

REFLECTIONS

Robert Silverberg

JOHN FRUM, HE COME

A pernicious scam—a hoax that might be said to have taken on some aspects of a Messianic cult—spread through the United States during the scorching summer of 2012, when thousands of people convinced themselves that the American government was willing to pay up to one thousand dollars toward their utility bills. East and west, north and south, the joyous news spread across the Internet and by automated telephone calls, by text messages, and even by the quaint old process of stuffing printed fliers into your mailbox. People made haste to tell their friends about it through Facebook and the other social media.

It all sounded very plausible, too. Our benevolent government, deeply concerned about the utility-payment crisis at a time of such economic difficulty across the land, had supposedly set aside a huge fund to help out with the bills. All you had to do, upon learning of this wondrous new benefit, was to supply a little personal information: your Social Security number, your credit-card number, your checking-account number. You would then be given a bank routing number and checking-account number to use when paying your next utility bill. The fake number would be rejected by the bank within a day or two, but meanwhile the scammers would be busy cleaning out your bank account or going to town with your credit card.

The scheme worked particularly well in New Jersey, where ten thousand customers of Public Service Electric & Gas fell for it, despite warnings from the utility and various government agencies. The trouble was that nobody seems to pay much attention to such warnings, whereas the happy reports of the bonanza spread rapidly through all the electronic media that make communication

of misinformation such an easy matter in the modern world. People hear what they want to hear. A PSEG spokesman said that the victims thought it was “a legitimate federally sponsored program, and, of course, that can become confusing, because there are legitimate federally sponsored programs.”

It became confusing, all right. Two thousand customers of Entergy Corp. in Louisiana and Texas signed up for their government checks, as did fifteen hundred customers of Duke Energy in the Carolinas, and bunches of others in Wisconsin, Mississippi, Michigan, and Iowa. How many more were duped before the con men called off their campaign is uncertain, but the total damage probably was considerable.

In a country where, as the PSEG spokesman said, “there are legitimate federally sponsored programs,” and new ones have been proposed regularly as the financial crisis that began in 2008 deepened, it is reasonable to expect people bedeviled by debt on all sides to grasp at such straws without stopping to consider that the administrators of legitimate federal programs would very likely not need to have their checking-account numbers and surely would have no need for their credit-card numbers. Evidently there are no limits to contemporary gullibility, though. The whole episode summons to mind a somewhat similar adventure in optimism that spread through in the islands of the South Pacific in the early twentieth century and came to have the general name of the cargo-cult religion: the belief that a messiah from the heavens would come to the islanders, bringing them their share of the material wealth that European colonial settlers so obviously enjoyed.

The earliest of the cargo cults seems to

have arisen on New Guinea, where the myth of a culture-hero named Mansren originated as far back as 1857. It was said that Mansren, a mysterious figure who was creator of the islands and their peoples, had sailed off into the stars long ago, but now was due to return, bringing with him all the dead ancestors, and inaugurate an apocalyptic age of miracles. The black Papuan natives would turn white, the white European settlers would turn black, and ships would arrive to bring the people the fabulous goods that only the white people had previously had—knives, guns, lamps, clothes, bicycles, and ever so much more, the much-coveted “cargo” for which the islanders longed. After that, a golden age would begin for the islands, in which the whites would leave, old age, illness, and death would likewise disappear, there would be no further need for anyone to work, and the islanders would enjoy riches and good health to the end of time.

Since the Mansren myth had certain aspects that paralleled Christianity—it included the virgin birth of a miraculous child, engendered by Mansren by magical means—the Christian missionaries who came to New Guinea in the late nineteenth century chose not to make any very strenuous attempts to suppress it, thinking that belief in Mansren might provide an easy transition to belief in the Christian God. What it led to, though, was an expansion of belief in Mansren, or in similar mythical figures known by other names, who would, like Mansren, appear out of the sky bearing the rich gifts that were generally known as “cargo.”

