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# THE FINAL SPIRITUAL FRONTIER? THE SPIRITUALITY OF SCIENCE FICTION

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## Abstract

A number of science fiction authors have stated that the genre of science fiction is a form of mystical faith, a spirituality that attempts to understand who human beings are and what they shall become in the future. This essay will set forth an understanding of the spirituality of science fiction. It will include an examination of the beliefs of the Raelians and other science-fiction-based religions, the interplay between Science and science fiction, ethical realities stemming from the displacement of traditional religious ethics by new spiritual and religious beliefs, and the spirituality of encounters with aliens and alien abductions. Science fiction's view of God, the new humanity, its view of organized religion, the present and the future will be examined. Christian science fiction from individuals like C.S. Lewis and George MacDonald will also be included in this study.

*Keywords:* science fiction, Raelians, Christian science, C.S. Lewis, G. MacDonald

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## 1. Introduction

During the last 100 years, the Western religious world has experienced dramatic change because of the following: the rise of secularization; the lessening of the societal influence of traditional religions especially Christianity; the elevation of Science as the prime repository of truth; the rise of interest in Eastern religions; the New Age movement; the occult; trends towards individual spirituality including those defining themselves as spiritual but not religious; the larger presence of the nones; the dramatic increase of many spiritualities and New Religious Movements (NRMs) including invented religions which are entirely based on science fiction (SF) [1, 2]. (Six SF based religions have been identified – they are Discordianism, The Church of All Worlds, The Church of the Sub-Genius, Jediism, Matrixism, and the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster [3].) A number of these NRMs have incorporated Science and SF in their religions or spiritualities. Sociological and religious studies have begun to examine the spiritualities of sex, Science, the New Age, technology, humanism, transhumanism, drugs, tattoos, and atheism [4]. (Carl Sagan wrote that “Science is not only compatible with spirituality, it is a profound source of spirituality.” [5]) This essay will focus on the spirituality of SF.

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## **2. The spirituality of SF**

SF authors like Samuel R. Delaney, Thomas M. Disch, and Ian R. MacCleod “have emphasized the spiritual core of the genre” [6]. That spiritual core has led some to state that SF “is a form of faith, even a form of mysticism that seeks to help us understand not only who we are, but who we will become”. SF speculates about the future of human beings in the Universe in the hope that the best things in that future might come to pass. This speculation seeks to “create a viable spirituality of the future” [6, p. xiii-xiv]. SF also brings readers into contact with powerful god-like forces and beings that “challenge our understanding of” traditional views of God, and open possibilities for new thinking about God, to “encompass both Science and faith” [6, p. 1].

The spirituality of SF is viewed as a response to the decline of traditional religion. A retired Harvard professor of Psychology argued that SF is “contributing to the development of a new spiritual outlook” and to the “growing desire for transcendence and spiritual significance” which is needed to replace the spiritual poverty of the current age [7]. George Lucas stated that he put the Force into Star Wars in an attempt “to awaken a certain kind of spirituality in young people, more a belief in God than in any particular religious system” [8]. He used SF as a tool to help people connect to spiritual hope in the wake of the perceived spiritual poverty of the 21<sup>st</sup> century [3, p. 119-120; 7, p. 240-243; 8, p. 31, 38-39]. Lucas was heavily influenced by Joseph Campbell’s mythological vision in which he sets forth the monomyth of the hero [9]. SF ties “scientific speculation” together with “theological themes” so much so that it has led any number to believe that “[o]utside of science fiction there is no salvation” [3, p. 146].

## **3. SF and organized religion**

The relationship of SF to organized religion is an uneasy one. SF coexists with organized religion in a sceptical and often superior relationship. “As a matter of fact, SF, like Science, is an organized system that, for many, takes the place of religion in the modern world by attempting a complete explanation of the Universe. It asks the questions — where did we come from? Why are we here? Where do we go from here? — that religions exist to answer.” Thus religion is a “commonplace” subject in SF [10].

Generally SF views individual spirituality positively but “most SF writers seem to view organized religions as corrupt tyrannies that attempt to govern or suppress that spirituality”. There are exceptions, but “a clear majority” of SF writers are “distrustful of organized religion”. Established religions are most often portrayed as exhibiting corrupt authority. Many heroes of SF stories are individuals who oppose organized religion’s conformity, and praise “reason and personal freedom over inherited dogma”. Since some SF has “roots in secular humanism”, it is to be expected that this kind of individualistic free spirituality,

opposed to organized religion, would be an integral part of those story lines [6, p. 206-207].

