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Holy Sci-Fi!

Where Science Fiction and Religion Intersect

 Springer

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Author's Note One

I am not a religious person, in the sense of believing in a supreme being who is the ultimate cause of the world we immediately live in, or of the universe at large in which our world is but an extremely tiny part. I am not even a deist. In other words, I am not someone who at least believes in a Creator, while not going so far as to further believe that He/She/It cares about human affairs. In fact, to be up-front about it, I confess to being an agnostic (a polite atheist). For all my readers who *are* true believers, however, please understand that I am not aggressively hostile about this issue. I don't think it silly to believe, and I am even willing to admit I could be wrong. I simply haven't been convinced that I am in error. I almost certainly don't have to discuss here the difference between being an agnostic and an atheist, but I do like the following illustration of an agnostic, an atheist, and a true believer:

True Believer: God made the heavens and the Earth.

Agnostic: Prove it.

Atheist: There is no way that God exists.

Agnostic: Prove it.

None of the above means that I don't find it a glorious event when I see a rainbow in the sky. Instead of creating a 'toasting marshmallows over a campfire' tale about dancing elves in green pants and pots of gold being the reason for that wondrous vision, however, or some other equally fanciful 'explanation,' I look for a rational underpinning to the colorful arc in the laws of physics and the rules of mathematics.¹

¹ For more on the mathematical physics of the rainbow, see my book *When Least Is Best*, Princeton 2004 (corrected paperback 2007), pp. 179–198.

For some, any mention of physics and math brings back unpleasant memories of Mr. Scienceguy’s boring high school class (I know *you* aren’t in this category!) , along with the feeling that technical subjects somehow lack the compassion, the understanding and forgiveness, the *loving comfort* of an all-forgiving God. The world is undeniably a harsh place, and the concept of God offers an emotional refuge from what would otherwise simply be a mean and brutal existence from birth to death. To the lower animals the universe may well be, as Tennyson wrote, “red in tooth and claw,” but for creatures with souls (as so many believe are the unique possession of humans) there just *must* be something beyond the dry, pitiless, morality-neutral laws of math and physics. Or so do many believe.

One person who would surely have felt that way was the famed essayist Charles Lamb, at the so-called “Immortal Dinner,” a party given on December 28, 1817 at the home of the English painter Benjamin Haydon. In attendance at what Haydon modestly described as “a night worthy of the Elizabethan age . . . with Christ hanging over us like a vision” were such luminaries as the poets Wordsworth and Keats. That evening Lamb toasted a portrait of Isaac Newton with words describing Newton as “a fellow who believed nothing unless it was as clear as the three sides of a triangle, and who had destroyed all the poetry of the rainbow by reducing it to the prismatic colors.”

Lamb was described by Haydon as having been “delightfully merry” just before he made his toast, which I suspect meant he was thoroughly drunk. Still, one of Lamb’s younger dinner companions was greatly influenced by that toast, as 3 years later John Keats repeated the sentiment in his poem *Lamia*, where we find the words

“ . . . Do not all charms fly
At the mere touch of cold philosophy?
There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
We know her woof, her texture; she is given
In the dull catalogue of common things.
Philosophy will clip an Angel’s wings,
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
Empty the haunted air . . .
Unweave a rainbow . . .”

Much better, I think, and in the spirit with which I’ve written this book, are the following words by the English poet William Wordsworth (written in 1802, years before he attended the Immortal Dinner):

“My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky;
So was it when my life began;
So it is now that I am a man;

So be it when I shall grow old;
 Or let me die!
 The Child is father of the Man;
 And I could wish my days to be
 Bound each to each by natural piety.”

In a famous 1954 science fiction story, “The Cold Equations” by Tom Godwin (1915–1980), the conflict of physics versus poetry was powerfully illustrated in a way many found to be shocking. The entire story is set in the cabin of an Emergency Dispatch Ship (EDS) ferrying a load of urgently required medical supplies to a colony on a remote planet at the frontier of the galaxy. The ship has just enough fuel to make the trip with the expected payload—if there is either just a bit less fuel *or* just a bit more payload, the EDS will fall short. Partway into the trip, the pilot discovers there is a stowaway on-board, a young girl who snuck aboard to hitch a ride to see her brother who is one of the colonists.

She knew what she had done was wrong, but had thought she’d merely be lectured, or perhaps fined. Instead, the pilot tells her she is in much deeper trouble. There is no possibility of the EDS returning to base, as it was launched into space from a hyperspace mother-ship that had briefly ‘dropped into normal space’ to start the EDS on its way. The mother-ship had then vanished back into hyperspace. The EDS had only one way to go, to the colony. But it couldn’t make it with the stowaway on-board.

The laws of physics allowed only one solution—the payload had to be reduced. The medical supplies couldn’t be touched, as without *all* of them many men would die on the colony. It was the girl that had to go. There was no other possibility, as the story tells us that

“Existence required order, and there was order; the laws of nature, irrevocable and immutable. Men could learn to use them, but men could not change them. The circumference of a circle was always pi times the diameter, and no science of man would ever make it otherwise. The combination of chemical A with chemical B under condition C invariably produced reaction D. The law of gravitation was a rigid equation, and it made no distinction between the fall of a leaf and the ponderous circling of a binary star system. . . . The laws were, and the universe moved in obedience to them. . . . The men of the frontier had long ago learned the bitter futility of cursing the forces that would destroy them, for the forces were blind and deaf; the futility of looking to the heavens for mercy, for the stars of the galaxy swung in their long, long sweep of 200 million years, as inexorably controlled as they by the laws that knew neither hatred nor compassion. The men of the frontier knew . . . h amount of fuel will not power an EDS with a mass of m plus x safely to its destination. To him [the EDS pilot] and her

brother and parents she was a sweet-faced girl in her teens; to the laws of nature she was x , the unwanted factor in a cold equation.”

There was no last-minute Hollywood-movie rescue to save the day; so she was ejected from the EDS. The pilot felt terrible about it, yes, but there simply was no alternative:

“A cold equation had been balanced and he was alone on the ship. Something shapeless and ugly was hurrying ahead of him . . . but the empty ship still lived for a little while with the presence of the girl who had not known about the forces that killed with neither hatred nor malice.”

As with so much of modern science fiction, H. G. Wells (1866–1946) anticipated Godwin on the indifference of nature to the needs of men in his 1899 short story “The Star.” There we read of the approach of an enormous mass, a rogue planet from the depths of space, as it plunges into the Solar System. Colliding with Neptune, “the heat of the concussion had incontinently turned two solid globes into one vast mass of incandescence.” Then, perturbed by Jupiter’s gravity, this flaming new star appears to be on a collision course with Earth. A “master mathematician” who has calculated the star’s new orbit declares “Man has lived in vain.” But he was wrong—it’s ‘just’ a near miss and Man survives. Indeed, to the Martian astronomers who have watched the almost-but-not-quite fatal disaster unfold from afar, little seems changed. As Wells’ last sentence eerily expresses the indifference of nature, the Martians’ blasé evaluation “only shows how small the vastest of human catastrophes may seem, at a distance of few million miles.”

Eight decades later the science fiction author, editor, and critic Algis Budrys (1931–2008) asserted the writers that had come after Wells had learned the lesson of “The Star” well. As he wrote in one of his many erudite book review columns, “The essential thing [in modern science fiction] is the effect on human thought of the fundamental discovery that the Universe does not care; it simply works. There is no way to repeal or amend physical laws. The rich, the poor, the holy and the unholy are all subject to hunger, thirst, pain, and death. . . . And yet, how appealing it is to think that simply displaying the proper attitude might modify the Universe! It’s a hope we somehow cannot bring ourselves to abandon.” Budrys never mentions religion, miracles, or God in this essay, but it is difficult to believe he wasn’t thinking of them when he wrote.²

² See Budrys’ essay in the “Books” column of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, May 1979, pp. 19–28. As the Polish science fiction writer, critic, and analyst Stanislaw Lem (1921–2006) wrote 2 years earlier in the same spirit as did Budrys, “it makes no sense at all to look at the universe from the

The Universe *is* a violent place. When most people think of the ‘end of the world’ the image of nuclear war is perhaps the first one to come to mind. Such a war would be terrible, of course, but it would be small potatoes compared to what the Universe is capable of doing to us by merely following the laws of physics. To start off ‘small,’ just imagine what a rock 10 miles in diameter smashing into Earth at 50,000 mph would do. Indeed, *has* done, numerous times, in the past. The last time it happened, 65 million years ago, the dinosaurs vanished forever. And on a grander scale, we of course have the scenario in Wells’ “The Star.” Such impacts sound pretty bad, but at least we would see them coming at us and, perhaps armed with a sufficiently advanced technology, we could even do something about it. The Universe has even worse possibilities for us, however.

