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Transcendent Outsiders, Alien Gods, and Aspiring Humans: Literary Fantasy and Science
Fiction as Contemporary Theological Speculation

A Dissertation Presented

by

Ryan Calvey

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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This dissertation argues that mainstream discourse on theology and morality often fails to explore the value and credibility of different theological approaches and the possibility of moral evolution and that, as a result, we need to pay more attention to arenas which allow for deeper speculation about theology and morality. Following an observation by Margaret Atwood, I argue that one such space within literature is literary science fiction and fantasy. In my first chapter, I argue that, while some science fiction merely echoes the limitations of mainstream debate, the genres can creatively explore theological questions because, like myth and theology, they contextualize known existence and voice what I call “transcendent outsiders,” beings who are superior to humans and provide critical and comforting outside perspectives. In the second and third chapters, I draw on the work of writers such as Carl Jung, Brenda Denzler, and Linda Dégh on alien beings as spiritual/theological figures to argue that a range of narratives and films, such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and Carl Sagan’s *Contact*, present aliens as godlike transcendent outsider figures in ways that explore, endorse, or critique various theological conceptualizations: in chapter two, the judgmental, punishing god figures of much ancient myth and traditional religion; in chapter three, more loving, peaceful god figures echoing Eastern and New Age theological concepts and progressive spirituality. In chapter four, I argue that science fiction and fantasy also contextualize by depicting what I call “aspiring human” figures, a kind of flipside of transcendent outsiders which allows us to explore human identity and morality and, by positioning us as gods, theology. I assert that in his *Wizard Knight* and *Short Sun* series, Gene Wolfe uses an array of aspiring humans to raise deep questions about human identity, morality, and theology and to present hierarchical Christian solutions. I conclude by suggesting both a fresh approach to theology that emphasizes the need for imaginative, open-minded speculation about transcendence that goes beyond the limitations of the mainstream debate and an increased recognition of the value of science fiction and fantasy as literary arenas in which important, creative theological speculation is occurring.

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Introduction: More/Less Theology is the Problem/Solution

“Why are people so mean?”

“Because they separate themselves from the Outsider.” I had not thought about it in those terms before and said what I did without reflection, but as soon as I had spoken, I realized that what I had said was true. (Wolfe, *Whorl* 271)

If you think it would be impossible to improve upon the Ten Commandments as a statement of morality, you really owe it to yourself to read some other scriptures. Once again, we need look no further than the Jains: Mahavira, the Jain patriarch, surpassed the morality of the Bible with a single sentence: “Do not injure, abuse, oppress, enslave, insult, torment, torture, or kill any creature or living being.” Imagine how different our world might be if the Bible contained this as its central precept. Christians have abused, oppressed, enslaved, insulted, tormented, tortured, and killed people in the name of God for centuries, on the basis of a theologically defensible reading of the Bible. It is impossible to behave this way by adhering to the principles of Jainism. How, then, can you argue that the Bible provides the clearest statement of morality the world has ever seen?

[...]

[...] Religion allows people to imagine that their concerns are moral when they are not—that is, when they have nothing to do with suffering or its alleviation. (Harris 22-23, 25)

We are often told what Gene Wolfe’s protagonist tells another character in the first epigraph: that human weaknesses and flaws are the result of our lack of belief in or connection to God, whom Wolfe’s character calls “The Outsider.” Anyone who proposes, for example, that schools are now more dangerous and young people more violent, sexually active, or less respectful of authority because the Ten Commandments are no longer posted on the walls and God has been “driven out of our schools,” is invoking this theme. The implication is that morality results from religious adherence to divine teachings or scriptures, from a spiritual connection to God, or, in some cases, merely from a fear of divine punishment. Our secular society has strayed from the first, lost the second, and no longer takes the third seriously, and the result is moral regression and sometimes confusion or chaos. In brief, this diagnosis suggests, the lack of religion/belief is what plagues us. But there is hope: things might be bad now, but if we reconnect, we can return to a time when they were better.

