

We have just passed the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the release of the original Star Wars film, "A New Hope Episode IV". I can clearly remember seeing it for the first time in Sarasota, Florida with my youngest brother, Donald one of the world's great sf fans. 30 years later he still is. I think everyone who saw the movie during its first run remembers the feeling when the Imperial vessel passes overhead. We knew something new had arrived in movie making.

Thinking back on that time prompted me to revisit the theme of science fiction and its religious

aspects. I'm not talking about those rabid fans who seem to make a religion out of Star Wars or Star Trek, although there may be a sermon there too. I'm thinking of the common themes addressed by science fiction and by religion: What is the Universe?, How did it get here (and just try to think about where the "here" was for the universe to get to!) Does it have "meaning"? Who are we and what is our role in the universe? What defines humanity? What, if anything, transcends the known?

Science fiction is sometimes referred to as "speculative fiction". For me this is a characteristic that it shares with religion. All religions speculate about the nature of existence, trying to find truth or at least explanations. Of course many religions would not call their searches speculative. We do. This is an important point. It keeps an individual, a group, a religion humble to realize that we can only speculate on the nature and meaning of "it all", that some things will remain beyond our current knowledge. Speculation is a very human activity, the desire to play with reality, to go beyond current limitations. It is closely related to that other very human activity, imagination. Speculation and imagination can lead to new realities. Asking "What if?" can inspire "Why not?" and "how can we do that?". Recent specials on the History channel have looked at scientists who have traveled that road starting with inspiration from "Star Wars" and "Star Trek".

What I would like to do is turn to some specific works of science fiction and the religious ideas I find in them. The field of science fiction is vast and covers many viewpoints from many different perspectives. SF can be utopian or dystopian. It can be very humorous or deadly serious. Like all literature the human experience, even if none of the characters in a given piece are human, underlies it all.

SF has always been part of my life. In general I am a non-fiction reader but SF is my fiction of choice. I have always appreciated it as both serious and escapist literature. Yet speaking of reading leads to acknowledging that SF is not always delivered via the printed page. Perhaps because of its very nature much excellent SF has had its original incarnation in visual media, television and the movies. Star Trek and Star Wars are the most obvious examples, but remember "The Outer Limits" and the "Twilight Zone"? And of course Marvin the Martian.

Star Trek was and remains a phenomenon. At its very heart is a failed 3 season TV show.

For me the original series remains the standard. Set a few centuries in the future, Star Trek presented a reality that had transcended our own but was recognizable as a potential

future for us. Star Trek was certainly of its time. In the 60's space was hot. We were in the midst of the space race and astronauts were national figures. Space exploration still had a romantic aura and offered some hope for the future. There was in the 60's a profound dichotomy in our thinking. On the one hand there was the very real possibility that we would become the last generation as our nations pursued confrontation and for the first time nations possessed weaponry capable of destroying earth. Science from this perspective often played the villain, technology pursued for the sake of power, technology we no longer felt sure of our ability to control. On the other hand it was the era of the "flower child", of "peace and love and human understanding", yes the "Age of Aquarius". The innate good in humanity would come to the fore a new young generation would not repeat the errors of the past. Well, so many of us thought.

Star Trek spoke to this divide in our spirit. Its imagined future combined the two visions. Technology would march along and open up new opportunities. We would be healthier, happier, the earth would pull back from the brink and unite. The combined services of the Federation would have as their primary mission exploration. Unlike the colonial powers of the earthly past these explorers would be guided by a Prime Directive of non-interference. We would even take our place with other races in an alliance of sapient beings.

What saved Star Trek from being maudlin was Gene Roddenberry's realization that none of this would be easy, nor once achieved would it go unchallenged. The characters constantly struggle with themselves, Kirk is noted for sometimes playing fast and loose with the prime directive. Spock embodies the tension between cool reason and emotion. Spock's character raises the question of just what constitutes "humanity". He is torn between his two heritages.

In this way he embodies one of the major questions faced by SF and by religion: Who are "we" and who is "other"? If we ever do encounter intelligent life "out there" this will be a crucial question for us and for them. Will they regard us as peers, as evil beings, potential labor saving devices, or perhaps hors d'oeuvres? (remember "To Serve Man"?).

In the Next Generation, Data takes this dilemma one step further. He is a created being and his status is uncertain. Unlike Spock however he wishes to be regarded as human. He is, in fact, Pinocchio. Both characters point up the nature of self definition. We can only define ourselves in relationship to others. We are "like" or "not like" or some of each. We are formed by others and their perception of us, just as we contribute to forming their concepts of self. Self can only exist in context. In traditional religions this can take the form of "everyone is a child of God" or it can take a very negative form. Pope Alexander VI calmed the anxieties of Queen Isabella of Castile by ruling that, in God's eyes the natives of the new world did possess souls and could be saved, but they were not equal to Europeans in their level of humanity. Africans on the other hand were without souls. Therefore Native slavery should end, African slavery was no big deal.