Things like supernovas and gamma-ray bursters (a massive star that reaches the end of its fusion life is no longer able to support itself against gravitational contraction, and so collapses into either a neutron star or a black hole, respectively), releasing in a flash more energy than the Sun will radiate over its entire existence! If such a thing happened close to Earth (where ‘close’ means anything perhaps as far away as several thousand light-years) then we could literally be toast. And we’d never see it coming, as the radiation energy of such stupendous explosions travels at light speed. Just think, such a monster wave of energy could be just two light-seconds from Earth *right now* and you’ll be dead before you finish this sentence. Sound like SF nonsense?

No, it isn’t, and such things are happening in the Universe *right now*. It is estimated that there are a hundred billion galaxies (our own Milky Way is one) in the observable Universe, each with a hundred billion or so stars. On average, *one* of those stars in each galaxy becomes a supernova once each century. This is just an average and, in fact, the last supernova observed in the Milky Way was five centuries ago and many thousands of light-years distant. Perhaps one-a-century doesn’t sound like much to you but, working with that average value, it is simple arithmetic to conclude that there are 30 supernovas *each second* somewhere in the Universe! That’s a billion supernovas each year. To end life on Earth, all it would take is *one* of them to occur within, say, 2,000 light-years. We’d never see it coming—and that would perhaps be a blessing, God’s final gift to us even as He (through His laws of nature) lights the match.

A more subtle treatment of Wells’ idea in “The Star” that gets ‘closer’ to God and His laws of nature is in a 2001 tale, “Anomalies,” by the physicist Gregory Benford (born 1941). Astronomers discover that the moon is suddenly out of position, too far ahead in its orbit “by several of its own

standpoint of ethics.” See his “Cosmology and Science Fiction,” *Science Fiction Studies*, July 1977, pp. 107–110.

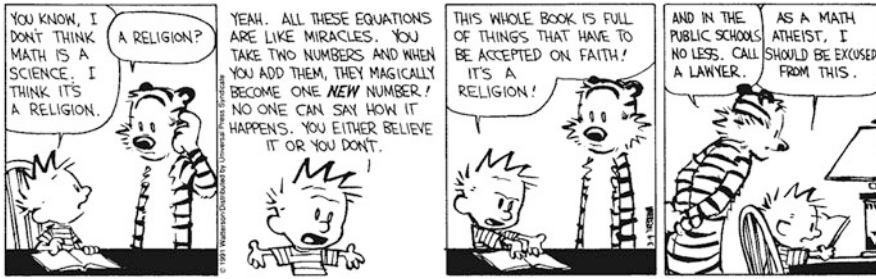
diameters.” And the tides on Earth are slightly off, too. The scientific community is perplexed until it is suspected that what has happened is a ‘cosmic error’ in the logical computation of the state of the universe. As one character expresses it, “God’s a bloody mathematician?” Like any good computer, however, the universe has error-correction capability and the moon is soon back to where it should be. The episode does have one lasting result, though—the founding of a new scholarly field, that of *empirical theology*!

As I think Benford was hinting at, one might well argue that Godwin’s ‘cold’ laws and rules, and Newton’s ‘cold’ philosophy (to use Keats’ word) were created by a supreme being, who thereafter remains hidden from us and simply allows everything else to ‘naturally’ occur in accordance with those laws and rules. And, in fact, I have no real quarrel with that viewpoint, but would simply add to it that the ‘supreme being’ can then only be ‘known’ through those laws and rules, and so it is, ultimately, only those laws and rules (what we call *Nature*) that interest me.

I agree with one of the characters in the 1981 novel *Project Pope*, by Clifford Simak (1904–1988), who becomes involved in a search for the physical location of Heaven. At one point she comes to reject the idea of “a never-never land that could exist with no need of either time or space and, presumably, *without the steadying hand of the physical laws that went with them* [my emphasis].”

One analyst who would surely have disagreed with me (and Simak) on this issue is the lay theologian (and late Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge University) C. S. Lewis (1898–1963). Lewis held that the natural laws *could* exist quite well with what he called God’s occasional “interventions,” if so required (for example) to bring about a miracle. For many (if not all) scientists, however, the true miracle is just the inverse of Lewis’ claim: the known natural laws appear to apply *everywhere* in the observable universe, at *all* times, with *no* exceptions. The discovery of even a single violation would be a guaranteed Nobel Prize, so I don’t think anyone is covering anything up! I’ll leave Lewis for the moment, but we’ll return to him in the next section.

I do suspect that even Lewis would have drawn the line at the thesis in the 1982 story by Hilbert Schenck (born 1926), “The Theology of Water,” in which the physical properties of water differ from place-to-place in the universe, becoming whatever are required for humans to flourish in each place. On Saturn’s moon, Titan, for example, water freezes not at 32 °F, but at a different temperature because that ‘works out better’ on Titan for humans. Such a conceit is so broad that I think even Lewis would think God had gone mad to have arranged matters for such continuous, universe-wide miracles to occur.



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Whether or not you agree with my views is not important for deciding whether or not to read this book. I've included these comments because I know readers are generally curious about an author's personal position when his or her book is on a controversial subject—and that certainly includes religion. This is a 'what-if' book, a book in 'experimental imagination,' if you will, and not a 'you'd better believe it or you are going to go straight to Hell' book. If Rod Serling had included religious tales in his 1960s "Twilight Zone" television classic, the stories I've selected to discuss in this book could well have served as starting points for scripts. There *were* "Twilight Zone" episodes in which supernatural characters appeared; for example, Mr. Death, Mr. Fate, and yes, even the Devil, but they were the sort of tales that I think only occasionally (if at all) attempted serious theological speculation.

You don't have to believe in God to be interested in the search for God. The fact that other people *do* believe is enough to make *their* search non-trivial. I'll be even stronger on this last point: while I don't think (as do the more extreme skeptics) that it is plainly madness to believe in a supreme, personal being (God), I have to say that, *in my opinion*, it does necessitate the suspension of rational skepticism. What is ultimately required—and surely this is no surprise—is *faith*.

1.2 God and Skepticism

In a brilliantly original book,³ the political scientist Steven Brams uses the mathematics of two-person game theory to study the outcomes of an ordinary person interacting with an 'opponent' who possesses the attributes of

³ Steven J. Brams, *Superior Beings: if they exist, how would we know?*, Springer-Verlag 1983. This book is the sequel to Brams' first application of game theory to theology: *Biblical Games: a strategic analysis of stories in the Old Testament*, MIT Press 1980. Brams is professor of politics at New York University. See also Appendix 1.

omniscience, omnipotence, immortality, and incomprehensibility. That is, he studies the interaction of a human ‘playing against’ what he called a ‘superior being’ (SB)—or, in a theological setting, God. The first three attributes are clearly those that no human has ever possessed, and so can fairly be called *supernatural*. The fourth attribute of incomprehensibility, however, is *not* beyond the reach of ordinary humans.

As Brams defines the term, incomprehensibility is just the standard game theory concept of using a *mixed strategy*, which means that if a ‘player’ has two or more possible responses to each of his opponent’s decisions, then the ‘player’ should choose among those various available possibilities according to some probabilistic rule. In that way the player’s behavior from game-to-game will appear to others to be arbitrary. Brams makes the interesting argument that the rational use of arbitrariness may offer an explanation for what may well be the central conundrum of theology: why, even with a benevolent God, do evil things still happen? The science fiction writer Poul Anderson (1926–2001), in his 1973 story “The Problem of Pain,” argued as did St. Augustin in his *Confessions*, that moral evil—defined as the willful disobedience of God—is the logical result of giving man free will, and that the *real* conundrum of theology is the question of why there is undeserved pain, such as an agonizing, prolonged death by cancer.