And yet, if some voices in our public discourse tell us that secularism and the lack of faith or religious belief are the problem, others, including, recently, writers dubbed the “New Atheists,” assert that the exact opposite is true. Our moral problems are not the result of a *lack* of faith, but rather the direct results of *too much faith* or belief in outrageous and primitive ideas and in an outrageous and primitive God, like the Old Testament God, whom evolutionary

biologist Richard Dawkins describes in *The God Delusion* as an “evil monster” (248). As another atheist critic, Sam Harris, has put it,

It is terrible that we all die and lose everything we love; it is doubly terrible that so many human beings suffer needlessly while alive. That so much of this suffering can be directly attributed to religion—to religious hatreds, religious wars, religious taboos, and religious diversions of scarce resources—is what makes the honest criticism of religious faith a moral and intellectual necessity. (56-57)

While many forces can prompt human hatred, violence, and cruelty, as Harris observes in the epigraph quote, religion has perhaps more power than anything else to make us act badly while believing we are doing the greatest good. According to this line of argument, to advance to a better future, we need to disconnect and replace faith with reason. Along these lines, nun-turned-scientist Mary in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* series learns that God (in Pullman’s world, the “Authority”) is a fraud and Christianity a “very powerful and convincing mistake” (*Amber Spyglass* 393). In other words, our task is not to return to faith and better times in the past but to advance past oppressive delusions which are holding us back from a brighter future.

If the two sides of this argument propose opposite solutions to present problems, for fairly obvious reasons, they also sometimes see very different worlds. The voices urging us to reconnect with God, faith, or spirituality tend to see a world in which these have been lost or, as Wolfe’s protagonist implies, people have “separate[d] themselves from” them (*Whorl* 271). In the worlds of Wolfe’s major series, for example, people have forgotten the true God and fallen into false worship of lower beings and, as a result, morally regressed to barbarism and brutality. The atheist side of the debate sees a world in which religion and faith dominate or tyrannize, a world oppressively controlled, and held back, by faith and superstition. Philip Pullman’s fantasy series, for example, depicts an alternate England controlled almost completely by a Church devoted to repressing heresy and eradicating “dust” (what they mistakenly take to be harmful original sin, but which is actually the gift of consciousness), which eventually requires separating children from their very souls. At the very end of his comic documentary *Religulous*, Bill Maher, standing in Megiddo, Israel, where he says, “Many Christians believe the world will come to an end,” suggests that we must abandon religion or face cataclysmic consequences, his commentary visually accompanied by images of violence and destruction¹.

While the differences between the two sides I’ve outlined are what stand out, there are at least two significant points of agreement. First, they both believe that present conditions could be better, and that trying to bring about moral improvement (whether as an evolution or a return to the past) is among the most important tasks we face. The atheist side, which in this sense might be considered more progressive, often suggests that things *are* getting better and looks for how to continue and speed up human moral evolution (faith and religion are thus roadblocks on the highway of human progress). The “faith” side sees things as getting worse and believes that what’s needed is a return to traditional values and religion. Less obviously, both sides agree that theology has significant consequences for human behavior and thus plays a central role. On both points, they are right; we do need to focus on moral improvement, and we cannot neglect the role theology often plays. The problem is that our mainstream discussions of theology are often not helpful, primarily because of their style/format and its impact on the participants chosen and the potential content of the discussion.

