

INTRODUCTION

Religion and Science Fiction

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THIS BOOK EXPLORES THE intersection between two topics that until recently seemed to many to be light-years apart, but which in our time have come to interact and overlap frequently and prominently. The connection between religion and science fiction is becoming a regular subject for discussion not only among academics but in the popular press. As I write this introduction, I am truly impressed as I think back on the number of books and articles that have been published over the past two decades or so, relating to at least some aspect the intersection between religion and science fiction. Yet a survey of this literature will also give an indication of how *fragmented* treatments of this topic are along disciplinary lines. Religion and science fiction is a subject of interest within the fields of literature, film studies, history, philosophy, religious studies, theology, cultural studies, and probably many more. If there is something lacking in previous publications on this subject, it is an attempt to bridge the gap not merely between different *works* of science fiction, different *subgenres*, and different *themes and issues* raised in the stories in question, but *also different approaches to and angles on the subject itself*. The present volume intends to take a first step towards remedying this situation, by bringing together in a single volume not merely treatments of a range of books and films, illustrating a range of topics and themes, but also a range of *areas of expertise*, providing an opportunity for students, scholars and indeed anyone fascinated by the subject to get a sense of the many differ-

ent methodologies and perspectives from which one may approach it. If this volume takes you through territory both familiar and unfamiliar, it does so intentionally.

The story is often told, even though it is apocryphal, about Yuri Gagarin declaring that God does not exist, since he could not see him when looking out the window of his space capsule. For most of us today, at any rate, such a judgment seems trite—but perhaps that is only because of the extent to which human beings in general, and religious traditions in particular, have revised their view of the universe to incorporate scientific perspectives. Before the modern era, the heavens *were* the domain of religion, and stories about humans traveling there featured apocalyptic seers rather than astronauts. We need not look very far in order to encounter a point of intersection, where on the one hand science fiction takes on religious overtones, and where on the other hand religion takes on an aura of science fiction.

As an example of the former, some of the stories of contemporary UFO abductions (particularly those made popular on the TV series *The X-Files*) parallel the scenario set forth in ancient apocalyptic literature such as the Ethiopic Book of Enoch. For those unfamiliar with either storyline, both include interbreeding between humans and celestial beings, at least one person being taken up into the sky, a loner who warns that this human-celestial collaboration and hybridization program will end in disaster, beings from “up there” providing humans with advanced technology, and the list could go on.¹ And for an example of religion being expressed in a sci-fi manner, we do not need to turn to UFO cults or anything else that would be so obvious and yet so marginal. Books such as the *Left Behind* series have not inappropriately been categorized under the heading “science fiction.” Indeed, if one watches the *Left Behind* movie, one might easily expect Mulder and Scully to appear on the scene at some point to investigate these strange goings on, and in doing so to catch a glimpse of the worldwide conspiracy that lurks beneath the surface.

Both religion and science fiction tell stories that reflect on the place of human beings in the universe, good vs. evil, humanity’s future, and at times about the very nature of existence itself. But the parallels run much deeper than mere similarities of storyline. Science fiction scenarios often imagine the future of technology, and thus provide a wonderful starting

1. See further my “Religion, But Not As We Know It: Spirituality and Sci-Fi,” in *Religion as Entertainment*, ed. C. K. Robertson (New York: Lang, 2002), 153.

point for ethical discussions. Moreover, at a deeper level, at least some science fiction provides an opportunity not only for discussion of specific moral issues and technologies, but of the very nature of good and evil itself. The Star Wars saga, to look at one classic example, began with an episode that, when taken on its own, might easily have seemed to be simply a re-telling of a classic and rather superficial story. A boy leads an insignificant life, dreams of adventure, meets a wise wizard, goes on a quest, rescues a princess, and so on through familiar territory. However, in the second installment (Episode V), the person viewers still thought of as the hero of the story, Luke Skywalker, was shaken from this complacent and superficial viewpoint, and learns that overcoming evil involves great dedication and not simply a desire for adventure. Over the course of the final installment of the original trilogy, it is revealed to us that this is a story not just about a boy, but about a father and a son, and we are confronted with the idea that ultimately evil is overcome not simply by “killing the bad guys” but by redeeming fallen heroes. The fallen hero in question, Darth Vader, is introduced to us in greater detail in Episodes I–III, where we learn that he (rather than his son) is the real main character of the story as a whole. More than that, we see how in times of conflict even “the good guys” (in this case the Jedi) can lose the moral high ground, with disastrous consequences. Anakin had been struggling with a number of issues, and we see how Chancellor Palpatine enticed Anakin to the dark side by manipulating him in precisely his areas of weakness. We also see, however, how the blurring of right and wrong in the context of a time of war contributed to his fall, when the Jedi asked him to spy on the chancellor and so break the Jedi code, and when a member of the Jedi council member uttered words that had earlier been spoken by a Sith lord, claiming that their enemy was “too dangerous to be kept alive” and should thus be killed on the spot rather than made to stand trial. The persistent contemporary relevance of these issues is obvious, and the depth of insight and distinctive perspective that these particular films offer is not to be overlooked.²