Another of Brams’ surprising conclusions is that there exist possible interactions between the SB and a person in which the formidable supernatural attributes of the SB fail to give the SB any advantage—they may even prove to be a disadvantage to the SB—and so it would be impossible for a human to determine that the opponent actually is an SB. In those cases, the SB remains hidden from discovery. As Brams puts it, this provides rational support for agnosticism in those who reject outright belief but who, like the French mathematician Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), are also reluctant to firmly declare their disbelief.

‘Playing games with God’ is not a modern indulgence; as Brams observes, Pascal used such a game-theoretic approach (although he didn’t call it that) more than three centuries ago, in his famous analysis on the rational basis for believing in God. Briefly, if God exists and you believe, then you *gain* infinite bliss for all time to come (presumably in Heaven). If you believe and He doesn’t exist then you don’t lose (or gain) much (if anything). If God exists and you don’t believe you *lose* infinite bliss, while if God doesn’t exist and you don’t believe you don’t lose (or gain) much (if anything). The rational choice is obvious—be a believer. The one thing an agnostic knows for sure: you never know, so better safe than sorry! This line of reasoning does seem to have a fatal flaw, however, as surely an omnipotent God would be aware of the spiritual emptiness of Pascal’s proclaimed belief.

To believe in God requires that one accept reports of miracles (the virgin birth of Jesus, and his rising from the dead, for example⁴), a step that is just too big for many to take and so they remain ‘skeptical.’ The patron saint of skeptics, the Scot David Hume (1711–1776), devoted a section of his 1748 masterpiece *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* to how a rational person should react to the claim a miracle has occurred. *By definition*, proclaimed Hume, a miracle violates scientific law and, since scientific laws are rooted in “firm and unalterable experience,” any violation of one or more scientific laws immediately provides a refutation of the reported miracle.

The historical motivation for Hume’s views was that of what he took to be non-rational arguments for believing in God. As one writer put it,⁵ Hume was “an expositor of bad arguments in rational theology.” For Hume, second-hand (or even more remote) tales of the return of a man from the dead—the claim that literally defines Christianity ever since Jesus’ execution on the Cross—are suspect. As Professor Heath wrote, “Hume . . . makes no attempt to deny the supposed facts; he simply argues that they are consistent with other explanations . . . of a less ambitious kind. There is no right to attribute to the causes of such phenomena abilities more extensive than are needed to produce the observed effects.” This is, of course, a view that long pre-dates Hume, a view that goes back to the well-known philosophical concept called *Occam’s razor*. It can be found, for example, at least in spirit (no pun intended) in the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). Aquinas actually used the principle of ‘make no assumptions beyond what is required’ to ‘prove’ the non-existence of God—and then rebutted his own ‘proof!’—a theological irony that no doubt didn’t escape Hume’s notice when he arrived on the scene a few centuries later.

From the very start Hume has had his critics. Many have argued that he wouldn’t have been convinced of God’s existence by *anything*. One of them, C. S. Lewis, expressed his frustration with Hume in the following amusing way in his 1986 book *The Grand Miracle*: “If the end of the world appeared in all the literal trappings of the Apocalypse; if the modern materialist [Lewis’ word for a skeptic] saw with his own eyes the heavens rolled up and the great white throne appearing, if he had the sensation of being himself hurled into the Lake of Fire, he would continue forever, in the lake itself, to regard his experience as an illusion and to find the explanation of it in psychoanalysis, or cerebral pathology.”

⁴ See 1 *Corinthians* 15, in which Paul the Apostle declares the resurrection of Jesus to be *the* basis for the truth of Christianity.

⁵ Peter Heath, “The Incredulous Hume,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, April 1976, pp. 159–163. Heath was a professor of philosophy at the University of Virginia.

Lewis is a particularly interesting writer for us—he'll appear again later when we get to religious time travel—because not only was he a witty and persuasive writer on theological matters, he also wrote classic, masterful fantasy (the 1950 *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*) and science fiction (the 1938 *Out of the Silent Planet*). He was great pals with J. R. R. Tolkien (*Lord of the Rings*), and clearly had a most inventive imagination; his unfinished work *The Dark Tower* is one of the spookiest pieces of fiction I have ever read. And since in this book I care not a bit if you're a skeptic or a believer—only that you can imagine without dogmatic constraint—then we'll embrace Lewis just as enthusiastically as we do such writers as Isaac Asimov (1920–1992) who more than once declared his belief that there is nothing beyond the grave, and Carl Sagan (1934–1996), an agnostic who included a balanced, energetic debate between a skeptical scientist and a religious man on the existence or not of God in his 1985 novel *Contact*. (I'll return to Sagan's fictional debate later in this chapter.)

1.3 God, Fantasy, and Science Fiction

When you see the words *what if* that I used in Author's Note One, combined with *physics and math*, I think the next words that almost certainly popped into your mind were *science fiction* or, if you prefer, although it seems just a bit pompous to me, *metaphysical speculation*. And that's where the subtitle of this book comes from, as it is in the genre of SF (an abbreviation I'll often use from now on for 'science fiction') that we find, among all the various literary forms, the most complete unshackling of constraints on imagination.

Well, maybe I should back-off that assertion just a bit and say the *second* most complete unshackling. *Good* SF does require that a writer not completely and utterly ignore known science. It is often said that in a science fiction story you are allowed, *at most*, one violation of known science (using the well-known 'willing suspension of disbelief'); if a story has more than one violation then it may still be a good story, but it isn't a science fiction story but rather a *fantasy* story. For example, an author can imagine a perpetual motion machine, *or* a time machine, but cannot have *both* gadgets in the same story and still be writing SF. A slight variation on this 'rule' is that it applies only to the 'typical' SF author. Winners of either the annual Nebula or Hugo writing awards (the Nobel prizes of SF) are allowed two violations, while Grandmasters (authors in the class of Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein (1907–1988) or A. C. Clarke (1917–2008), for example) are allowed three. In any case, the appearance of demons, vampires, werewolves, ghouls, dragons, angels, magic, ghosts, zombies, fairies, God and/or the Devil (usually bargaining for a human soul) are also dead giveaways that you're reading a fantasy story.

Now these last words on fantasy are not to be interpreted to mean you are therefore reading a poor story. The Devil, for example, makes a valiant but failed attempt at locking-up the soul of a math professor in Arthur Porges' hilariously funny "The Devil and Simon Flagg," which originally appeared in the August 1954 issue of the most literate of the pulp magazines, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. And from the same magazine (November 1958), in the story "Or the Grasses Grow" by Avram Davidson (1923–1993), we learn the strange fate of crooks who attempt to steal the land of Indians and so run afoul of a vengeful spirit world. Still, with only a few exceptions, all of the fictional tales discussed in this book are SF, not fantasy. (We will, however, despite my earlier words about him, run into the Devil and his minions again in this book.) For examples of each story type in a 'religious' context, see Appendix 2 (fantasy) and Appendix 3 (SF).

Fantasy and science fiction are occasionally dismissed by serious students of theology who make the curious argument that, since such stories are 'made-up' tales—and so must be telling 'lies'—then those tales are implying either the inadequacy or the outright falsehood of the Biblical tales. This argument (a wrong-headed, indeed ludicrous one) has been specifically addressed by at least three scholars of both genres, two of them academics and the third a writer. The writer, Robert Silverberg (born 1935), wrote the following in an insightful (as well as often hilarious) 1971 essay⁶:

"The problem that arises when you try to regard science fiction as adult literature is that it's doubly removed from our 'real' concerns. Ordinary mainstream fiction, your Faulkner and Dostoevsky and Hemingway, is by definition made-up stuff—the first remove. But at least it derives directly from experience, from contemplation of the empirical world of tangible daily phenomena. . . . What about science fiction, though, dealing with unreal situations set in places that do not exist and in eras that have not yet occurred? Can we take the adventures of Captain Zap in the eightieth century as a blueprint for self-discovery? Can we accept the collision of stellar federations in the Andromeda Nebula as an interpretation of the relationship of the United States and the Soviet Union circa 1950? I suppose we can . . . But it's much easier to hang in there with Captain Zap on his own level, for the sheer gaudy fun of it. And that's kiddie stuff. Therefore we have two possible evaluations of science fiction: (1) That it is simple-minded escape literature, lacking relevance to daily life and useful only as self-contained diversion; (2) That its value is subtle and elusive, accessible only to those capable and willing to penetrate the experiential substructure concealed by those broad metaphors of galactic empires and supernormal powers."

