

PROGRESS TOWARD DEITY AND THE END OF TIME:  
CONCEPTS OF THEOLOGY AND ESCHATOLOGY  
IN THE WORKS OF ISAAC ASIMOV

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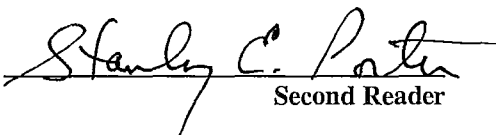
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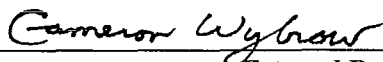
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## ABSTRACT

History has shown story and myth to be powerful communicative tools. This is no less true of modern myths, particularly the genre of science fiction (or “SF”). Isaac Asimov, a major contributor to the genre, used the framework of SF to develop concepts regarding the progress of humanity. In this thesis, two of these concepts will be explored.

The first subject is that of godhood, or deity. Christian theology and SF espouse two very different definitions of God. The former is biblically based, while the latter subscribes to Asimov’s promotion of “teleological anthropology”. This progressive doctrine helps to clarify the source of conflict between Christian theology’s view of God, and that advocated by SF.

The second concept is that of eschatology. The study of “last things” or “end times” is confusing even when Christian views are the only ones being considered. To alleviate this confusion, many of eschatology’s most frequently used terms will be defined from a biblical and theological basis. SF’s views of the future and eschatology are also considered, once again highlighting Asimov’s contributions. Special attention will be paid to Donald A. Wollheim’s model of “future-history”, a framework that proves helpful in systematizing Asimov’s thought and lasting legacy. Wollheim’s model helps to polarize Asimov’s implicit ideology of “evolutionary eschatology”, a system of thought which provides a context for the doctrine of teleological anthropology.

These two areas of discussion hold intriguing ramifications for the Christian gospel and its applications. This thesis will conclude with an attempt to define the gospel as it relates to the task of theology. Building on this foundation, some potential

adaptations will be drawn together as responses to the challenges raised by the previous discussion with SF, concluding with suggestions for adapting the gospel to new contexts.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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On a broader level, my thanks go out to two sources of inspiration: to the many science fiction authors who have taken me along for the ride on their literary flights of fancy, and to Jesus Christ, who led a life of love and gave that life as a sacrifice for my salvation. This work is dedicated to my mother, Peggy Lowe, for her many years of patience, guidance, and hard work in raising my sister and me. On this, the day after Mother's Day, I hope that she is proud of the fruits of her labours.

Matthew Lowe

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## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. The Power of Story and Modern Myth

Human history has demonstrated the remarkable power of story when used as an illustrative tool. Many societies have created *myths*: stories that discuss serious concepts (such as unexplained natural phenomena, or human origins and nature) within an imaginative framework of story. Contemporary North American society is no exception: though they are usually treated as entirely fictional in nature, myths and stories continue to be used as a societal medium of self-exploration. At times these stories are appropriated from the past; modern culture has a passing acquaintance with biblical stories, themes of ancient Greek and Egyptian myth, and the more recent categories of fairy tales and folk stories. But myth is not limited to the past. Today, the human race continues to create concepts that help to interpret human experience. These are *modern myths*,<sup>1</sup> grounded in beliefs about the present and future as often as the ancient myths were rooted in the past.

Chief among these modern myths is a genre of literature known as science fiction (hereafter “SF”). A collection of imaginative stories set in the future and usually dealing with new technology, encounters with aliens and voyages to distant planets, SF is often maligned as a genre of pulp and mindless fantasy. Only after a significant period of growth and development in the middle of the twentieth century has it gained any respect as a legitimate genre of literary work. As a valid category of modern myth, SF is unusually well qualified to make statements of social and religious commentary.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “modern myth” is taken to mean that although the setting is contemporary or futuristic, these stories contain themes designed to speak to the current era. Such a setting is a key difference between modern and ancient myths: ancient myths spoke similarly to their societies, but using situations derived from real or imagined *past* events, as in the case of origin or creation stories.

Why does myth matter in the first place? Perhaps it matters because it is capable of transcending the “gap” between perceived fact and fiction. Myth can illustrate problems from the natural and social spheres by removing the problems from their normal context, forcing the audience to re-evaluate their own views on a given subject by translating that subject into an entirely different frame of reference. The power of story and myth is based not so much in the *ability* to translate but in *how* such a translation is effected. Simply put, myth takes the transcendent and makes it immanent. It takes what is “out there” and pulls it into the realm of “in here”. That which is infinite and incomprehensible becomes local, tangible, and knowable, or a part of personal experience.<sup>2</sup> If necessary, the process can be reversed: the familiar can be made foreign in order to demonstrate a point regarding the natural world, human nature or even divine identity.<sup>3</sup> This is particularly true of ancient Greek myth, where human traits were ascribed to the gods, who inherited any facet of human nature (for example, pride or jealousy) on which the story’s author wished to comment.<sup>4</sup> SF is a significant and legitimate category within the spectrum of modern literature and modern myth. It provides the mind with one of the best possible “vehicles”, so to speak, with which to consider the unfamiliar, the unknown, often including anthropological and theological insights.

When SF contributors choose to express views on religion, the comments they

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<sup>2</sup> For a more in-depth study of myth, see Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Bollingen; 1949, repr. New York: MJF Books, 1996), pp. 3-46. Campbell may be slightly overstating his case when he declares that “It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation” (p. 3). He does however go on to explore myth as a metaphorical representation of inward, psychological functions (p. 29).

<sup>3</sup> James W. Bittner speaks of the ability of myth and romance to “estrangle” the familiar: “what appeared normal appears strange, what had been alienated is brought home.” See Bittner, *Approaches to the Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984), p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> See Campbell, p. 29.

make on Christianity are often as revealing and of more practical significance in understanding the “human situation” than any explicitly stated religious study or systematic theology. That is, though their settings may be placed in the future, their socio-religious commentary is firmly rooted in the present, so that their audiences can relate to the characters and their thoughts. The imaginative contexts of these modern myths do not reduce their meaning; they enhance it. Their authors already transcend the limiting natures of time, space, technology, and current human problems; they can speak about the condition of the human relationship to God just as easily as they can comment on the human condition itself.

### **B. Theological Challenges from SF: Isaac Asimov**

SF has a great deal to say about anthropology, theology, and the relationship between the two. The proliferation of different voices, and even entire sub-genres within the field, however, makes it difficult to draw any real conclusions on exactly what SF has to say. It would be difficult and even counterproductive to explore the theology and eschatology of an entire genre. For a more specific focus, it is necessary to emphasize one particular contributor to SF, preferably one whose writings are well known, well documented and early enough in the development of SF as a genre so as to be normative for much of the body of literature that has followed. The ideal choice in this regard is Isaac Asimov. One of the genre’s foremost pioneers, Asimov established the foundation for much of what was to follow. In effect, his novels – particularly the *Foundation* series – formed a guiding force that shaped the general consensus of science fiction “doctrine” as it stands today.<sup>5</sup> A few of the author’s nonfiction works should also be considered, for

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<sup>5</sup> Donald A. Wollheim, *The Universe Makers: Science Fiction Today* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 42 and 44.

these contain themes which Asimov also displayed in his fiction while assembling the structure of civilization's growth on a cosmic scale. Though his stories were created with a strong interest in the technological and interstellar progress of humankind, the process of such storytelling makes certain assumptions about the nature of God, the universe, and the human race, which challenge the concepts of traditional Christian theology.

Asimov's challenges fall conveniently within the scope of a few distinct subsections of Christian theology, and it is best to use each of these same concepts as a focus for discussion. This study will emphasize two of these major themes. The first of these is the specific concept of godhood, or deity, as understood by Christian theology and by SF; the second is eschatology, as envisioned by Christian interpreters and by SF's authors. A third and final point of focus falls on suggestions for possible adaptations to the Christian gospel message, in light of the preceding discourse on theological themes.

### **C. Structure and Goals: Theoretical and Practical**

This study, then, will be organized into three major areas of discussion. Each subject area will begin with definitions of relevant terms, followed sequentially by an exploration of the views espoused by evangelical Christian theology, then those of SF and of Asimov in particular, and finally some commentary on the significance of any conflict between these two perspectives.

Chapter Two addresses the first main subject, that of godhood, or deity: the specific concept of God, as understood through the attributes of divine nature. Traditional Christian theology has arrived at a definition of God that is biblically based and quite comprehensive, though by no means final; in SF, beginning with a progressive understanding of the relationship between humanity and the divine, a very different view

has evolved. At the core of this latter view is Isaac Asimov's promotion of what may be called "teleological anthropology". This doctrine will be explored in Asimov's fiction and religious nonfiction, and its background and repercussions will also be studied in order to understand the source of conflict between Christian theology's view of God, and that advocated by the SF genre.

The second focus of consideration will be outlined in the third chapter, eschatology. A difficult and controversial subject, eschatology – the study of "last things" or the "end times" – is confusing enough even when Christian views are the only ones being considered. To alleviate some of that confusion, many of eschatology's most frequently used terms will be defined, including a biblical basis and subsequent theological interpretations. The discussion then moves to SF's views of the future and eschatology, once again highlighting Asimov's contributions, as framed by a few of the SF genre's qualified critics. Special attention will be paid to Donald A. Wollheim's model of "future-history", a framework that proves helpful in systematizing Asimov's thought and the developments of later authors who have furthered his legacy. Wollheim's model helps to polarize Asimov's implicit ideology of "evolutionary eschatology", a system of thought which provides a context for the doctrine of teleological anthropology. Again, the significance of this conflict will be addressed before moving on to the final chapter.

Chapter Four presents the third area of discussion, the gospel and its applications. This focus will take a slightly different form, beginning as usual with an attempt to find a definition for the Christian gospel as it relates to the task of theology, taking care to establish biblical support for such a crucial concept. Rather than proceeding to SF's

views on the gospel (of which there are very few), some possible adaptations will be drawn together as responses to the challenges raised by the previous discussion with SF, concluding with some specific suggestions for adapting the gospel to new contexts.

Ultimately, the goals of this study are twofold. The first, with which the majority of the paper will be concerned, is theoretical. The theology and eschatology of classical Christian doctrine, as they have been biblically and historically stated, will be discussed and compared with the theology and eschatology of SF, as implicitly outlined by Asimov. The strengths and weaknesses of each will be pointed out, and the aspects of the one that might benefit the other will be emphasized.

The second goal is the practical extension of the theoretical. Significant challenges to Christian doctrine should always be intelligently addressed: any response to perceived changes in cultural values and needs should be an informed and creative attempt to make theology relevant to Christian ministry in society. The gospel of Jesus Christ must be expressed in relevant terms, without losing the integrity of the essential message. The ability to respond to changes in cultural values and needs is a very necessary thing for theology, because the outward expression of theology – the gospel – must be expressed in relevant terms, without changing the content of its saving message. To reform, reshape, and rephrase the gospel creatively, then, is vital to theological discussion. Studies along the lines proposed above will be highly theoretical by nature, but they are also grounded in practical use in today's world. One of the goals of this research will be to produce a coherent, active and forward-thinking theology, resulting in a gospel that is malleable without sacrificing the integrity of its own truth. Ideally, a theoretical and theological response should lead to a practical means for ministry.

Again, the response must be practical, not merely theoretical: what are the implications of these challenges for the expression of the gospel, the essential Christian message? A teleological understanding of humanity and the divine, framed by an evolutionary understanding of the universe as outlined by Asimov in his fiction and nonfiction works, demands new and creative responses from traditional Christian theology. This will be the main statement in this thesis, with an emphasis on formulating such responses in relevant fashion.

## II. GODHOOD and DEITY

This chapter will begin with an attempt to frame several relevant definitions: theology as a discipline, religion as a context for theology, and God as the central focus of theology. The understanding of God held by traditional, evangelical Christian theology will be outlined in an attributive fashion, working from a biblical basis to a brief survey of attribute-oriented theological thought. SF's non-traditional definitions of God, and the states of being a god or godlike figure, will be discussed and compared with the classical positions of Christian doctrine.<sup>6</sup> Isaac Asimov's work will be the prime focus of this comparison. In his science fiction, and in particular his *Foundation* trilogy, Asimov espouses several themes that are relevant to theology. The process of demythologization is prominent, as is *teleological anthropology*: the idea that humankind's potential progress is virtually unlimited, that through technological and genetic prowess human beings will someday become practically omnipotent. These same themes are reflected in Asimov's nonfiction: his *Guide to the Bible* is a study in demythologizing a religious text, a trend that has remained popular in SF, while in the same work, teleological anthropology is advocated in what may be labelled the "grasshopper theme". When the level of power available to humans is so easily equated with godhood or god-likeness, how should Christian theology reply?

### A. Difficult Definitions: Outlining Theology and Religion

What is theology? What is the difference between theology and religion?

Theology, literally the study of God or god(s), has gradually been transformed in many

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<sup>6</sup> Christian theology's diverse history makes it difficult to locate one unanimously affirmed position concerning definitions of God. Conveniently, the views of SF are just as diverse; both traditions can be said to operate by general consensus, as will be pointed out later with regard to SF.



academic curricula until it begins to impinge on the realm of what many would call religion. The two are admittedly inseparable in many areas – first and foremost, both are concerned with God and/or the divine – but here the definition of theology should be limited somewhat. Theology is an understanding of divine identity, nature and purpose, usually including, but not limited to, the relationship between God and humanity.<sup>7</sup> Christian theology is such an understanding based upon the revelation contained in the Bible, and upon the doctrines that can be reasoned from this source; the exact nature of the God disclosed in biblical study will be addressed later. Religion’s definition, meanwhile, must be more comprehensive, and is usually oriented “from below”, that is, from the human standpoint. Religion is the way in which humans relate to that which they consider divine. It is more broadly concerned with a categorical understanding of the sacred, and a phenomenological approach to human response to the sacred, both in belief and praxis.<sup>8</sup> It forms the larger context, the frame of reference, for theological discussion, and so it must be included in that discussion; theology can only be understood within it.

The defining difference between theology and religion is more than just that of comprehensiveness and disciplinary approach. Theology as a discipline is more specific, and ideally more devotional, than is the general study of religion, surveying the study and teaching of God’s nature, his purpose for and relationship to human beings, and the acquired knowledge of these things, seated in both the head and the heart. In his *Spiritual*

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<sup>7</sup> This definition, while original to this study, is indebted and similar in content to that of Simon Chan (“theology is simply the rational and precise expression of the believer’s reflection of God”) and the lengthier understanding offered by Millard Erickson. See Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 16; and Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 1998), pp. 17-24.

<sup>8</sup> Much of the above is similar in content to Erickson’s comments on “the nature of religion”, pp. 18-19.

*Theology*, Simon Chan reminds his readers that Christian theology has historically been worked out as an act of prayer.<sup>9</sup> Theology refers to the knowledge of God and his relationship to humanity, the dynamics of individual and corporate relationship with him. It is for the most part an internal, or perhaps internalized, discipline; theology must be paired with an ecclesiology, an ethical framework, or some other practical outlet for the application of faith and doctrine, in order to be of any good outside the realms of personal belief and corporate agreement. It is this internalized and potentially applicable discipline that is of primary concern for the purposes of this study. The study, however, must have an object; God must be defined as well.

Who, or what, is God? What is he like? How does he make himself known to this world? To answer these questions is no easy task, and it is made still more difficult because the different sources of theology that will be explored here – the Bible, together with its traditional interpretations, and science fiction – give very different, and even contradictory, responses. Part of this problem can be explained by the dichotomy between their categories as literature. The Bible is sacred literature, while SF is usually linked with the secular, particularly because of its emphasis on science and the supposedly anti-religious agenda of this interest. The Bible is also ancient literature, written in the distant past and reporting on primeval events. SF is not only modern in origin, but casts its gaze upon the future, musing on what advances are yet to come. Last and perhaps with the greatest degree of difference, Christians hold the Bible to be nonfiction, and more than that, divine revelation. By contrast, SF is fiction by its very name, a study in ideas and possibilities, at times only loosely based in present fact and

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<sup>9</sup> Chan, p. 16.

occasionally even assassinating the deity so adamantly claimed by the Bible. Out of these stark contrasts comes a profound debate as to the question “who is God?”