I could go on and on. Many episodes of Star Trek had religious implications and for some fans. Star Trek is in and of itself a religious experience. What they see is perhaps a Messianic vision of sorts, one we can also endorse. The savior is all of us working out of our best natures, working together. It won't be easy work, nor will we always succeed but it is our best hope.

Star Wars is very self consciously mythic. Remember that one definition of mythology is “someone else’s religion”. Most religions have narratives that illustrate the beliefs and values its adherent hold to. Star Wars can be seen as that type of narrative. It is as has been said often enough centered on the “hero’s journey” really two hero journeys, one initially failed journey and one successful one which redeems the first. There are elements of Christianity, Taoism, Buddhism, Ancient Greek religion, even references to Sumerian deities. Luke could be seen as a Christ-like figure, Darth/Anakin a fallen Lucifer. Luke and Leia could equally be representative of Apollo and Artemis. Then of course there is “The Force” It is a rather nebulous concept, as befits the ultimate uniter of all life. The Force is simply there, it is. The Force can be used for good or evil - it is the potential present in life. The Force is never worshiped in the way a god would be, it is revered for the awesome thing that it is but it is not prayed to. For those who believe in the force, the question is not so much what is its nature as it is what is my nature, how do I use my presence in and with the Force? Some have said it is vague enough that all faiths could see their own ultimate truth in it, but this does not really work. Yoda says at one point that life creates the force and the force permeates life. While in point of fact all visions of deity are human creations ( which is not to say there may not be a divinity, it simply says that all the arguments we have are over our visions of the divine.) Western faiths do not posit a divine force that arises out of life. What Star Wars is proposing is that life contains divinity, life is sacred. It also acknowledges the Dark Side that life can embrace the negative as well as the positive. The films also illustrate the role of temptation. The Dark Side is seductive and does reward its followers. It also demands sacrifices from them.

The Emperor is transformed into a hideous being and can ultimately trust no one. Anakin loses his humanity as surely as his body is burned away. Both have to live their lives in fear and alone. After all someone else may do unto them... Darth Vader is perfectly willing, even before his transformation is complete to contemplate the destruction of the Emperor and his own ascendancy, either with Padme or Luke. The Emperor has no qualms about disposing of one apprentice to make way for another. However, the Jedi have to forgo intimate relations and Luke loses his hand. Leia loses her entire home world. In the end the question facing all of them is “was it worth it?” Vader comes to realize it was not, the love of his son redeems him, sets him free from the bondage he is in to the Emperor and the Dark Side. He dies in the process but it is worth it. He sees his son, his own better self, with his own eyes. Again an interesting twist. The son redeems not the universe in the eyes of the father, but the father in the eyes of the universe. In short the Dark Side consumes its devotees, the Light Side completes its followers.

Now to turn to the books. If you are of my generation you can remember a time when “Stranger in a Strange Land was THE science fiction book. Written in 1961 it also addressed the concerns of its time and did so through a very religious lens. In my high school we were very taken with it and when we created an “alternate “ school literary magazine ( to publish the politically charged stuff the principal would not allow in THE literary magazine, we called it, what else?, GROCK. Grocking was what the good guys did in the novel. It meant totally ‘getting”another. Empathy to the point of seeing the world as the other saw it, seeing the other as he or she saw self. It was like totally groovy to grock. The story revolves around Michael Valentine Smith the first human born on

Mars and the only survivor of that failed first colony. Raised by the “ghosts” of the vanished Martians he develops abilities and powers that most humans are unaware of possessing the potential for. He is also rescued and declared the sole owner of Mars, and thus fabulously wealthy. A new religious group dedicated to love, anytime anywhere with anyone (consenting that is). His followers totally share everything and really get their vibes right. Of course this threatens the man and Smith, by now clearly a messiah figure, is killed. Not really though as his disciples take communion to the logical conclusion and consume his body thereby taking in and expressing his spirit. I really got into this in high school. When I re read the book in my 30s I was astounded that it had ever impacted me so much. We grow, we change we learn. Still it was a good thing for me at the time. It played a role in opening my mind.

On the other hand another book that blew me away in high school and still does was George Orwell’s 1984. This work is perhaps THE dystopia, more powerful even than Brave New World. (Not a bad read itself by any means). 1984 was still in the future by many years when I first read it. Orwell’s vision from the 1940s still had resonance then and does now. He sounded an alarm against the marriage of technology and totalitarianism. He warned about the misuse of the emerging science of psychology. Living in the time of Hitler and Stalin he knew what he was talking about. Like many of the bright young people of his time he had been drawn to socialism only to see how easily it could be perverted by someone like Lenin or Stalin. 1984 is the work of a disillusioned man. Remember that in the end the doomed Winston does love Big Brother.