⁶ "The Science Fiction Hall of Fame," reprinted in Silverberg's *Beyond the Safe Zone*, Donald I Fine, Inc. 1986.

In a more recent essay, the first academic (Northwestern University professor of media ethics Loren Ghiglione) confessed that “I long dismissed science fiction as fairy-tale foolishness banged out by hacks for barely literate adolescents. Such fiction was aimed at pimply teenage boys who purchased or purloined their sci-fi paperbacks from the bus-stationed racks next to displays of romance novels and the hardcore men’s magazines in brown wrappers.”⁷ It is nothing less than astonishing how many of those “barely literate adolescents” are among today’s professional scientists and mathematicians!

As for the second academic, she writes⁸ of the secular reputation of SF that “Contemporary science fiction is often negative towards religion. . . . However, it is an ideal form to deal with religious themes because it is, by nature, more interested in ideas such as the future of mankind or the ethical implications of science than many other genres. It is thus a natural type of literature to speculate about religion on other planets or in the future.”

Let me give you two examples of what the second academic may have had in mind. First, playing on the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1844–1900) theme that ‘God is dead,’ is the dark 1967 story “Evensong” by Lester del Rey (1915–1993). There we find a still powerful entity on the run from those it calls the Usurpers, creatures that are relentlessly hunting him from galaxy to galaxy. As we read we learn of the entity’s growing despair as the hopelessness of its fate becomes ever more apparent until, finally, it is trapped by one of the hunters at the very place that the hunt began long ago. As the entity seeks to hide in the dense undergrowth of a garden, it hears the command “Come forth! This earth is a holy place, and you cannot remain upon it. Our judgment is done and a place is prepared for you. Come forth and let me take you there!”

And then we learn the truth, as the story concludes:

“‘But—’ Words were useless, but the bitterness inside him forced the words from him. ‘But why? I am God!’”

“For a moment, something akin to sadness and pity was in the eyes of the Usurper. Then it passed as the answer came. ‘I know. But I am Man. Come!’”

“He bowed at last, silently, and followed slowly as the yellow sun sank behind the walls of the garden. And the evening and the morning were the eighth day.”

For a second example of other-worldly fantasy that enthusiastically *embraces* Christian theology, consider the well-known saga of Superman, a story known literally around the world that has had a tremendous cultural impact.

⁷ See “Does Science Fiction—Yes, Science Fiction—Suggest Futures for News?” *Daedalus* Spring 2010, pp. 138–150, for why Professor Ghiglione came to change his mind.

⁸ Martha C. Sammons, *A Better Country: the worlds of religious fantasy and science fiction*, Greenwood Press 1988, p. 127. Sammons was a professor of English at Wright State University.

Our hero's story begins just after his birth on the doomed planet Krypton, as the son of that world's master scientist Jor-El. To save his son from the planet's predicted imminent extinction by explosion, Jor-El sends him by rocket to Earth with the Biblical-sounding good-by of "All that I have I bequeath you, my son. You'll carry me inside you all the days of your life. You will see my life through yours, and yours through mine. The son becomes the father and the father the son." After the rocket arrives on earth the baby is found by a kindly, childless couple and raised as their own. It is a wonderful childhood.

Once he reaches age 18, however, *Superboy* feels an irresistible urge to seek out the Fortress of Solitude in the remote Arctic where he undergoes further training from holographic images of the long-dead Jor-El (a process nicely portrayed in the 1979 movie). The purpose of this training is explained by Jor-El, again in Biblical-sounding words: "They only need the light to show them the way. For this reason, and this reason only, I have sent you, my only son." When he is 30, the now *Superman* returns to the world to begin his new life as 'savior' of humankind. The parallels with the story of Jesus sent to Earth by God are simply too obvious to miss.

Fantasy generally has an attractive, 'romantic' sense to it, but SF is often thought of as escapist, hyper-speculative, unrealistic, gadget-littered writing inhabited by zero-dimensional robots and mutant monsters, one-dimensional humans, and fourth (or higher)-dimensional aliens, all continuously explaining to each other—so readers will know, too—how all their fantastic, futuristic gadgets work. To understand why this particular story-telling goof is the red-flag signature of amateurish writing, just ask yourself how many times *you* have engaged in lengthy discussions with friends about the details of how a jet airplane, a digital video recorder, the telephone network, a refrigerator, a machine gun, the remote control for a garage door opener, or an Xbox360 works? C. S. Lewis called tales like this "Engineers' Stories." In an elaboration of Lewis' characterization, SF writer James Blish (1921–1975) complained that "engineers-turned-writers" often simply cannot resist trying to show their characters are witty sophisticates by having them engage in long, painful, sophomoric back-and-forth banter while leaning over drafting boards designing spaceships, or while discussing technical spec-sheets of some fantastic gadget.⁹

Grotesque, salivating, bug-eyed monsters (BEMs in SF lingo) terrorizing screaming (yet always hauntingly beautiful), half-naked Earth women seemed to be uncommonly present in the SF stories of the 1920s through the 1950s or so. This particular imagery was a real favorite for SF magazine cover artists

⁹ See Lewis' essay "On Science Fiction" in his *Of Other Worlds*, Harcourt 1975, and Blish's essay "Cathedrals in Space," reprinted in *Turning Points* (Damon Knight, editor), Harper and Row 1977.

(who were, without exception, male), grumbled highbrow critics of the genre. Exploration of a philosophical and spiritual nature was imagined by these unhappy analysts to have no place in SF. It was writing appealing mostly to immature teenage boys, so said those demanding readers. As one critic put it, SF is “a genre noted for stereotyping men as Messianic heroes able to conquer everything before them—the moon, the planets of this solar system, the entire galaxy.”¹⁰ In much of early SF such a harsh characterization was more or less deserved.¹¹ There are, however, numerous counter-examples of brilliant, modern SF stories tackling profound issues that actually are *best* set in a science-fictional ‘world.’ Representative of such tales are those involving speculations of a religious nature.

To support that claim, later in this book I’ll discuss many of those stories including (just to excite your curiosity right now, without delay):

1. “The Star” (Arthur C. Clarke): what if it was discovered that the Star of Bethlehem was a supernova that destroyed the planet of a vibrant, advanced civilization?
2. “The Rescuer” (Arthur Porges): could a time traveler armed with a modern, high-power gun ‘save’ Jesus from the Crucifixion?
3. *Behold the Man* (Michael Moorcock): what if a time traveler discovered that the historical Jesus was unlike the Biblical Jesus, and so assumed the recorded role for himself?
4. “Reason” (Isaac Asimov): what if an intelligent robot decided that it was simply too complicated to have been created by humans, and therefore there must be a ‘higher being’ beyond humans (and so assumed the role of that being’s Prophet)?
5. “Let’s Go to Golgotha!” (Garry Kilworth): what if the Crucifixion was simply a tourist attraction for time travelers from all across time?
6. *A Case of Conscience* (James Blish): imagine that a Jesuit biologist, a member of a mission to an alien planet, finds that the natives are intelligent, supremely rational beings who have no concept of God. There is no evil, no religion, and no original sin—is this utopian world the work not of God but of Satan, one created to show humans that a belief in God is not necessary for a happy and good life?
7. “*Angel of the Sixth Circle*” (Gregg Keizer): what might be the implications of a time traveling hit-man, in the employ of a new religious movement, who

¹⁰ Beverly Friend, “Virgin Territory: the bonds and boundaries of women in science fiction” in *Many Futures, Many Worlds: theme and form in science fiction* (Thomas D. Clareson, editor), The Kent State University Press 1977, pp. 140–163.

