Dear Reader,

My fingers hovered above the keyboard, motionless, my eyes fixed on the small black blinking monolith on the white empty page. It remained that way for a long time until I just started typing. Often I’d be at a loss for what to say or where to begin. The very act of putting words on screen helped me. Much like a shark, I have to keep moving forward. When I wasn’t writing, I’d be in a state of analysis paralysis. Which is a feeling I normally loathe, I always enjoyed being curt and expeditious in my decision making. I think that was my biggest take away from this endeavor, premeditation is overrated (sometimes).

I would like to know, and should have asked, do I put too many flourishes in my writing? I don’t speak this way regularly; my vernacular is not as wide ranged as it is when I write. Just a month, ago a professor in another one of my classes had been dubious of my writing. She said it was “atypical” of the writing she normally receives. She changed her mind once she had spoken to me for the first time. In our peer review, a student asked that I write in more colloquial language. Maybe they are right, but how often do I get to use the word colloquial?

I would think I’d have a feeling of closure writing the cover letter, but even now my work feels unfinished. Not to say I haven’t done my revisions, I feel as though so much more could said on the topic, and little of it can be said definitively or absolute conviction. In my opinion, the strength of the topic lies in the discourse and ideas espoused between science and religion, not the answers.

Upon some reflection, I think the best thing I could have done earlier would have been writing a preliminary draft in the assignment’s first week. I did not try to pool my thoughts together until the first draft one week prior to the assignments final due date. In writing the draft, I tried to keep a thread tying the whole thing together. Ideas that I really liked sometimes didn’t fit into the overall piece, even though it did seem to reflect my thesis. It wasn’t until my body began taking shape that the thesis became more tangible. If the thesis was the head, and my body paragraph, the body… then I should have heeded the advice from Fritz Lang’s Metropolis, you can’t have one without the other.

So why would Professor Belli assign this assignment? Why not assign an exam passable with rote memorization. As much as I’m sure she enjoys reading our work, (and grading it) I do believe it was for our benefit, some of the most important lessons are learned through dialogue. This exercise, to me at least, of looking at various opinionated second hand sources was an extension of the conversations we had in class in which we’d reach a catharsis through debate. Class may be over, but we’ll be students a little better equipped to scrutinize the world.

Best Regards,

Johnny Zapata
Religion’s Role in Science Fiction

For the entirety of human history, the beliefs concerning the creation of life has fallen into the authority of ancient mythology and religion. Soon however, the creation of life and all its repercussions will fall into the jurisdiction of science. For centuries, science fiction has envisioned what that future might entail and what awesome powers technology would bestow us, powers that had previously belonged only to gods. Within science fiction (SF), religion has been presented as a necessary opposing force, to challenge scientific progress that has gone too far. The dialogue between science and religion is necessary so that we may prepare for the responsibilities of governing either other forms of intelligent life or artificial intelligence of our creation, and to better understand life’s greatest mysteries.

In an article titled *Religion/Science/Fiction: Beyond the Final Frontier* written by Professor Rudy V. Busto, he writes about the importance of the discourse between religion and science fiction. Busto shares some insight offered by his one of his own students: “Like the monolith of [Stanley Kubrick’s film] *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the Big Dumb Object is mute and utterly incomprehensible to the point of challenging the way man views himself and the universe around him. The Big Dumb Object can inspire intellectual contemplation, but it exists at a higher level of intelligence that man is capable of reaching. God is the ultimate Big Dumb Object” (8). If you’ll excuse the contentious language of the somewhat tactless writer, the sentiment still holds merit. The belief that some knowledge exists perpetually outside of our breadth of understanding has ignited the imaginations of some of the greatest SF authors. Such
knowledge may never be readily available to us, but through SF we can estrange ourselves from that impossibility.