## **B. Definitions of God and Gods**

### **1. God-Definitions: Traditional Christian Theology and SF**

The first task is to define God, or godhood. Establishing a working definition is essential, for many of the succeeding arguments in the chapters to come will build upon the definitions begun here. As this study begins and ends with *theology*, the study of god, it must begin by exploring the central subject of theology, before attempting to understand how it is that humans think about and interact with him. It is best to start with a relatively simple definition, which may increase in complexity later on. To use the concepts with which most familiar attempts at theology are concerned, *God is the original (and pre-causal) entity who creates and sustains the universe. He is omniscient, omnipotent, and eternally unchanging, often playing a beneficent and/or redemptive role in human history.*<sup>10</sup> These qualities, the familiar qualifiers to traditional definitions of deity, have often been disputed in recent times.<sup>11</sup> They will serve adequately for the purpose of this study, however, the point of which is to compare the concepts of traditional Christian theology with the newer and often contradictory ideas of SF. This working definition represents the concept of God most familiar to a largely Western,

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<sup>10</sup> The two major god-definitions (one for Christian theology and one for SF; the latter appears below, on p. 18) to be used here, while not completely independent of other and older sources, are original to this study. It is acknowledged that both definitions are broad in scope, with the hope that a more comprehensive definition can also be a simpler one.

<sup>11</sup> Omnipotence was a subject of debate for Aquinas, as well as for more recent scholars like George Mavrodes; see Louis P. Pojman, *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1987), pp. 233-237. A recent example is the controversy regarding God’s omniscience (specifically his foreknowledge) and impassability, a dispute in which Clark Pinnock and Gregory A. Boyd feature prominently. See Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994); this debate is also referenced in Gregory E. Ganssle, “Introduction: Thinking About God and Time”, and Alan G. Padgett,

Judeo-Christian audience (with which a wider audience of Muslims, Mormons, and even most non-religious Westerners would agree, for the most part). This would seem to generate validity through “majority opinion”, but the current majority view is less relevant than the larger historical perspective, the “big picture” of theological doctrine. An investigation beginning with a definition of a God with these qualities will be most revealing as the focus shifts toward the definitions that SF implicitly and explicitly uses.

Why should so much attention be directed toward the qualities of God?

Traditional Judeo-Christian thought, based largely in what the Bible says about God, determines that God is unknowable, incomprehensible to the human mind.<sup>12</sup> As the Psalms are conceived of collectively as a book of praise to God, it may be helpful to draw illustrations about his attributes from them.<sup>13</sup> Psalm 139:17-18 exclaims, “How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them – they are more than the sand”. In response to a God whose ways are mysterious and hidden from human understanding, those who wish to learn about the God of the Bible have turned their focus to his attributes. Assuming, as the Bible often implies, that a vast gulf exists between the human and the divine, then the character of the unknowable God can only be known via his characteristics. Following are several examples of the process of discovering God’s attributes.

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“Eternity as Relative Timelessness”, in Ganssle, *Four Views: God and Time* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001) p. 21 and 109, respectively.

<sup>12</sup> This statement is not intended to discount the exercises in philosophy and natural theology advocated by Thomist thought; it merely acknowledges that there are some areas of divine nature and purpose that remain opaque to theology and philosophy alike. See Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, Volume I: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1984), pp. 317-319.

<sup>13</sup> It should be acknowledged that the Psalms are “first order” statements (directly describing God) rather than “second order” statements (addressing the process of God-contemplation itself). While statements of the second order are often more useful for religious discussion, the direct contemplation of God and his attributes is of greater concern here. Kerygmatic documents such as Psalms are therefore quite helpful.

To know God as well as is humanly possible was the goal of many of the Church's earliest theologians. The first of these was Paul. The self-proclaimed apostle to the Gentiles never outlined the full extent of his systematic thought in his epistles; it is debatable whether he had even determined that for himself.<sup>14</sup> God was made known to Paul mainly by his actions and what could be inferred from them. From the point of his conversion or call on the road to Damascus, it gradually became clear to the apostle how God sent his Son as a sacrifice, how he detested sin, how he forgave and justified sinners, and how he gave his Holy Spirit as a guide and comforter to all believers.<sup>15</sup> In these actions, Paul could see love, holiness, mercy, grace, justice, goodness, and faithfulness. This was, then, the earliest thorough exploration of God's characteristics.

Three centuries later, Augustine took up the writings of Paul and the rest of the Scriptures and produced, among other works, *De Trinitate*. This book can be acknowledged as the first major attempt at systematic Christian theology as it is understood today – that is, rather than concentrating solely on the person and work of Christ, Augustine went on to explore the concepts that have since been identified with the *economic* and *immanent trinity*. Based largely on Pauline thought and the tradition of patristic theology, Augustine's work outlined the nature and functions of the Trinity, further developing the attributes of its three Persons along the way.<sup>16</sup>

Two later attempts may help to show more recent lines of attribute-oriented thought. In his devotional classic *The Knowledge of the Holy*, A. W. Tozer devoted a

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<sup>14</sup> R. P. Martin, "Center of Paul's Theology", *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, G. F. Hawthorne, R. P. Martin, and D. G. Reid, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 92.

<sup>15</sup> For more on the restructuring of Paul's belief, see Lee Martin McDonald and Stanley E. Porter, *Early Christianity and its Sacred Literature* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), pp. 334-337.

<sup>16</sup> For Augustine's contributions to Trinitarian thought, see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, 1978), pp. 269-275.

chapter each to nineteen distinct characteristics of God. Included among these was one for each of the traits mentioned above in Paul, and one on the Trinitarian nature of God as an attribute in itself.<sup>17</sup> His particular emphasis on the quality of holiness will be examined in detail later. While Tozer's work is admittedly more devotional than academic in style and content, his attributive understanding of God has received strong support and historical legitimacy from the likes of J. I. Packer and Millard Erickson.<sup>18</sup>

Modern systematic theologies such as Daniel Migliore's *Faith Seeking Understanding* often take a broader and more developmental approach, beginning with "the task of theology" and "the meaning of revelation" before applying this knowledge to the God who is thus revealed.<sup>19</sup> Here there is a greater attention to the people of God, as individuals and as a corporate church body,<sup>20</sup> as well as emphases in the major theological debates that have raged over the past few centuries. Even when Migliore's focus is not on God's attributes, he must build his arguments on their implications because of the attention that these qualities received from Migliore's predecessors.

The attributes of God, then, have a historically demonstrated record of efficacy. Though it must acknowledge the ineffable and infinite nature of God, Christianity's admittedly limited comprehension of God has been largely attribute-based, oriented toward discovering who God has shown himself to be and what he has done among his people, in the world at large and in the cosmos as whole.

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<sup>17</sup> A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961; repr. Markham, ON: Thomas Allen and Son, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> See J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1993), pp. 23-56 and especially pp. 43-44; and Erickson, pp. 289-367 and especially pp. 311-313.

<sup>19</sup> See Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), chs. 1-3.

<sup>20</sup> Migliore, pp. 189-205.

SF's definitions of God have a decidedly different basis, a background of optimistic and progressive views of humanity's future. Locating an exact definition remains difficult, however, because SF tends not to make use of the term "God" itself too frequently. There are two reasons for this trend.

First, even the most seasoned readers of the genre can name no more than a handful of books where a major character or culture exhibits clear signs of organized religious faith. Though it would seem that God could exist independently of institutional, corporate religion, religious traditions themselves form a context in which belief in God and interactions with God can be addressed. Without this context, discussion of God is reduced to either philosophy (which can deal with discussion *of* God but is hardly capable of interaction *with* him) or loose systems of personal non-codified beliefs and superstitions (which may describe how to interact with God but are ill-suited for any sort of organized belief). The latter option is quite popular in SF – allusions to an anthropomorphized "fate" or "destiny" are frequent and necessarily vague, as are references to "religion" without any of the trappings normally associated with this category.<sup>21</sup> SF often tries to lay claim to religion as a phenomenological or sociological label, and even as a category, without always understanding the ramifications, and in many cases the impossibility, of its claims.

Every religion must have some supernatural, spiritual or transcendental concept or Person at its core (see page 10), as well as a method for relating to that centre, whether specifically christocentric, more generally theocentric, or even pluralistically "Real-

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<sup>21</sup> For these points, see respectively *Star Wars* and novelist Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Telling*. *Star Wars* has immortalized "the Force" as a life-guiding entity, while several of Le Guin's novels attempt to deal with religion without prayer, ritual, adepts, or any attention to the miraculous; Ursula Le Guin, *The Telling* (New York: Harcourt, 2000), pp. 133-136.

centred".<sup>22</sup> For Christian belief, that centre is Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Saviour of humankind; more broadly, there is the central Trinity of God the Father, Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Even outside of specifically Christian circles, however, there must still be a divine or transcendental core focus of some kind in order for a religion to function with any degree of efficacy or even logical sense. The transcendental object (a person or supernatural being, a goal, or even a central idea) is what gives a religion meaning and purpose; to develop one idea without the other, religion without the centre, seems rather pointless. Like Western culture over the past decade, SF has been occasionally interested in exploring the spiritual aspects of religion,<sup>23</sup> but not at the great cost of genuinely investigating the driving force or forces that demand religious thought and behaviour in the first place.

Second, when SF does mention God, the reader is often left with the sense that the word is not being defined in traditional Christian terms. When SF speaks of God, the title is not nearly as exclusive as it is when used by the Christian tradition; in SF, god-status is often only implied. When the title is used openly, it is usually left uncapitalized, and rendered in the plural, as in "god" or "gods"; this item will be addressed in more depth below.

As a result of these two factors, SF's concepts of God and religion are kept separate and distinct from one another. Religion is viewed sociologically, seen as a guiding or controlling influence on society, while its divine central object is often

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<sup>22</sup> This last term has been coined and advocated by John Hick in his discussions of criteria and common denominators for pluralist religious belief. For a summary see Hick, "The Theological Challenge of Religious Pluralism", in Roger A. Badham, *Introduction to Christian Theology: Contemporary North American Perspectives* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), pp. 33-35.

<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Puttick, "New Religions in the New Millennium", in Stanley E. Porter, Michael A. Hayes, and David Tombs, *Faith in the Millennium* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), pp. 320-321.



ignored;<sup>24</sup> God, meanwhile, when discussed at all, is deprived of his divine attributes as they have been traditionally understood. To attempt an attributive definition of godhood for SF, it can be said that *God (or god) is an entity or group of entities who are, by means of technological progress, eugenic evolution, or a combination thereof, powerful to the point of virtual omnipotence and capable of exerting a profound creative, destructive or otherwise active force upon the universe.* Several differences should be noted between this and the traditional Christian definition above, particularly in what SF's definition leaves out: it is a definition for a truncated god, stating as much about what SF assumes that god is *not* as it does about what god *is*. Gone is original, pre-causal existence. The creating and sustaining roles, as well as the beneficent manner in which these are carried out, become optional; some of SF's gods prefer maleficence. Then, too, as god-status is achieved by progress, "eternally unchanging" is eliminated as well.

Even if the attributes debated above have been efficacious in theology, why should they continue to be the basis of understanding the divine in SF? The definition given by SF presents a God more easily understood, one who can be dissected and compartmentalized according to familiar human categories and concepts. This is because SF's idea of god is fundamentally more human, and often depends on the development of a given individual or group of humanoids, progressing to a point where they can be accurately referred to as "god".

This man-become-god idea is not new; its roots can readily be found in Egyptian, Greek and Roman myth, including the "emperor cult" of Rome; it is also a premise of Buddhist thought. These, however, were all attempts to explain past and present events. By contrast, the prominence of deification in SF is due to its simple predictability for the

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<sup>24</sup> Again, see Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Telling*.

future. Given the right conditions for intelligent life to evolve, and ample time for culture and technology to progress, it is a near-universal assumption in SF that sapient<sup>25</sup> beings will eventually become godlike in power and ability. Even now, formulae have been developed to calculate the probability of intelligent extra-terrestrial life using just such factors.<sup>26</sup> This seeming inevitability of godhood, however, stands in direct opposition to the God-definitions of traditional theology. The resulting conflict can be better understood once the background of SF's god-definitions has been explored. For modern SF, this means turning to the writings of Isaac Asimov.

## 2. Science Fiction's God-Definitions: Isaac Asimov

Isaac Asimov is best known as an author of science fiction, whose works span a period of over fifty years. A professional writer since 1938, his short stories were first published in editor John W. Campbell Jr.'s *Astounding Science Fiction* magazine.<sup>27</sup> His famous trilogy, the *Foundation* series (to which later volumes were added) first appeared there in serial form, beginning in 1942.<sup>28</sup> He went on to write numerous other well known SF novels and short stories, a few of which, such as *Bicentennial Man*, have been produced as feature films. Asimov was also a prolific nonfiction writer, penning multiple

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<sup>25</sup> While the majority of SF, especially the more popular visual form of the genre, refers to intelligent life as "sentient", this is something of a misnomer; "sapient" is closer to the intended meaning and is used by several authors who deal with definitions of intelligent life. See classic SF novelist H. Beam Piper's works *Little Fuzzy* and *Fuzzy Sapiens* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1962 and 1964; repr. New York: Ace Books, 1984).

<sup>26</sup> See Drake's Equation (named for radio astronomer Frank Drake), where the number of intelligent civilizations in the universe is equal to the product of 7 multiplicands: rate of star formation, probability that a star has planets, number of planets in star's ecosphere, probability that a star lives long enough for life to develop, probability that life develops, probability that this life becomes intelligent, and lifetime of intelligent culture. Repr. in Michael Zeilik, *Astronomy: The Evolving Universe* (New York: Wiley, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, 1988), pp. 491-495.

<sup>27</sup> Isaac Asimov, "The Story Behind the *Foundation*" (Davis Publications, 1982; repr. in Asimov, *Foundation* [Toronto: Ballantine, 1983, 1989]), pp. IX-X.

<sup>28</sup> Asimov, "The Story Behind the *Foundation*", p. X.

volumes in the disciplines of history and the physical sciences. Asimov stands out as one of the pioneers of the modern genre of SF.

SF as a genre can certainly be traced back as far as masters like Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, and some would locate its roots in sources as old as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.<sup>29</sup> As critic Donald A. Wollheim puts it, SF as it stands today is the result of a sort of accumulated "system of ideas...it speculates in futurities and in probabilities. These are more to be remembered than the depth of character of its heroes."<sup>30</sup> This system is not the work of any one person, but is based instead on a sort of collective building process, in which the creative contribution of each SF storyteller "grows upon the body of [SF] lore".<sup>31</sup> The genre is composed entirely of "ideas worked out in the past and now taken for granted when utilized today."<sup>32</sup> Wollheim explains that a "pseudoscience" explanation for a given SF phenomenon or invention can be used to form a "scientific" premise.<sup>33</sup> Such a premise, once used by one author, may be adopted by others, leading to widespread use of the accepted "scientific" premise without any further explanation or "operational manual"; this process, loosely based in true science as it is, is governed only by a degree of suspended disbelief that Wollheim labels a "plausibility quotient".<sup>34</sup>

As a genre constructed from many such premises, SF exists as a tradition of *consensus*, with multiple authors, whose various innovations vie for popularity within the

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<sup>29</sup> The horror genre also has a legitimate claim on this work, and both SF and horror have developed the monster-creation theme in recent decades. See George Mann, *The Mammoth Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2001), pp. 8-9.

<sup>30</sup> Wollheim, p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Wollheim, p. 12.

<sup>32</sup> Wollheim, p. 14; Mann, p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> Wollheim, p. 14.

<sup>34</sup> Wollheim, p. 14; for a more recent summary, see Mann, p. 5.

tradition and are developed and reworked by later contributors. Asimov stands as one of the earliest of the modern contributors, and many of his “pseudoscience” ideas have been accepted and further developed by his successors and followers; his “plausibility quotient” can thus be said to be quite high, and his premises have become normative for SF as a genre.