¹¹ But not always. For example, H. G. Wells’ *The Time Machine*, first published in 1895 in serial form, is deservedly recognized as a literary classic and it has never been out-of-print.

kills Catholic priests in the past to improve the situation of the movement in the present?

8. “The Word to Space” (Winston P. Sanders¹²): Suppose that the first contact with an alien culture is by radio, with a planet 25 light-years distant that is ruled by a fanatical religious theocracy that attempts to subvert all of Earth’s religions by inundating us with endless religious broadcasts? How, in particular, would the Vatican respond?

And where else but in a science fiction story—as in the 1951 tale “The Quest for Saint Aquin” by Anthony Boucher (1911–1968)—could you have the following exchange between Thomas (an emissary of a Pope in the far future) and an intelligent *robot*?

“To believe in God. Blah. . . . I have a perfectly constructed logical mind that cannot commit such errors.”

“I have a friend,” Thomas smiled, “who is infallible, too. But only on occasions and then only because God is with him.”

“No human being is infallible.”

“Then imperfection,” asked Thomas, suddenly feeling a little of the spirit of the aged Jesuit who had taught him philosophy, “has been able to create perfection?”

“Do not quibble,” said the [robot]. “That is no more absurd than your own belief that God who is perfection created man who is imperfection.”

As the science fiction writer and anthologist George Zebrowski has written¹³: “Science fiction as the art of the hypothetical has been in a unique position to speculate freely about religious concepts. A story is not bound by the strictures of assertion or argument, and a writer need not believe in the conditional circumstances of the possibility or impossibility depicted in his work. . . . a science fiction writer can try a concept on for size, spinning out its imaginative content in any direction. The creativity of science fiction asserts only the autonomy of the disciplined imagination, the pursuit of concepts and constructs and their expression in pleasing narrative forms, often purely for their aesthetic and intellectual beauty.”

In other words, these are tales that will make you *think*. Stanislaw Lem wrote of this signature feature of SF in one of his many insightful essays¹⁴: “As in life we can solve real problems with the help of images of non-existent beings [for an example of what I think Lem had in mind, astronomers solve for

¹² A penname for a writer better known under his real name, Poul Anderson.

¹³ From the Introduction to the anthology *Strange Gods* (Roger Elwood, editor), Pocket Books 1974.

¹⁴ Lem’s “On the Structural Analysis of Science Fiction,” *Science-Fiction Studies*, Spring 1973, pp. 26–33.

the orbits of the planets by thinking of those spatially *extended* objects as idealized *point* masses], so in literature we can signal the existence of real problems with the help of *prima facie* impossible occurrences of objects. Even when the happenings it describes are totally impossible, a science fiction work may still point out meaningful, indeed rational problems.”

I think you’ll discover on the following pages of this book just how many SF writers have thoughtfully treated a wide spectrum of religious themes, and that the view of the time traveler in the 1986 novel *Moscow 2042* by Vladimir Voinovich (born 1932) is *not* necessarily true: “Science fiction . . . is not literature, but tomfoolery like the electronic games that induce mass idiocy.” There certainly is a lot of nonsense in science fiction, but there is a lot of nonsense in *every* genre. The point, not to state too bluntly the obvious, is to be discriminating.

1.4 God and Science

I mentioned earlier that one of the attributes Steven Brams assumed for his ‘supreme being’ was omnipotence. As an excellent example of how the mind of a technically trained SF writer works, ‘what if God did *not* have that attribute? That’s the question Arthur C. Clarke asked himself in a 1972 essay, in which he put forth what he called an “astrotheological paradox.”¹⁵ After observing that the speed of light is the absolute limiting propagation speed of information and energy, Clarke writes

“If God obeys the laws He apparently established, at any given time He can have control over only an infinitesimal fraction of the Universe. All hell might (literally?) be breaking loose ten light-years away . . . and the bad news would take at least ten years to reach Him. And then it would be another ten years, at least, before He could get there to do anything about it.”

Clarke isn’t ignorant of an obvious rebuttal to this: “Nonsense, God is already ‘everywhere.’” This is sometimes called ‘divine omnipresence,’ an attribute that seems to be claimed in the Old Testament (*Jeremiah 23:23–24*) where we read “*Am* I a God near at hand, saith the LORD, and not a God afar off? Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? saith the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and Earth? saith the LORD.” Despite this endorsement in Scripture, there are those who nevertheless view omnipresence with suspicion.

¹⁵ “God and Einstein,” in Clarke’s *Report On Planet Three and Other Speculations*, Harper & Row 1972, pp. 115–116.

In one analysis,¹⁶ for example, we read that the “attribute of omnipresence . . . has always been something of an embarrassment to classical supernaturalism . . . The presence of God is indeed something unique . . . He is the only entity who can be said to be everywhere: *but what does this mean?* In the hands of supernaturalist theologians the attribute of omnipresence does seem to die ‘the death of a thousand qualifications.’”

Now, as I stated earlier, this is a ‘what-if’ book and so—*just suppose*—that God’s awareness of events *is* limited by Einstein’s relativity theory. With that supposition then, Clarke ends his essay with these chilling words: “He’s coming just as quickly as He can, but there’s nothing that even He can do about that maddening 186,000 miles a second. It’s anybody’s guess whether He’ll be here in time.”

In the 1950s Clarke wrote two short ‘theological’ stories which have since been anthologized numerous times (“The Nine Billion Names of God” and one I mentioned earlier, “The Star”), both of which are discussed later. He once remarked that after the great English biologist (and self-proclaimed atheist) J. B. S. Haldane (1892–1964) had read “The Nine Billion . . .” he wrote to Clarke to say “You are the only person to say anything original about religion for the last two thousand years.” (Haldane was the model in C. S. Lewis’ *Out of the Silent Planet* for the villain/genius physicist Weston—“Has Einstein on toast and drinks a pint of Schrödinger’s blood for breakfast”—whose only ‘religion’ was that of science). I think Haldane’s praise just a bit over the top, but in fact Clarke’s 1972 essay might fairly be counted as a non-trivial addition to modern theological speculation: it offers us, for example, a *physical* reason, different from the *mathematical* one due to Brams, for understanding the presence of evil in a universe created by a benevolent God who is also constrained by His own laws.

I should mention that earlier SF stories did anticipate Clarke’s essay, although none made his points with the same explicit force. For example, in a 1942 story that rewrites *Genesis* (I’ll discuss this tale more completely later), “The Cunning of the Beast” by Nelson Bond (1908–2006), God is stated in passing to move “with the speed of light.” And in the story “Shall the Dust Praise Thee?” by Damon Knight (1922–2002), God arrives on Earth for Judgment Day, only to find the planet utterly destroyed by nuclear war and these words on the wall of an underground bunker: “WE WERE HERE. WHERE WERE YOU?” (So here we have a non-omniscient God showing up late for the Apocalypse!) When Knight’s story first appeared in a 1967 anthology he included the following provocative Afterword: “This story was

¹⁶Rem B. Edwards, *Reason and Religion*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1972, p. 175. Edwards was a professor of philosophy at the University of Tennessee.

written some years ago, and all I remember about it is that my then agent returned it with loathing, and told me I might possibly sell it to the *Atheist Journal* in Moscow, but nowhere else. The question asked in the story is a frivolous one to me, because I do not believe in Jehovah, who strikes me as a most improbable person; *but it seems to me that, for someone who does believe, it is an important question* [my emphasis].”

Lest I give you the impression that a scientist writing religious SF has some sort of ‘imagination advantage’ over non-scientists, let me give you an example of what I think an astonishing *goof* from none other than the well-known astronomer Carl Sagan. I mentioned earlier that in his novel *Contact* there is a quite interesting debate between a skeptic and a believer and, as part of this encounter, Sagan has his skeptic challenge the believer with a question that has bothered many—even theologians—for centuries: why doesn’t the Bible contain any clear, unambiguous statements that would absolutely convince *anyone, at any time in history*, that the words truly come from a supernatural being?