However, SF has a positive view of new forms of religion and spirituality and states “that if any Church is to remain a vital force” in the future of humanity, “it must be willing to face whatever changes may come and adapt itself to the spiritual questions of the future” to enable human beings “to meet the challenges” of the future. SF “hopes to forge a spirituality that will survive whatever the future may bring” [6, p. 212-213]. SF as a genre has become the “type of fiction” which carries “the exciting possibilities of scientific religion and spiritualized science” to the world [8, p. 249].

Carl Sagan wrote about “a kind of philosophical hunger” - the desire to know how we as human beings came to be here – and the search for “a cosmic perspective for humanity” Sagan and Carl Jung were asking questions traditionally answered by religion, but Sagan and Jung rejected timeless religious answers and searched for “a new spiritual perspective suitable to a scientific age”. Many see the spirituality of SF as a replacement for traditional religion and mores. As Ray Kurzweil said, “we need a new religion” [8, p. 12-13].

UFO Religions are among the NRMs of our current age. These include the Aetherius Society, Chen Tao, Heaven’s Gate, the Raelian Church, Semjase Silver Star Center, Solar Light Retreat, Unaris Academy of Science, and the Universe Society Church. (Some classify Scientology as a UFO religion because of the alien Thetans in its teachings. Some put Theosophists in a UFO/alien religion category because of their pursuit of consciousness via the ascended masters, and their blending of the scientific and spiritual. Theosophist contact with the ascended alien masters has many interrelationships with science fiction literature [11-15].) These NRMs have arisen as mythological spiritual alternatives to organized religions especially Christianity.

Carl Jung's last book was on UFOs. He saw the UFO phenomenon as “the emergence of a powerful mythology in the post-Christian West”. Jung was not a religious man, yet he concluded that UFOs were “a deeply significant *spiritual* phenomenon”. The UFOs and those who travelled in them were the “new gods” who were filling “a new psychic need” created by the rise of the modern “scientific age, an age without God”. He saw the possibility that the space age would “arouse expectations of a redeeming, supernatural event” [8, p. 12, italics in original].

#### **4. Contact with the alien**

SF books and movies share a vision about alien contact with human beings. Tales of UFO sightings and abductions do as well. SF speculation about friendly (E.T.) and not so friendly (The Blob) aliens coming to Earth contributed to the creation of the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) project, which for many years was funded by NASA. Now this scientific project is supported by private donations. Though UFOs and aliens are described with

scientific terminology, there is no scientific evidence of their existence. Thus they are a “mythic” reality [16]. Extra-terrestrials are often depicted as being more advanced than humans in spirituality/religion, Science, technology, intelligence, physical prowess, morals, politics, the arts, and have overcome problems like war and poverty. They journey to Earth to give earthlings greater wisdom and to advance them intellectually. These extra-terrestrials are often seen as alien messiahs. Contact with aliens is at times viewed as providing answers for human problems, the preservation of human life, and as the salvation of human beings. The astronomer Steven Dick sees the search for extraterrestrials as “a kind of religion”, and the SETI project as “science in search of religion”. Soviet scientists like Shklovskii viewed the search for space aliens as a “spiritual quest” which would confirm “basic Soviet assumptions” [8, p. 11-13, 18, 63-67]. Being abducted by aliens is viewed by some as “baptism in a new religion of this millennium” [8, p. 20]. Arthur C. Clarke envisions unquestioned human trust in the benevolence of aliens and this trust has become “a virtual article of faith in much science fiction, speculative science and extraterrestrial religion” [8, p. 253].

Some believe that human contact with aliens will dramatically change or even possibly destroy existing religions especially Christianity. The Lutheran theologian Ted Peters believes that contact with alien beings will expand the vision of existing religions [17]

## 5. The International Raelian Movement

One of the NRMs resulting from purported contact with aliens is the International Raelian Movement. The beliefs of this movement are that aliens designed life here on Earth. What humans understand as gods were really alien scientists from outer space known as Elohim who created all forms of life on Earth and created human beings in their own image. Raelianism desires to unite all faiths and replace them. It teaches that Science is “the most important thing for all humanity” and should be humanity’s religion, because the aliens (the Elohim) “created” human beings “scientifically” [8, p. 209-210]. Thus Science should replace religion. “The Guides of the Raelian Movement will become the priests of this new religion...Spirituality and Science will work together free at last from the medieval fears that have haunted our past. This will enable us to become ‘gods’ ourselves as was written long ago in the ancient scriptures.” [18]

For Raelians, Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, and other religious figures are the children of women Jahweh impregnated - the last child being Rael. Raelianism denies the existence of supernatural gods and thus is an atheistic religion. Raelians believe in immortality by means of cloning, and free love between consenting adults. Adherents go through a ceremony entitled Act of Apostasy which renounces their association with any previous religion or spirituality [C. Beyer, *What Is the Raelian Movement? An Introduction to Raelians for Beginners*, <http://altreligion.about.com/od/alternativereligions/az/a/raelians.htm>; C.J. Anders, *Meet the Raelians: Inside the World's Strangest* –

and Nicest – UFO Sex Clone Religion, <http://io9.com/5860418/meet-the-raelians-inside-the-worlds-strangest--and-nicest--ufo-sex-clone-religion>; and <http://www.rael.org/message>].