For which specific ideas is Asimov responsible? Foremost is a general structure of cosmic progress, of the exploration of the galaxy and encounters with alien races, to be addressed under the rubric of eschatology. Within his general idea of the progress of humankind, Asimov promoted “teleological anthropology” as an assumption, based in humanist belief, that the potential of humanity is practically unlimited. For Asimov, the forward progress of intelligent life is not a steady pattern, but it is a predictable one, ultimately culminating in godlike power. Though this assumption is always implicitly stated, teleological anthropology has been accepted as a premise of SF. Through his own writings and the developments made by his followers, Asimov has formulated more of SF’s theology than almost any other author, rivalled only by Arthur C. Clarke.

The question remains, however: why this view? It may be that this understanding is the result of a “demythologized” universe.<sup>35</sup> Christian theologians are accustomed to Bultmann’s use of the term, as an attempt to make Christianity more appealing to an intended audience accustomed to rationalist thinking. The mere suggestion of “demythologizing” the Bible indicates that the trend away from myth is a broader one, and that religion in general has been subjected to a great deal of rationalist

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<sup>35</sup> The demythologizing process in SF contains an irony that should be noted here: religious ideas, stripped of their very religious aspect and explained scientifically, are then incorporated into the new mythological framework of SF.

scrutiny in recent decades. Regarding any account of divine, miraculous or magical intervention with skepticism, alternative rational explanations were sought for events whose veracity had traditionally gone almost unchallenged.

These alternatives themselves were not necessarily any more plausible than the traditional explanations which they replaced. Several theories, for instance, posited that the divine characters of ancient mythic and religious accounts were actually powerful extraterrestrial beings. Erich von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods?* ascribes Ezekiel's apocalyptic visions to flying saucer sightings, and ponders whether the Ark of the Covenant was in reality "an intercom system through which the prophets received the word from outer space".<sup>36</sup> W. Raymond Drake's similar work, *Gods and Spacemen in the Ancient East*, explains that "distorted race-memory"<sup>37</sup> has deified powerful beings who are constantly pointed to as "possibly Spacemen", waging war with superweapons that (to Drake) can be equated with nuclear devices.<sup>38</sup> "To marvelling mortals spaceships gleaming in the sunshine would resemble silver swans," Drake states,<sup>39</sup> finding extraterrestrial intervention in the *Ramayana*, the "eye of Horus" of Egyptian myth, and even the history of the Venerable Bede.<sup>40</sup> The result of his generalizations is "a clear, consistent story covering the entire Ancient East...Myth becomes science, the old fables subject to empirical proof".<sup>41</sup> Myth, within the rationalist view taken by Asimov and taken to extremes by Däniken and Drake, does not simply "become" science, but is

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<sup>36</sup> Däniken's work is reviewed in "Pop Theology: Those Gods from Outer Space", Religion column of *Time* magazine (September 5, 1969), p. 50.

<sup>37</sup> W. Raymond Drake, *Gods and Spacemen in the Ancient East* (New York: Signet/New American Library, 1968), p. 226.

<sup>38</sup> Drake, pp. 29 and 33.

<sup>39</sup> Drake, p. 38.

<sup>40</sup> Drake, pp. 36, 68, and 105.

<sup>41</sup> Drake, p. 223.

replaced by science; the most implausible scientific explanation is thus regarded as more credible than the smallest of miracles.

Examples of both teleological anthropology and demythologization can be found in Asimov's *Foundation* series. The epic storyline revolves around the First Foundation, an institution on a remote world established by the character Hari Seldon in the last days of the Galactic Empire. Seldon is a mathematician and the master of "psychohistory", which is in essence a game theory approach<sup>42</sup> to predicting the interaction of large population-masses. Seldon's calculations indicate that the Empire will soon decay and fall, with a resulting "Great Interregnum" that may last up to thirty millennia. To shorten this dark age, Seldon gathers the best and brightest of his disciples into two Foundations, which will act as his tools in manipulating the galaxy's events over a span of one thousand years.<sup>43</sup> The original three novels (*Foundation*, *Foundation and Empire*, and *Second Foundation*) narrate the intrigues of the First Foundation as its members face a variety of political and military crises, blindly following the "Seldon Plan" while the Empire decays around it.

In the three novels, a great degree of power is displayed by the Foundation, whose members maintain and develop technical knowledge during the "Great Interregnum", and the reverence shown them by the "barbarian" worlds around them is equally striking. Kings who rule by means of Foundation technology are referred to as god,<sup>44</sup> while the reputation of the Foundation is that of "magicians at the edge of the galaxy, magicians

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<sup>42</sup> Game theory: a strategic and mathematical form of problem-solving, used to weigh possible gains, losses, and potential future outcomes within given limitations, with many applications in commercial and military fields.

<sup>43</sup> While a time period of this length is often representative of an apocalyptic "millennium", there is no indication that Asimov meant the number to be anything other than arbitrary.

<sup>44</sup> Asimov, *Foundation* (repr. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), p. 109.

who glowed in the darkness, who flew unaided through the air, and whom weapons could not touch.”<sup>45</sup> “Magician”, as the title is used here, is indicative of power, mysterious in origin, rather than conventional sleight-of-hand or witchcraft.

There are rational, “pseudoscientific” explanations for all of these “magical” phenomena, but they are not explained to the masses, they are not demythologized, unless it serves the Foundation’s purpose. When unexplained, there is an “involuntary surge of near-worship” of the Foundation on the part of those worlds that have lost the knowledge necessary to be technologically competitive.<sup>46</sup> Even the original storehouse of technical knowledge, the Library on the former capital world of Trantor, is treated as sacrosanct.<sup>47</sup> The main reason for the Foundation’s existence is to preserve and develop the sum of human knowledge, so that it may be reclaimed and shared when the rest of the former Galactic Empire is ready to move forward from the Interregnum. Its mission, then, is essentially one that aids the cause of teleological anthropology.

Demythologization would seem to run counter to that same cause. Point of view, however, is of great importance. For the Foundation itself, any magical or religious interpretations of its abilities are nonsense, but these can be useful as propaganda. Originally, the Foundation’s mandate is the preservation of scientific truth, which the enlightened Seldon maintains to be uncoloured by any agenda, “beyond loyalty and disloyalty” to the Empire or any other allegiance.<sup>48</sup> Not long after his death, however, his Foundation colours just such truths in order to buttress its own standing among its

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<sup>45</sup> *Foundation*, p. 193; a similar account is given in Asimov, *Foundation and Empire* (repr. New York: Avon/Doubleday, 1953), p. 113.

<sup>46</sup> Asimov, *Second Foundation* (repr. New York: Avon/Doubleday, 1953), p. 31.

<sup>47</sup> *Second Foundation*, p. 156.

<sup>48</sup> *Foundation*, p. 23.

neighbouring planets. It dispenses technical knowledge and innovations as gifts from their divine science, “half religion, half balderdash” with “a hierarchy of priests and complicated, meaningless ritual” as part of the package.<sup>49</sup> It is significant, however, that eventually the Foundation outgrows the need for such religious trappings, relying increasingly on economic power through trade. Though the reputation of magic persists from a distance,<sup>50</sup> it is no longer necessary; within the scheme of the Seldon Plan (which has its own semi-religious following), the Foundation’s leaders observe that “religion is played-out” and no longer helpful to their mission.<sup>51</sup> While it lasts, religion is useful as a tool, a mystical vehicle for essentially political propaganda, nothing more. Gods are referred to infrequently, but their nature is designed, and immanent, rather than transcendent. A scientific explanation (or “pseudoscientific premise”, as far as the reader is concerned) lies at the heart of every “magical” phenomenon.

Outside of *Foundation*, Asimov occasionally takes the idea of demythologization further still, in the direction of Däniken and Drake, supposing an alien presence in ancient religious accounts. In his short story “Hostess”, a character discovers the presence of parasitic aliens who feed off human mental activity from within the brain, and she wonders if the account of the serpent in Genesis is actually an allusion to the parasites’ initial invasion.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, in “Nightfall”, the most credible reason given for the recurrent catastrophes suffered by one planet is one shrouded in “a lot of religio-mystic notions”; when stripped of myth, the religious accounts provide an accurate, but entirely

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<sup>49</sup> *Foundation*, p. 86.

<sup>50</sup> See *Foundation and Empire*, p. 13, where a cynic downplays Foundation magic as “myth”.

<sup>51</sup> *Foundation*, p. 226.

<sup>52</sup> Asimov, “The Hostess”, *Galaxy Science Fiction* (World Editions: May 1951); repr. in Asimov, *Nightfall and Other Stories* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1970), p. 97.



scientific, explanation.<sup>53</sup> Significantly, blind religious faith is severely criticized in the same scenario.<sup>54</sup>

From Asimov's suggestions has come a wealth of new developments in these themes. While Asimov's technological innovations have often been forgotten – his fanciful “needle guns” and “atomic field depressor”<sup>55</sup> pale in significance when compared to now-factual predictions like Verne's submarine and Gene Roddenberry's personal computers<sup>56</sup> – echoes of his thematic work endure. Däniken and Drake seem to take some of their cues from his work. Many of today's SF authors learned their art by emulating Asimov, Clarke, and other early masters of the genre, and they may have learned to imitate the masters' thoughts on power, magic, godhood and the destiny of humankind as well.<sup>57</sup> Certainly there has been little deviation from the theological ideas laid down by Asimov and his contemporaries. In Hollywood's SF productions, numerous episodes of the various incarnations of *Star Trek* and the more recent film and television series *Stargate* can be seen as building on a “foundation” of Asimov's work. Asimov's influence can thus be traced through multiple “generations” of SF creators.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Asimov, “Nightfall”, *Astounding Science Fiction* (New York: Street and Smith, September, 1941); repr. in Asimov, *Nightfall and Other Stories* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1970), pp. 17-20. This reasoning is further developed in the original story's later and larger novelization under the same name; Asimov and Robert Silverberg, *Nightfall* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

<sup>54</sup> “Nightfall”, p. 27.

<sup>55</sup> The former is a consensus technological premise from Asimov's early writing days; the latter appears in *Foundation and Empire*, p. 134.

<sup>56</sup> Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870) pioneered the idea of a practical submarine, while Roddenberry's *Star Trek* envisioned a time when personal computer terminals would be the norm. See Mann, pp. 10-11 and 420-422.

<sup>57</sup> Here it should be noted that Clarke, Asimov's contemporary, produced many of his ideas on theology independently; still, the ever-present exchange of ideas and assumptions in SF makes the assumptions of these authors difficult to separate on this point. Mann does note that the contributions of Asimov and other earlier contributors formed the foundations of the “Golden Age” of SF, during which many current writers learned by example. See Mann, p. 487.

<sup>58</sup> One example is the film *Stargate* and its spinoff TV series, which uses the Däniken/Drake alien-visitation theology premise as its “bible”; this in turn is based on ideas of relative power and deity as implied by Asimov, Clarke and others.

### 3. Theology in *Asimov's Guide to the Bible*

Asimov's thematic ideas would prove more relevant to theological debate if they could be traced through a wider scope of his work. To this end, an Asimov commentary on a religious text should be examined, for surely the themes above that deal with matters of theology and religion will be prevalent here as well. The best example is *Asimov's Guide to the Bible*, a massive and comprehensive commentary on the book that is both the most historically relevant religious text in world history, and the centre of traditional Christian theology and church doctrine. Several themes traced in the discussion above are in evidence here, and new sub-themes will also be worth exploring.

The theme of demythologization makes its presence known through Asimov's constant need for rationalist explanation and scientific proof; any miraculous event is treated with skepticism and even cynicism. In both the Old and New Testaments, multiple events that have traditionally been described as acts of God are credited instead to meteorites, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and other such natural phenomena; the supernatural is either glazed over or eliminated entirely. Meteorites were particularly numerous and dangerous, it would seem: they are blamed for the Flood and for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis,<sup>59</sup> and "the statue that fell from heaven" (or in the King James Version, "the image which fell down from Jupiter") of Acts 9:35.

Of this last incident, Asimov says that

Meteorites, if seen to fall from the sky, are a natural object of worship for primitive men, who know nothing of astronomy and see them merely as objects hurled down by the sky-god. If the meteorite was perhaps in the crude shape of a human being... the effect would be all the more impressive.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Asimov, *Asimov's Guide to the Bible. Vol. 1: The Old Testament and Vol. 2: The New Testament* (New York: Random House, 1988), pp. 40 and 82.

<sup>60</sup> *Guide to the Bible*, p. 1072.

Similar rational backgrounds are sought for other events, such as military victories: unless Israel had an advantage of superior numbers or weapons over their rivals during the conquest of Canaan, Asimov assumes that the Bible exaggerates.<sup>61</sup> A host of other miraculous events are also explained away, as with the proposition that the star of Bethlehem was due to a supernova or other random astronomical event, or the repeated insistence that accounts of “wonder-working” do not dovetail with the “historic Jesus”.<sup>62</sup> With regard to the titles of God in the Old Testament, Asimov notes the plurality of “Elohim”<sup>63</sup> in the Genesis creation account, with the subtle implication of a God who is more immanent, and less sovereign, because of his plurality.<sup>64</sup> Finally, rationalist answers are sought for the origins of the Bible itself, crediting many of its stories to editorial additions, “religious fiction” and garbled international myth.<sup>65</sup>

Also apparent is the theme of religion-as-tool. Moses, instead of being God’s chosen deliverer for his people, is portrayed politically as “instituting the rituals of Yahvism” upon the Israelites, formerly a religiously diverse people.<sup>66</sup> The ulterior motives of Samuel are equally political in tone, as he is shown to be a manipulative “kingmaker” supported by the members of the “prophetic party” as he pulled the strings behind the nationalistic sect of Yahvism.<sup>67</sup> The same can be said of Hilkiah and Josiah, whose discovery and re-institution of the book of the law in 2 Kings 22 are, in Asimov’s eyes, fabrications indicating the original and politically timely composition of the book of

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<sup>61</sup> *Guide to the Bible*, pp. 274 and 280.

<sup>62</sup> *Guide to the Bible*, pp. 791 and 810.

<sup>63</sup> *Guide to the Bible*, p. 18.

<sup>64</sup> Tozer, p. 83: “Infinitude can belong to but One. There can be no second.”

<sup>65</sup> Asimov, *Guide to the Bible*, pp. 23, 37, and 52; examples of stories inspired by legend can be found on pp. 129 and 132.

<sup>66</sup> *Guide to the Bible*, p. 153.

<sup>67</sup> *Guide to the Bible*, pp. 283 and 334.

the law itself.<sup>68</sup> Just as in his science fiction, Asimov consistently locates a true political agenda behind the cloak of religious “mummery”.<sup>69</sup>

The third and most important major theme that Asimov puts forth is what may be called the “grasshopper theme”.<sup>70</sup> Simply put, this is the perception of superior power as representative of divine status. In this theme, one social group regards a rival group as superior to themselves (usually on technological grounds) to the extent that they are unable to conceive of their rival’s power as anything short of a godlike, or at least magical, status. At a certain point, it seems that power can no longer be viewed as the result of human invention; any spectacular and otherwise unexplainable feat must be indicative of virtual omnipotence. Power is displayed on an exponentially magnified scale, and the beings that possess such power are magnified and even deified accordingly.

This is strongly evident in several episodes of ancient Israelite history that Asimov singles out. The first is in Genesis 6, in which the “Nephilim” and the “sons of God” procreate with humans. Asimov wonders, were the giant Nephilim really giants? “The term [nephilim] must have been used metaphorically at first, as a dramatic expression of the technological advancement of the enemy.”<sup>71</sup> He later guesses that similar exaggeration was at work regarding the physical stature of Og.<sup>72</sup> The second incident comes from Numbers 13, where the Israelite spies sent into Canaan report that “the land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size.”<sup>73</sup> Here, again, Asimov speculates that size

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<sup>68</sup> *Guide to the Bible*, p. 195.

<sup>69</sup> This cynical view is taken from the discussion on religious façade in *Foundation*, p. 86.

<sup>70</sup> This term is not used by Asimov, but is a title original to this study, summarizing his idea and its basis in the Bible.

<sup>71</sup> *Guide to the Bible*, pp. 72-73.

<sup>72</sup> *Guide to the Bible*, p. 182.

