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"Introduction" to Theology and Science Fiction

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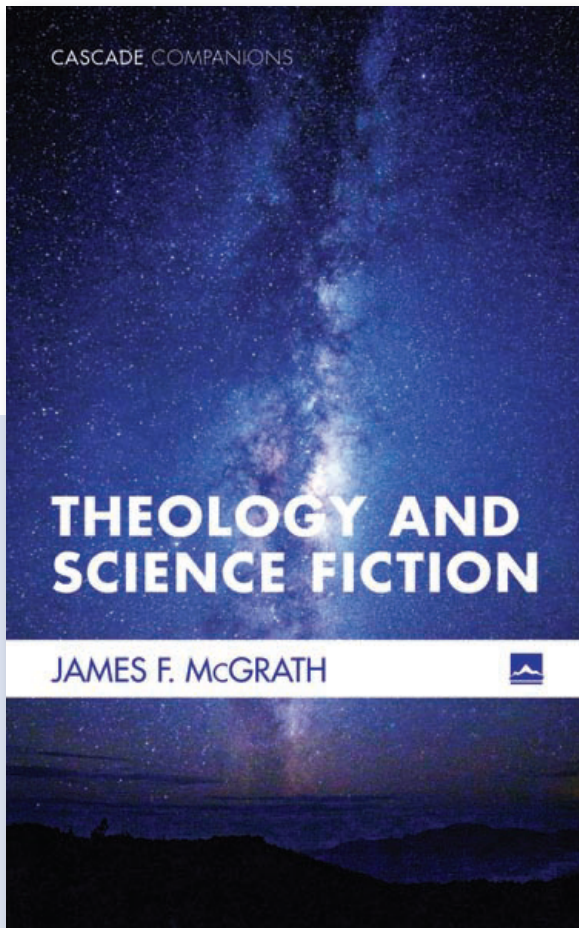
THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE FICTION

JAMES F. McGRATH

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THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE FICTION

JAMES F. MCGRATH



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THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE FICTION

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PREFACE

GIVEN THE AMOUNT OF time I now devote to exploring the intersection of science fiction and religion, some may be surprised to learn that it is, in fact, a subject that I have come to in a round-about sort of way, and relatively recently as far as my academic involvement in the subject is concerned. My doctoral work and early teaching experience were both focused in New Testament, with the furthest afield that I branched being the Jewish context of early Christianity. At Butler University, however, I found myself in an environment that required me to stretch myself beyond my usual areas of expertise in order to contribute to the core curriculum in a variety of ways. It also gave me the freedom, as a professor of religion, to stretch beyond the Bible and teach on other topics of interest. As a result, in 2003 I developed a core course on religion and science fiction. I found this subject worked reasonably well in its initial form as a freshman humanities colloquium, but it seemed better suited to become an upper-level elective, and so it is in that form that I have since continued to offer the course every few years. I always like to find ways to do research on the subjects about which I teach, and so I accepted an invitation to contribute to a volume on *Religion as Entertainment*, seized the opportunity to present a conference paper on *The Matrix*, and

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before I knew it, I was trying to assemble an edited volume of my own, *Religion and Science Fiction*, which brought together a wide array of disciplinary perspectives around the subject.

Since that time, the exploration of the intersection of science fiction in all its varied forms, and religion in all its varied forms, has taken off and continued to grow exponentially. This book marks my first book-length treatment of the topic on my own rather than as part of a multi-editor volume. But I am grateful to all those who have contributed to previous volumes that I put together, and in doing so have inspired me to continue thinking and writing in this area. I remain grateful to Butler University for the privilege of teaching and researching in this area. I am also grateful to my Butler colleagues—Brent Hege, Royce Flood, and Franny Gaede—for both discussions of this topic in general over the years, and feedback on this manuscript more specifically. There are also academics from other institutions with whom I've interacted over the years, too many to name them all. And from beyond the academy I am grateful to friends and family who provided opportunities to discuss ideas, and in so doing ensure that I approach this topic in a way that remains accessible to a general audience. From among these I am especially grateful to Rose La Vista and Dawn Shea. I would also like to offer special thanks to my wife Elena for tolerating my love of science fiction (which, alas, she does not share), and to my son Alex for sharing my interest, and in so doing rekindling my own enjoyment of the genre over and over again.