The advent of religions tied to purported contact with aliens gives weight to Susan Clancy's statement that in this scientific and more secular age belief in aliens satisfies the human being's "religious desire" [8]. A poll conducted in 2002 indicated that 75% of those surveyed "are spiritually and psychologically" prepared for "the discovery of extraterrestrial life" [8, p. 14]. Some of the acceptance stems from the influential work of Erich von Daniken [8, p. 237-239].

As SF often questions traditional religion it also questions traditional ethical mores, considering them to be too straight-laced, constraining, and restrictive of personal freedom. The Raelians are an example of this as is Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* which espoused sexual freedom, and non-traditional family patterns [3, p. 53-54]. With the advent of new religions, some presumably coming even from aliens, new values and ethics will also come forth.

## **6. The relationship between Science and SF**

The relationship of Science and SF is a complicated one. Some individuals studying this relationship emphasize the primacy of Science – meaning that Science fuels SF [19]. Others see greater influence by SF on Science [8, p. 36-37, 50-51, 74-79]. Regardless, the two are engaged in a symbiotic relationship – especially the relationship between speculative science and SF. An example of this kind of cross-fertilization is seen in that scientists like Carl Sagan and Soviet scientists like Konstanin Tsiolkovsky, Alexander Beliaev, and Ivan Efremov were also SF authors [20]. Another example is a book entitled *What Does a Martian Look Like? The Science of Extraterrestrial Life* which combines Science, speculative science and SF because each has useful material for understanding the possibility of alien life [21]. SF stories about alien life on other planets and Science have both helped the advent of new scientific disciplines such as Astrobiology (or exobiology - the study of the origin and future of life in the Universe and of the possible existence of extraterrestrial life) [L. Spiegel, *Will ET Be Here Soon? NASA Brings Scientists, Theologians Together to Prepare*, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/22/nasa-astrobiology-alien-search\\_n\\_5860714.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/22/nasa-astrobiology-alien-search_n_5860714.html); 22].

SF authors and scientists met at Arizona State University's Center for Science and the Imagination to address the downturn in interest in funding space and other scientific projects. Many attendees felt that the dreams of the past seemed absent. As one individual put it, "...maybe science-fiction writers are not doing enough to inspire those dreams" [P. Voosen, *Fiction Writers Help Scientists Push Known Boundaries*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 19, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/20/science/fiction-writers-help-scientists-push-known-boundaries.html>]. Voosen's article also noted the

complicated relationship between science and SF. Another problem that regularly surfaces in scientific communities is ‘ideological preference’ for a certain scientific approach at the expense of others [23].

The dissemination of spiritual and religious ideas through “science fiction and speculative science” is no accident. It is planned and designed to be so. SF is “a genre that has married scientific speculation with theological themes” and has given 21<sup>st</sup> century Westerners new spiritual and religious narratives in which to believe [3, p. 146; 8].

## 7. SF and Theology

SF “often paints a sinister picture of God” portraying him as a “flawed deity”. SF also describes God as a benevolent deity created by a good universe [6, p. 15]. As SF speculates more and more about the universe, and the possibilities of spiritual encounters with aliens and the divine, SF will “give us new ways to approach our gods” [6, p. 20].

The search for messiahs from the heavens is visible in many SF stories and movies, either with the casting of a Christ-like figure like Klaatu in the film *The Day the Earth Stood Still* or offering different messiahs in the place of Christ like that seen in *Dune Messiah* or in the superhero of many SF stories [6, p. 128-150]. As an example of the influence SF has on religious beliefs, in the British census of 2000, 390,000 people listed Jedi or Jediism as their religious faith [8, p. 14; 3, p. 113-128].

The view of the future presented by SF colours its view of a messiah. SF “presents a future radically different from” the past or present. According to SF, this new world would need “a new messiah, a new divine messenger” to bring humanity into this wondrous future [6, p. 146].

SF often depicts the reality of sin, but most of SF rejects a “spiritual afterlife” in favour of an earthly immortality like cloning, or immortality in electronic form like transhumanism. The afterlife “should not be necessary” for “this life should be enough. What really matters is how we live this life...science fiction suggests that if we are to have paradise, we must forge it ourselves” here on earth by doing good [6, p. 234]. This SF forging of paradise is very similar to the teachings of Golden Rule theology seen in most spirituality and a certain type of Christianity [24, 25].