<sup>73</sup> Numbers 13:32.

was a metaphor for perceived technological differences. He compares this perception to the ancient Greeks, who supposed that Mycenaean city walls must have been built by giants because of their enormous size;<sup>74</sup> similar ideas may have served as initial explanations for more familiar structures, such as Stonehenge. Recalling his earlier remarks, Asimov comments that the modern equivalent might be “how an unarmed man might feel facing a man with a loaded rifle, or how the latter might feel facing a man in a tank.”<sup>75</sup> Either of these situations might well be suitably analogous – if the victim had never seen a tank before.

When faced with marvels of engineering, weaponry, and the like, the awed beholders no longer think “Isn’t technology wonderful?” but rather, “...to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them”.<sup>76</sup> This view promotes an understanding of power and physical stature by means of degree. The “grasshopper theme” implies that power and virtual omnipotence are only a matter of time and technological progress.

What was Asimov’s purpose in choosing to write this? What did his *Guide to the Bible* prove? Certainly one purpose is the same as that of any other Bible commentary: to serve as a helpful tool of biblical criticism. Asimov’s thesis statement is an attempt “to bring in the outside world, illuminate it in terms of the Bible story and, in return, illuminate the events of the Bible by adding to it the non-Biblical aspects of history, biography, and geography”.<sup>77</sup> Asimov’s analysis does not stop there, however. The book also functions, whether deliberately or no, as an advancement of some of the author’s

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<sup>74</sup> *Guide to the Bible*, p. 72.

<sup>75</sup> *Guide to the Bible*, p. 73.

<sup>76</sup> Numbers 13:33.

<sup>77</sup> *Guide to the Bible*, p. 8.

favourite ideas. Aspects of teleological anthropology, the demythologization of myth and religion, as well as sub-themes such as scientific rationalism and the idea of religion-as-tool, can be found in abundance. The promotion of these themes leaves a telling effect in its wake. Through the various rationalist explanations offered by Asimov, the idea and existence of God is fundamentally altered. This is not the “death of God”, which has proven popular in recent decades of theological debate, but the deconstruction of God: by means of demythologization and the “grasshopper theme”, divine identity and activity are “scientifically” explained as nothing but anthropology (or more broadly “sapientology”) writ large over time. Asimov effectively polarizes the traditional Christian God-definition: God is either relativized virtually out of existence, or made so immanent as to threaten his infinitude and sovereignty.

In the *Foundation* series and in his *Guide to the Bible*, then, Asimov puts forth several major themes that simultaneously represent a formative influence in the genre of SF and a potent challenge to traditional Christian theology. The significance of this conflict remains to be addressed.

### **C. Significance of this Conflict**

#### **1. Biblical Thought versus Secular Humanism**

The two traditions of biblical scripture and science fiction, one ancient and one modern, are fundamentally at odds on issues of theology, particularly on definitions of God and his relation to human beings. The traditional interpretation of the Bible dictates that humankind is on one plane of existence, and God is on another, though he is free to act and interact on the plane of human existence. God is transcendent, but can choose to work on an immanent level; the incarnation of Jesus Christ is of course the foremost

example of this. The Christian disciplines of theology and anthropology have some common interests and can certainly be studied simultaneously, but should never be thought of as congruent.

In SF, these disciplines are contiguous; the subject of anthropology eventually leads to theology. To increase in knowledge and power to a point of virtual omniscience and omnipotence is the ultimate goal of sapient life. This is an application of the doctrine of teleological anthropology, mentioned earlier.<sup>78</sup> It is an understanding of human (or sapient) existence in which the overarching goal is to advance in knowledge and power, ultimately becoming “gods”. Though similar ideas have been referred to elsewhere as “evolutionary eschatology”,<sup>79</sup> here this term will be reserved for later use, with related but slightly different connotations. In the present context, teleological anthropology is a concept with roots in secular humanism. Here, again, there is a problem of overlapping terms; movements almost indistinguishable from “secular humanism” have been labelled “scientific materialism”<sup>80</sup> and “materialist humanism”.<sup>81</sup>

Regardless of their names, these movements share some underlying premises. The first is oriented toward the past, coalescing around “the idea that the final reality is impersonal matter or energy shaped into its present form by impersonal chance”.<sup>82</sup> Little room is allowed for any external force, let alone the personal and creative entity of God,

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<sup>78</sup> Cf. p. 9, above.

<sup>79</sup> Gregory Peterson, “Religion and Science in *Star Trek: The Next Generation: God, Q, and Evolutionary Eschatology on the Final Frontier*”. In Jennifer E. Porter and Darcee L. McLaren, eds., *Star Trek and Sacred Ground: Explorations of Star Trek, Religion, and American Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), pp. 72-75.

<sup>80</sup> Edward O. Wilson, “Scientific Humanism and Religion”, *Free Inquiry* (Spring 1991), pp. 20-23 and 56; repr. in Wayne G. Boulton, Thomas D. Kennedy, and Allen Verhey, eds., *From Christ to the World: Introductory Readings in Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 152-156.

<sup>81</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books/NIMS Communications, 1981), p. 18.

<sup>82</sup> Schaeffer, p. 18.

in such a scenario. The idea of God is often thrown out entirely: some would define humanism through “the placing of Man at the center of all things and making him the measure of all things.”<sup>83</sup> Based on this view, a rationalist understanding of the universe is called for, so that humankind has the potential to understand and manipulate its environment. The second common theme is future-oriented and can be found in the applications of humanism, often made in the sphere of sociobiology. If humankind is the result of what has been termed a “coevolutionary circuit”,<sup>84</sup> a mutually informing evolutionary process taking place between human genes and culture, then humankind has the ability and even the right to control its own development in the future.

From this ability to control and develop, to achieve a degree of self-determination, comes the seed of teleological anthropology. As the aspirations of Edward O. Wilson and other major “scientific materialism” advocates are written for the present time or the near future, teleological anthropology may well be a nascent reality even today, awaiting only the further scientific means that it requires to develop fully. The modernist era, to which humanist principles are closely linked, has to a large extent given way to postmodernism, and so the variants of humanism are not frequently considered a serious threat to the Christian worldview.<sup>85</sup> Teleological anthropology, however, is not so closely associated with modernism; it exists as a separate phenomenon, rooted in, but distinct from, both modernism and the humanist movements that have given it its shape.

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<sup>83</sup> Schaeffer, p. 23.

<sup>84</sup> Charles J. Lumsden and Edward O. Wilson, *Promethean Fire: Reflections on the Origin of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 55. For ties to the “open system” model of chaos theory, see A. B. Çambel, *Applied Chaos Theory: A Paradigm for Complexity* (New York: Academic Press/Harcourt Brace & Co., 1993), pp. 41-43.

<sup>85</sup> This trend is perhaps best observed in anti-humanist polemics that catered to a modernist worldview, such as Schaeffer’s *A Christian Manifesto*; while still relevant in its definitions, the work was intended for application during the Christian “window of opportunity” of the Reagan era.



This will be seen in more detail when the utopian trends of SF are addressed as tradition and stereotype. For the moment it is sufficient to note that in its ability to survive as a concept, and in its fundamental opposition to the biblical separation of theology and anthropology, it continues to be a potent threat to traditional Christian doctrine.

## 2. What Distinguishes the Biblical God?

What, if anything, sets the biblical God apart, on a level that teleological anthropology cannot reach? Again, it is instructive to focus on attributes. It was noted above that original, pre-causal existence and creative acts were central to traditional God-definitions. These qualities are encompassed in what Tozer refers to as the “eternity of God”; citing Isaiah 46:9-10, he says that because God lives “in an everlasting now, He has no past and no future...for Him everything that will happen has already happened. This is why God can say, ‘I am God...and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning’”.<sup>86</sup> While Tozer does not list God’s creative nature or ability as a separate attribute, the existence of God at the beginning and end of human time makes it possible for him to create, terminate and even re-create the universe, should he have the power to do so. Pre-existence should be impossible for a “god” who progressively achieves his, her or its status.<sup>87</sup>

It would seem that God does indeed have the power to create, or to do anything else he pleases, for according to Christian theology, God is omnipotent. Whenever Scripture declares God’s strength and ability, the closest thing he has to physical attributes, it is assumed and sometimes stated outright that these are immeasurably great.

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<sup>86</sup> Tozer, pp. 72-73.

<sup>87</sup> A loophole is possible if the “god” in question creates a universe within his or her own, as in David Brin’s short story “Ambiguity”, in *Otherness* (New York: Bantam/Doubleday/Dell, 1994).

Tozer complains that “the word infinite has not always been held to its precise meaning, but has been used carelessly to mean simply much or a great deal”.<sup>88</sup> The complaint is a justifiable one, as God’s attributes are all understood to be unlimited,<sup>89</sup> and therefore incomprehensibly great. Human curiosity balks at the immeasurable, wanting somehow to compartmentalize the infinite; yet by definition, this is impossible. Unfortunately, the same difficulty exists with near-omnipotence. Power may be quantifiably measured by degrees, but a being who operates at an immense span of degrees above one’s own measure of ability could conceivably be seen as all-powerful; it is, in essence, another form of the “grasshopper theme”. Likewise, there is a problem with omniscience; its very infinitude makes the quality of all-knowing an impossible claim to validate.

The infinitude of God, then, is a source of major differences between traditional Christian god-definitions and those of SF, but omnipotence and omniscience are much more complicated. So, it would seem, are many of the divine attributes noted earlier. Love, mercy, grace, justice, goodness, and faithfulness can be shown in great measure, but who is to say whether they are infinite, or simply very great? Any of these, as well as the omnipotence and omniscience already mentioned, can be truly demonstrated or falsely claimed; even pre-existence is difficult to verify or disprove.

There remains one attribute that should not be humanly possible to demonstrate or mimic convincingly. This quality, that of holiness, is also one of the most frustrating to define properly. In his monograph *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolf Otto conceptualized the holy as a category that encompasses the encounter with the “mysterium tremendum”, an

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<sup>88</sup> Tozer, p. 83.

<sup>89</sup> Tozer, pp. 84-86.

unknowable force whose “awefulness” inspires fear and dread.<sup>90</sup> This literally supernatural force is “wholly other”, impelling “self-depreciation” and worship by religious instinct whenever it is present.<sup>91</sup> It is noteworthy that this entire concept runs directly counter to teleological anthropology: the very notion of an external and potentially guiding or controlling force, the “numinous...felt as objective and outside the self”,<sup>92</sup> is anathema. Otto’s work remains an influential model in studies on religious theory, useful in delineating the sacred or “numinous” by its characteristics and the results it produces, in order to be studied more easily. In *The Knowledge of the Holy*, Tozer adapts Otto’s title and refines the latter’s approach within a Christian context, rather than a general religious one. In Tozer’s treatment, holiness speaks of the very opposite of human depravity, of the spiritual distance between human and divine.

We know nothing like the divine holiness. It stands apart, unique, unapproachable, and incomprehensible, and unattainable. The natural man is blind to it. He may fear God’s power and admire His wisdom, but His holiness he cannot even imagine.<sup>93</sup>

Where is holiness observed in SF? In Asimov’s work, many traditionally divine attributes are achieved by technological or eugenic prowess. Holiness, however, is entirely absent as a category or attribute in depictions of godhood generated by Asimov or the rest of SF. Its inclusion in systematic theology distinguishes the traditional understanding of God from the understanding that has been offered by SF. This attribute makes insufficient and immaterial an argument by degrees of difference. A God who is

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<sup>90</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, John W. Harvey, trans. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 12-14.

<sup>91</sup> Otto, pp. 25 and 21, respectively.

<sup>92</sup> Otto, p. 11.

<sup>93</sup> Tozer, pp. 197-198. For Tozer’s use of Otto, see pp. 198-199.

holy is completely unlike anything else; all else is created, not creator, and profane, not sacred, unless God himself should choose to declare it otherwise. Every other known attribute of God can be reduced to a comparative metaphor of some kind, however poor the analogy, but holiness is irreducible. It may be categorized, but never fully understood or embodied. It describes who and what God is, by his very nature. It alludes to the ineffable, non-rational awareness<sup>94</sup> that the creation has of its creator, and it cannot be convincingly faked with “smoke and mirrors” and other “special effects”.

### **3. Summary: The Challenge to Traditional Theology**

The basic conflict between the theologies of the Bible, with its traditional interpretations, and SF, with formative influences from Asimov, is one of nature and development. Is God still to be understood as pre-existing and pre-causal, fully omnipotent and fully omniscient, or are these terms relative? SF’s theology, based on a teleological anthropology with roots in secular humanism, speaks of the unlimited potential of the human species, and that of all sapient life that may exist in the universe beyond. Given time and the ability to develop, nothing is impossible. Biblical theology can of course respond with unlimited language of its own, stating that infinite human progress does not equal God. By no means does this reply end the discussion; the challenge to traditional theology remains potent. The rejoinder simply points out that opinions differ on who is ultimately in control, and on what the passage of time will bring. It is on this last point that the next section will focus.

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<sup>94</sup> Otto, p. 5.

### III. ESCHATOLOGY

Here another issue, that of eschatology, enters the fray. Christian theology takes the book of Revelation and some of the statements of the four Gospels and the Pauline epistles as its sources of eschatological doctrine,<sup>95</sup> just as it uses Genesis to illuminate the origins of the universe. Eschatology is a subsection of theology, studied within the context of theology just as theology is understood within the framework of religion. SF's claims about the future, meanwhile, are often judged to be spawned by the optimism and rationalism of the natural sciences and the progress that have resulted from discoveries in these fields. The assumptions SF makes about the future, however, are often perceived to be directly at odds with Christian views on the subject. These conflicts can be explored through a detailed examination of theology and eschatology as SF understands them.

After a brief introduction, biblical eschatology will be considered, beginning with the specific terms the discipline uses and the beliefs that stem from those terms, and concluding with observations on millennial trends and themes. As with chapter two, SF's views will be chiefly represented by Isaac Asimov, in both his fiction and historical nonfiction. Asimov's understanding of "future-history", as outlined by Wollheim, is instrumental in understanding SF's perspective on the flow of time. Themes reflected in the previous chapter, such as demythologization, will also remain evident. Most important, Asimov seems to assume as an established belief an ideology that has been called *evolutionary eschatology*: the idea that time, and the universe into which humankind will presumably expand, are infinite, without any pre-ordained terminus.

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<sup>95</sup> Examples include the Olivet Discourse of Mark 13 and the passage regarding "the Coming of the Lord" in I Thessalonians 4:13-18.

How does this threaten the tenets of Christian eschatological doctrine, and what should the response be?

### A. Introduction: Opening Thoughts

What is the fate of humanity? Will the progress witnessed since the dawn of the Age of Industrialization continue unchecked, far into the future? Or will some disaster, whether natural, man-made, or divinely ordained, strike the human race, crippling modern civilization or wiping it out entirely? Possible answers to these questions have been offered throughout history, but recently the possible “end of the world” has been the focus of a surprising dialogue between theologians and scholars of the natural sciences.

The contributors to John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker's recent work, *The End of the World and the Ends of God*, codify this debate in terms of *continuity* and *discontinuity*: the struggle to make sense of optimistic Christian claims about the *eschaton* in the face of science's pessimism regarding the long-term future of the universe. Their essential message is an attempt to find parallels between the theological view and the scientific one, with the goal of maintaining hope in the midst of a chaotic galaxy.<sup>96</sup> They admit, however, that there is a certain “irreconcilable split” on the issue of eschatology between the worldviews of theology and the sciences, on the grounds of the disciplines' opposing claims about the nature of reality.<sup>97</sup> The concepts of progress over time put forth by science fiction, particularly that which is derivative of Isaac Asimov, are a key factor in this interdisciplinary split. To understand how and why this

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<sup>96</sup> John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker, “Science and Theology on the End of the World and the Ends of God”, in Polkinghorne and Welker, *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), pp. 1-2 and 6-7. The authors submit that eschatology can be a discipline of agreement between theology and science, despite contradictions.

<sup>97</sup> Polkinghorne and Welker, p. 1.

is the case, it is necessary to delve into the eschatological foundations of both traditional Christian theology and Asimov's science fiction.

