EQUIPPING CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP in an AGE of SCIENCE

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A LECTURE ON *THE BLAZING WORLD*

Isadora Monteiro, University of Lisbon

In my presentation, I will focus on Margaret Cavendish's *Description of a New World, Called The Blazing-World* (1666). This text is rich with philosophical, scientific, political, and religious discussions, created by a woman who, because she felt she did not have a place in this world, decided to create her own fantasy world. In this world, she initially positions herself as the leader of a women's congregation that did not exist before her arrival. By the end of the book, this congregation has dissolved in the face of the moral and political conviction that the world should be maintained as it was before: with one sovereign, one religion – one perspective. As such, the text serves as a space in which the role of women in religion in the early modern world could be explored. For the modern audience, and despite Cavendish's own conclusion, it also raises questions about respect for a diversity of beings and beliefs, as well as the ongoing debates about the role of different categories of being within different religious congregations, groups and institutions.

'WE ARE MEAT, WE ARE POTENTIAL CARCASSES': FRANCIS BACON'S *ALIEN*

Dr Andrew M. Butler, Canterbury Christ Church University

H. R. Giger was inspired in his design of the titular alien in Ridley Scott's 1979 film by Francis Bacon's *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944). In this painting, the Irish-born Protestant artist omits the cross itself and thus any depiction of Christ. Bacon places grotesque figures at the foot of the crucifixion, rather than the more conventional St John, the Virgin Mary, and Mary Magdalene, identifying his depictions with the Eumenides or Furies, female agents of vengeance. I intend to take

Bacon's vision of suffering, despair and horror, possibly without resurrection and salvation, to interpret *Alien*. It depicts an imagined future where there may be damnation but no salvation, giving its audiences the chance to think through the nature of evil and what might drive people in a world without faith. Here science fiction allows us to reconsider how the world works by giving us a very different perspective on our perceptions.

MAKING PEACE WITH THE FUTURE: COSMIC NEED VERSUS COSMIC HORROR

Dr Paul March-Russell, Independent Scholar

Living in an era of climate change, we can often feel a sense of despair and powerlessness. We might even think of it as an overwhelming and pitiless threat, a 'cosmic horror' in the terms used by H.P. Lovecraft, and which has influenced some of the more pessimistic elements in contemporary philosophy. On the other hand, as Rowan Williams suggests, the existential danger of phenomena such as climate change also makes us aware of how interdependent we are, of what we require from one another, or what he terms 'cosmic need'. In other words, we need to balance these two concepts in order to find spiritual well-being within a seemingly dispassionate universe. Whereas Williams, writing in 1983, turns to Doris Lessing's *The Sirian Experiments* as an example of this cosmic need, I suggest that there are more recent science fictions that could be used – and this supplies a useful justification for why we should treat popular cultural texts as serious aids in thinking about spiritual connectedness.

SCIENCE FICTION AS ESCHATOLOGY

Philip Ball, Science Writer

The 1996 movie *Independence Day* promised to show us "the end of the world as we know it" – a phrase that can be read in more than one way, since by 1996 we were certainly familiar with the 'alien apocalypse' version of the world's end. That vision was first introduced in H. G. Wells' 1897 scientific romance *The War of the Worlds*, in which the transformation of cosy English suburbia into a blasted wasteland prefigured the desolation of Ypres, the London Blitz, and Hiroshima. Wells himself had prefigured such an 'end of days' scenario in his first novel *The Time Machine*, in which the Time Traveller witnesses the dying planet beneath a red-giant sun. Mary Shelley had also conjured up another apocalyptic fantasy 70 years previously in her novel *The Last Man*, where humankind was extinguished by a plague. This book has recently enjoyed renewed popularity during the lockdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic. From Camille Flammarion's *The Last Days of the World* (1893) to Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), science fiction has served up recurring images of eschatological revelation, offering the vicarious "fantasy of living through… the destruction of humanity itself", in Susan Sontag's words. This paper explores the thematic and moral relationships between the biblical descriptions of the end of days and the ways in which science fiction writers have depicted these events.

SUZUME AS THE REVIVAL OF *UTAGAKI:* THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCIENCE AND RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY ANIME

Tetsuro Tanojiri, Kyōtō Bunkyō University (remote participation)

This paper focuses on the revival of the ritual *Utagaki* and its status. This cultural and religious ritual was shared in ancient times in the Laurel Forest cultural belt, from southwest Japan, including Okinawa, to Taiwan, Yunnan and the southern edge of the Himalayas. After being almost lost, this ritual is being revived through narratives of science and religion found in anime work consumed by people, not only in East/Southeast/South Asia but also worldwide. Using the film *Suzume* (Makoto Shinkai, 2022) as its focus, this paper shows that *Utagaki* in this form has three characteristics. It is a social and cultural phenomenon linked to 'modern occultism', which portrays scientific and religious perspectives as interacting and juxtaposed with each other – as for example, in the interpretations of 'natural disasters' and their consequences where both gods and people share the hope and struggle for disaster prevention and recovery. *Utagaki* is understood as a form of communication between gods and people through song (as in antiquity), but (unlike antiquity) occurs not in traditional sacred spaces, but in cyberspace and through social networking sites.

