

Science and Fiction

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- Future scenarios, transhumanism, posthumanism, intelligence explosion
- Virtual worlds, cyberspace dramas
- Consciousness and mind manipulation

Paul J. Nahin

Holy Sci-Fi!

Where Science Fiction and Religion Intersect

 Springer

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Frontispiece illustration reproduced by permission of the artist, Rowena Morrill. Two robotic priests tend a rose bush in Clifford Simak's 1981 novel *Project Pope*. Located on the remote planet End of Nothing at the far edge of the galaxy, the colony outpost called Vatican-17 has the goal of creating a universal religion led by an immortal computer Pope.

Also By Paul J. Nahin

Oliver Heaviside (1988, 2002)
Time Machines (1993, 1999)
The Science of Radio (1996, 2001)
An Imaginary Tale (1998, 2007, 2010)
Duelling Idiots (2000, 2002)
When Least Is Best (2004, 2007)
Dr. Euler's Fabulous Formula (2006, 2011)
Chases and Escapes (2007, 2012)
Digital Dice (2008, 2013)
Mrs. Perkins's Electric Quilt (2009)
Time Travel (1997, 2011)
Number-Crunching (2011)
The Logician and the Engineer (2013)
Will You Be Alive Ten Years From Now? (2014)

*For Patricia Ann who, for reasons known only to God, Himself;
always had faith in me.*

Epigram

“Science fiction bears the same relation to the world of science and technology that legends of the saints do to the Christian religion.”

—John Robinson Pierce, in *Engineering & Science* (November 1981)¹

¹J. R. Pierce (1910–2002) was a 1936 Caltech PhD in electrical engineering, was executive director of research of the Communications Sciences Division at Bell Labs (where he gave the transistor its name and proposed the Echo 1, Telstar, and Relay communication satellites), and was Chief Technologist at Caltech’s world-famous Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Not so well known is that in March 1930 he published his first science fiction story—“Relics from the Earth”—in the Hugo Gernsback pulp magazine *Science Wonder Stories*. Two dozen more tales and essays about the future followed over the years, in magazines ranging from the elite *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* to the more worldly—and far better paying—*Playboy* and *Penthouse*. The above quotation is from an interview I did with him for the Caltech alumni magazine (<http://calteches.library.caltech.edu/527/2/Nahin.pdf>).

Note to the Reader

There are many religions in the world, but the stories discussed in this book mostly assume either Christianity or something “vaguely Christian.” If a priest is a character he is often a Catholic, and then usually he is a scholarly Jesuit, almost always appearing as a mathematician, a biologist, or a physicist. Typical is the Jesuit scientist-hero in the 1958 novel *A Case of Conscience* who, when faced with an enormous moral dilemma (on a planet 50 light-years from Rome) that intersects science and religion, is described as follows: “a lifetime of meditation . . . had made [him], like most other gifted members of his order, quick to find his way to a decision through all but the most complicated of ethical labyrinths. All Catholics must be devout; but a Jesuit must be, in addition, agile.”

A good, that is, *interesting*, science fiction story requires emotional tension, and that is the natural result in having a member of the Society of Jesus caught in conflict between his spiritual faith and his scientific intellect. This isn't *always* the case in science fiction, however—in one story Tibetan monks appear, in another we read of a rabbi, and in yet another we encounter the spirit world of American Indians—but it is pretty nearly the case. This isn't an intentional snub of other religions, but simply recognition of the fact that most science fiction writers in the English language were raised in a Christian-based culture, even if they themselves are/were not Christians. After all, you write best, the old saying goes, about what you know. When it comes to the religions of alien beings from outer space, however, well then, of course all bets are off!

I have also limited my presentation to stories that have appeared in English, either directly or in translation (for example, the novels of Stanislaw Lem, originally published in Polish). This isn't to deny the fact that non-English science fiction writers have had a lot to say in their tales about religion, but rather it is simply that my linguistic skills are limited! Spanish, in particular,

has been the language of numerous stories dealing with what might happen if the Catholic Church ever encounters alien theology.²

I have limited myself to discussing science fiction in the written word and mention movies only in passing (and TV stuff not at all). I made that decision because movies are often based on previously published *written* works, and the transition process from one medium to the other has usually resulted in a decline of merit. The “Hollywood effect” is, more often than not, not a particularly good one for science fiction.³ And the less said about TV science fiction the better.

That last sentence is a pretty damning claim, and, like most blanket statements, there *are* exceptions. It is generally agreed in the science fiction community that two episodes of the 1964 season of TV’s *The Outer Limits* (“Soldier” and “Demon with a Glass Hand”) and an episode in 1967 on *Star Trek* (“The City at the Edge of Forever”) were pretty darn good science fiction. On the other hand, all three works were the work of a *single* writer—Harlan Ellison (born 1934)—and that sad fact (along with all three works dating from a half-century ago!) lends support to my harsh assessment.

² See Elizabeth Small, “Religious Institutions in Spanish Science Fiction,” *Science-Fiction Studies*, March 2001, pp. 33–48. In one of the tales mentioned in this essay, “El orgullo de Dios” (“The Pride of God”) by Pedro Jorge Romero (published in 2000), the Church engages in direct physical combat with Satan and “the Earth is vaporized, and a militarized Catholicism spreads through the galaxy, with monasteries and convents as the front lines of defense.” If you think that this is just “science fiction talk,” consider these words by General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, in a speech to the cadets of the US Military Academy in May 1962: “We deal now, not with things of this world alone, but with the illimitable distances and as yet unfathomed mysteries of the universe. We are reaching out for a new and boundless frontier. We speak . . . of spaceships . . . of ultimate conflict between a united human race and the sinister forces of some other planetary galaxy . . .”

³ A funny, insightful essay on the mostly dismal record of science fiction in the movies is “The Imagination of Disaster” by Susan Sontag (1933–2004) in her collection *Against Interpretation*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux 1966, pp. 209–225. This essay appeared before the 1968 release of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, however, and I think Sontag would have had better things to say about that film as well as such romantic or funny SF films as *Somewhere in Time* (1980), *Back to the Future* (1985), and *Bill & Ted’s Excellent Adventure* (1989).

Acknowledgements

Holy Sci-Fi!, with two exceptions, is very different from all the other books I have written. But even those two exceptions, treating the physics of time machines and the paradoxes of time travel as presented in science fiction, avoided considerations of the human soul, a central issue in this book. So, even among those who were supportive of my books on mathematics, physics, and electronics, there was surprise and more than a little caution when I revealed my new project. Still, there were three people who *did* greet the writing of *Holy Sci-Fi!* with immediate enthusiasm.

The well-known SF writer (and professor emeritus of physics at UC/Irvine), Gregory Benford, liked the idea a lot and generously allowed me to reprint two of his short stories that originally appeared in *Nature*.

Trevor Lipscombe, my former math editor at two university presses (and now Director of a third, well-known university press dealing with both medieval and modern theology), also liked the book—but felt it perhaps not quite right for the “serious theologians” that make up most (if not all) of his present audience. Trevor, almost certainly I have to admit, will not agree with everything I say in *Holy Sci-Fi!*, but I know that rather than being upset with me he will instead sincerely pray for the salvation of my soul.

My wife, Patricia Ann, to whom I’ve dedicated this book, is the only reason I am still alive to write it. Without her I would long ago have eaten far too many pepperoni pizzas, french fries, and apple pies and would by now have personal knowledge of the truth about Heaven (or, at least as likely perhaps, of Hell).

Finally, I must thank the great people at Springer whose support made all the difference: Jace Harker (past physics editor), Amita Raval (present physics

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Lee, NH
January 2014

Paul J. Nahin

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