## **B. Biblical Eschatology and Its Historical Interpretations**

### **1. Biblical Eschatology**

Christian eschatology, as a sub-discipline of Christian theology, finds its basis in the Bible, primarily in the New Testament, and in the interpretation of relevant passages regarding the end of time. Within the New Testament, there are several pericopes that lend themselves to an eschatological hermeneutic. Most prominent are the sayings of Jesus, such as Mark 13; the writings of Paul, such as the letters to the Thessalonian church; and the visionary Revelation, or Apocalypse, of John. All of these passages are somewhat cryptic in nature, and none are easily deciphered. Little wonder, then, that so many interpretations have been given to these and other such texts. The topic of Christ's return to earth, or *parousia*, has remained a popular topic of debate in the Church, from the early church fathers to the present best-selling works of Hal Lindsey and Tim La Haye. These debates have continued to the point of ecclesiastic division and even militant conflict. The only consensus, it would seem, is on the terms that are used in the fray, several of which should be explained here for reasons of expediency.

### **2. Defining Terms and Historical Views**

Eschatological terminology can be confusing, even when scholars agree on the meaning of the terms they use. In prefacing their glossary on eschatology in *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now*, Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther define this problem:

Part of the difficulty for mainstream Christians in coming to grips with the doomsday scenarios proffered by pre-millennialists is confusion over the variety of terms used by and about interpreters of Revelation... Various ‘insider’ jargon terms are often thrown around as if listeners already knew the difference between the ‘Tribulation’ and the ‘Rapture’.<sup>98</sup>

It remains possible, however, to attempt brief and coherent definitions for the terms that will be used here. For the present discussion, some eschatological terms are more important, or at least more central, than others. For instance, a concept such as the “rapture”, while relevant to Christian eschatological discourse, is addressed as such only rarely in the Bible (and then only in vague or allegorical reference), and almost never appears in SF.<sup>99</sup> In contrast, both Scripture and SF feature comparatively prevalent, implicit referents to “the millennium” and a “tribulation” of sorts that precedes it. The eschatological events and beliefs of interest here are those held in common, albeit with differing interpretations, by biblical theology and SF.

Eschatology begins and ends with the *millennium*. The millennium is the prophesied physical return of Christ, who comes to deliver his believers from evil and to rule the earth for one thousand years.<sup>100</sup> Based on Revelation 20:4-6, this event is the defining moment of Christian eschatology. Eugen Weber describes the millennium as the “antechamber of the new heaven and new earth,”<sup>101</sup> and William E. Cox adds that the

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<sup>98</sup> Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), p. 3. Loraine Boettner also notes the problem of inadequate millennial terminology; see Boettner, *The Millennium* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1958), pp. 19-21.

<sup>99</sup> One of the very rare exceptions is Robert A. Heinlein’s *Job: A Comedy of Justice* (New York: Ballantine/Random House, 1984), in which the protagonist, a Christian, sees his own travels through a disrupted series of alternate realities as portents of the imminent rapture.

<sup>100</sup> See Howard-Brook and Gwyther, p. 5, and Michael Barkun, *Disaster and the Millennium* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 27.

<sup>101</sup> Eugen Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults, and Millennial Beliefs through the Ages* (Toronto: Random House, 1999), p. 30.



millennium is generally agreed upon as signifying the earthly initiation of the “kingdom of God”.<sup>102</sup>

Surrounding the coming of the millennium (though the relative timing is a matter of no small amount of debate) are the *tribulation* and the *rapture*. The tribulation is the “anticipated seven-year-reign of Antichrist”, the figure of evil incarnate predicted in both Daniel and Revelation; during the tribulation, a time of peace will give way to immense persecution and suffering, especially for Christians.<sup>103</sup> The rapture is the deliverance of the “true believers” from the corrupt earth to a new home in heaven.<sup>104</sup> When the biblical foundation of this event in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 is taken literally, it is assumed that Christians who are alive at the time of Christ’s return will be physically lifted up “to meet the Lord in the air”. Such a rescue is both physical and spiritual in its significance, and is anticipated eagerly by many Christians. As with the tribulation, the timing of this event is disputed among millennialist groups. Some remarks about the separate categories of millennial belief may help to illustrate such disagreements of timing.

Beliefs about the millennium are alternately referred to as *millennialism*, *millenarianism*, or *chiliasm*. To some extent these terms are interchangeable, though chiliasm is not quite synonymous with the other two. It is usually reserved for historical use, and seems outmoded when used in modern contexts; along with millenarianism, it also carries a more social emphasis. Michael Barkun says that “millenarian or chiliastic

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<sup>102</sup> William E. Cox, *Amillennialism Today* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1966), p. 66. Cox further states that Christ and his disciples used the terms “millennium” and “Kingdom of God” synonymously (p. 69). Stanley E. Porter has contradicted this, using a narrow definition of millenarianism to point out the dangers inherent in equating loosely defined millennial terms in the New Testament. See Porter, “Was Christianity a Millenarian Movement?” in Porter, Hayes, and Tombs, pp. 243-244.

<sup>103</sup> Howard-Brook and Gwyther, p. 5.

<sup>104</sup> See Howard-Brook and Gwyther, p. 5.

movements are social movements which expect immediate, collective, total, this-worldly salvation. They expect the complete destruction of the existing social, political, and economic order, which is to be superseded by a new and perfect society.”<sup>105</sup> Simply put, millennialism is anticipation or apprehension over the new age to come and the cataclysmic event of discontinuity that will bring it about.

Distinct millennialist beliefs can be separated into several categories based on differing interpretations of millennial Scripture passages and the expected timing of the chain of events described in those passages. These categories are cross-denominational, and while some authors try to fashion them into “branches” of “millennial Christianity”<sup>106</sup> as though they were denominations unto themselves, the groups have never been that cohesive. The three main categories are *premillennialism*, *postmillennialism*, and *amillennialism*.

Premillennialism is the belief that the Christ’s return will precede his earthly rule.<sup>107</sup> This view all but requires a pessimistic outlook on this world, for no amount of preparation or social action can hope to redeem the corrupt earth and its sinful people. Ultimately the premillennialist message is one of hope, for the *parousia* (the return of Christ) brings deliverance and redemption to all who believe; the short-term premillennialist view is grim, as Creation goes from bad to worse because of its fallen nature. Instead of arriving as “the result of a gradual process of progressive growth, the millennium will be inaugurated cataclysmically, dramatically, and visibly”.<sup>108</sup> Peace will

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<sup>105</sup> Michael Barkun, p. 18.

<sup>106</sup> Howard-Brook and Gwyther, p. 5.

<sup>107</sup> See Howard-Brook and Gwyther, p. 5; Cox, p. 5; and Weber, p. 172.

<sup>108</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *The Millennial Maze: Sorting Out Evangelical Options* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), p. 128.

abound, but will be ushered in violently; the Lamb of God will reign, but only after entering like a lion. Even within premillennialism, distinctly different views can be found regarding the relative timing of millennial events. Dispensationalism (discussed below) advocates a rapture that precedes Christ's return, while representatives of Congregationalist groups have argued the two events to be concurrent: Cotton Mather and his family of Puritan preachers took this view.<sup>109</sup> Taken as a whole, premillennialism looks forward to the imminent return of Christ but remains skeptical of human efforts to hasten this event; "human action alone simply can never lead to ultimate success".<sup>110</sup>

Postmillennialism is the opposite belief: the return of Christ will follow the millennium, necessitating "preparation on the part of Christians to make the world worthy of Christ's return".<sup>111</sup> Social action, evangelism, and other efforts at improving the world are strongly emphasized, to the extent that humanist and utopian agendas can easily surface. Weber notes occasional postmillennialist efforts to create a perfected society in this material world, rather than waiting for its spiritual manifestation in the next: the "city of God" is envisioned as a real place on this earth.<sup>112</sup> The object of such hopes is not necessarily "paradise regained", but "a foretaste of heaven, an earnest of the good things that God has in store for those who love him", as Loraine Boettner puts it.<sup>113</sup> Even when not taken to the extreme of establishing heaven on earth, postmillennialism is basically optimistic in its worldview.

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<sup>109</sup> Calling them "apocalyptic Massachusetts clergymen", Weber notes the preaching activities and beliefs of Richard, Increase, and Cotton Mather in seventeenth and eighteenth century New England; see Weber, p. 170.

<sup>110</sup> Grenz, p. 146.

<sup>111</sup> Howard-Brook and Gwyther, p. 5; Cox, p. 5; and Weber, p. 172.

<sup>112</sup> Weber notes strong ties from this trend to the ministry of John and Charles Wesley, among others, through a link of Augustinian thought. See Weber, p. 155.

<sup>113</sup> Boettner, p. 61.

Pre- and postmillennialism are covered in detail by several authors, especially by Howard-Brook and Gwyther in their apocalyptic glossary. In so doing, however, these authors in particular neglect the third major category of millennialist belief.

Amillennialism, as opposed to the other two divisions, does not undertake a literal reading of Revelation's prophecies. Instead of a physical rule by Christ, the amillennialist position maintains that "revelation had been accomplished and the reign of Christ occurred in the heart of Christians."<sup>114</sup> Firmly set against "hyperliteralist" hermeneutic, amillennialism advocates an "inaugurated" eschatology: the millennium has in fact been ushered in by Christ's *first* coming, beginning a continuous process of transforming this world and the hearts of those who inhabit it.<sup>115</sup> The "coming of the millennium" is not so much literal as it is symbolic and spiritual.<sup>116</sup> This metaphorical outlook also influences the amillennialist perspective of time, and sets it in direct opposition to theories such as Dispensationalism<sup>117</sup> which divide periodically the passage of time leading up to the millennium.

It may also help at this point to examine a few examples of trends in millennial belief and practice. One trend that is all too pervasive is that of separationism and militancy. Weber and Barkun highlight the Taborites in this regard, particularly in their movements following the 1414 execution of Jan Hus. Practicing a separationist form of primitive communism, the Taborites' leaders began to predict the imminent apocalypse,

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<sup>114</sup> Weber, p. 172; for differences between amillennialism and pre- and postmillennialism, see Cox, pp. V, 1-4, and 64.

<sup>115</sup> Cox, pp. 57 and 64.

<sup>116</sup> Stephen Hunt, "The Rise, Fall and Return of Post-Millenarianism". In Hunt, ed., *Christian Millenarianism* (London: Hurst and Company; New York: New York University Press, 2001), p. 50.

<sup>117</sup> Cox, p. 9.

and used force when necessary to cleanse the earth in preparation for that moment:<sup>118</sup>

“massacre cleared the way to the millennium. Purge the corrupt earth of sinners, and Christ would descend in majesty while his saints rose up to greet him.”<sup>119</sup> The apparent inheritors of this trend are groups such as the Branch Davidians and the Heaven’s Gate cult, which have cropped up frequently in recent years.<sup>120</sup>

A second trend that bears scrutiny is the millennial mania (*fin de siècle*) in medieval Europe. A premillennial concern with the arrival of the year 1000, and similar fears that followed with the close of each subsequent century, created constant social and religious unrest. As Weber describes the phenomenon, “sooner or later, beginnings suggest ends, and ends suggest decline... Christian chronology, which was essentially end-directed, also intimated a sense of decline and senescence.”<sup>121</sup> Nor is this thought limited to pessimistic outlooks on the millennium: Weber goes on to note the tendency of progress to advance “side by side with the notion of decadence.”<sup>122</sup> Also of note in this trend is Joachim of Fiore, the twelfth-century monk who worked out a complex historical schematic of the past, present and future of Creation. His spiritual hermeneutic of history has in turn influenced later attempts to periodize history from a biblical perspective; while basically optimistic, Joachim’s outlook included a “final onslaught of evil prior to the end times.”<sup>123</sup> A more recent equivalent of this sense of the inevitability

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<sup>118</sup> Barkun, pp. 16-17. Similar references can be found in Andrew Bradstock, “Reading the Signs of the Times: Millenarian and Apocalyptic Movements Then and Now”, in Porter, Hayes, and Tombs, p. 302.

<sup>119</sup> Weber, p. 151.

<sup>120</sup> Weber, p. 221 and following. While Weber labels these millenarian movements, he often uses this and the term “apocalyptic” interchangeably; apocalyptic should perhaps be reserved for groups devoted exclusively to the apocalypse itself, rather than the millennium that precedes or follows it.

<sup>121</sup> Weber, pp. 15-16.

<sup>122</sup> Weber, p. 19.

<sup>123</sup> Anthony R. Cross, “The Bible, the Trinity and History: Apocalypticism and Millennialism in the Theology of Joachim of Fiore” in Porter, Hayes and Tombs, pp. 261, 283-284, and 291.

of decline might be found in Dispensationalism, advocated by John Nelson Darby and later by Cyrus Scofield in the latter's *Scofield Reference Bible*. Both of these premillennialist contributors sought to divide history into logical units, and thus attain a better sense of the imminent millennium's timing.<sup>124</sup>

A third trend is that of the doctrine of "manifest destiny" in North America, particularly in the United States. As the population increased in the original states, an interpretation of Scripture was developed to validate expansion into the western territories. This hermeneutic, loosely based in the prophecies of Revelation, featured the frequent use of "eschatological terminology" in United States foreign policy,<sup>125</sup> both abroad and in the early western movements of pioneers into Native American territory.

From the trends above, a few millennial themes can also be pointed out. First is that of *optimism*. Postmillennial ideology postpones the *parousia*, sometimes indefinitely, with an eye toward social progress that can be seen as leading to a utopian outcome. The popularity of this belief, simply in terms of social improvement, is obvious; this theme has proven especially pervasive in the history of the United States. The second theme is that of *numbers*. Dispensationalism is not often referred to as such today,<sup>126</sup> but its disciplines live on in numerology, and the intent to predict the imminent

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<sup>124</sup> Weber, pp. 141-2 and 186. For more on Darby's influence on premillennialism, see Mark Patterson and Andrew Walker, "Our Unspeakable Comfort": Irving, Albury, and the Origins of the Pre-tribulation Rapture" in Hunt, pp. 100-103.

<sup>125</sup> Barkun, p. 185. Also see Howard-Brook and Gwyther, pp. 7 and 123. This trend continues today in U.S. foreign policy, though the terminology may be used outside of appropriate contexts. See also Caroline Walker Bynum and Paul Freedman, "Introduction", in Bynum and Freedman, eds., *Last Things: Death and the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), p. 17.

<sup>126</sup> Grenz points out trends that explain this decline of references, including the tendency of conservatives to equate Dispensationalism with "biblical eschatology" as a whole, and a gradual supplanting of "classical" Dispensationalism with "progressive" versions which more adequately address postmillennial and amillennial arguments. See Grenz, pp. 62-63.

millennium.<sup>127</sup> Bynum and Freedman note the rise in the millennial fears of sickness, death, and disaster that accompanied the approach of the year 2000.<sup>128</sup> The ability to predict rationally the outcomes of an uncertain present and future has proven to be very comforting. The third theme, *meaning*, is simply the investment of belief in millennialist ideas. At its extreme, it can lead to separationism and militancy, for the interpretations of the word of God, and the lives of human beings, are often at stake. Outside of such extremes, millennial meaning remains applicable on an everyday level: people care a great deal about their future and that of their children and descendants.

While millennialist ideology may survive and even thrive in the present day, even these themes have lost some of their importance, as eschatological and apocalyptic terms are used without much thought to their content or original intent. Bynum and Freedman warn their readers that “our era can’t help but mimic and appropriate language and imagery from the Middle Ages even if rendered in an eclectic, doctrineless fashion... we are neither very apocalyptic, nor very eschatological, nor even very scared. Not, perhaps, as much as we ought to be.”<sup>129</sup> Millennialist leanings may be popular, but the background of the terminology in use is often ignored or even unknown. Little wonder, then, that some have sought new contexts in which to place millennialist thought. Though it seems an unlikely candidate, SF offers a valid context for doing just that.

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<sup>127</sup> Hal Lindsay provides an excellent example of the fervour of assigning current times and events to biblical prophecies. See Lindsay and C.C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970). For critique of this trend, see Bradstock, p. 303.

<sup>128</sup> Bynum and Freedman, p. 2.

<sup>129</sup> Bynum and Freedman, p. 17.