INTRODUCTION

A LIGHT SHINES DOWN from heaven. Beings from above descend to Earth, take hold of a human male, and return to the place from whence they came, ascending with him. Where they take him, he sees wondrous and horrific things. He learns that in the celestial realm, as in the earthly, there are beings who stand for good and beings who stand for evil. He has confirmed to him what he had already believed—that those beings, good and evil, are not only at war with one another somewhere above the skies, but are involved in terrestrial affairs. Some of that involvement has set human history on course for a terrible end. Once he is returned to earth, the celestial traveler tries to share his knowledge with others, but many scoff at his message. But he writes a book about his experience, in the hope that some will listen.

Is this a summary of a modern story about an alien abduction, or of an ancient apocalyptic work? The fact that it could be either highlights the parallels between much ancient and contemporary storytelling, and the unbroken tradition that connects them. I have introduced the subject

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of “theology and science fiction” in this way, as the groundwork for plotting a course ahead through the subject of this book, because it would be easy to miss the extent to which theology and science fiction have at times told much the same story. Doing justice to the intersection of theology and science fiction must entail taking the distinctive characteristics of each seriously, as well as recognizing those instances in which there scarcely seems to be any distinction at all.

One popular approach to theology and sci-fi is content to do what we have done above, namely to note parallels between recent books or movies on the one hand, and Biblical or other sacred literature on the other. Indeed, in some circles it is popular to look for “Christ figures” and religious symbols in popular culture, so as to turn stories into allegories or illustrations of religious teachings. This book will not be approaching the relationship of theology and science fiction in that way, for several reasons. First of all, merely noticing similarities is the most superficial level of treatment of the topic, and those who are content with it can find it in plenty of other places. It is also very easy to read parallels into stories in ways that do not detect symbolism in them, so much as impose a particular religious standpoint as the framework for reading, in a way that risks distorting both in the process.

In this book we will try to look deeper at the way that stories themselves tackle theological ideas, sometimes giving expression to the theological vision of the author, in others simply articulating the religious outlook of characters in the stories in the interest of making them seem more realistic. We will also look at the intersection of science fiction with the formulation of theology in the present, as traditional religions discuss topics such as life on other worlds, or whether machines deserve rights or could even

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have a “soul.” Theology can be expressed in and through science fiction, and science fiction can provide opportunities for the exploration of theological ideas. But before we begin to explore the relationship, we need to first say at least a little about precisely what is meant by the words used in the title of this book.

WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

Whole books have been written about the task of theology, and so readers without at least some background in this area are encouraged to seek more information elsewhere. But it is necessary to say a little here, by way of introduction, about what theology means in the context of the present book, and what it does not. Theology, in terms of its etymology, sounds like it could mean the “study of God,” just as biology studies life and living things. But no one has access to God in a way that would allow God to be placed under a microscope and examined. Indeed, many theologians would emphasize that any being, entity, or reality that can be studied and grasped by the human mind is by definition *not* God (with a capital “G”) and unworthy of the label. That stance, however, itself assumes a certain theological axiom, namely that there is one God who is greater than human thoughts can conceive and transcends what human words could ever hope to describe. But that definition is not the only one possible. We therefore need to define “theology” here in a manner that encompasses not just one view of the divine, but many possible ones, even as specific theologies may then proceed to offer definitions and to specify attributes of the divine. For the purpose of the present volume, theology may be defined as systematic thought about one’s own beliefs about the divine, spirituality, and/or other religious matters.

THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE FICTION

The aim here is to discuss ways that diverse theologies may engage with science fiction, not to offer an engagement exclusively from one particular theological perspective. As an academic discipline, theology is often contrasted with religious studies, the latter representing the study of religions mostly by outsiders, while theology is defined as the articulation of a religion's perspective from the point of view of an insider. Yet even though this volume is not written to advocate one community's view of God in relation to science fiction, that does not make it a book that is better described as being about *religion* and science fiction. Theology in the present age can scarcely be done in a serious manner without taking into account the viewpoints of religious others who are our neighbors in both the literal geographic sense as well as in cyberspace. And so one can engage with science fiction as well as with the contemporary terrestrial religious other simultaneously, just as one may encounter fictional religions in sci-fi that may more closely resemble one's own religion or that of others found in the world in the present day. This book seeks to provide a guide to readers that will help them as they reflect on their own beliefs, and consider those of others, in relation to science fiction, which often provides fictional stories about dealing with entities who are religiously other as well as biologically different from humans.