Science fiction also provides opportunities for tracing cultural trends. Although the setting of the stories is the future, like all fiction, sci-fi reflects and comments on the time in which it is produced. One well-known example is the development of *Star Trek* from the original series through its subsequent spin-offs. The original series adopted the

2. See *ibid.*, 165–68.

view typical of “modernity,” with the enlightened, sophisticated and apparently religion-free crew of the Enterprise encountering either similarly advanced cultures, or primitive ones that were still enslaved by religion/superstition. This is not to say that there could not be “gods” and the *apparently* supernatural: one needs to think only of Apollo from the episode “Who Mourns for Adonais?” or Q from *The Next Generation*. But in the end, for anything apparently supernatural, a reasonable, scientific, natural explanation is assumed to exist. However, as one moves into subsequent series such as Deep Space Nine, the cultural shift that has taken place in our time, from a modern to a postmodern perspective, is reflected. On the space station Deep Space Nine, every race has its own culture, and usually a religious perspective, and the human characters are invited to try them out. Perhaps most significantly, however, is the fact that no attempt is made to provide a scientific explanation for some of the apparently supernatural happenings—here the possibility that science may not have all the answers is seriously entertained. And so when one finally reaches the last series, *Enterprise*, Capt. Archer’s claim to be open minded sounds far less impressive than Dr. Phlox’s readiness to dive in and participate in other cultures, their beliefs and their ceremonies. *Star Trek* has from its very beginning engaged in cultural commentary, and it is not surprising to find the cultural shifts of recent decades depicted in its portrayals of the future.³

Over the course of the chapters of this book, the reader is invited to explore some of the many diverse points of intersection between religion and science fiction. This book is intended to be useful as an introduction to academic perspectives on this subject, suitable as a textbook, but of interest and accessible to any reader, even those who may not have read or seen all of the novels, stories, movies, or series mentioned. For that reason, each chapter seeks to engage and explore a major *theme* related to religion and science fiction. Although a chapter may focus on particular books or movies that a reader has not seen, each author attempts to use specific stories to illustrate more general *topics* of interest and *approaches* to the broader subject.

3. See *ibid.*, 154–59, as well as more recently Michael A. Burstein, “We Find the One Quite Adequate: Religious Attitudes in *Star Trek*,” in David Gerrold and Robert J. Sawyer, eds., *Boarding the Enterprise: Transporters, Tribbles, and the Vulcan Death Grip in Gene Roddenberry’s “Star Trek”* (Smart Pop Series; Dallas: BenBella, 2006), 87–99.

Exploring dark, postmodern depictions of postapocalyptic futures, Janca-Aji finds within the complex intertextual play of postmodern sci-fi symbols of transcendence that lead to further explorations in the realms of chaos theory, panentheism and Gaia. This journey leads us to what Janca-Aji refers to as “the natural theology of children: a view of the world and nature as alive, magical, and with limitless potentiality.” The female saviors of two French sci-fi films and *Alien Resurrection* are contrasted with the male-centered outlook of the movie *Left Behind*. Yet ultimately, it is suggested, the female-centered theological horizon of the films explored in this chapter has something positive to offer to Christianity, and is not simply antagonistic to it.

Continuing into the realm between the traditional novel and the graphic novel, Robertson’s chapter introduces the importance of *myth*. Science fiction has, from its beginnings with a “modern Prometheus” to its recent big-screen epics inspired by the work of Joseph Campbell, treated and reenvisioned for new generations the key themes, characters and stories of classic mythology. Popular piety has always incorporated stories of super-human heroes, and a key moment in the blending of this traditional aspect of human religiosity with the science fiction genre is traced by Robertson in the surprising appearance of new mythmakers and new myths in small books “that only cost a dime.” While comic books and the stories they tell may be scorned by defenders of “real literature,” their expressions of and influence upon the worldview of the vast majority of human beings is no less worthy of serious investigation than those beliefs that scientists or theologians may regard with dismay and frustration, yet which a great many people nonetheless adhere to with deep devotion.

Robertson’s chapter hints at the ways in which social relationships and organizations embody fandom in the real world, in ways that at times parallel religious modes of expression. Lozada’s chapter brings social-scientific expertise to bear on the subject of how literature and film intersect with the lives of reader and allow for the exploration in a contemporary context of perennial human questions, focusing on the particular situation in today’s China. If Janca-Aji’s chapter explores the limits of the post-modern, Lozada’s shows how the shock of the modern continues to be felt in parts of our world as an ongoing formative influence right up to the present day, as the classic modern view of science prevails (and is promoted) in a postsocialist context. In the process, Robertson’s analysis of the mythological element in comic books finds its parallel in the mythologi-

cal antecedents which have been identified for Chinese sci-fi. This chapter also explores the theme of nationalism in Chinese sci-fi, and compares it to the postnational “transgalactism” of Western science fiction.