'THAT IS HOW OUR RACE WAS BORN': ECHOES OF THE CREATION-EVOLUTION DEBATES IN THE MECHANICAL WORLD OF THE TRANSFORMERS

Dr Gavin Merrifield, Independent Scholar

The Transformers is an internationally popular science fiction franchise that was originally aimed at children. Over the last 40 years it has grown to maturity, as successive waves of children move into an adulthood where they remain invested in its developing characters and stories. During that same time many conversations around science and religion in the Church have veered away from helpful discussions into angry disagreements. These changing trends, topics and attitudes in the science-religion debates are mirrored in the stories of the Transformers, particularly those of the highly publicised and polarised debates around creation and evolution.

This shows how what we may regard as 'internal' debates and the way in which they are carried out within the Church can often impact far beyond the immediate walls of the Church. They can, often unintentionally, set the wider, public scene, both positively and negatively, for successive generations and how they view and engage with the Church and Christian theology. This should sound a warning bell for the Church to be more intentional about the public teaching of science related topics and the quality of the narratives and discussions with which we surround them.

THE PSYCHOHISTORY OF RELIGIOUS FUTURISM: WHAT SF TELLS US ABOUT THE FUTURE OF FAITH

Jim Clarke, Independent Scholar

Science Fiction (SF) is a speculative multimodal genre of art commonly associated with the near and far future, and concomitant speculative technologies, philosophies and social developments, such as space travel, advanced robotics, post-scarcity economics, utopianism and post- and transhumanism. This paper surveys what some leading SF texts have to tell us about the future of religion, and explain

the patterns and predictions which emerge from their speculations, in light of existing challenges to existing religious beliefs.

In his renowned *Foundation* series of SF novels, Isaac Asimov posited the development of a discipline called 'psychohistory', which he defined as "the quintessence of sociology; it was the science of human behaviour reduced to mathematical equations. Asimov's novels explore the clash between this determinist scientific approach to history unfolding and the random intervention of unpredictable individuals. Generally, SF is a somewhat atheistic genre, and it often shies away from making predictions about future faiths. However, when it is not proposing a scientistic alternative such as psychohistory, it does offer some interesting visions of how existing religions might survive, or not, in our near to far imagined futures.

SCIENCE FICTION BUILDS OUR RESILIENCE FOR THE FUTURE

Maaike E. Harmsen, VU Amsterdam

We should approach our religious, scientific and technological assumptions on our current environment and the future with healthy humility, as we have been often proved wrong in the past. In order to build mental resilience for all possible futures, we need to consider different scenarios – and science fiction is a good way of doing this. SF enables us to consider who we want to be, what we should value and how we should act in the future. It provides us with scenarios that we might think (or hope) are unthinkable or at least uncertain, and enables us to explore how we might react. This paper explores one science fiction story – Michel Faber's *The Book of Strange New* things, and asks how it portrays alien life, how we might speak of religion to aliens and whether we could or should become multiplanetary. SF can help us prepare for the future by encouraging humility of mind and action, emphasising the intrinsic value of humankind and reassuring us of divine love, even if we are not unique.

AI AND THE IDEA OF THE 'CREATION' OF RELIGION IN SF IMAGINARIES AND IDEOLOGIES

Professor Beth Singler, University of Zurich (remote participation)

> *Slowly, the robot obeyed. His photoelectric eyes focused reproachfully upon the Earthman.*
>
> *"There is no Master but the Master", he said, "and QT-1 is his prophet."*
>
> *"Huh?" Donovan became aware of twenty pairs of mechanical eyes fixed upon him and twenty stiff-timbered voices declaiming solemnly:*
>
> *"There is no Master but the Master and QT-1 is his prophet!"*
>
> *"I am afraid", put in Cutie himself at this point, "that my friends obey a higher one than you, now."*

This moment in the short story "Reason" by Isaac Asimov, first published in the April 1941 issue of *Astounding Science*, disturbs the human protagonists Donovan and Powell. Encountering a robot aboard a space station who is questioning its own origins, they get to witness the creation of a new robot religion that emerges from Cutie's own reasonings about the evidence of its photoelectric eyes. This paper will provide examples of various 'Robot Religions' from science fiction, and bring them

together with ethnographic research on responses to the question "Will AI create religion?", a question encountered in both online and offline conversations. Rather than seeking to definitively answer this question, this paper will instead examine what is being implied when it is asked. A typology of the kinds of responses we can observe, as well as the various representations of kinds of 'Robot Religions' in SF, will reveal important assumptions about religion and its future, the nature of intelligence, the roles of reason and evidence, and how similar, or not, AI will be to humans.