In just a moment I’ll tell you where Sagan goes with this in *Contact*, but first here is what Professor Heath suggests: “What is wanted, evidently, is . . . communication on a scale which only omnipotence could account for. Crude as it may be, the following flight of fancy will perhaps bring the matter to a head: if the stars and galaxies were to shift overnight in the firmament, rearranging themselves so as to spell out, in various languages, such slogans as **I AM THAT I AM**, or **GOD IS LOVE**—well, the fastidious might consider that it was all very vulgar, but would anyone lose much time in admitting that this settled the matter . . .? Confronted with such a demonstration, the hard-line Humean could continue, of course, to argue that, for all its colossal scale, the performance is still finite, though immense, and so cannot be evidence of more than the finite, though immense, power that is needed to achieve it. But this now seems a cavil, designed only to prove that even omnipotence is powerless against the extremest forms of skeptical intransigence. . . . If celestial inscriptions of this kind had first appeared, say, at the time of the Crucifixion, and were periodically altered in accordance with terrestrial circumstances, it would long since have become entirely natural to treat them as a system of messages emanating from a supreme being, and as the clearest evidence imaginable of the authenticity of a particular revelation.”

When Sagan’s skeptic is challenged by the believer to give examples of what sort of statements could have been put in the Bible to convince anybody, the skeptic replies with a version of just what Professor Heath suggests (without moving the stars about!). The following examples would, as Sagan writes, “leave a record for future generations” that would make God’s “existence unmistakable”: “The Sun is a star,” or “A body in motion tends to remain in motion,” or “There are no privileged frames of reference,” or “Thou shalt

not travel faster than light.” As Sagan has his skeptic declare, all of these statements, in addition to sounding ‘cryptically Biblical’ to the people of the times of Moses or Jesus, are true statements that nobody could “possibly have known three thousand years ago.” (I am sure any reader of this book could cook-up more such statements, too. Here’s one of my own: “The oceans are the union of two, one without which no man or beast can live, and the other is two-fold and the lightest of all.” That would have meant nothing to the followers of Jesus, but a lot to any high school chemistry student who has just learned what can result when hydrogen and oxygen get together in the formula H_2O .) The skeptic’s views in the novel were Sagan’s personal views, as he repeated them, word-for-word, in his Gifford Lectures on Natural Theology that he gave in 1985 at Glasgow University.¹⁷

This is excellent skeptical stuff, I think, but Sagan’s admirable approach is not to preach to the reader, but rather to be even-handed, and so his believer gives as good as he gets. At the end of the debate the skeptic admits to a friend “I don’t think I did much to convert him. But I’ll tell you, he almost converted me.” So far, so good. But then Sagan, at the end of his novel, goes astray by having his skeptic make the computer-aided ‘discovery’ of a secret message tucked away in the infinite digits of the transcendental number pi, a message Sagan calls “The Artist’s Signature.” The numerical value of pi is intimately connected with the geometry of a circle (it’s the ratio of the circumference to the diameter, of course), and the big discovery is that there is, somewhere in pi’s digits, a long, unbroken string of just 0s and 1s such that, if printed out as a square array, forms the picture of (big drum roll) . . . holy cow, *a circle!* Any mathematician reading that must have ground his/her teeth with the utter banality of such a so-called ‘message.’

Sagan did include a bit of discussion of all the obvious objections to the sensibility of the ‘big discovery’—but then waved them away with what I think some quasi-mathematical irrelevances. Here’s what I mean by that. The digits of pi are believed to be what mathematicians call ‘uniformly random,’ which simply means that if you look at very long strings of digits you’ll see 0 through 9 each randomly occur about 10 % of the time. Therefore, if you look long enough you’ll find *all* possible sequences of those digits, including *all* possible sequences of just 0s and 1s. Sagan has one of his characters point this out, and then has the discoverer of ‘God’s message’ brush that aside with the comment ‘Yes, of course, but it will be a very low probability occurrence if it happens just by chance.’ That’s simply mathematical nonsense—*all* possible sequences *will occur with probability 1*. The pictures that these strings of 0s and 1s would

¹⁷ The lectures can be found in Sagan’s *The Varieties of Scientific Experience: a personal view of the search for God*, The Penguin Press 2006.

form will not be just Sagan's circle, but also *all other possible images*, including the Nazi swastika, a message not from God but rather, if from anyone, from Satan. I can only wonder how many people who read *Contact* actually came away thinking there really is a secret message from God in pi. When the book was made into a 1997 film, the screenwriters wisely decided to delete that scene from the script.

There is a wonderful passage in a famous SF novel by Robert Heinlein—his 1961 *Stranger in a Strange Land*—that I think nicely catches my view of the interlocked nature of science (and science fiction) and theology. The words are those of a character who befriends a man born on Mars, a man who then travels to Earth (the 'Strange Land' of the title, which Heinlein apparently took from *Exodus* 2:22): "Man is so built that he cannot imagine his own death. This leads to endless invention of religions. While this conviction by no means proves immortality to be a fact, questions generated by it are overwhelmingly important. The nature of life, how ego hooks into the body, the problem of ego itself and why each ego *seems* to be the center of the universe, the purpose of life, the purpose of the universe—these are paramount questions . . . they can never be trivial. Science hasn't solved them—and who am I to sneer at religions for *trying* . . .?"

1.5 Author's Note Two

In conclusion of this introductory chapter, let me say a little about the origin of the book. The idea for its writing came to my mind slowly, over a period of many years. The question of the historical evidence for the actual existence of Jesus has long fascinated me: did a person of that name *really* exist and do all the things the New Testament describes or, like those of King Arthur and Robin Hood, are the stories in the four Gospels simply ones that we all just *wish* could be true? Much of the story of Jesus is not unique to him; the mythologies of the ancient Greek gods Osiris, Attis, and Dionysus, for example, all include the idea of resurrection and, like Jesus, Dionysus in particular was born of a mortal woman and a supernatural father (Zeus). This, all *centuries* before Jesus.

The Bible is said to be the inspired word of God, but of course the words we read today have passed through the hands of many men, translators, and interpreters over the past 2,000 years, each with their own agenda.¹⁸ For

¹⁸ See, for example, Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?*, Harper & Row 1987. Friedman is a distinguished Bible scholar, now on the faculty of the University of Georgia. More provocative reading can be found in Robin Lane Fox, *The Unauthorized Version: truth and fiction in the Bible*, Viking Penguin 1991, and Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: the story behind who changed the Bible and why*,

those who think the Bible is literally the ‘word of God,’ remember that we do not have the original documents that form the Bible; all we have are copies of copies . . . of copies, from Aramaic to Greek to . . . to Coptic to Latin to English, with ‘adjustments’ at every stage. It’s a bit like the story of the fellow who claims to have the very axe his grandfather used a hundred years ago: the handle has been replaced only three times and the blade only twice!

An example of what I am getting at here can be found in the second volume of Isaac Asimov’s autobiography,¹⁹ in which he writes of an experience he had after writing his well-known *Guide to the Bible*. While on a visit with a friend to Brandeis University near Boston, Massachusetts, to view a collection of old Bibles, Asimov writes

“At one point we were looking at a Jewish Bible published in Spain before the expulsion of the Jews. It was open to the seventh chapter of *Isaiah*, and was in Spanish, except for one word that was in Hebrew and stood out like a sore thumb amid all the rest.”

“My friend said to me, ‘Why do they have one word in Hebrew?’”

“Having spent some time on that very point in my Bible book, I said ‘That’s the verse that, in the King James, goes, ‘Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son.’ The only trouble is that the Hebrew word is *almah*, which does not mean ‘virgin’ but ‘young woman.’ If the Jewish publishers were to translate the word correctly they would seem to be denying the divinity of Jesus and they would be in serious trouble with the Inquisition. Rather than do that, or translate incorrectly, they leave that word in Hebrew.”²⁰

In another place Asimov had a funny illustration of those who don’t fully appreciate the evolutionary history of the Bible. There²¹ he wrote of one aged parishioner who said, while waving his Bible, “If the King James was good enough for the prophets and apostles, it is good enough for me.” This would, I suppose, make some sense in a world with time travel.