WHAT IS SCIENCE FICTION?

Science fiction is not quite as hard to define as religion, but it isn't straightforward either. Are works of dystopian futurism "science fiction" even if science does not feature prominently in the story? What if a work is set in a dystopian future in which not only is there no new science, but even much present science has been forgotten? Are superhero

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comic books science fiction? What about James Bond and other spy thrillers which feature gadgets that did not really exist at the time the story was written? If a TV show depicts people traveling using teleportation technology that could probably never exist in reality, some might challenge its right to be called *hard* science fiction. But what makes it science fiction at all?

If there is a key distinction to make in relation to science fiction, it is distinguishing it from the genre of fantasy. Both are sometimes placed under the broader heading of “speculative fiction.” But the distinction between fantasy and sci-fi is important as it relates to our interest in religion and theology. One can find many of the same elements in both—worlds different from our own, inhabited by beings like ourselves (often with minor differences like pointed ears), as well as terrifying and dangerous monsters, and the use of weapons that at least seem like magic. The difference is that, in science fiction, the quasi-humans may be called *aliens* rather than *elves*, the monsters will likewise be alien animals, and instead of casting spells that fire lightning, one will use a laser rifle. It is the positing of a scientific explanation for these unreal beings and occurrences that distinguishes sci-fi from fantasy. But the distinction is a blurry one, in the sense that there does not need to be a *plausible* scientific explanation that seems valid based on our current understanding, but merely the assertion that things are realized by scientifically explicable means, rather than actual magic.

And so, minimally, it would seem that any stories in which science—or things which purport to be scientific—feature prominently deserve to be placed in the category of science fiction. Just as one can debate endlessly about what precisely is or is not *religion*, so too can one debate what deserves to be called science fiction. Fortunately, we can set

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aside such debates, as there are plenty of uncontroversial examples that could fill a much larger book than this one. But the rejection of magic on the part of most sci-fi, while embracing it under a quasi-scientific guise, is important to keep in mind as a common feature in science fiction. We will find that many sci-fi stories overlap with and even borrow from earlier traditions of storytelling which featured the mythical and the magical. Religion has also regularly sought to distinguish itself from magic, albeit in very different ways and along different lines. And as we proceed, we will find that both religion and science fiction have a more ambiguous relationship to magic and myth than either tends to acknowledge.

Before proceeding, it is worth mentioning that this book will avoid focusing in detail on specific stories. Instead it aims to explore questions and themes that pervade a great deal of science fiction literature, television, and film, using specific stories as examples and illustrations. That way, it shouldn't matter whether you have read or seen this or that story or television show, making the book more useful to a wider array of readers. Focusing on the details of specific stories would risk unnecessarily alienating the reader (pun intended).

WHAT IS THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE FICTION?

There are a great many different ways to relate theology and science fiction. One can approach sci-fi through the lens of one's own theological assumptions, and treat the text (whether written or cinematographic) as a place to find culturally relevant illustrations of one's own beliefs. Or, alternatively, if the stories are not malleable enough to allow one to find support for one's own ideas in them, one can criticize the stories because they oppose one's own belief

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system. One can also ask questions about authorial intention, often more easily addressed in relation to sci-fi than ancient sacred texts, because in many cases the authors of the former are still living, while in other cases, merely by virtue of having lived more recently in history, we have more evidence about their views than we have for specific ancient authors, or even entire human cultures of the past. One can also eschew questions about what authors intended and focus on the imaginary world within the text itself, adopting a narrative approach and asking about gods, rituals, and beliefs within the world of the text. And one can look at ways that science fiction stories inspire people to believe and to act in the real world in ways that are at least quasi-religious, and which incorporate theological elements.