EXPLORING RELIGION THROUGH SCIENCE FICTION

Chris Beckett, Science Fiction Author

All readers of fiction are familiar with the paradox that, by making things up, we can sometimes get to otherwise inaccessible truths. By placing imaginary characters in imaginary situations, we engage in 'thought experiments' about human psychology. Science fiction is a particular kind of story-telling which not only invents characters but invents the setting as well: not just the material circumstances that apply there, but its belief system — or, more likely, belief systems plural.

In this talk I will discuss my experience of developing imaginary belief systems from the perspective of a practitioner (as opposed to a scholar) of this form of fiction. I will discuss, in particular, my *Eden* trilogy, which looks at a human society marooned on a sunless planet, and how its communities and belief systems develop and fragment over a span of several centuries. In examining the three main belief systems that have emerged by the end of the Eden trilogy, some key aspects of a workable belief system can be identified: (1) It has to relate in some way to people's actual experience. (2) It has to give comfort and speak to people's hopes and longings. (3) In practice, it has to accommodate the wishes of powerful groups in society, though it can only do this to a certain degree, since it must still meet the first two conditions to be viable. The paradox of fiction applies to belief systems too. A set of beliefs which contains propositions that are manifestly not literally true, can lead nevertheless to a truth which might otherwise be out of reach.

REINCARNATING, REMOVING AND RECOVERING SOULS IN *CARGO* (2020, INDIA) AND *COLD SOULS* (2009, USA)

Dr Amy Chambers, Manchester Metropolitan University

Contemporary science fiction media heavily draws upon religious symbolism and accepts concepts like the 'soul' (see also: self, mind, ghost, etc.). In SF the soul can be aligned with the sciences as a material organ in some instances but more often as an explanation of human exceptionalism in the face of rapid technological change. This paper explores two recent women-directed independent feature films – *Cold Souls* (2009, USA) and *Cargo* (2020, India) – that both acknowledge the soul as literal/material and consider the broader science fictional questions around what it is to be human. They offer distinctly Western and Eastern religious culture attitudes to human souls. *Cold Souls* aligns with a linear narrative of individual souls, experiences, and Judeo-Christian concepts. *Cargo* is aligned to Hindu traditions and a cyclical narrative of reincarnation working towards the union of the collective human soul (*Ātman*) with God (*Brahma*). Death is not the end for a soul in either Judeo-Christian or Hindu-Buddhist theology, but interventions from SF allow for discussion of what part of human identity and experience lives on after death and how fast-paced developments in science and technology can align with, rather than automatically contradict, matters of faith.

IS THERE LIFE ON MARS: PLACING FAITH IN OUTER SPACE

Professor Iwan Rhys Morus, Aberystwyth University

In 1903, the American author Louis Pope Gratacap published a scientific romance titled *The Certainty of a Future Life – In Mars*. Its readers would have immediately recognized the cover illustration as being one of the many maps of the Martian canals then doing the rounds. The plot involved a father and son experimenting with wireless telegraphy (radio) and the son's discovery, following the father's death, that he had moved on to the next stage of spiritual existence on Mars. It's a fascinating mixture of theosophical ideas and the latest scientific technologies to speculate about spiritual existence.

Space clearly made a good place for these kinds of speculations. Travel to Mars was a commonplace of scientific romance, and it was commonly understood that the other planets were necessarily populated (what else would they have been created for? – though Gratacap's novel suggested a potentially different answer to that question). The physicist James Clerk Maxwell argued that the homogeneity of space and the uniformity of the electromagnetic ether offered proof of divinity, since molecules, whether on Earth or on the Dog Star, were all the same, like manufactured articles. Others, though, like electrical entrepreneur Nikola Tesla, argued that space offered an arena where humans themselves could aspire to be divine.

CYBORGS VS THE METAVERSE: BINARIES IN THE TECHNO DYSTOPIAN BODY

Iona Curtius, University of Aberdeen

Stories help us to understand ourselves. As a genre, science fiction tends to be especially insightful about the fears that drive us, and analysing the stories we tell can therefore tell us a lot about where we are – which can, in turn, help us tell new stories that might take us into a better future.

This paper uses three SF movies to show how attitudes towards (and fears of) technology have shifted over the past few decades. Earlier science fiction (*RoboCop*) portrayed the human mind as good, technological bodies as bad, but with the birth of the internet this began to shift. The *Matrix*, for example, shows a world where we cannot trust our minds to keep us safe from technology. Current fears about AI and social media are expressed through stories such as the film *Transcendence*, where comfort is found in our physical bodies, and not our weak, easily manipulated minds.

These stories reflect how our fears of technology have shifted over time but also some constants – in particular, that it's the blurring of boundaries between human and technology that is most unsettling – in these films, often associated with the blurring of other perceived boundaries relating to key social divisions such as gender.