A modern SF classic, treating this question of ancient history by imagining what the Catholic Church might evolve into in the far-distant future, is the 1979 short story “The Way of Cross and Dragon” by George R. R. Martin

HarperCollins 2005. Ehrman is a professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and Fox is a historian at Oxford. Most recent is the quite scholarly (that means it’s pretty dense reading!) by Philip Jenkins, *Jesus Wars: How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 Years*, HarperCollins 2010. The title says it all. Jenkins is a professor of history and religious studies at Penn State University, and a senior fellow in religious studies at Baylor University.

¹⁹ *In Joy Still Felt*, Doubleday 1980, p. 461.

²⁰ The verse Asimov is discussing is *Isaiah* 7:14, and you can find additional discussion of it in his *Asimov’s Guide to the Bible: the Old and the New Testaments*, Avenel 1981, p. 532.

²¹ In *Creations: the quest for origins in story and science* (Issac Asimov, et al., editors), Crown 1983, p. 101.

(born 1948).²² The tale is set so far in the future that nearly two centuries have passed since the Pope (of the One True Interstellar Catholic Church of Earth and the Thousand Worlds) ruled that non-humans might serve in the clergy.²³ The present Pope is an immense, whale-like alien creature that, smelling like rancid-butter, floats naked (save for a damp Roman collar) in a pool. He has summoned Father Damien, a human Inquisitor of the Order Militant of the Knights of Jesus Christ, to order him to investigate the charge of heresy on the planet Arion, where Judas Iscariot, shockingly, is celebrated as a *saint*.

As Father Damien travels to Arion in his faster-than-light spaceship (named *Truth of Christ*) he reads that world's heretical bible, called *The Way of Cross and Dragon*. It is a mish-mash conglomeration of myths, legends, and the Church's own Bible, relating the life of Judas and his relationship with Jesus. A Keeper of Dragons, Judas was actually (according to *The Way*) the victim of lies spread by Peter. On Arion, however, the 'truth' is at last being preached by a rogue priest who has broken free of the One True Interstellar Catholic Church.

Father Damien is enthralled by the stories in *The Way* but, of course, thinks them ultimately absurd. As he tells a friend (who has also read *The Way*) during the journey to Arion, it's all "an unbelievable tangle of doctrine, apocrypha, mythology, and superstition. Entertaining, yes, certainly. Imaginative, even darling. But ridiculous, don't you think? How can you credit dragons?" In reply, his friend laughs and says "Is that any sillier than water changing into wine, or Christ walking on the waves, or a man living in the belly of a fish?"

Soon after arriving on Arion Father Damien confronts the priest with the words "A more ridiculous creed I have yet to encounter. I suppose you will tell me that you have spoken to God, that he trusted you with this new revelation, so that you might clear the good name, such that it is, of Holy Judas?" He is stunned when the reply is (along with a smile) "Oh, no, no, I made it all up."

When asked to explain *why*, the priest replies that it is simply to make the people of Arion happy. The truth would be far too hard for most to accept, and the truth is that there "is no afterlife, no God. [Those who know the truth] see the universe as it *is* . . . and these naked truths are cruel ones. We who

²² Martin is best-known today, to viewers of television's HBO, as the creator of that channel's extraordinarily popular fantasy series *The Game of Thrones*.

²³ This idea, of aliens not only being proselytized by human missionaries but actually becoming members of the missionary faith, was presented in an hilarious 1974 story by William Tenn (the pen-name of Philip Klass (1920–2010)), "On Venus, Have We Got a Rabbi." There we learn of the very non-human Bulbas, from the fourth planet of the star Rigel, who with the help of a human rabbi win the legal right to be recognized as Jews.

believe in life, and treasure it, will die. Afterward there will be nothing, eternal emptiness, blackness, nonexistence. In our living there has been no purpose, no poetry, no meaning. Nor do our deaths possess these qualities. When we are gone, the universe will not long remember us, and shortly it will be as if we had never lived at all. Our worlds and our universe will not long outlive us. Ultimately, entropy will consume all, and our puny efforts cannot stay that awful end. It will be gone. It has never been. It has never mattered. The universe itself is doomed, transient, uncaring.” Father Damien professes to be appalled at that but, by the end of the story and even as he continues to serve his bloated, alien Pope in rooting out heresy from one end of the galaxy to the other, his *faith* has been destroyed.

So, to repeat my question: the Biblical stories are undeniably ones of powerful moral teaching but, ultimately, are they just *stories* to make us happy? It is, after all, only by the Gospel stories (which don’t always agree), and the account given by the historian Flavius Josephus (c.37–100 AD) in his *The Antiquities of the Jews*, that we have any record at all for a person called ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ And even then it is only for the time of his ministry that anything of detail is told. Still, Josephus lived in Galilee and knew people who were alive when Jesus was said to be active, and so it *seems* as though the historical truth of Jesus is on reasonably strong ground. But the question still tantalizes.

But it can be a risky question to ask. For how an analysis of a story of Jesus that deviates from traditional Church teachings on his divine origin (even if sympathetic) can provoke the outrage Asimov suggests, I remind you of Hugh Schonfield’s *The Passover Plot*. When the book originally appeared in 1966 it was a sensation, offending as many as it did whose imaginations it captured. In it we are told that Jesus did not die on the Cross, but rather craftily *pre-arranged* for all the post-Crucifixion events that we read about in the Bible. The idea that Jesus didn’t die on the Cross actually long predates Schonfield; you can find it, for example, in the *non-SF* 1929 novella *The Man Who Died* by D. H. Lawrence. Lawrence’s work is actually even more provocative than is Schonfield’s, as he has Jesus surviving his ordeal by accident and then, realizing what has happened, Jesus renounces any further attempt at preaching the word of God and sets forth into the world to enjoy all the earthly pleasures he had missed during his ministry (including having a child).²⁴

The same idea was used in the 2007 story “Friends in High Places” by Jack McDevitt (born 1935), which opens with Jesus waiting in the Garden of

²⁴ In a case of ‘fact following fiction,’ in September 2012 Karen King, an historian of early Christianity at the Harvard Divinity School, announced the discovery of a fourth-century Egyptian papyrus that refers to Jesus as being married. That announcement caused, as you’d imagine, not just a little turmoil at the Vatican.

Gethsemane for the mob to take him. Jesus does *not* want to die, as we learn from his thoughts:

“It sends the wrong message [Lord]. It will be a hard sell, persuading people You love them when you let this happen to me.”

and

“Why? Why must we do it this way? We create a faith whose governing symbol will be an instrument of torture. They will wear it around their necks, put it atop their temples. Is this what we really want?”

In this story, too, Jesus escapes (to become a librarian in Egypt!), and as he begins his journey to a new life he thinks “how much better it was than a cross.” What has happened is that God, apparently in answer to Jesus’ concerns about the Crucifixion, has *changed the past*. We suspect something like this has happened because the Greeks, not the Romans, are in power, and then the really big clue comes when Jesus learns that decades earlier Mark Antony had *won* the naval battle of Actium. (Whether or not changing the past makes any ‘sense’ is an issue I’ll address in a later chapter!)

There are some who think the question ‘Was Jesus a real person?’ is meaningless, as silly to ask as might be ‘Did Shakespeare actually write *Julius Caesar*?’ (or was it, as the old joke goes, somebody else with the same name?), or as might be the question ‘Did Homer really write the *Illiad*?’ We have those great works in front of us today, so goes the argument, so let’s just read them and who cares who actually wrote the words hundreds or thousands of years ago. I think the analogy of the mystery of authorship and of the reality of Jesus to be a grossly false one. The books and plays of Homer and Shakespeare *do* exist, yes, and in the end it is the greatness of their ideas that is what really matters.