“When science found science fiction, it found religion” and began asking ultimate questions. SF authors raise questions like is God an alien, the relationship of evolution and salvation, do humans become gods, is truth found in extraterrestrial life, is “scientific insight ultimately spiritual insight”? [8, p. 250, 251]

## 8. SF and the new humanity

SF stories have crafted a futuristic view of human beings that envisions at least some of them evolving into a new humanity “disembodied and virtually

divine". As one SF author put it, "The centre of the science-fiction universe (in place of the absent God) is...man as he will 'become' in the future." This is SF's "secular hope for individual and societal salvation" [8, p. 98].

Many scientists and SF authors believe that psychic powers and mental telepathy are signs that humanity is evolving to a better state. Nineteenth century scientists like William Crookes, Francis Galton, and Alfred Russell Wallace saw humanity progressing because of mental telepathy "and other 'spiritual' powers". These scientists and many to the present age believe that "science...could assist" in bringing about "spiritual progress" [8, p. 113-114]. These individuals and others were moved by the vision of an ever-evolving human being.

This evolutionary view of human beings lay behind almost all of H.G. Wells's writings - *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, *The Invisible Man*, *War of the Worlds* and *The Time Machine*. Because of Wells's emphasis on evolution it "became a major theme in later science fiction" [8, p. 103]. Many progressive thinkers in the late nineteenth century saw in Darwinian-inspired natural selection "the seed of the next great spiritual movement" [8, p. 105]. This movement would bring about a new faith that would replace the "irrational revelation" of Christianity and other religions with "the Great Scientific Fact: life evolves, and as it evolves, it progresses. A morally and spiritually evolving human race would restore the sense of transcendence lost with God's disappearance from the cosmos. The New Humans" would be "the needed objects of worship for a new civilization founded on science." [8, p. 106]

SF asks - what is it that makes human beings human? There is the mind, our emotions, and the soul. Can our minds be uploaded to a computer which then extends our lives electronically or robotically into eternity? What if we are purged of our emotions? Does simple cold reason define us as human? What type of existence makes us truly human? What of artificial intelligence? *When Harlie Was One* posits a supercomputer which not only becomes 'human' but moves beyond humanity and becomes G.O.D. - Graphic Omniscient Device [26].

For some SF writers like Haldane and Stapledon, human progress could lead to humans becoming divine. Thus "divinity" was something they envisioned to be within the "grasp" of human beings [8, p. 111].

## **9. Christian science fiction**

Christians have also engaged in writing SF. C.S. Lewis wrote three specific SF books which attempted to depict a more traditional view of God and Christian spirituality in fictional form [27]. Lewis was in part moved to write his SF stories because of the secular and at times anti-religious cast of some SF of his day [8, p. 127, 151].

Lewis was influenced by George MacDonald. MacDonald wrote several SF books from a Christian perspective – among them *Phantastes* [28] and *Lillith* [29]. J.R.R. Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy [30]. Madeline L'Engle

wrote *A Wrinkle in Time* [31]. Given the popularity of SF and the emphasis on spirituality in SF, this is an open avenue for Christian writers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to share a more traditional view of God and the teachings of Christianity. The fiction of C.S. Lewis has shared with the world a picture of the faith once delivered to the saints. People like Anne Rice have been attracted to the Christian faith through Lewis' writings [32]. Tammy Bruce, an atheist, spoke well of Christianity specifically as a result of reading Lewis' work [33].

## 10. Conclusions

A recent study emphasizes the fact that audio-visual (especially television) media play a very important role in establishing a given social imagery in people as well as a specific moral vision and influences an individual's self-perception [34]. This influence is also true of the printed page.

Given the popularity of SF and its obvious spiritual and religious influence in Western culture today, Christians need to be studying the culture, the causes of the rise of NRMs and their teachings, as well as reading SF to see how others view the world, human beings, scientific advancements, space exploration, the search for extraterrestrials, spirituality, religion and God. Christians also need to positively engage the world of Science with their faith [35, 36]. By the power of God's Spirit, these things will better equip Christians to engage the culture as Christ commanded. SF authors are sharing their message and perspectives with the world. Christians should be sharing the Gospel of Christ with the world. Christians of all denominations are encouraged to establish a combined English/Theology major in their colleges and seminaries. This major would encompass apologetic writing, the writing of Christian based fiction, science fiction, poetry, plays, screen plays, and other literature from an Orthodox Christian view.

These works of SF and others should be designed to share the truths of the faith in a way that would spark interest in the Christian faith, and attract them to the love of the Saviour Jesus Christ.

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