Orwell’s world is a plausible outgrowth of his own time. He took the science around him and illustrated how it could be mis-used. What will he make of the television cameras now on many London street corners monitoring for crime? After all, if you are doing nothing wrong you have nothing to fear. What would he make of the new speak our leaders so often now resort to, collateral damage, friendly fire, police action, non operative phrase etc.? Would he look at the tensions of our day and see his prediction of a permanent state of war artificially maintained by those in power to justify permanent emergency powers? By the way, I still have my “1984 Elect George Orwell” buttons.

Orwell presented a bleak dismal future in which there was very little joy, sex was purely pro creative, love was directed solely at the state. By contrast, Huxley’s future is an orgy. Drugs and sex are available in over-abundance. A sedated populace accepts whatever the government decrees. Children are created in labs to be perfect workers and followers. Rebels are seen as uncivilized. Both men outlined societies that could come to be if we allowed it. Both pointed out the dangers inherent in scientific advances applied without regard to moral values. Both messages remain vital today. Both speak to one of humanism’s fundamental insights, that we must remain involved and vigilant, we must work for the world we envision based on human worth and dignity or we may well be overwhelmed by another vision, one of power for power’s sake.

Two of my favorite authors are Arthur C. Clarke and Isaac Asimov. Both tell (or in the case of Asimov, told) great stories. Both incorporate a fair amount of scientific knowledge in their stories and both raise interesting and challenging questions. Both communicate a sense of the awe and wonder they feel about the universe. In fact, I think SF has long been ahead of traditional religion in responding to the discoveries we are making about our universe. It is so vast, so complex, so in motion so intricate, so violent

and so beautiful that no current religious mythos does it justice. Joseph Campbell used to say that one of the dilemmas facing modern Westerners is that we are still using the mythologies inherited very pastoral people who lived 2,000 years ago or more in a small area of the Mediterranean world to understand a vastly different reality. Science fiction sometimes gives us those stories we need.

Clark wrote a book called "Childhood's End" which raises many religious issues. Based on a short story called "The Sentinel" it is the story of the "last" human generation. At a critical moment on Earth 50 alien space ships appear over the planet's major cities. These ships take over the direction of earth's affairs for several generations ushering a time of peace and prosperity planet wide. In time the final generation is born and they spend most of their time dreaming of a strange super being. At this point child births simply stop, everyone is aware that the species as known is at an end. The children join together and as a single consciousness leave the planet to pursue their future evolution to become the super being of which they dreamed. It turns out that mid- wifeing this transformation is what the beings on the ship (it was only ever one ship which projected an image over the cities.) do and have done for many other species. They can never attain this higher level themselves, only move other species toward it. When they do reveal themselves they are the very image of Satan. It seems that our collective unconscious had an image of that which would end our species. So are they evil beings or angels? To the parents of the last generation, left behind on a world with no future they must seem evil, they have stolen the one thing that matters most, the future. To the super being to be they must seem a needed tool, something allowing the children to become something greater than they could ever have become on their own. For themselves they must live in a tantalizing combination of heaven and hell, they have usefulness, they assist in the performance of a miracle, yet they themselves are shut out of that miracle, they know of it, help create it but can never participate in it. Yet they do their work willingly. This too is sacrifice, it is religious work to help others achieve what you can never have yourself. Good or Evil the question is not so simple after all.

Clarke addresses the question of God in his "Nine Billion Names of God" In this a group of monks devotes themselves over generations to learning and reciting every known name for the divine. Eventually they reach name number nine billion which is completeness, so the world ends. Once everything is understood ( i.e. God has been completely named) what is the point of existence? What I take from this is to be thankful that everything can not be known, that there is something new always. There is a nine billionth and one name, we might just have to make it up. As Linus Van Pelt ( didn't know I'd sneak a little Peanuts in did you?) once said, "Just when I learned all the answers they changed the questions!" To which I would add Thank God!