The existence or not of Jesus is not so smoothly dismissed, however. If he didn’t actually live then what we are left with is nothing less than a stupendous fraud 2,000 years in the making, in the name of which literally millions have died. The question of Jesus’ historical reality *does* matter and, as you’ll see in the pages of this book, science fiction writers have eagerly tackled that question and more, sometimes in ways that may be shocking. In the opening to an anthology of religious science fiction stories, for example, the editor wrote “I am perfectly certain in my own mind that God is alive. I am less certain that He’s well. I think, in fact, that He may be fighting for His life in the pages of this book.”²⁵

As an academic electrical engineer who has bought (and written, too) a lot of math and physics books, I’ve also amassed a fair number of texts in my personal library on Biblical archaeology. As you might expect from that, I

²⁵ See the Introductory essay by Alan Ryan in *Perpetual Light*, Warner 1982.

am a great fan of the *Indiana Jones* movies—or at least of the first (and best) one, the 1981 *Raiders of the Lost Ark*—and I think it was Indy’s quest for the Ark that really planted the seed for this book. (But see Appendix 3 for how my interest in such matters predates the film.) The Ark in the movie was not Noah’s Ark, but rather the Ark of the Covenant (or Ark of the Law) which was built to transport the stone tablets bearing the Ten Commandments, as received in the thirteenth century BC by Moses from God on Mt. Sinai. The Ark, built by Moses according to detailed instructions from God (*Exodus* 25), is described in various Jewish legends as being surrounded by sparks and so was seemingly electrical in nature. Further, to directly touch the Ark itself (it was carried on poles), for any reason, was to be immediately struck down, as was Uzzah in the tenth century BC (*Samuel* 6:6–7); perhaps a death by divine electrocution? In *Exodus* 25:22 the Lord tells Moses He will speak to him from the Ark, and in the movie the electrical nature of the Ark is implied when the central villain dramatically tells Indy “It’s a transmitter. It’s a radio for speaking to God!” The Ark eventually ended-up in the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, where it remained until the destruction of that city by the Babylonians in the sixth century BC. At that point the Ark disappears from both the Bible and history—until more than twenty-five centuries later when the Nazis,²⁶ and then Dr. Jones, take-up the hunt.

One SF explanation for the disappearance of the Ark is given in the 1954 story “For I Am a Jealous People” by Lester del Rey. There we read that God, furious with an unrepentant world, has broken the ancient covenant with man and abandoned him, and has taken an alien race of reptiles to be his new chosen ‘people.’ An alien priest (who speaks perfect English²⁷) tells a human, “The Lord Almighty commanded us to go down to Earth where abominations existed and to leave no living creature under your sun.” To aid the aliens as they invade Earth by this divine decree, He has given them the Ark to carry into combat.

The final, big push for me to go forward with this project came when I read Ari Goldman’s terrific 1991 book, *The Search for God at Harvard*. Goldman, then the religion reporter at *The New York Times* (he is now a professor of journalism at Columbia University), received a sabbatical leave from the paper to spend a year (1985) at the Harvard Divinity School. The vivid description

²⁶ The movie’s depiction of Nazi obsession with the supernatural was not just made-up Hollywood make-believe nonsense. See, for example, Bill Yenne’s *Hitler’s Master of the Dark Arts: Himmler’s Black Knights and the Occult Origins of the SS*, Zenith Press 2010.

²⁷ The problems of communication between humans and SF aliens have received a scholarly (and highly entertaining, too) treatment by Walter E. Meyers, a professor of English (now emeritus) at North Carolina State University in his book *Aliens and Linguists: Language Study and Science Fiction*, The University of Georgia Press 1980.

of his experiences that year sharply illustrated for me the vast diversity of thought among theologians, and prompted me to take seriously many of the issues that I then realized puzzled not just me, but the ‘professionals,’ too. The science fiction component of this book is a continuation of the themes of two of my earlier books.²⁸ To understand how two such *seemingly* distinctly different patterns of thought—SF and religion—can be connected, an argument (that I really like) was nicely made by Robert Silverberg in the Introduction to his short-story collection *Beyond the Safe Zone* (see note 6 again):

“When the world turns incomprehensible, it makes sense to look for answers from some other world. In former times it was sufficient to look no further than the Church: God was there, emanating love and security, offering the hope of passing onward from this vale of tears to the true life beyond. One of the difficulties of [modern] life is that most of us have lost the option of using religious faith as a consolation. It may be that science fiction has evolved into a sort of substitute: a body of texts of an examination of absolute values and the hypothetical construction of alternative modes of living.”

Now, at the risk of being repetitious, let me end this first chapter by restating my opening words in an alternative way, just to be absolutely clear on what my intentions are with this book. I am not a believer, but I certainly do hope that as you read you won’t think I’m being obnoxious about it.²⁹ I am not going to be the bomb thrower that Oxford emeritus fellow and former professor Richard Dawkins is, a man described on the dust jacket of his own 2006 book *The God Delusion* (Houghton Mifflin) as “the world’s most prominent atheist.” I do, in fact, personally agree with just about everything Dawkins argues in his book, but the rationality for believing (or not) in a personal, supernatural God is *not* what this book is about. It’s about how SF has treated religious issues. *And that’s all.*

SF writers have a thoroughly imaginative mind-set (if they don’t they don’t survive as writers for long!), and so many of their religious tales snuggle-up pretty close to what some—usually devout Christians not used to entertaining any challenge at all to what they were taught as kids in Sunday school—

²⁸ *Time Machines: time travel in physics, metaphysics, and science fiction* (2nd edition), Springer-AIP 1999, and *Time Travel: a writer’s guide to the real science of plausible time travel*, Writer’s Digest Books 1997 (reprinted, with a new Preface, in 2011 by The Johns Hopkins University Press).

²⁹ As I finish the writing of this first chapter, I think that my take on the matter of God has, in fact, evolved towards the one adopted by the SF writer James Blish: “I believe there might have been a Creator but He never intervenes, does not desire worship and may not even be around any more.” Quoted from the brilliant, book-length treatment of Blish by David Ketterer, *Imprisoned in a Tesseract: the life and work of James Blish*, The Kent State University Press 1987, p. 321.

consider impropriety. SF writers are often vocal skeptics. As an afterword to his story “Friends in High Places,” Jack McDevitt wrote

“I’ve never felt comforted or encouraged by the notion that God would stand by and allow his son to go to the cross. (If that happened to Jesus, what were *my* chances?) Or that he would be willing to watch casually while tidal waves rolled in and killed tens of thousands. Or lethal diseases ravaged whole continents. Or Nazis ran wild and killed millions [McDevitt might have mentioned Stalin’s purges at this point, too]. You have to be willing to overlook a lot to accept the idea that a compassionate supernatural force worries about our welfare. But we are capable of doing it. A man misses a plane, the plane goes down, two hundred people die, but the guy left standing in the parking lot starts talking about how God stepped in to save his life. And we buy it [with the explanation, McDevitt might have added, based on the well-known phrase ‘God works in mysterious ways’]. Never mind the crew and passengers on the flight.”³⁰

McDevitt is right, that *is* asking a lot, and I personally am in sympathy with his concern. Nonetheless, he still strikes me as less extreme than is Dawkins.

Since I’ve tried very hard to avoid proselytizing in this book, I am not even going to take the soft position taken by the authors of a recent book-length anthology of essays that collectively examine the issue of the resurrection of Jesus, the central claim of Christianity asserting that he returned from the dead.³¹ The essays are quite hostile to attempts to base Christianity on miracles, and yet they remain sympathetic to Christianity. Whether or not *you* accept miracles is not at play in this book, however. If you do, then okay. If you don’t, well, that’s okay (with me, anyway), too.

A recent book that may, at least superficially, appear similar to this one has as its goals (according to the cover blurb) that of teaching readers “how to think of God” and to help readers “keep their beliefs alive in a world of rapidly changing technology.” Now I *did* find that book helpful in my writing (I recommend it as a good read), but while I am sympathetic to its first goal I am going to specifically avoid the second.³² That’s because this book is *not* about *my* beliefs, and I have *no* personal agenda to convert your beliefs to mine. So, *please*, no outraged e-mails in an attempt to convert my beliefs to yours!

³⁰ *A Cross of Centuries: twenty-five imaginative tales about the Christ* (Michael Bishop, editor), Thunder’s Mouth Press 2007, pp. 45–46.

³¹ *The Empty Tomb: Jesus Beyond the Grave* (Robert M. Price and Jeffery Jay Lowder, editors), Prometheus Books 2005. See also note 4.

³² Gabriel McKee, *The Gospel According to Science Fiction*, Westminster John Knox Press 2007. The author has a Master of Theological Studies from the Harvard Divinity School, which probably explains the second goal.