Throughout the 1930s the cargo cult spread from island to island, updated now to specify delivery by airplane of such modern marvels as radios and telephones. One place where it became solidly rooted was the island group called Vanuatu, then known as the New Hebrides: when American troops landed there in the early years of World War II they found the natives hard at work building what they said were roads,

docks, and airfields in preparation for the arrival of the magical ships and planes that would bring the cargo treasures from America. The newly arrived troops did indeed come with immense quantities of cargo—the military supplies out of which they would build the bases they needed for the battle against Japan—and distributed small gifts to the natives of the island, and all this helped to reinforce the hope that the promised savior was on his way. It was on Tanna, one of the eighty islands making up the New Hebrides, that the cult messiah acquired the name of John Frum—perhaps because one of the GIs had introduced himself to them as “John from America.” Many of the incoming troops were black, which led to the belief that John Frum himself was a black man, and the slogan “John Frum, he come” spread through the land.

To hasten the coming of the cargo the islanders discarded their recently adopted western ways, thinking that they were offensive to the cargo gods. They gave up European dress, reverting to loincloths and body paint; they threw their money into the sea; and in their confidence that once the cargo had arrived all their needs would be provided for, they abandoned their farms and slaughtered their livestock. They erected mock radio antennae made of bamboo and rope to pick up announcements of the journey of the cargo-bearers to their island, and stockpiled great mounds of firewood to see them through the three promised days of darkness that would precede the millennial moment. They held great dance festivals at which they implored the cargo gods to come, erecting wooden altars to which they brought flowers and other offerings, and they spent hours staring out to sea or looking up into the sky, searching for the vessels that were to bring the miraculous gifts.

John Frum did not come. Now and then a false messiah would arise, claiming to be he, and the European colonial authorities would arrest him and trans-

port him to some other island. The chief impact of this was to intensify the development of these messianic cults throughout the region. Anthropologists have identified a host of such movements: the Taro Cult of New Guinea, the Tuka Cult of the Fiji Islands, the Vailala Madness of Papua, and many more. They still thrive today on some islands, for believers in messianic cults can be patient people. In the Vanuatu archipelago, February 15 is celebrated every year as John Frum Day, the day on which he will eventually arrive. There is ceremonial dancing, the altars are decorated, sacred relics of the wartime occupation such as military dog-tags and soldiers' helmets are brought forth and displayed. Some years ago Chief Isaac Wan Nikiu, then the leader of the John Frum Movement, was quoted as saying that John Frum was "our God, our Jesus," and would eventually return. By now the movement seems to have become political and cosmopolitan: its leader, as of December 2011, was Thitam Goiset, a woman of Vietnamese origin whose brother, Dinh Van Than, is a powerful local businessman.

I'm pretty sure that the cargo-cult phenomenon inspired more than one science fictional story, with the scene transferred to some lush, bejungled alien planet where the "natives" pray daily for the arrival of a spaceship bearing marvelous cargo for them. I even may have

written such a story myself. (So many stories, so long ago: I have some difficulty now in remembering all the work I did fifty-odd years back.) Certainly it would have been a logical theme for the pseudo-anthropological SF that was so popular in the 1950s.

It's easy, of course, to chuckle at the idea that the simple native folk of these islands may still be painting their faces, beating the tribal drums, and imploring mysterious gods to bring them television sets and smartphones aboard gleaming airplanes descending from the heavens. But we ought not to be too condescending here. What is the utility-bill scam of 2012 but the naïve belief that our benign government will reach out to suffering citizens and pay the cost of those unusual air-conditioning bills of that torrid summer? How many millions, or is it billions, of dollars do Americans ship every year to places like Nigeria and Kazakhstan and Mali in the naïve and never to be fulfilled hope that a cargo of money will come thundering into their bank accounts from some far-off benefactor? John Frum, he will not come. But variations on the cargo-cult dream have been with us since the earliest days of humanity, and, I suspect, they will still be acquiring followers when the sun is a mere dim red ball in the dark chilly sky of the end of days.