

Film Review

DUNE: PART TWO

(Denis Villeneuve, US 2024)

Over the last 50 years, multiple attempts have been made to adapt Frank Herbert's epic science-fiction novel *Dune* (1965), some more successful than others. The list includes comics, video games, and television series. Particularly notable are David Lynch's film adaptation in 1984¹ and Alejandro Jodorowsky's failed film adaptation in the 1970s. In 2019, filming started for the newest endeavour to bring *Dune* to the silver screen, directed by Denis Villeneuve and starring Timothée Chalamet as Paul Atreides. *DUNE: PART 1*, released in 2021, quickly proved a success. It generated new interest in the *Dune* books, and a sequel was soon announced. This review looks at *DUNE: PART TWO* (Denis Villeneuve, US 2024) from a study of religion perspective, exploring where we find religion in the film and how religion is visualized, implied, and reproduced.

The Legacy and Adaptation of *Dune*

The development of the original books, Frank Herbert's interest in ecology and his work in journalism, and the convoluted myths surrounding the adaptations (even Lynch's *DUNE* is simultaneously a failure and a cult hit) have been told before and need no repetition. But Villeneuve's adaptation certainly inherits a difficult legacy. The book *Dune* was long seen as unadaptable. The success of *DUNE: PART 1* only raised expectations for *DUNE: PART TWO*. The core of the *Dune* franchise lies in Herbert's original trilogy, of which Lynch's film attempted to adapt the first book, *Dune*, into a feature-length film. *DUNE: PART 1* uses around a third of the first book, and *DUNE: PART TWO* finishes it.

1 *DUNE* (David Lynch, US 1984).

DUNE: PART TWO picks up at the end of the first film: Paul and Jessica, fleeing from the Harkonnen into the desert of Dune, are taken by a group of Fremen to Sietch Tabr. Jessica will only be accepted by the Fremen if she takes the place of their dying Reverend Mother by drinking the poisonous Water of Life. As a Bene Gesserit, Jessica is able to survive the ritual, but her unborn daughter is changed as well: her mind and genetic memory awaken and she communicates with her mother telepathically throughout the film. While Paul immerses himself in Fremen culture and fights alongside them, Stilgar and other Fremen become convinced he is the prophesied Lisan al Gaib. This is a cause of conflict between Paul and his love interest Chani (Zendaya), who acts as a guide to Fremen culture for Paul but does not believe in the prophecy. Jessica, fully aware of the hand the Bene Gesserit have in spreading the prophecy, plans to use it to consolidate Paul's leadership. In the end, seeing no alternative Paul submits to this role, despite the destruction that he knows will result. He triumphs over the Emperor and kills the Baron Harkonnen, but the Great Houses do not accept him as the new Emperor and Paul proclaims the Holy War.

The basic construction and deconstruction of the Hero's Journey narrative of *Dune* naturally appears in any adaptation, as do religion, the issue of prophecy, and questions surrounding free will. As such, *Dune* has always been interesting in the study of religion, specifically the overlap between science fiction and religion. We can explore Villeneuve's *DUNE* with these issues in mind, and not only in terms of where it differs from other adaptations, but also in relation to how Villeneuve uses light, music, dialogue, objects, and language to frame religion in a specific way.

Prophecy, Predestination, and Free Will

Questions of prophecy and free will permeate Herbert's *Dune*. It also deconstructs the Hero's narrative after the first book. Ever since *Dune* was published, there has been academic and theological interest in Paul as a messianic figure, in its account of prophecy, and in its various religious components. These topics remain relevant. *Dunes'* political theology, the God Emperor, and Eric Voegelin's theory of Political Religion still come together in discussions decades later.²

2 Voegelin 1938. Also to be mentioned here are Hauser 1985; Wakefield 2022.

The multiple pressures of religion, politics, and the personal are present in Villeneuve's adaptation as well. Both prophecies, Lisan al Gaib and Kwisatz Haderach, directly influence Paul through his ability to use them in his favour for revenge on the Harkonnen and for the preservation of his life among the Fremen. When both threaten his new identity as a Fremen and as a Fedaykin, his individuality and free will have to be subsumed under the role of the Messiah. In one key scene leading up to the climax, Paul presents himself before the Fremen war council and declares himself the Lisan al Gaib and, in the same breath, the heir of the Atreides dukedom (referencing his father's signet ring). As a result of the powerplay that involves Paul taking the Padishah Emperor's daughter as his wife, he gives up being one Fedaykin among others, which may indirectly lead to Chani having to take the status of a concubine. Paul's personal foresight or prescience, be it supernatural or transhuman, leads him to these roles; he accepts the possibility of a martyr's death in exchange for the possibility of power. And as Princess Irulan (Florence Pugh) comments, martyrdom and repression make religion flourish.

Religion finds a place in the DUNE films as a catalyst, a collective conviction, and an aesthetic, but rarely as everyday faith.