SF has played a lot with the question of the divine. Star Gate gave us the ancient gods as evil aliens posing as ancient gods to control humanity and later others after we caught on. Of course none of these posed as Yahweh, just Egyptian, Sumerian, Mayan, Chinese and other types. Star Trek revealed the ancient Greek gods to be aliens with super powers, although they were largely beneficial, we just outgrew the need for ( as Kirk put it) any god but the one true God. I also recall another story, author and title forgotten in which there was a kind of central divinity authority that dispatched gods to reign over planetary systems from a headquarters located in the system's star. The story revolved around the challenge faced by the young god sent out to replace the ailing senile

Jehovah who did not realize that he was past it. Central authority did not find flooding the planet, favoring and the abandoning to atrocities one particular people, demanding sacrifices of oldest sons, sending plagues, wiping out cities, impregnating virgins and so on to be very god-like behavior. In another dimly remembered story, a group of scientists set out to discover and meet God. They succeed only to find that we are totally unknown to God. Seems we just happened accidentally while he was doing something else and he never noticed. Rather a nice way of pointing out that we may not be as significant in the universe as we would like to believe. Or perhaps of making us think about this: does God give us meaning or do we have to create our own meaning?

Asimov wrote so much that it would be impossible to give even an overview. I am just going to talk about his Robot series. It explores in depth the question mentioned earlier about Data: When does Pinocchio become a real boy? Indeed I think the character of Data owes a lot to Asimov. In these stories Asimov gives rein to his fascination with robotics. The robots often prove more compassionate as well as more competent than the humans. They suffer when they can not help and they often find that the task of helping humans involves self contradictory human urges. Robots in all of Asimov's stories are governed by three laws which make them incapable of harming humans or allowing harm to come to humans, only after this does self preservation kick in. In the stories the robots are often treated poorly by humans as a sub species or as unfeeling unthinking creatures. It turns out they need their own robopsychologists. So how human are they? Asimov leaves it to us to decide, but if it acts like a duck, walks like a duck and behaves with more morally integrity than a duck, is it a duck? Asimov's greatest work was probably his Foundation Trilogy. All I'll say about it here is read it. It covers eons of future history exploring the questions of human identity, power relationships, heritage, ethics, control, technology, corruption, values, destiny, social relations and justice, all the biggies.

Another fascinating story that deals with defining "humanness" is Poul Anderson's "Brainwave" It turns out that throughout the history of life on this planet the solar system has been traveling through a "cloud" that has the effect of slowing down mental processes. When we emerge from this cloud suddenly the dumbest human is smarter than Einstein was under the cloud. Everything should be wonderful, no? No is right, the Einsteins remain relatively much smarter than average, but now the average person truly resents the fact. Chaos breaks out which is made even worse as the animals reach intelligence levels previously only seen in humans. Once the animals figure out how we have treated their ancestors, and still wish to treat them the chaos only gets worse. So what is the role of intelligence in defining humanity? In this story the true super geniuses get together build rocket ships and get out of Dodge. Which is nice for them but does not really answer the question. Does superior intelligence justify our dominance over other species? This is a story PETA would love.

I could go on and on, but I want to mention one other type of SF I particularly love, humorous SF. Science Fiction writers seem particularly prone to word play and puns. You may know that I consider fun to be a religious experience. I believe we should take joy in our being and pleasure in the nimbleness our minds can achieve. What humor does that I believe is supremely important is train our minds to make connections that are not obvious. I believe that is what happens when something "tickles" us. To mention a few favorites here. Spider Robinson author of the Callahan's Bar stories. Lately he's moved

the locale of the stories to Florida but the originals were set in Kings Park, New York. Spider started writing when he worked as the night watchman at the sewer plant on the grounds of the Kings Park State Hospital (a mental hospital). One of my first jobs was at the Kings Park Library whose grounds backed up to the hospital property. He sets these stories in a bar on 25A. I am pretty sure I know the bar. So I have a particular fondness for the series. The stories deal with the intergalactic folks who hang out at the bar but also serve as the vehicle for some of the most elaborate puns imaginable. One ends with the sentence "That just proves you can lead a whore to culture but you can't make her think". Try them out. Then of course there is Terry Pratchett's magnificent Disc World series. These take place on a planet that is literally a disc. The four major directions are spinward, antispinward, centerward and edgeward. The disc is supported by four elephants standing on the back of a giant turtle, the Great A'tun. A'tun is swimming through space and is the only creature in the entire universe who knows exactly what he is looking for. Pratchett strongly hints that disc world will meet its end when A'tun finds her. And, oh yes, magic is real on this world. It is all very sensible though, follows a logical set of rules, they are just very different rules, based on a different physical reality. And again the puns and word play are wonderfully awful.

So once again we are back to a religious theme, what constitutes and governs reality? I have just scratched the surface today. Science fiction has many different aspects and certainly many sf novels and stories have little or no religious implications. Great SF though is about humanity, about our hopes, our fears, our relationship to everything, our place in the cosmos. It addresses questions of transcendence and of meaning. It seeks to explore imaginatively the unknown or the barely perceived. SF may just be the mythology of our times. Live Long and Prosper.