformed him so effectively as any spore. He couldn't move, he couldn't think. Sister Guinevere held his arm.
Suddenly Compton was moving toward the gnome.
"Stop!"
The lasers reached out like tongues.
The little figure fell. And the thought went out from him in one last effort, reaching light-years into space. I loved you. You did not love me, or such other. They all heard the thought, and it stopped them momentarily. Compton was still standing, but his right arm was gone, and he was bleeding noisily onto the grass.
Again the lasers lashed out. Compton fell on his back, a few yards from the gnome. Sister Guinevere fell to the grass on her knees, sobbing. She began to wail. The soldiers began to retreat

back to their shuttle craft. Father Chavez sat down on the ground, he didn't know what to do, he looked at the two bodies. There was smoke coming from Compton's clothing. The gnome's hair was aflame.
The tall officer now stood alone on the other side of the pool Chavez knew that his orders had probably been sealed, and he only now felt their full force. After a few moments the tall officer turned and went after his men.
The alien knew this would happen, Chavez thought. He knew, and that was why he told us everything.

When the great disk of Antares was forty-five degrees above the horizon, Rufus Kade came out to the.a. He put the two bodies in plastic specimen bags. Sister Guinevere was calm now and was holding Father Chavez's hand. They both stood up when Kade was finished with the bodies.
"They had an official pass from way up," Kade said. "I even checked back on it."
He walked slowly with them to the administration building. The shuttle to the starship was ready.

Thirty hours out from Antares, Father Chavez sat alone in his small cabin looking at the small monitor which showed him where he had been. Soon now the brilliance of the stars would be replaced by the dull emptiness of hyperspace. Antares was a small red disk on the screen.
Momentarily Chavez resented the fact that he had been a creation to the gnome. In any case the alien had not been God. His future importance would be no greater than that of Christ-probably less. He had been only an architect, a mere shaper of materials which had existed long before even his great race had come into being. But still-was he not closer to God than any man had ever been? Or would he?
The conspiritors for which the gnome had made mean wound never take place now. The point of mankind's existence as he had
made it was gone. And the alien had not known God. If there was such a being, a greatest possible being, he now seemed hopelessly remote . . .

O Lord, I pray for a sign! Chavez thought.

But he heard only his thoughts and nothing from the being who would surely have answered in a case like this. And he had stood by while they killed the gnome there in the garden by the poolside, on that planet circling the red star whose diameter was greater than the orbit of Mars. Despite all his reasoning now, Chavez knew that he had stood back while they killed that part of the small creature which had loved humanity.

But what had he said? The sort of the gnome's being was humanity, and it still existed, except that now it would never be reunited with him. "To not fear." the Holy. Antony had said three thousand years ago, "this goodness as a thing impossible, not its pursuit as something alien, set a great way off. it hangeth on our own advisement. For the sake of the Greek meaning men go overseas. . . but the city of God is everywhere . . . the kingdom of God is within. The goodness that is in us only asks the human mind." What we can do for ourselves, Chavez thought, that's all that is ours now: goals.

He took a deep breath as the starship slipped into the nothingness of hyperspace. He felt the burden of the political power which he now carried as a witness to the alien's murder, and he knew that Compton's life had not been for nothing. He would have to hide his intentions carefully, but he knew what he would have to do.

In time, he hoped anew, we may still give birth to the resemblance of godhood that lives on in mankind, on that small world which circles a yellow sun.