The chapter by MacWilliams takes us back to the very roots of the modern science fiction novel. In addition to their pivotal role in giving birth to the genre as a whole, *Frankenstein* and *The Island of Dr. Moreau* gave rise to that subgenre of science fiction fixated on the disasters that may result when scientists “play God.” Yet the actual novel *Frankenstein* is much more complex and nuanced than many of the comparatively simplistic treatments found in later literature and film—and even in movies based on the novel *Frankenstein* itself. When it comes to scientists playing God, does practice make perfect?

As the chapter before it began moving us into the realm of ethics (another major theme explored in science fiction), Danna’s chapter seeks to penetrate deeper still, focusing not on the individual ethical issues raised by particular future technologies, but on *the nature of good and evil itself*. These questions are explored in connection with one of the most famous science fiction TV series of all time, and a somewhat less well known British series from the same time period, both of which were given a contemporary “reboot” in 2009. Star Trek’s transporter provided more than one opportunity to split a person along moral lines, or switch the “same” individual between parallel universes, and in so doing raise the question of the very nature of human beings and our morality. But it is not enough to ask about the nature of evil—it is also necessary to reflect on appropriate ways to address it, to deal with it. Mirror opposites in science fiction stories (which also featured prominently in the TV show *Lost*) provide a mirror that allows viewers to see themselves and reflect on these questions more clearly. Parallels and symbolism from Christian theology are prominent in this discussion, as are questions about free will, whether evil is primarily systemic or personal, and the use of violence in combating evil and/or seeking freedom.

The first part of my own chapter focuses on the ethical issues which will be raised if we are ever successful in creating a full-fledged artificial intelligence. We understand so little about the workings of the human mind, that any attempt to determine whether a machine has a similar subjective experience of self-awareness may be doomed from the outset. Nevertheless, we will not be able to forestall addressing *legal* issues regarding such technology until we have solved the relevant philosophical

mysteries. Perhaps our relationship with these future creations of ours (and whether they turn around and enslave us, their creators) will depend less on our programming abilities, and more on our *parenting skills*. The second part of the chapter reverses the direction of consideration, and asks what artificial intelligences might make of some of our own human religious traditions.

Pepetone's chapter represents the perspective least commonly included in volumes on religion and science fiction, which most frequently focus on matters of philosophy, theology and ethics. Yet can there be any treatment of science fiction in film and television that does not enter the realm of the *fine arts* and the *aesthetic*? Not only that, but it is hard to imagine the epic story of Star Wars told without John Williams's incredible score, and the same could be said for many other science fiction films. Certainly one can tell the stories on their own, but the form in which they have made their monumental impact on human life and society is not as mere words, but as words, music, and images combined in a multifaceted sensory experience. Music and religion have been intertwined over the course of human history, and Pepetone explores the possibility that this may be because both give expression to archetypes deeply rooted in the human psyche. In dialogue with not only Madeleine L'Engle (whose personal faith is well known) but also Pythagoras, Origen, Bach, and many others, Pepetone engages in a reflection "on the relationship between religious truth and artistic truth"—a question at the very heart of the intersection between religion and science fiction, approached from a perspective all too infrequently included in the conversation.

The final chapter is deliberately placed last, since in it Blythe offers not simply insights into a particular film or topic, but guidelines for "detecting embedded theology in science fiction films," including at the end of her chapter a series of questions one can ask to facilitate this process. While for some readers this volume may simply be a compilation of writings by individuals with various areas of expertise relevant to the subject matter, for others it will be a starting point for *personal* reflection by readers attempting to integrate theory and practice, the intellectual and the spiritual, the fictional and the religious, life in the present and speculation about the future. Blythe's concluding chapter provides an example of that, but goes further, providing a helpful method for others who want to join in the same exploration.

Our aim in this book is to provide a broad treatment of, and diverse perspectives on, the topic of religion and science fiction. We write not only as scholars of religion and popular culture, but out of research and teaching interests ranging across a wide array of fields: history, literature, biblical studies, religious studies, theology, philosophy, anthropology, and music, among others. The intersection of religion and science fiction is a genuinely interdisciplinary field, with the range of approaches crossing the boundaries not merely between the humanities and the social sciences, for instance, but also between the liberal arts and the fine arts. In this volume, the aim has been to be *representative* rather than *comprehensive*, touching on a number of the major themes and perspectives in a broad historical and global context, and in the process discussing works that have already become classics, as well as ones whose long-term status is yet to be determined. Reading and writing the chapters of this book, and putting it together in this volume, has been a fun and fascinating adventure. I hope that you the reader will find your own experience every bit as enjoyable, stimulating, and thought provoking.

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