In his novel *A Case of Conscience (1958)*, author James Blish introduces readers to Father Ruiz-Sanchez, a character solely given the responsibility of choosing to either share a life-changing discovery, or withhold the knowledge from humanity. In the text, the protagonist is afraid of a planet which is an idyllic paradise, the idea of murder does not exist and its inhabitants are perfectly moral. In Blish’s story, intelligent life is discovered and a team of humans is sent to determine whether the planet should be opened to the public, quarantined, or mined for resources. It comes down to a vote, the protagonist Father Ruiz-Sanchez has the final say. Hrotic describes the creatures whose fate is to be determined in Blish’s novel: “The Lithians act as perfectly moral Catholics, but completely lack a belief in God. They are the ultimate pragmatists, assuming that if a question cannot be tested, the question itself is meaningless...Goodness can exist without God. The Lithians therefore represent an atheistic proof that the religious spirituality of humanity could not survive” (99). One would assume as a Catholic that he would vote to have the planet open for human travel, however Ruiz-Sanchez votes to quarantine the planet. He commits an immense sin to prevent humanity from ever learning of such a peaceful race of creatures who do not believe in God. He believes such knowledge would shatter the entire world’s faith and ruin Catholicism. Unfortunately, his decision dooms the planet to becoming a weapons factory and subsequently the planet is destroyed by inattentive scientists. Perhaps such a monstrosity may have been avoided if Ruiz-Sanchez had not acted out of fear or if his faith had been unwavering. Should any information, religious or scientific, ever be withheld from any form of life? Perhaps we had no right in
proselytizing, commercializing or interfering with other life forms at all. On the other hand, do we have a say in such matters if the life form is of our creation?

In Isaac Asimov’s novel *Reason* written in 1941, a remote power station afloat in space, far from Earth, there is a robot that wonders who or what created it. Asimov tells of a robot named QT-1, “cutie,” who rejects the story of its creation proffered by humans aboard the station. Cutie refuses to believe he was made by humans on a planet that is not even visible. Paul J. Nahin discusses Asimov’s work in his analytical text *Holy Sci-Fi! Where Science Fiction and Religion Intersect* and quotes Cutie from the novel: “These are facts which, with the self-evident proposition that no being can create another being superior to itself, smashes your silly hypothesis to nothing” (89). Moreover how could an inferior life form create a superior life form? Rejecting all knowledge presented to him, through its own powers of observation and logic Cutie declares the power station to be a deity and begins converting other robots to his view. The humans try to reason with Cutie and even go so far as to build a robot in front of it, to no avail. The bickering stops short of violence when the humans realize the robots, now being devoted to the power station, are running it far better than they had before. What rights have we to say another’s faith is wrong, even with near definitive proof? Even as creators of artificial intelligence, we are not omniscient. Asimov’s story is comedic and blithe at times, but it presents musing that should be taken under serious consideration before we find ourselves creating life.

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein: Or the Modern Prometheus (1818)*, needs little introduction, the tale of Victor Frankenstein experiment gone awry is well ingrained into our
culture. Sadly though, more people equate Frankenstein’s monster with the bumbling, child like version of cinema and not the eloquent and well spoken being in Shelley’s novel. Another striking difference is the absence of the details of the monster’s creation in the novel. When questioned, Frankenstein only alludes to grave robbing and torture of living animals. By omitting scientific details and adding this element of ambiguity to Frankenstein’s act of creation, it further draws the parallel between him and God. Historian Adam Roberts states in this book *The History of Science Fiction*, “The emphasis of the novel, in other words, is on the hubris of Frankenstein himself, and his ambition to usurp the status of God” (94). It this hubris that ultimately becomes his undoing. Adams believes Shelley had intended the story to be a cautionary tale advising humanity to not create life in its own image, to instruct us that we are unfit to play the role of creator. As we are imperfect, perhaps all attempts to create life in our image would result in something monstrous. Shelley very cleverly commented little on the morality of her tale. Others have surmised that it was not Frankenstein’s failure as a god that undid him; it was his failure as a father.