Perhaps not surprisingly, mainstream discourse about theology and morality is often hamstrung by the same impulses that diverse observers including satirist Jon Stewart, political bloggers Glen Greenwald and Andrew Sullivan, linguist/activist Noam Chomsky, and essayist/fiction writer George Saunders have persuasively argued limit and in some cases neuter most mainstream political discourse.² Mainstream discussions of spirituality/religion/faith/theology often take the form of brief, theatrical “debates” (in which opponents attempt to “win”) rather than discussions in which participants attempt to find truth, understand each other, or enlighten an audience. Straw man arguments, ad hominem characterizations, and misleading assertions abound since the implicit objective is simply making one’s opponent look bad and oneself appear right. Mainstream theological debates also typically feature only two sides: atheists and “believers” (members of traditional organized religion, and even then usually only Christianity, Judaism, or Islam)—in other words, between fixed, traditional theology and anti-theology/no theology³. As in political discourse, media moderators demonstrate an obsession with the appearance of “balance” (as opposed to accuracy or objective truth). The exaltation of balance manifests itself in the idea that every discussion must have exactly two sides (which can be represented by the “strongest” voices, typically meaning the most strident or extreme) and that (in the interests of balance) these two sides must always be presented as if equal and all debates left completely unsettled (One side says this; one side says that—we’re gonna have to leave it there), regardless of the relative merits of the claims actually made or the credibility of the speakers making them. We are led to believe that for the journalist/moderator to weigh in on such a value (for example, pointing out that the position taken by one side is supported by a vast consensus of evidence or the historical record and the other no credible sources, or that one speaker is a respected figure in the field and the other merely a propagandist) is, rather than a proper use of moral authority and the media’s essential role, the manifestation of some kind of political bias. If it is not immediately clear how this obsession with balance is harmful, or even how balance and accuracy are incompatible rather than complimentary, imagine, for comparison, what we might think of the value of a world series game in which an umpire refuses to call a pitch a ball or strike (or calls them always in equal number for both teams) for fear of seeming to have a Pro-Yankees bias—or of a murder trial presided over by a judge who, in the interests of “balance,” gives equal time/weight to the testimony of a court psychiatrist and a discredited friend of the defendant⁴.

In mainstream discussions of theology as in political discourse, then, the brevity of the segments; the emphasis on the appearance of victory rather than any reality of understanding or insight; the mediator’s central focus on, at all costs, appearing “balanced”; the entertainment motive that requires loud, polarized voices representing a limited range of familiar perspectives all work to ensure that the odds are stacked very highly against actual discussions of real insight and value. Much like political debates on cable news programs, mainstream theological debates can rarely go anywhere productive because both sides “know” what they know—and both believe they know all *anyone* needs know about the topic: that there is a God and God looks exactly like my faith/inerrant holy book tells me, or that your holy book’s idea of God cannot exist. Ironically, the primary accomplishment of the debates we tend to have about theology and spirituality is to ensure that discussions we need to have cannot happen because neither side is actually willing to discuss theology: one side is certain their theology is it; the other that their traditional theology is foolish and irrational, and so theology is necessarily irrational and harmful.

Instead, the content of such discussions is typically limited to simplistic questions which make for easy “yes/no” shouting matches but actually do little to enlighten: Does God exist? Is religion a force for good? What is the value of faith? Can we have morality without religion? From the perspective of the media, such questions are perfect, because they will certainly not be “settled” in any way, the debates will be entertaining, and by presenting “strong” voices for such obviously different sides, they will appear balanced. But will we learn anything more than the obvious? One side is sure God exists and is of course an anthropomorphized being exactly like their faith portrays him (it is virtually always a him); the other will argue that belief in such a God-figure is irrational. One will argue that religion and faith are the only true sources of morality, and atheism leads to nihilism and moral collapse, while the other will argue that morality exists despite religion and that, when religion prompts moral behavior, it does so for the wrong reasons⁵.

In addition, the focus on those simplistic questions keeps us from exploring two interconnected issues I’d like to argue are far deeper and more useful than the simple “Does God exist?” approach of mainstream discussions: (1) what we consider transcendent/how we define the transcendence (what ideas about transcendent beings such as God or gods make sense to us now, given our current understanding of ourselves and the world) and (2) what moral improvements are desirable and how could they become possibilities, even realities. The mere presence or absence of belief (what most mainstream discussions cover) is an unproductive focus since it is objectively beyond debate that either can produce the best and the worst behavior, providing reasons for treating others with striking love and compassion or a rationale for the most shocking brutality. Considering transcendence and moral evolution keeps our focus on what actually shapes behavior—in the case of believers, the *content* of their theology; in the case of atheists and agnostics, their moral decision-making about what, in the absence of any spiritual context, is best for the individual and for humanity in general in life in the here and now.