One may also ask about the appropriate response to science fiction, and how it compares to the responses to important stories in religious settings. Are science fiction stories—and any theology expressed in them—supposed to be “believed”? Is the suspension of disbelief involved in reading stories in this genre different from what is involved in reading the Bible or the Ramayana or another sacred text, and if so, in what way? Science fiction provides wonderful opportunities to discuss the nature of narrative and of belief in relation to religion. Kronos was the Greek god of time, and not just a character on *Doctor Who*. When ancient people first depicted time as devouring his children, was this thought of as a literal story about what happened once in ages past, or as a picture of the way time constantly produces things and yet also eventually destroys them? Can we know the answer to this question, given that we have stories which well antedate the time in which these characters were first spoken of? And, given that there were subsequent interpretations of such stories in both a literal and an allegorical fashion in the Greek tradition, what does

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it indicate that *Doctor Who* chose to incorporate this entity as a character that literally exists in the fictional world the show depicts?¹

MODELS OF INTERACTION BETWEEN THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE FICTION

Ian Barbour is well known for having delineated a number of different possible approaches to the relationship between theology or religion on the one hand, and science on the other.² These can usefully be adapted to the relationship between theology and science fiction. The two may be seen as in conflict, as having nothing to do with one another, as having potential for dialogue between them, or as ideally to be integrated into a unified whole. There have been examples of science fiction authors and of theologians who would embrace each of these models. We advocate here, however, just as Barbour does, for certain kinds of interaction being preferable to others. Since science fiction is literature which imagines humanity's future and the role science will play in it, the only way to declare them as inherently in conflict is to say that humanity will have to choose between religion and science, and that only one can be part of its future. That is, of course, precisely what some have depicted in their stories, but the mere ability to portray something does not immediately render it either likely or preferable to alternatives. In much the same way, to treat theology and science fiction as having nothing to say to one another is to suggest that either science or religion has nothing useful

1. See Leonhardt, *Jewish Worship in Philo*, 68–69, 289–90, on the way Philo of Alexandria makes use of Roman traditions about Kronos/Saturn. Kronos appears in the *Doctor Who* episode “The Time Monster” (S9/E5).

2. See for instance his *When Science Meets Religion*, 1–4.

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to contribute to humanity's future. If one regards religion and science as non-overlapping magisteria (to use Stephen Jay Gould's phrase)—as completely distinct spheres of human life each with its own separate validity—it nonetheless remains the case that *fiction* which finds one or the other utterly superfluous to its story is suggesting that a major aspect of historic human expression has no place in the future being imagined.³ And so, at the very least, the two ought to be in conversation, and indeed, science fiction ought to be one of the places in which and around which the conversations between theology and science actually take place. However, the case can be made that, in fact, the best scenario is one of integration, one in which we find ourselves able to incorporate insights from both science fiction and religion in our theological reflection, and to incorporate science and theology in our storytelling and our thinking about the future and about humanity's role in the cosmos. For evidence that this is the best scenario, one needs to do little more than look at some of the most interesting and engaging science fiction, from the very beginnings to the present day, and one will find that theological themes are woven into their very core—provided one understands theology not as a narrow sectarian enterprise, but as asking questions and exploring mysteries related to the nature of existence, of transcendence, and of meaning.⁴

This book aims to help readers explore the theological ideas in science fiction stories, and the intersection of those stories with modern theological concerns and issues as well. It should therefore be just as useful for those who adopt a religious studies approach as a theological one, since religious studies still examines the ideas, beliefs, concepts, and symbols that religious traditions use. But the book will also

3. Gould, "Nonoverlapping Magisteria," 16–22.

4. On this point see further Cowan, *Sacred Space*.

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be useful for those who want to engage science fiction in relation to a theological tradition of their own. Each chapter will end with questions intended to assist the reader in reflecting further. But anyone who knows theology and/or science fiction will know that questions will arise every step along the way.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Is your interest predominantly in either theology or science fiction rather than equally in both? How do you think your interests and background might influence your view of how to relate the two?
- What are some of your favorite science fiction stories, shows, and films? Which are you aware of but have never read or seen? What theological tradition has shaped you personally and your immediate cultural context? What other theological traditions are you aware of but have never studied them? How might your own specific experience and perspective influence your exploration of this topic?