## C. Science Fiction's Eschatology

### 1. Tradition and Stereotype: Utopia

The “future” as described in science fiction is usually conceived of in idealistic terms, without much thought as to how that future comes to be: it is an end without an explicit means. SF has traditionally been dominated by the vision of attaining a utopia, an ideal, perfected society. This is particularly evident in the “visual SF”,<sup>130</sup> where Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek* set a trend for conceiving the future. The original *Trek* series offered an “optimistic vision of an egalitarian future”<sup>131</sup> in the midst of a decade of tremendous social change, and later additions to the *Trek* franchise have continued to portray the “Federation” as a perfected, utopian civilization.<sup>132</sup> To some extent, the utopian goal is a humanist one, shared by Roddenberry<sup>133</sup> and other major SF contributors. While humanism has sometimes wavered in popularity, the SF genre and its utopian future have not; if anything, the success of the latter has understandably developed into a stereotype. Even when contributors to SF move away from the utopian ideal, when cracks appear in perfection and the negative ideal of “dystopia” replaces it (a change usually due to contemporary cultural shifts, which can affect the degree of goodness or wretchedness in an imagined future society), SF maintains the perception that humankind is moving toward a better future. Evolution, within the biological,

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<sup>130</sup> Mann uses this term to distinguish cinematic and television forms of SF from “literary SF”. While SF as a genre was conceived and developed in short-story and novel formats, television and film have exposed a much broader sampling of the Western public to the genre's ideas, and have done so over a shorter period of time. See Mann's recent definitive survey of SF television and cinema, *Encyclopedia*, pp. 327-456.

<sup>131</sup> Jennifer E. Porter, “To Boldly Go: *Star Trek* Convention Attendance as Pilgrimage”, in Porter and McLaren, p. 255.

<sup>132</sup> Peter Linford, “Deeds of Power: Respect for Religion in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*”, in Porter and McLaren, p. 88.

<sup>133</sup> Anne Mackenzie Pearson, “From Thwarted Gods to Reclaimed Mystery? An Overview of the Depiction of Religion in *Star Trek*”, in Porter and McLaren, pp. 16-17.



technological, and even the moral sphere, is “synonymous with progress.”<sup>134</sup> The means by which this progress occurs, however, often remains an implicit series of assumptions.

It is in clarifying the ways and means of progress that Isaac Asimov excels. Asimov’s view, like that of many others in the sciences and SF, is grounded in humanism and utopian thought. He places a great deal of confidence in humanity’s future, and seems to see the potential of the human race as practically unlimited. At times he even goes beyond the themes common to the rest of SF, portraying in his fiction a human race that proves capable of surviving a dystopian stage, ultimately evolving beyond the utopian ideal. This can be demonstrated by taking a closer look at Asimov’s knowledge of Western history, and how he projects this knowledge into a vision of “future-history”.

## 2. Asimov’s View: Roman History and Future-History

“When we think of the Middle Ages,” Asimov says, “we are apt to think of the fall of the Roman Empire and the victory of the barbarians. We think of the decline of learning, of the coming of feudalism and petty warfare.”<sup>135</sup> Asimov’s point is a valid one. At the very least, the Empire’s fall is what Asimov is apt to think of, and this idea dominated his fiction and historical nonfiction alike; at times it is difficult to tell the difference between his factual and fictitious styles. He admits to beginning the premise of the *Foundation* series on Roman terms, during a brainstorm of free association:

I thought of soldiers, of military empires, of the Roman Empire – of a Galactic Empire – aha! Why shouldn’t I write of the fall of the Galactic Empire and of the return to feudalism, written from the viewpoint of someone in the secure days of the Second Galactic Empire? After all, I had read Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* not once, but twice.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Peterson, in Porter and McLaren, pp. 73-74.

<sup>135</sup> Asimov, *Constantinople: The Forgotten Empire* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), p. 1.

<sup>136</sup> Asimov, “The Story Behind the *Foundation*”, p. IX.

Asimov, then, had more than a passing familiarity with Roman history from which to draw. Long after *Foundation*, he expanded his nonfiction works in world history. These included volumes on the Roman Republic, the Roman Empire, and the Dark Ages, where Asimov could feed his fascination with the decline and decay of military might, of which Rome is the leading historical example. In many of his historical accounts, the basic *Foundation* storyline is readily apparent. As he says in *Constantinople: The Forgotten Empire*,

So few westerners realized that in the centuries when Paris and London were ramshackle towns...there was a queen city in the East that was rich in gold, filled with works of art, bursting with gorgeous churches, busy with commerce – the wonder and admiration of all who saw it.<sup>137</sup>

The Byzantine capital, as painted by Asimov, hardly differs from the portrayal of the “First Foundation” in the author’s fiction. Designed as a stronghold of art, learning, and commerce, first under Constantine and later revived by Justinian,<sup>138</sup> Constantinople survived and thrived while the rest of the “civilized” western world fell apart into local kingdoms, petty bickering, and “barbarian” raids. So too with the First Foundation: established as a storehouse of knowledge to safeguard humankind’s legacy from the coming dark ages predicted by the “prophet” Hari Seldon, the Foundation itself is seen by few outsiders. Nevertheless, tales of its “magical” technical prowess gradually spread throughout the Galaxy: witness the search for the mythical “magicians” and the awe inspired by their impossibly efficient technological power in Asimov’s second volume.<sup>139</sup> Deprived of the skills remembered only by the Foundation, the rest of the galaxy begins

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<sup>137</sup> Asimov, *Constantinople*, p. 2.

<sup>138</sup> *Constantinople*, pp. 25-26 and 68.

<sup>139</sup> Asimov, *Foundation and Empire* (New York: Avon/Doubleday, 1953), pp. 13 and 16.

to fall apart, whether as prey to spacefaring “barbarians”, or as a result of feudal disputes. Soon the galaxy is “back to oil and coal”, reduced to “comic-opera kings and nobles, and petty, meaningless wars, and a life that went on pathetically among the ruins. A civilization falling. Nuclear power forgotten. Science fading to mythology”.<sup>140</sup>

As the Constantinople of the fallen Galactic Empire, the First Foundation endures a similar history of small wars, near defeats, and other catastrophes, but always preserves its mandate. In addition, there is one final parallel to consider. When Constantinople finally fell, Rome and the rest of Europe had recovered sufficiently, ready to take centre stage again, and the centre of knowledge was effectively relocated. Similarly, by the time the First Foundation is defeated, the Second is ready to emerge. To the student of history, Asimov’s secret location of the Second Foundation is not so secret after all. This is an example of “inverse exemplarism”: galactic future-history functions effectively as Asimov’s metaphor for an already determined world history.

Over time, however, Asimov’s future-history has become much more than a metaphor. On a much larger plane, it has become the model, the medium, through which all SF is interpreted. In his critical work *The Universe Makers*, Donald A. Wollheim outlines a codified model of the future-history first traced by Asimov and (to a lesser extent) other early writers of science fiction.<sup>141</sup> Consciously reminiscent of the political and religious history of the Western hemisphere, the model maps the gradual technological and teleological progress of intelligent life in the universe, using eight

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<sup>140</sup> Asimov, *Foundation*, pp. 62 and 98.

<sup>141</sup> Mann notes that other authors have created future-histories of their own. Olaf Stapledon’s *Last and First Men* is the earliest such proposal; Robert Heinlein’s is equally well known. See Mann, p. 483. SF critic and author Damon Knight even notes that Heinlein’s future-history may slightly predate Asimov’s; see “Introduction by Damon Knight”, in Robert A. Heinlein, *The Past through Tomorrow* (New York: Ace, 1987), pp. 9-10. It is Asimov’s future-history, however, which provides the definitive model of future Galactic civilization and its collapse and restructuring, which became the normative structure for later SF.

descriptive stages of development. Briefly paraphrased, these are Asimov's future-history phases, as titled and outlined by Wollheim.<sup>142</sup>

- I. Early Exploration: local space travel, contact with local intelligent life (such as Martians), if any; colonization and trade within the Solar System.
- II. Interstellar Exploration: conquering vast spatial distances through the development of faster-than-light (FTL) or other means of travel; contact and interaction, friendly or hostile, with alien intelligence; establishment of distant human colonies, and interaction between these and Earth.
- III. Rise of a Galactic Empire:<sup>143</sup> constant contact and commerce with multiple intelligent alien races. Diplomatic and defensive relations between Earth and other powers. The threat of hostile aliens. Rise of political interests and powers, resulting in a federation or empire, usually centred on Earth.
- IV. Prime of the Galactic Empire [or federation, union, etc]: Frequent commerce, cooperative interstellar ventures in politics and in exploration outside the explored portion of the Galaxy. More sophisticated problems involving political intrigue, hostile outside forces, and robotic intelligence.
- V. Decline and Fall of the Galactic Empire: Political intrigue leads to corruption, rebellions, and possible invasion by forces outside the Empire. Loss of contact, trade, and political ties with outlying colonized worlds. The Empire "becomes an empty shell or is destroyed at its heart".<sup>144</sup>
- VI. Interregnum: "Worlds reverting to prespace-flight conditions, savagery, barbarism, primitive forms of life, superstition".<sup>145</sup> Barbarian raids dominate an era of decay. Long-term loss of interstellar contact. Humans and other intelligent forms of life evolve to suit conditions of their "native" worlds. Memory of Earth, the Empire and technology is lost or relegated to myth.
- VII. Rise of Permanent Galactic Civilization: Efforts to rebuild, restoring interstellar contact, trade, and diplomacy. The difficulty of relations between long-separated worlds. Various abortive attempts at restoring the past glory of the dead Empire. The "eventual rise of galactic harmony among intelligences".<sup>146</sup>
- VIII. Challenge to God: The use of unimaginably sophisticated knowledge and technology to experiment with faster travel, the creation of intelligent life in one's own image, and the solutions to "the last secrets of the universe. Sometimes seeking out and confronting the Creative Force or Being or God itself, sometimes merging with that Creative First Premise".<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Wollheim, pp. 42-44. Repr. and summarized in Bittner, *Approaches to the Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin*, pp. 89-90.

<sup>143</sup> While Wollheim, like Mann, credits some basic future-history ideas to other sources, such as Edmond Hamilton's "invention" of the galactic civilization, he gives Asimov the credit for codifying it as a stage in Galactic imperial development. See Wollheim, p. 30.

<sup>144</sup> Wollheim, p. 43.

<sup>145</sup> Wollheim, p. 43.

<sup>146</sup> Wollheim, p. 44.

<sup>147</sup> Wollheim, p. 44.

“What the Foundation Series did was to create the point of departure for the full cosmogony of science-fiction future history. It is possible to analyze present-day stories and place them into that framework of millions of years to come”.<sup>148</sup> In essence, Asimov constructed an exceptionally large “box”, encompassing all that SF had been able to theorize up to the prime of Asimov's own career. This “clarified much that was implicit in previous science-fictional projections”,<sup>149</sup> presenting a future-history model so large and so appealing that fifty years of subsequent SF has been unable to think outside of it. From SF master Robert A. Heinlein's tales of early space exploration to Jack McDevitt's more recent post-Interregnum stories of research and reconstruction, SF literature has been bound within Asimov's box. Visual SF, from Roddenberry's original *Star Trek* series to recent films like *Titan A.E. [After Earth]*, has been similarly constrained.

Some SF authors and critics have tried to produce counter-examples, in an attempt to prove that Asimov's structure is not final. James Bittner posits Ursula Le Guin's SF writings, featuring an “anarchistic” empire, as an antithesis of Asimov's model; but even Le Guin had to start within Asimov's vision, and she has she never completely escaped it.<sup>150</sup> It seems that Asimov's own creation of “psychohistory” still silently guides the evolution of SF itself.

### 3. The Eschatological Nature of SF

Aside from its epic scale and inclusiveness, why is Asimov's future-history model so persuasive? Perhaps its greater impact can be better understood through an examination of the nature of time and space as the larger sphere of SF conceives of it. As

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<sup>148</sup> Wollheim, p. 42.

<sup>149</sup> Wollheim, p. 37.

<sup>150</sup> Bittner, p. 90.

a genre, SF is fundamentally eschatological.<sup>151</sup> According to the strict definitions of its composite terms, SF is fiction – narrative works of the imagination, deliberately fabricated into story that is at least slightly discontinuous from present reality – which is chiefly concerned with premises ostensibly grounded in science. As the genre has matured, the sum of these terms has become inextricably associated with future (or at least futuristic) events. Though many SF tales continue to be written as if their events take place within a few years of their actual provenance (e.g. the many SF films that begin with the subtitle “In the near future”), SF maintains a strong attachment to categories futuristic, technological, and alien.<sup>152</sup> The Bible and the theology based upon it have often sought to place divine revelation within a specifically apocalyptic context or a more general “eschatological setting”,<sup>153</sup> what better eschatological setting can be found than that offered in SF? The other major components of literature, such as plot and characterization, are the elements that make good SF “tick”, but it is the potential of advances in science, predictive by nature, that sets SF apart as a genre of eschatological setting and futuristic import.

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<sup>151</sup> Some critics prefer to use the term “apocalyptic” to describe SF. This label is in many ways an apt one, as SF does include several key features of apocalyptic literature; see Frederick A. Kreuziger, *Apocalyptic and Science Fiction: A Dialectic of Religious and Secular Soteriologies* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982). The periodization of history described above is also a key trait of apocalyptic, as noted by John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction on Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 33. SF’s interests, however, do not necessarily lie in the apocalypse itself, but in its prevention or its aftermath; the broader label of “eschatological” is thus more accurate, for reasons that will be discussed further below.

<sup>152</sup> For more detail on this point, see Mann’s more extensive SF definition, *Encyclopedia*, p. 6.

<sup>153</sup> The prophetic and visionary nature of the book of Revelation illustrates the biblical portion of this point; as for the theological component, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Word and Revelation: Essays in Theology I* (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1964). Von Balthasar speaks of the power of God’s word with an awe that is both reverent and analytical: “Surely the word must be something so tremendous and radical that it can only be expressed in an eschatological setting, as John for example describes it in the Apocalypse”. This statement is all the more important because von Balthasar himself made the use of “theo-drama” central to his theology. He felt that the character of Christ was vital to theology – so vital that the only place where the word, the revelation of that character, could be safely spoken of was in an “eschatological setting” as suggested here.

Its unique setting, then, makes SF inherently eschatological. At first glance, it would seem that SF's emphasis on scientific potential would conflict with any theological focus. Science and Christian religion have certainly been at odds in the past, and continue to be so today, because of the tendency of each to make exclusive claims regarding what is thought to be the other's demesne. Though Polkinghorne, Welker and their contributors in *The End of the World and the Ends of God* see some promise for discussion and even agreement on certain issues, the debate looks likely to grow even more intense on most fronts. As these authors demonstrate, there is adequate room for interdisciplinary discussion within the field of eschatology,<sup>154</sup> but they neglect to adequately explore one major factor that makes this discussion possible. This factor, in which Asimov's contributions figure prominently, is the twofold approach that SF takes to eschatology and the millennium.

What the SF worldview assumes is quite logical. As the human race and its technology progress forward, one of two things will happen: either time will eventually end (*discontinuity*), or it will continue without ceasing (*continuity*). Long the domain of religious prophecy, these two possibilities have recently been turned over to the would-be prophets of scientific fact and fiction, who sing the praises of largely unrealized technology and human achievements. Some of these prophets, to use Old Testament parallels, are perhaps best represented as modern-day Jeremians, doomsayers who emphasize the hopelessness of an uncertain future, impending disaster, and the futility of human progress and existence in the face of such a fate. Others are latter-day Davids, focusing on the future's bright and unending promise. Both groups would seem to subscribe to a "demythologized" view of the millennium. The former might be

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<sup>154</sup> Polkinghorne and Welker, pp. 1-2 and 6.

categorized as demythologized premillennialists, while the latter are essentially demythologized postmillennialists.