When we discuss theology, our most important concern should be the *content and effects* of different theological visions. Exactly what concept of God, spirituality, or transcendence does a particular view provide? How rational, compelling, and sophisticated does that vision appear to be? Perhaps most important, how successful is such a belief and the approaches to life it sponsors at producing happiness and alleviating suffering and despair⁶. In what cases have such concepts or visions of transcendence sponsored approaches to life that lessen happiness/increase suffering and despair? If such visions or concepts have weaknesses in either conception or impact, what conceptions of God, spirituality, or transcendence might make more sense? The key factor regarding theology, then, is something rarely broached in the mainstream debate discussed above: what one imagines that God to be, how one envisions that spiritual framework, and how one fits oneself into both ideas, what one envisions both demand of him or herself. Some theological ideas promote compassion and alleviate despair; others prompt incredibly brutal, irrational behavior that, at least in our modern world, could hardly be justified or argued for *except with* resort to some variation of the “God wants it” rationale⁷. Theology, like atheism and agnosticism, cannot be assessed categorically, but this point is missed when, as in most mainstream debate about theology/spirituality, the options are simply to dismiss all of theology because of its worst offenders or to choose from one of the official, proper choices, which thus appear to stand for all spiritual and theological possibilities.

In an atheistic or agnostic view, what is most relevant is how, morally, one should react to an atheistic conclusion: if there is nothing else but the world we observe with our senses and the lives we are experiencing at this moment, what approaches to those realities would have the

best chance of producing happiness and alleviating suffering for the individual concerned and for people in general. Following Dostoevsky's line, "If there is no God, everything is permitted," many suggest that the absence of a God, of purpose, judgment, an afterlife, etc, means anything goes, but this is clearly a simplistic position⁸ (Dostoevsky 717). Sam Harris, Phillip Pullman, and many other atheists and agnostics argue that the absence of a heaven or other form of afterlife judgment or reward can actually make justice and kindness right here and now *more* important, since there will be no person or place afterward to make up for what we have done or failed to do here. From an atheistic or agnostic perspective, then, the questions are, What is transcendent behavior? How could humanity evolve? What would the kinds of utopias Harris or Pullman suggest actually look like? How could we get from here to there?

The crucial factor, then, regarding theology, is not simply belief or lack of belief, which is the focus of much mainstream debate. If someone believes that this is or may be all there is, it matters *how they react* to that conclusion; if someone believes in God or gods or some kind of theological framework or notion of the afterlife, clearly it matters greatly *what that belief is*, what that God is seen as being, what it is seen as needing or expecting (if it needs or desires anything), and how all of that should translate into human behavior in the present. So it is not the absence of theology or the presence of theology that most demands discussion, but *the kind of theology*. In a sense, then, from either a spiritual/theological perspective or an atheistic/agnostic one, the questions we most need to explore are virtually the same questions—what would be more evolved or transcendent and how we might we improve. We might even say that the only substantial difference between a theological and an atheistic/agnostic approach is whether we view ourselves improving on our own or through the assistance or collaboration of something. Or, to put it another way, the only real difference is whether we believe that the model of transcendence/moral evolution we envision and aspire to emulate is something real we are coming to understand (such as a God or spiritual reality) or a model we are creating ourselves. (And, it is worth noting, some spiritual perspectives would suggest that we need not even choose between those two viewpoints—that coming to understand and creating/imagining transcendence or divinity are not mutually exclusive). Either way, the idea is evolution, improvement, transcendence—and the discovery of that transcendent way or path through a higher model that truly exists or one we envision for ourselves. And we can explore the model (and we must, if moral improvement is to happen) without necessarily agreeing on whether we are creating something or coming to understand it. The important part is the exploring and envisioning of the model—asking what a transcendent model would or could be, etc. The answer to one question (is such a model something “out there” to be understood or something “within” to be imagined or reasoned out?) need not be found or decided upon in order for us to speculate usefully about transcendence and moral evolution. And speculating about transcendence can help us out of the negative forms of theology and atheism: away, on the side of theology, from ideas of God that, rather than transcendent, seem regressive, and on the side of atheism, from a simplistic nihilism that suggests, if there is no judge, then all is meaningless. Instead of attempting to improve the state of affairs by eradicating either belief or atheism (seemingly the desired outcome of those who occupy the two sides of the mainstream debate), we could attempt to improve both views of the world so that the best versions of either clearly lead to compassionate behavior and the alleviation of despair.