In a collection of essays *Religion and Science Fiction* edited by James F. McGrath, scholar and historian Alison MacWilliams comments on why Frankenstein’s efforts created a monster and not a man. She states it is not Frankenstein’s lofty aspirations that doom both him and his creation to death; it’s his failure as a creator and mentor. MacWilliams writes “In the central narrative, that of the monster, the monster presents himself as a potentially moral being – open to the beauty of nature, receptive to human affection. He becomes a killer, says the monster, not because he was made by human hands, but because his creator made the mistake of abandoning and rejecting him” (86). Shelley tried to refrain from being didactic, trying to say
as little as possible on her own morals or proposed lessons of the novel. Instead she offers the three narratives in her tale, and reviewers at the time praised her for her foresight and others reprimanded for even considering we could play god. MacWilliams proposes that the monster’s perspective rings true. In time, creating life may even become easy. The difficulty lies in being responsible parents so to speak. If we fail to enumerate what lessons and morals we should pass on to our progeny, we won’t create life in our image, we create monsters.

In Lester Del Rey’s novel Into Thy Hands (1945), humanity does in fact end, but one scientist has the foresight to see it coming and contemplates what knowledge is essential for the second chance of humanity’s survival. A robot maker, Simon Ames, creates ten robots and buries them, hoping they will survive and work together to create human life and properly guide it. After humanity has passed away, a nameless robot succeeds in resurrecting humans. Alone in a bunker elsewhere, Ames’ tenth robot awakes. The robot SA-10 (Satan) has comprehensive knowledge and understanding of science, but only a cursory familiarity of religion. A confused Satan uses the Bible to discern his purpose on Earth and concludes he must destroy life after he is attacked by desperate humans outside the bunker. Fortunately another robot named Eve comes to his aid. Having little knowledge of science, Satan has to instruct Eve on how to repair him. What Eve lacks in scientific wherewithal she makes up for in her acumen and knowledge of humanities, culture and religion. Eve explains to Satan that he is not evil, but that he was simply not ready for the knowledge made available to him. Hrotic comments on the three robots relationship:
“The first, *sine qua non* but isolated, resurrects the human animal; the latter two will allow us to reclaim our science and culture, but they are successful *only when operating in concert*. Fascinatingly, it is the science-oriented robot that is crippled by existential questions of purpose and origins, and by too literal readings of myth; the culture robot cannot reason her way out of a wet paper bag, but is able to generate nondestructive interpretations. Individually, science and culture are stupid; they (and we) need both to accomplish anything worthwhile (79).

Religion will persist with or without our involvement; it is a force in itself. Ames has the foresight to see that religion and science are integral to progress, but that each on their own can be overwhelming. Ames creates Eve not to provide answers to Satan’s confusion, but meaningful “interpretations.” Ames does not give the robots absolute authority on claiming what will be the truth for the new race of humans, he simply gives them the same knowledge and philosophies quandaries available to him. Perhaps he is dooming humanity to repeat its history, but Ames trusts it is better than giving the robots absolute authority, even if they do create us.

Despite our exhaustive scientific wherewithal, there is little we can claim with absolute authority. The more we discover, the more we know that we know nothing. Pulitzer Prize winning poet Tracy K. Smith doesn’t wallow in the void of knowledge, she revels in its mystery. In her article *The Speed of Belief: Religion and Science Fiction*, Kimberly Rae Connor offers insight into Smith’s poetry: “So Smith juxtaposes the mysteries of science with major questions
of life and religion, and uses space as science fiction narrators do: as the great unknown, to
explore the unknowable...Both science fiction and religion offer the temptation to escape the
fear, but each also offers hope and urges us to confront the reality of our existence and to do so
in ways that extend beyond the private” (370). In her poetry, Smith visualizes the space her
deceased father occupies. Even if it is an escape, there is solace in creating a new reality for her
father. Both science fiction and religion take the unknowable and make them palpable in our
minds. Connor adds that Smith’s work shows how religion and SF can hold hands as they help us
map out the unknown, even if it is just fiction.

We know so little about ourselves, yet, we may soon grasp the immense responsibility
of nurturing new intelligent life, of our creation or otherwise. We are beholden to religion and
science fiction for laying out the paths of our future, and giving us frameworks to prepare
ourselves for this inevitability. Numerous questions arise from sharing the universe with
another intelligent life form. What rights should we allow them, or should we give them
equality from the very start? As we become more alike to artificial intelligence, how do we
create a distinction between us? The questions arise ad infinitum, SF allows us to speculate
about these issues before they before we are face to face with them.
Works Cited