Demythologized premillennial thought has a pessimistic outlook on the future. While it seldom predicts the literal return of Christ or even a final end of space and time, discontinuity remains its strongest aspect. This discontinuity is essentially a demythologized tribulation, a catastrophic event that completely destroys, or at least severely cripples, humanity. In some cases, a plague, a stellar cataclysm, or some other natural disaster wipes out most humans, leaving descendants scattered among the remnants of civilization.<sup>155</sup> In other sources, humankind is the author of its own destruction: a massive war, either on earth or among the stars, results in civilization's demise.<sup>156</sup> This is the setting for the beginning of the Interregnum in Asimov's model; the collapse of the Galactic Empire leaves the human race in a war-torn shambles, cut off from what was once a thriving interplanetary civilization. The demythologized tribulation has remained popular in post-Asimov SF: several episodes of *Star Trek* and its spinoffs speak of an "ultimate crisis" coming to "all races",<sup>157</sup> and super-weapons (the interstellar equivalents of the nuclear threat) are often the source of such widespread, permanent destruction. Demythologized premillennialism is essentially Interregnum

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<sup>155</sup> See Jack McDevitt, *Eternity Road* (New York: HarperPrism, 1997).

<sup>156</sup> It is tempting to refer to the demythologized tribulation as the apocalypse, and this label, like that of SF as "apocalyptic literature" (n. 151, above), is accurate to an extent. Certainly the SF sub-genre of "post-apocalyptic", consisting of accounts often placed immediately after a major catastrophe, justifies such a view. Susan Glicksohn even refers to Asimovian future-history as the "secular version of the apocalyptic view of history." See "A City of Which the Stars are Suburbs", in Thomas D. Clareson, *SF: The Other Side of Realism* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1971), p. 341. The label fails, however, because it tends to gloss over major differences between SF and the apocalyptic literature of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Unlike this tradition, SF works do not attempt to describe or predict the apocalypse, but to avoid it entirely by human effort or to rebuild after it is over.

<sup>157</sup> These particular references are excerpted from the *Star Trek* original series episode, "Return to Tomorrow", in which an ancient and immensely powerful energy being warns the *Enterprise* crew of the disaster which has claimed his race and has yet to be faced by humankind.



literature, foretelling an “apocalypse” that has yet to be fully realized. Asimov’s future-history encompasses such apocalyptic possibilities, treating them as forerunners or possible by-products of the Interregnum, but it does not end with them.

Demythologized postmillennialists are usually more optimistic about the ultimate future. Recent centuries of astronomical research have shown quite conclusively that the earth, and on a broader level the solar system, the galaxy, and the universe, will all eventually come to an end; Asimov himself discusses this topic in his nonfiction work *A Choice of Catastrophes*.<sup>158</sup> SF’s postmillennial thought, however, remains steadfast in the hope that humanity can somehow prepare for and even avert its own extinction, whether by technological prowess, biological evolution, or some combination of the two.<sup>159</sup> Perhaps humankind will develop the ability to relocate itself to another planet or star, or to find another means of forestalling the end. The demythologized postmillennialist does not deny the universe’s eventual death; he simply finds ways around it. An example of this can be found in works such as Olaf Stapledon’s *Last and First Men*, in which the human race destroys Earth but survives to create new homes on other nearby planets over the course of two billion years. Certainly, this idea pre-dates Asimov, but he receives credit for codifying this hopeful future of humanity. Girded by utopian thought in much the same way as the beliefs of its Christian counterpart, demythologized postmillennialism maintains continuity and progress as its main themes. Infinite growth eliminates the possibility of a finite end. Asimov ends *A Choice of*

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<sup>158</sup> For more on this topic, see Asimov, *A Choice of Catastrophes* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979) and in brief see William R. Stoeger, “Scientific Accounts of Ultimate Catastrophes in Our Life-Bearing Universe”, in Polkinghorne and Welker, pp. 19-28.

<sup>159</sup> Asimov notes that humanity is more likely to destroy itself than to be wiped out by natural causes; *A Choice of Catastrophes*, pp. 361-362; this explains why SF’s portrayals of tribulation are seldom natural in origin, despite the genre’s scientific knowledge of potential natural disasters.

*Catastrophes* on a similar note of hope, but he reminds himself and his readers that such a future will not come easily.<sup>160</sup> Utopia may not be such a wonderful goal.

There is, however, a third option of demythologized millennial belief. In order to categorize properly the full scope of Asimov's view of the future, it is necessary to consider this third alternative: amillennialism. Biblical amillennialism is itself something of a demythologized view, as it subscribes to a metaphorical understanding of the coming millennium. Its perspective on the kingdom of God as already "inaugurated", mentioned earlier, extends from the millennium to neighbouring concepts such as the tribulation: both are seen as continuous processes, once initiated.<sup>161</sup> The continuity of a universe already reconstructed, but still plagued by evil, is a dominant focus.

So too with SF's version: rather than lamenting over a doomed future or putting complete faith in human ability, demythologized amillennialism consists of an unlikely combination of these views. When asked, "What is the fate of humanity?", amillennialism seems to avoid the question by giving two contradictory responses. Like demythologized postmillennialism, it assumes that time will advance forever, as long as humanity is given enough warning to avert disasters of various kinds. This view taken alone, however, would be an unbalanced one. Amillennialism restores equilibrium by placing periodic limitations on the otherwise unlimited potential of humanity. Catastrophe is neither a permanent nor an ultimately destructive condition, but a recurring theme in human history of the past and future. Ironically, such a demythologized millennium is based on an idea with a strong mythic background:

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<sup>160</sup> See Asimov's chapter on "the dangers of victory", *Choice*, pp. 330-360.

<sup>161</sup> See Cox's definition of the tribulation as extending and growing progressively worse from the starting point of Christ's *first* coming; Cox, *Amillennialism*, p. 75.

Mircea Eliade frequently speaks of a *palingenesis*, a “cyclical conception of the disappearance and reappearance of humanity” that can be found in mythical stories throughout the world.<sup>162</sup> In demythologized amillennialism, there is no single “millennium” event; there is only a regenerating series of “mini-tribulations”, resulting in severe setbacks for the human race. These in turn are followed by “mini-millenniums”, periods of reconstruction buoyed by the hope of attaining lasting harmony.

Asimov formulated the dominant form of demythologized amillennialism through his model of future-history. In projecting the fall of the Roman Empire into the future, the author chose to believe that humanity’s progress would not come easily: it would be constantly tested by external forces (in threats of natural origin or alien intelligence) and internal ones (in the form of political intrigues, tearing the Empire apart). The fact that Asimov chooses to explore the crisis of the Interregnum, never actually continuing his narrative as far as the “mini-millennium” of reconstruction that follows, strongly indicates his amillennialist leanings. Even in the four additions he made to his original *Foundation* trilogy during the 1980’s and 1990’s, he chose to explore further into the Interregnum and to provide a look into the earlier fifth phase, the “Decline and Fall”. “Decay” and “barbarian”, always indicative of the Empire’s fall, are two of Asimov’s favourite words.<sup>163</sup>

Wollheim summarizes much of the activity in the early *Foundation* novels as the building of “star kingdoms... the equivalents of France and England and Spain, based upon Rome but not of Rome, holding the reconstruction of Rome as an ideal but never

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<sup>162</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, William R. Trask, trans. (New York: Bollingen/Pantheon, 1954), p. 87.

<sup>163</sup> See for example Asimov. *Foundation*, pp. 28 and 61, and *Foundation and Empire*, pp. 17-18.

achieving it...”<sup>164</sup> Such a reconstruction of the ideal requires that knowledge be preserved; this is why it is the loss of humanity’s total knowledge (and of scientific discoveries in particular), not the passing of any one human civilization, which Asimov presents as a tragedy to be avoided at all costs.<sup>165</sup>

Asimov’s view is not without flaw. Bittner rightly accuses Asimov of promoting ethnocentric Western values, “essentially imperialistic, mechanistic, and masculine values”, in his future-history model.<sup>166</sup> Yet the willingness of the rest of SF’s contributors to stay the course of Asimov’s vision, to develop it into a *consensus* future-history, has shown that the values he projected continue to enjoy popularity both in SF subculture and in Western society.<sup>167</sup> Asimov laid the groundwork for a cycle of creation and self-destruction, a cycle that has since become a basic tenet of SF’s visions of the future: a continuous series of tribulation and reconstruction.<sup>168</sup> To be sure, there is an end of sorts included in the cycle, a final battle or other climactic event paralleling Armageddon. Whether the catastrophe in question is natural, self-inflicted, or the result of an external conflict, it is never “The End”. Invariably, the descendants of various advanced and spacefaring races survive the wrath of the “ultimate crisis” to start the process of learning and building over again. A measure of optimism is preserved through

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<sup>164</sup> Wollheim, pp. 38-39; Glicksohn points to this failure to achieve the ideal as a “spiral movement of history”, prominent in both Stapledon and Asimov; see Glicksohn, p. 340.

<sup>165</sup> Asimov, *Foundation*, p. 28; Glicksohn points out that the “spirit of scientific inquiry” is the driving force behind the urge to preserve such knowledge before catastrophe and to reconstruct it afterward; see Glicksohn, p. 341.

<sup>166</sup> Bittner, p. 90.

<sup>167</sup> Certain modifications have been made in this development process; for instance, most recent SF projects assume a democratic “Federation” where Asimov suggested an Empire.

<sup>168</sup> This point might seem more reminiscent of a demythologized Hinduism or Buddhism, and Eliade’s “palingenesis” argument would support such allusions. The key difference is that the millennium is not an escape from this cycle, as Nirvana is from karmic rebirth, but a *completion* of it. This is supported by the fact that Asimov’s historical and fictional viewpoint is Western, not Eastern.

the hope of completing the rebuilding task, of actually reaching the millennium phase of “Challenge to God”.

The only major change between Asimov’s view of this situation and those of more recent authors is in the degree of this same optimism. Asimov dealt largely with the awareness of the Fall of Empire, and the decay and suffering that accompany the “end” of his cycle.<sup>169</sup> Later followers of his idea have stressed not the decay but the rebuilding, the beginning of a new cycle. Le Guin’s society of the “Ekumen” picks up the pieces where the shattered interstellar government left off, attempting to rebuild out of the ashes.<sup>170</sup> Similarly, the TV series *Gene Roddenberry’s Andromeda* has a premise set 300 years after the fall of the “Commonwealth” (another form of the ubiquitous Galactic civilization), and chronicles the attempts to reform old alliances. Is reconstruction, then, the ultimate goal of this cyclic history? Rebuilding carries optimism, and in many of SF’s more recent future histories the audience is deliberately left with a sense of hope for the future, centred around the promise of a rebuilt union. Like the “happily ever after” phrase that concludes the fairy tale, however, this is a difficult promise in which to place long-term faith. Asimov would probably have agreed: Wollheim points out that Asimov “applied to future-history the lessons of past history... certain events seem to occur predictably but always on a new and vaster level”.<sup>171</sup> Time may not literally repeat itself, but history certainly does; yet the human race will meet each successive challenge as it comes, evolving despite and in some cases

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<sup>169</sup> Eliade states that this awareness is also popular in myth: “By the simple fact that we are now living in... an ‘age of darkness’, which progresses under the sign of disaggregation and must end by a catastrophe, it is our fate to suffer more than the men of preceding ages.” *Return*, p. 118.

<sup>170</sup> “Ekumen” is derived from “oikoumenē”, the term used by Le Guin’s anthropologist father for the original people-group of human civilization; see Bittner, p. 88. This “teleological myth” (Bittner, p. 103) provides a link between historical and teleological anthropology.

<sup>171</sup> Wollheim, pp. 38-39.

because of such challenges. Human potential may never be immediate or completely unlimited, but it will be vast, with an ever-present, distant hope of final completion.

The significance of Asimov's contribution to eschatology, then, is the future-history model of the Galactic Empire, a chronological map of its development, rise, fall, and reconstruction. Ultimately, Asimov's model charts the progress of humanoid civilization until it evolves *beyond* humanity, *beyond* civilization – after surviving numerous setbacks. Culminating in the phase of “Challenge to God”, Wollheim’s schematic of Asimov's model polarizes the conflict between Christian theology and SF’s teleological anthropology. Asimov's understanding of time, though never explicitly articulated, can be accurately labelled a demythologized amillennialism. His SF posits humanity's progress, its struggle to overcome natural and internal obstacles, without end or lasting defeat, but also without any kind of meaningful triumph. Phrased in the language of SF rather than that of Bible-based theology, Asimov’s millennium is never fully realized, but ever hopeful; the “Challenge to God” is never-ending.

The result of Asimov’s groundwork, as developed by later contributors, is what Gregory Peterson calls “evolutionary eschatology”. Peterson’s definition for this term is “a competing religious vision...purportedly based upon a rational understanding of science, human nature, and evolution”; as such, it “replaces traditional religious beliefs” and “offers salvation and provides a rationale for the motivation and actions” of those who place faith in it.<sup>172</sup> He uses this term narrowly to explain the course of future human evolution and progress toward omnipotence, ending in a state of “naturalized” deity.<sup>173</sup> Evolutionary eschatology is indeed the larger force at work in such a vision, but its

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<sup>172</sup> Gregory Peterson, in Porter and McLaren, p. 72.

<sup>173</sup> Peterson, p. 75.

specific application to the future of humanity is more properly labelled teleological anthropology, which is the means by which an evolutionary eschatology comes to fulfilment. Only by a gradual, logical, *scientific* process of development can the stage of “Challenge to God” be reached, if indeed it can be reached at all.

This “if” is the major source of conflict between SF’s eschatology and Christian eschatology. Must eschatology be theistic? If so, must the god at the centre of eschatological doctrine be original and pre-causal, or can he be a “replacement” provided through teleological anthropology? These questions must be answered if the challenge of evolutionary eschatology is to be fully understood.

#### **D. Significance of this Conflict**

##### **1. Must Eschatology Be Theistic?**

Eschatology is related to, and perhaps dependent upon, theology, but is it necessarily theistic? The answer depends greatly upon which definitions of deity are used. If the classical definition established above – the truly *original, omnipotent creator and sustainer of the universe* – is used exclusively, then SF eschatology is generally not at all theistic. SF often refuses to even acknowledge such a concept, except in jocular, offhand references. SF’s own god-definition, submitted earlier as *an entity or group of entities who are, by means of technological progress, eugenic evolution or a combination thereof, powerful to the point of virtual omnipotence and capable of exerting a profound creative, destructive or otherwise active force upon the universe*,<sup>174</sup> shows SF’s eschatology to be deeply and profoundly theistic. Teleological anthropology, operating within a framework of evolutionary eschatology, makes it so. When godhood and magic

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<sup>174</sup> See p. 18.

are defined via Arthur C. Clarke's "Third Law" ("Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic"),<sup>175</sup> and reinforced by other sources that are ultimately Asimov derivatives,<sup>176</sup> then an abundance of gods (or at least godlike beings) can be found in SF. Deity is relative, it seems, especially over the course of time;<sup>177</sup> the same can be said for omnipotence, and therein the same is said of creative and destructive ability.

## 2. What Kind of God or Gods Does SF Eschatology Represent?

While this definition either reduces or relativizes the traditional idea of God, SF has never fully escaped the classical definition. For all the "gods" in SF, there is always an unquestioned drive for more progress and more power. There are wars and other cataclysmic events, there are dark ages, and yet there is always progress forward. Could it be that no SF writer since Asimov has hit upon the idea that evolution, in any form, might stop completely; that the drive away from the past and toward the future, the constant need to plot events on a timeline, might cease, at least from the perspective of even one culture?<sup>178</sup> Even in SF, it seems the clichés are still true: time waits for no man, and nothing stands in the way of progress toward practical omnipotence. Humanity and its potential sapient allies apparently cannot help but build another Tower of Babel –

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<sup>175</sup> See Arthur C. Clarke, *Profiles of the Future: An Inquiry into the Limits of the Possible* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

<sup>176</sup> See for example the "magic" of technology in Jack L. Chalker's *Well World* series, or the god-definitions offered in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* by the android character Data: "Any sufficiently advanced being would appear so [to be a god], sir." "Justice." *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987); James Conway, dir. Worley Thorne, teleplay.

<sup>177</sup> Postmodern thought takes into account the problems of objectively understanding ideas and meanings from differing cultures; these problems are frustratingly magnified when the prospect of immensely large periods of evolutionary time is considered, to say nothing of the addition of other intelligent, alien cultural viewpoints.