Visual Language and Aesthetics

Villeneuve's distinctive visual language overwhelms the viewer with vast landscapes. Vastness can convey a feeling of transcendence, romantic as well as horrific. The vastness of the Atreides' home planet's oceans, the desert sun over Arrakis, and the stark white and black of Giedi Prime seem to characterize each planet's inhabitants. The otherness certainly helps convince the viewer of the existence of a world with an all-encompassing struggle of whole planets, multi-generational blood feuds, eons of eugenics, and breeding programs seeking to transcend human capabilities. Giant worms and their psychedelic by-product, telepathy, and genetic memories are real parts of this world.

But Villeneuve also draws on works by the Swiss artist HR Giger and many science-fiction elements that were themselves a creative by-product of Alejandro Jodorowsky's failed adaptation in the 1970s.³

3 JODOROWSKY'S DUNE (Frank Pavich, FR/US 2013).

A specific religious aesthetic can be analysed in the Bene Gesserit and in the Fremen's Reverend Mother. Glimpses into the worship of the sand worms are provided by the decorations seen during the funeral of Jamis (Babs Olusanmoku) and in the temple, where the Water of Life is produced by drowning juvenile sand worms.

It remains to be seen how in future sequels religious aesthetics will be used in the context of Paul as a ruling religious leader. And how might the visual language contrast Paul and the Fremen with the Harkonnen and thus create a possible comparison between religious tumult and fascist fanaticism?

Cultural Appropriation and Representation

Any discussion of *Dune's* representation of religion includes Frank Herbert's engagement with Middle Eastern culture and Islam. Herbert's *Dune* sought to deconstruct the White Saviour narrative and presents the conflict around Spice in relation to international aggression and conflicts about oil.

Both of Villeneuve's *DUNE* films have been criticised for their incorporation of visuals from Muslim cultures.⁴ Representation tilts into orientalism without contextualization: visual shorthand risks become stereotyping. The film makes little space for everyday religious rituals, the ever-present coffee from the books, or explanation of how religions still exist in the universe of *Dune*. The Fremen's relation to real-world Islam remains superficial, evident only in their language and aesthetic.

Religion, Exploitation, and the Masses

The film supplements the source material with the idea that differing religious interpretations exist among the Fremen. Chani jokes about Stilgar (Javier Bardem) being from the south and thus more fervently religious. She herself is named after a part of the Fremen prophecy, which suggests their religious traditions are important throughout their society. Paul assimilates into the Fremen culture, is initiated through the Worm-ride, and takes on a new name. By contrast his mother, Jessica (Rebecca Ferguson), intentionally

4 Some examples include Durrani, 2021; Hadadi 2021; Venkatraman 2021; Wander 2022.

adapts to enter the power hierarchy as a Reverend Mother. The implication persists that she acts as a Bene Gesserit, utilising religious narratives and structures to ensure a position of power. The Bene Gesserit can seem to be a caste of experts or a religious order. In the source material, they are ambiguously located between religion, politics, and secret order, placed thus to allow for exploration of the boundary between religion and non-religious reflections on transcendence, control, and transhumanism. In Villeneuve's film and in the books, religion is evident as an element of the Bene Gesserit when Jessica takes on the role of Reverend Mother for the Fremen, continuing the *Missionaria Protectiva* in her own interests.

The films, like the books, are interested in religion as a social fact (*fait social*), as a political tool of manipulation and a way to mobilise the masses. However, they also explore prescience and prophecy, which concern the theological, rather than sociological, character of religion.

We might also wonder about the relative absence of religion, seen only in the Fremen and their fanatical belief in Paul as *Lisan al Gaib*. Is Paul's first Worm-ride a religious ritual or a secular coming of age transition? What is the function of the Worm-ride, and since the Worm is sacred to the Fremen, is its visual realisation "religious"?

Where Jessica's role promotes a religious narrative among the Fremen, Chani stands for the rejection of a religious interpretation of the events. But even then, Chani plays an integral part in the fulfilment of the prophecy when she awakens Paul from his pseudo-death by the Water of Life.

The *Dune* books and movies invite a number of approaches to their possibly religious content, for they succeed on many levels. I left the movie theatre well pleased with the overall aesthetics, the visual language, and the staging of the landscapes and architecture. While the second part is not uniquely innovative, in some ways it is self-contained and can be understood on its own within the new *Dune* franchise. The opening scene invites the viewer into the story: it contains limited dialogue but makes an immediate impression with its orange landscape and the starkly contrasting black figures of the Harkonnen, hinting at a fundamental antagonism between Harkonnen, Atreides, and the planet Arrakis. The narrative as it unwinds proves immersive and well-paced; the length of the film goes by surprisingly unnoticed. Austin Butler's Feyd Rautha deserves special mention: while the character has little screen time, he still leaves his mark and is an important foil for Paul.

DUNE: PART TWO ends with the characters and their world on the brink of upheaval and at the start of a Holy War. Many narrative threads are ready to be picked up by the third film. The role of religion will surely only deepen, linked to new themes as the wider world opens up. The prospect of a failed utopia and additional political players will certainly draw an audience to the next *Dune* film. How it depicts and uses religion will surely be interesting to watch, and just as intriguing to analyse.

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