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Does religion limit Science Fiction?

Science and religion, two different ideas that are always in conflict with each other. In an ever growing trend in society, more and more people are beginning to look at religion as a limitation; its system of beliefs prevents its followers from approving of things such as: education in the sciences (evolution), technological/medical advancements (A.I's and stem cell research), and even gay marriage. So then how is it possible that religion has somehow found its way into being a common theme in Science Fiction (Sci-fi) texts? It seems odd that a genre with science in its title would be so rich with religious themes, parallels, imagery, and symbolism; surely the conflicting ideas of these polar subjects combined together would be incompatible, which begs the question: does the use of religion in Sci-fi texts limit the appeal of the genre to a wider audience? Because each individual has a different interpretation of religious themes, the use of religion in sci-fi expands its audience to both religious and non-religious people.

*Neon Genesis Evangelion* is a popular Anime (Japanese cartoon), that takes place in a post-apocalyptic futuristic Tokyo. In the story a group of children working for a military organization use bio-machines known as Evangelions to fight off invading monsters which are called Angels. Right off the bat anybody watching this can immediately pick up on its religious references; however, those references do not end there. The oceans of this world have been polluted by the Angels resulting in the water turning into a blood red color similar to the plagues of Egypt. Additionally, the first Angel to arrive on earth is named Adam, and when he is introduced to the audience he is nailed to a cross, similar to the way Christ was. Lastly, whenever an angel is killed in the show it creates a massive explosion leaving behind a cross made of light in its wake of destruction. The religious parallels and symbolism in the show can be interpreted in myriad of ways depending on a person’s religious views.

Someone with a negative view of religion can interpret the destructive angel as the inherent destructive nature of religious beliefs. The society in the story is scientifically and technologically advance: they have created bio-machines, an underground city, and even buildings that can retract into the ground to avoid being destroyed during fights; however, despite all their efforts to keep civilization running, the destructive power of the angels is so great that they destroy at a quicker rate than society can rebuild. The Angel's destruction of such an advance society is an allegory for the way religion has only become cumbersome to modern say society.

On the other hand, someone with a positive view on religion can interpret the destructive nature of the angels as God's will. “But please don't confuse fact with fiction. The Bible is FACT. Neon Genesis Evangelion is FICTION. It is a great, soul-gripping anime that seeks to explore how mankind deals with situations beyond their control” (The True Nature of the Angels), this quote, taken from a forum about the anime, clearly shows an affinity to religion by its author, seen through the way he states bible as fact. Because of the author's religious beliefs, the person's interpretation of the destructive nature of the angels is not negative, instead the person goes on to interpret it as a justified will of God: “The most common and obvious reason is because that God was angered at humans for trying to artificially create and integrate something as sacred as human souls into machines (The True Nature of the Angels).” This thought pattern is similar to the way religion justifies the Flood that God cast upon the earth to cleanse it of 'evil'.

Although *Neon Genesis Evangelion* is filled to the brim with religious references and symbolism, it is in fact meaningless. In an interview, Assistant director Kazuya Tsurumaki is quoted as saying:

There are a lot of giant robot shows in Japan, and we did want our story to have a religious theme to help distinguish us. Because Christianity is an uncommon religion in Japan we thought it would be mysterious. None of the staff who worked on Eva are Christians. There is no actual Christian meaning to the show, we just thought the visual symbols of Christianity look cool. If we had known the show would get distributed in the US and Europe we might have rethought that choice. (Jamieson)

Even though the use of religious imagery and reference in Evangelion was simply an aesthetic choice, it became one of the most talked about aspects of the show; the presence of religious symbols on its own added an unintended layer to the show.

The religious references and symbolism in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* arequite obvious and really stick out when watching the show, but the topic of religion is so powerful that even slight obscure similarities can provoke a person to make religious connections and interpretations. These religious connections can be provoked by simple phrases and even body poses. Two culprits of such instances are *The Matrix* and *Superman returns/Man of Steel*.

Superman, a DC comic book character, is one of the most powerful characters in comic book history: he is virtually indestructible in the canon of DC comics. Anybody familiar with the character and comic books knows enough about the character and his history to know that he is just a superhero, no more, no less. But as the character has become more popular and spawned various movies, people have come to find a lot of religious parallels and meaning in the Superman character.

In 2006 *Superman Returns* was released and critically panned; however, one thing that became widely talked about was its religious parallels. Finlo Rohrer, of the BBC News Magazine, sums up the religious references that most people saw in the film. Although the movie does have some scenes that could be interpreted as having religious significance, oddly, people tend to heavily use the way superman poses as a main argument: “At one point Superman falls towards the Earth in a pose that vaguely echoes the Crucifixion” (Rohrer). It seems far-fetched, to anyone that is not religious, that anyone would find religious symbolism in something as simplistic as Superman's pose, but it is just another interpretation that is made possible by religious minds. In fact, even Rohrer himself states that symbolism and parallels could only be seen by someone with a religious background: “But as far as the imagery goes, what is "blatant" for those with a background in Christianity, comics, art or criticism, may be a little more opaque for the average cinemagoer.” If the imagery could only be seen by someone with a certain background of information, doesn't that show religion only adds to the ways Sci-fi can be interpreted? Additionally, some Christians believe that the symbolism in the movie is so obvious that it could be incorporated into religious teachings (Rohrer).