<sup>178</sup> In his *Well World* series, Jack L. Chalker does feature one race whose philosophy includes a Buddhist-like contemplation of existence, leaving behind the need to live by the rules of linear time. This may be a small step toward thinking outside of Asimov's "box".



but why, with all the optimism for the future that is present everywhere else in SF, can this effort never ultimately succeed?

There are theories to explain this problem, of course. Asimov's future-history model seems to take into account an almost predestined fracturing of galactic unity, which must be reassembled after it inevitably comes unglued; the only issue is whether or not this process repeats itself. Jack McDevitt exploits this possibility in *The Engines of God*, proposing that some cataclysmic event ripples through the galaxies in waves every few millennia, causing all sapient life to destroy itself.<sup>179</sup> Is there a predetermined structure to the rise and fall of spacefaring civilization? Is there no entity greater than which no being can be conceived, pulling cosmic strings from behind a backdrop of the Milky Way? Is there no Person who "changes times and seasons, deposes kings and sets up kings"<sup>180</sup> throughout the universe? SF has proven incapable of dealing with this issue. Omnipotent "gods" are usually portrayed as either capricious, sometimes malevolent creatures, jockeying for position and status like the Homeric gods, or as unfulfilled and bored, emptied of ambition after obtaining great power.<sup>181</sup> It seems that "absolute" power, if it is attainable at all, remains a misnomer as long as multiple candidates for the position of "god" exist. If "The End" is portrayed in SF, there is almost always an agent, whether omnipotent and acting deliberately or no, behind the final cataclysmic events.

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<sup>179</sup> Though the result is the same as Asimov's "spiral movement", there are two different understandings of probability at work. Asimov's "psychohistory" is a study in the predictability of large people-groups, and is aimed at the prevention of anarchic entropy. Chaos theory defines probability as a "measure of randomness" and entropy as a measure of chaos, able to fluctuate over time; see Çambel, *Applied Chaos Theory*, p. 144. This can be viewed as an increase, or at least a preservation, of entropy.

<sup>180</sup> Daniel 2:21a.

<sup>181</sup> Again, Chalker and *Star Trek* provide examples: Chalker's omnipotent beings find no purpose in their existence, while *Trek's* omnipotents appear dependent on lower life forms for amusement. See Peterson, pp. 73-75.

Is there perhaps in SF an implicit belief in a classical God, if only because anything less, whether theistic or no, seems arbitrary by comparison? Certainly such a belief exists in some circles: C.S. Lewis mixes mythical and astronomical allegory to illustrate classical Christian belief in his *Cosmic Trilogy*. As for the rest of the genre, it is sufficient to note that while SF is reasonably stable in its definitions of the divine, lingering doubts can still be discovered. Evolutionary eschatology, with its core belief of teleological anthropology, may not provide all the answers humanity seeks, but it is not going to go away.

## IV. THE GOSPEL

The goal here is a simple one: based on the observations made so far, how can the gospel, as defined below, be adapted as a creative response to the challenges posed by Isaac Asimov and the rest of SF? The gospel, as a personal, communicable, outward expression of theology, must be rendered in such a way as to be malleable in form – without abandoning the integrity of its content.

### A. Defining the Gospel

#### 1. Historical and Biblical Thought: Motivations and Revelations

Why is theology done? What good does it accomplish? Whom does it empower? To an extent, theology is studied for God: it is evaluated not solely on academic grounds, but on a devotional level as well. Theology is praise and worship through the continuing discovery and contemplation of God. The revelation of God's redemptive, salvific role in history is recollected and emphasized. The motive behind the discipline matters, and this motive is devotional.

Theology is also for humanity, in that it provides a supporting framework for a coherent set of religious beliefs and a praxis based on those beliefs. Once a given theology is reasoned out, it can be put to use and explained to others so that many people, not just a given theology's original author, can better understand God. It can be adapted to different contexts through the selection of the essential normative and experiential truths that will best communicate an understanding of God to particular individuals or groups within very specific situations. The end result is a gospel: the adaptable, communicable core of a framework of theological belief.

Historically, “gospel” has been understood in the Christian sense, as the Gospel (often significantly capitalized) of Jesus Christ. When the term is used in the New Testament, its definition is not so much academic as it is functional; what matters, especially in the Pauline corpus, is what the gospel does and how it does it, rather than what the gospel actually *is*. An example of this trend can be found in Romans 6, where Paul makes use of what might be called “gospel verbs” to present the finality of Christ’s atonement. “Crucified”, “died”, “buried”, “raised”, and “live” are all key actions that compose the heart of the sacrificial Christian message, while “united”, “believed” and “freed” all constitute the individual and collective response to that message.<sup>182</sup> As the written gospel accounts are concerned with portraying Christ’s suffering, death and resurrection after a few years of public ministry, so the emphasis in the epistles is often placed on the transition from sin and death to resurrected eternal life. Though the sacrifice of Christ was the moment of salvation, the gospel became the instrument through which the promise of that salvation would be proclaimed.

Another example, more useful in establishing an academic understanding of the term, appears in I Corinthians 15.<sup>183</sup> Paul outlines the progress of the gospel in terms of person-to-person communication, showing the ability of the “good news” to translate easily from one person’s world to their neighbour’s. The apostle states that the gospel is something precious that is received, a concept in which one can “stand”, and an instrument of salvation if used properly and faithfully.<sup>184</sup> It is that which is of “first importance”, received by Paul and (even more importantly) passed on to his pupils. As

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<sup>182</sup> See Romans 6:4-10.

<sup>183</sup> All citations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from I Corinthians 15:1-8.

<sup>184</sup> I Corinthians 15:1-2.

he delineates the gospel's function, Paul remains true to form by constantly involving people – Cephas (Peter) and the apostles, “more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time”, James and the apostles again, and in final and humbling fashion, Paul himself.<sup>185</sup> Especially in the case of this last appearance, these events would doubtless have been followed up with explanations from those more familiar with the Christian faith. In terms of *content*, the gospel revolves around the person of Christ and the events of his death and resurrection: atoning death, burial and resurrection in fulfilment of prophecy.<sup>186</sup> In terms of *method*, or *form*, the gospel is about people, acting quite literally as “witnesses” of Christ's resurrection.<sup>187</sup>

## 2. External, Evangelistic Focus of Theology

Methods of communicating the gospel, then, are part and parcel with the importance of its content; explaining its worth to others is the proper and faithful use alluded to above. No sooner has it been “received” than it must be “given away”. This is underscored by two crucial points. First, as has often been noted with regard to conversion experiences, the newly converted are the most likely and the most eager to testify about their experiences to others. Second, it is no secret that the act of explaining a concept aids in comprehension and retention. Post-conversion enthusiasm and gradually increasing comprehension make the gospel's translation process one of constant communication. Where is this communication today? This is the most important question in terms of praxis – how is the core of Christian belief being presented

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<sup>185</sup> vv. 5-8.

<sup>186</sup> “...in accordance with the scriptures”, vv. 3-4.

<sup>187</sup> Acts 1:8 et al.

and acted out in today's culture, in the light of our own unique and modern contexts? Adapting the gospel to address this need should result in a change in its form, and the best form for the task may well be that of storytelling.

## **B. Toward an Adaptable Gospel: Addressing Challenges Posed Above**

### **1. Theoretical Adaptations: The Gospel in SF**

The use of story as a device for communicating truth was effectively modelled in the gospel accounts themselves, when Jesus chose to use parables to explain and illustrate his teaching. Story continues to be a valid tool today; from *Star Wars* to *Harry Potter* to *Lord of the Rings*, the recent success of epic storylines in print and film demonstrates a continuing human need for great stories that communicate substantive truths.

Christianity should take advantage of this need by filling it with Christian story; yet Tolkien, Lewis and a few others who have been able to do this continue to be the exception rather than the rule. SF, mentioned in the introduction as a valid category of modern myth, should be a natural choice for newly shaped allegories of Christian story.

There are significant problems that would plague a theology grounded in SF-oriented myth. There is a danger in framing nonfiction in a medium that has always been, by definition, fiction. Then, too, there is the difficulty of "translating" scripture into SF-oriented myth. How far can the gospel be translated or otherwise altered before it is no longer recognizable, before its truth is hopelessly distorted and no longer effective as the self-proclaimed word of God? This difficulty occurs any time that the Bible is translated into new languages or brought into new cultural contexts. Missionary biographies often include stories and anecdotes focusing on the necessity of rewriting a parable, or even an entire segment of biblical doctrine, in order for a society to see and

appropriate its truth. What good is it, after all, to build one's house upon a rock, if elevated poles are the only stable foundation for a house in a jungle flood-plane? In situations such as this it is necessary to change not just the technical aspects of the Bible, but also its content. The changes in content required in the attempt to phrase Scripture in SF terminology are too severe; far better to concentrate on a few essential components of the gospel.

SF is not the only medium of modern myth that could serve as a new vehicle for the gospel. It is simply one valid option, one that should inspire and provoke a thoughtful and creative response. Some authors have already proven that SF can be a valuable tool for communicating Christian truth. One such example, that of C. S. Lewis' *Cosmic Trilogy*, was mentioned earlier. Lewis does not try to transcribe the entire gospel message into SF terms. He simply uses a framework of SF to concentrate on a few Christian themes in an inventive format that catches and holds his readers' attention, regardless of their prior opinions about Christianity. The cosmic battle between God and Satan is translated to an astronomical plane, as representatives of Christ thwart the efforts of demonic forces to control Mars, Venus and Earth. Ray Bradbury's story "In This Sign" concentrates on the need for a flexible response of evangelism, as he describes a Catholic priest's attempt to preach to Martians. "Christ is no less Christ, you must admit, in being represented by a circle or a square. For centuries the cross has symbolized His love and agony. So, this circle will be the Martian Christ. This is how we shall bring Him to Mars."<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Ray Bradbury, "In This Sign". In Roger Elwood, ed., *Chronicles of a Comer and Other Religious Science Fiction Stories* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1974), p. 133.

## 2. Practical Adaptations: Communicating the Core of the Gospel

These authors wisely choose against direct combat with the theological and eschatological challenges named above, but they do show the appropriate response. They go beyond a theoretical answer to state a practical one: they highlight truths that can be rephrased when necessary, but should not and cannot be permanently altered, not even by teleological anthropology or its larger framework of evolutionary eschatology. A theoretical response alone, however creative it may be, is not enough. In an attempt to answer the practical question of Christian belief, “What really matters?”, devotional author Max Lucado has this to say.

...According to Paul, the cross is what counts... You can't ignore a piece of lumber that suspends the greatest claim in history. A crucified carpenter claiming that he is God on earth? Divine? Eternal? The death-slayer? No wonder Paul called it “the core of the gospel.” Its bottom line is sobering: if the account is true, it is history's hinge. Period. If it is false, it is history's hoax.<sup>189</sup>

This is a practical response: locating “the core of the gospel” and making it relevant to the lives of Christians and non-Christians alike. The cross is the Bible's strongest statement in this direction; in addition to 1 Corinthians 15, referenced above and by Lucado, more proof is provided when Paul uses the “shorthand” abbreviation of the gospel, as he does in 1 Corinthians 2:2 and elsewhere.<sup>190</sup> The gospel must be communicated in such a way as to maintain the integrity and priority of the cross of Christ.

This work began with opening remarks on the differences between theology and its greater context of religion. It went on to explore the idea of teleological anthropology,

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<sup>189</sup> Max Lucado, *No Wonder They Call Him the Savior* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah/Questar, 1986), pp. 13-14.

<sup>190</sup> “...to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2).



within the larger sphere of evolutionary eschatology. This parallel is an apt one. Teleological anthropology is essentially the theology of Isaac Asimov, and of the rest of SF by adoption. Its extension into the larger religious worldview that Peterson discusses<sup>191</sup> includes views on time and the future of the galaxy, and as such it can be seen as a more complete evolutionary eschatology. Progress can only be charted within time. Teleological anthropology cannot be understood apart from evolutionary eschatology, but the latter “religion” term is also co-dependent; it makes little sense without teleological anthropology as the doctrine at its core. The eschatology of SF, a genre devoted to the pursuit of the future, forms a framework for its progressive, demythologized theology. This is the direct opposite of traditional Christian doctrine, where eschatology is normally categorized as a subsection of theology; for SF, eschatology and religious outlook are one and the same. If left unaddressed, the views put forth through teleological anthropology and evolutionary eschatology may gain ground, and this in turn may hinder the gospel. Fraser Watts makes a similar comment when he notes that “because theology ascribes omnipotence to God, an atheist eschatology seems to need to claim it for humanity.”<sup>192</sup>

To address this possibility, one of the initial goals of this study should be reiterated: to produce a coherent, active and forward-thinking theology, resulting in a gospel that is malleable without sacrificing the integrity of its own truth. Ideally, a theoretical and theological response should lead to a practical means for ministry.<sup>193</sup> The question to ask now is this: how should this be done?

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<sup>191</sup> See Peterson, in Porter and McLaren, pp. 72-75.

<sup>192</sup> Fraser Watts, “Subjective and Objective Hope: Propositional and Attitudinal Aspects of Eschatology”, in Polkinghorne and Welker, p. 50.

<sup>193</sup> Cf. p. 7, above.

Polkinghorne and Welker, along with their volume's contributors, recommend that theology, in its search for a "transformed reality", focus on providing renewed hope for a world that has heard too many dire predictions from the natural sciences.<sup>194</sup>

Ironically, this is an about-face; not so long ago, it was the sciences that could take advantage of the predictions of catastrophe made by Christian theology. The application that takes advantage of this reversal should not be one that merely initiates dialogue, but should also provide a new and innovative series of allegory, which can capture the world's attention and serve as a creative and sensitive platform for the gospel.

Such a task is less daunting if one considers reworking illustrations that have proven helpful in the past. One candidate is William Paley's "Argument from Design", commonly known as the watchmaker theorem. This classic theological argument remains important in the light of the assumptions that SF creators make about the origin of the universe, but it also bears consideration when discussing the universe's end. Historically, ideas like Paley's, while not without flaw, have commanded attention in the philosophy of religion and can be readily adapted to present the truths of the gospel. Ideas such as this should be re-explored and reworked to make them more relevant today.

Another way of easing the burden is to use popular secular stories. Recent films such as *The Matrix* and *Lord of the Rings* are rife with spiritual allusions that can easily be adapted for discussion of Christian themes. *Star Wars — Episode II: Attack of the Clones*, released at the same time as this study is finished, is even more germane to the present discussion: the film's story heads into millennial fascination, as a Galactic Republic decays into Empire – paralleling, and indeed obediently following, Asimov's

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<sup>194</sup> Stoeger, "Scientific Accounts of Ultimate Catastrophes in Our Life-Bearing Universe", p. 20; and Polkinghorne and Welker, "Introduction", p. 7; in Polkinghorne and Welker.

“Decline and Fall of the Galactic Empire” phase. Though the millennial anticipation noted by Weber<sup>195</sup> can be taken to extremes, it can also be a useful tool in evangelism and ministry-oriented dialogue. Bultmann called for a “demythologized” view of the Bible and Christianity, but that need has begun to pass. The time may well have come for a reversal of this idea, resulting in a “remythologized” gospel message – one crafted, ironically enough, through the adaptation of the modern myths of science fiction.

The final message here, then, is one of hope. Teleological anthropology and its framework of evolutionary eschatology make a convincing argument, yet they cannot subvert the essentials of theology, or the gospel, of Jesus Christ. Humankind may well continue to evolve biologically, technologically, and, God willing, perhaps even morally. Humanity will never be perfect, however, and will always have a deep need for a God who is. The gospel, understood from a Christian mindset, is a perfect thing, created for a fallen and imperfect world. Not cursed as the rest of the universe was in the Fall, this is a uniquely post-Fall creation, or so it appears to be from the human perspective of time. Like its creator, the only imperfection that touches the gospel comes when it must inevitably deal with human sin. Imperfection and hope are the reasons why the gospel was created in the first place.

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<sup>195</sup> Weber, pp. 13 and 15-16.

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