In 2013 Superman received a reboot called *Man of Steel*, and much like it's predecessor it became notorious for its use of religious references, with Superman's pose being something that is often pointed out. Doug Walker the Nostalgia Critic, a famous amateur internet critic, is one of many respectable critics that point out the use of body language as a religious parallel. Walker points out that a scene in which Superman is floating in space is meant to be interpreted as a comparison to Christ, he even repeats the phrase “I am Jesus” when he shows the audience the scene in question (Walker, 27:47). Walker, however, is reviewing the film with another person named Joe Vargas, also known as Angry Joe. Vargas believes that the scene in which Superman is floating in space is the directors way of showing how graceful superman is rather than presenting him as a Christ-like figure, even though it does seem like a religious parallel (Walker, 28:18). Both Vargas and Walker come from religious backgrounds, but would someone who doesn't still see the parallel with only a basic knowledge of Christianity? Additionally, even if the Christ-like parallel is universally seen, just from these two critics alone one could see how religion opens up a text to various interpretations.

“Hallelujah”, “Jesus-Christ”, “Oh god”, all of these are phrases/words that are commonly heard spoken, even by the non-religious. Even though the words are religious, they have been co-opted by society and used to simply express a given type of reaction to certain situations. Oh god is a phrase commonly used in shock; if someone heard their friend say it in reaction to something they would not assume that it has any religious meaning. Some people, however, believe that the use of these phrases/words instantly implies that they are being used within a religious context.

In “Forget Sci-fi and guns- The Matrix is really about religion”, Steven Tomkins expresses the idea that when a character in *The Matrix* is given a valuable disk by Neo (the protagonist), the character's response is a religious parallel, because the character says, "Hallelujah!" You're my saviour, man. My own personal Jesus Christ." To claim that the wording is a religious parallel is misguided, they are just religious words used in a certain context. In this context the wording only emphasizes the character's appreciation of being given something so valuable by Neo; it is not meant to be taken seriously. The action of using religious words causes people to find different meanings, again the brief mention of something religious opens up a Pandora’s box of interpretations.

The use of religion in Sci-fi texts isn't always obscure, but rather obvious and intentional. Some authors blend religion into Sci-fi to provide a social commentary of religion in society; therefore, the use of religion in Sci-fi also expands the boundaries of the kinds of stories content creators can express, even in non-religious stories. Some stories use religion to express a negative view on religious beliefs such as *The Machine Stops*.

In T*he Machine Stops* society blindly follows a machine that provides all of their necessities, because of this the machine has taken on the form of a deity to the denizens of this society. This can be seen through the book of the machine that people carry around, a parallel to the bible. The machine is also something that no one has seen yet they rely on it, an allegory for the way religious people rely on God despite not being a visible physical being. By the end of the story the society is destroyed and as it is facing destruction, Kuno, the protagonist, is praying and kissing the book of the machine; she is waiting to be saved rather than saving herself. The story is insulting religion, commenting on the way religious people rely on something that is incapable of being aware of their existence; religion has led this society to its demise, just as it corrupting to real modern day society.

Whether or not the effects of religion on Sci-fi texts are beneficial is disputable, but there is no doubt that it has not limited the genres audience. The use of religion in Sci- fi has opened up a myriad of ways one could interpret a text; simply the presence of a religious symbol, parallel, or word can cause a person to find a deeper religious meaning in something even if it wasn't intentional. *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, *Superman Returns*, *Man of steel*, and *The Matrix* all have vague religious references, or none at all depending on who you ask, yet despite the vagueness of its religious content people have come to interpret deeper religious meanings in all these texts; religion has only expanded the way Sci-fi stories can be told and interpreted. The use of religion in Sci-fi does not limit the audience to only religious people, in fact, it has only expanded it to the point where has spawned a sub-genre known as Christian Sci-fi. The existence of this sub-genre shows how religion is only meant to broaden the audience of the genre; it is expand on its already existing audience, rather than taking over the genre as a whole. Additionally, C.S. Lewis a famous Sci-fi author, known for the *Space Trilogy*, is actually considered one of the best authors of the sub-genre. Additionally, Arthur C. Clarke, another famous Sci-fi author, is an atheist; however, despite being an atheist and having strong negative views of religion, even he uses religion in his stories to provide social commentary and deeper meanings (Busto 397). To some people the use of religion in sci-fi is seen as a way to limit the genre to religious viewers/readers; however, because every individual interprets things in a unique way it only opens up the genre to a wider audience, with each person having a different positive or negative view of the religious content.

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