In Search of “Sane Spirituality”: Voices Left Out of Mainstream Theological Debate

The predominance of religious zealots in the media says more about their volume than their actual numbers. [...] The real voiceless ones belong to neither of those two camps. I'm referring to the enormous number of people who actively engage in some form of what my colleagues in the Forge Institute call "sane spirituality." These are people who recognize that we're part of a transcendent something -- a no-thing, really -- and that [sic] connect to, or unite with, that infinite ineffable wholeness is natural and beneficial. [...] But the media evidently can't handle nuance. Maybe Harris can now help us move beyond the clamorous tag-team matches that place faith and religion in one corner and reason and atheism in the other, relegating the sanely spiritual to the bleachers. (Goldberg, "Sane")

Our world has shrunk, and it is dawning on us that humanity is one, with one psyche. Humility is a not inconsiderable virtue which should prompt Christians, for the sake of charity—the greatest of all virtues—to set a good example and acknowledge that though there is only one truth it speaks in many tongues, and that if we still cannot see this is it simply due to lack of understanding. No one is so godlike that he alone knows the true word. (Jung 410)

There's nothing wrong with a fifth grade understanding of God—as long as you're in the fifth grade. (Keene)

Clearly, there are deep moral and theological questions in need of exploration. I have argued that unfortunately, mainstream discussions of theology, spirituality, and morality are typically incapable of exploring them because their approach limits the participants to loud voices espousing diametrically opposite viewpoints while excluding those who are willing to carry out open-minded, creative explorations of theology and spirituality that transcend the limiting narrative of "faith/believers/churchgoers versus atheists." In this section, I argue that the voices left out actually represent a vast range of current approaches to theology and spirituality which have a great deal to offer our current discussions of those topics—in large part because they eschew three main limitations of the religious perspectives more frequently represented: literalism, exclusivism, and dated/limited conceptions of divinity/transcendence.

First, the voices that go unheard in mainstream discussions of theology and spirituality actually include a broad range of current approaches to both that exist and thrive outside of, in between, and in some cases even within the "two sides" presented by media debates. As many observers have noted, one of those approaches is that followed by growing numbers of people who are open to spiritual possibilities but pursue them primarily outside of the structures of traditional religion. In his recent article "Making Space for Sane Spirituality," *American Veda* author Philip Goldberg says of the "voiceless" alluded to in the epigraph quote that "A large percentage of them are in the fastest growing religious category in America: spiritual but not religious (SBNR)" (Goldberg). In *The Eclipse of Eternity*, a comprehensive "sociology of the afterlife," Tony Walter points out repeatedly that many of the functions which, in previous eras, were closely associated with religion are so no longer. "There is continuing non-dogmatic belief in life after death, long after theologians have become sceptical and preachers silent on the matter. This would fit the researches of Hay (1990) into religious experience, which indicate the considerable detachment of religious experience from formal religion," he observes (45). "The

content of popular belief,” he notes, “seems to be becoming increasingly detached from both traditional religion *and* from modern scientific understandings” (48). And according to Walter, “though traditional religion is declining as a resource for people confronting their mortality, new forms of religion are taking their place” (64). “Though Christian literature today said little about death, it is a major subject in New Age books [...] Many of these new religious approaches allow the individual to pick and choose their own beliefs and techniques, and—in producing spiritual ideas that appeal to the modern self-determining individual—may succeed where conventional religion has failed,” he concludes (Walter 64).

The “sanely spiritual,” to use Goldberg’s phrase, also include people who, on the surface, might appear to be members of the two opposing sides often presented in media debates of theology and spirituality as well as many who follow approaches outside of the “big three” religions sometimes presented as the entire face of spirituality. As Goldberg notes, “the voiceless include many people who appear to be conventionally religious, in that they attend worship services, celebrate religious holidays and teach their children about their religious heritage” (“Sane Spirituality”). The difference, he explains, is that “they participate on their own terms: They don’t believe everything that staunch atheists assume they believe; they don’t accept all religious dogma as revealed truth; and if they value scripture at all they do so selectively and read it metaphorically, not as history or as an infallible guide to morality” (“Sane Spirituality”). Archbishop Desmond Tutu provides an example, stating in the film *For the Bible Tells Me So*, “The bible is the word of God through the words of human beings speaking in the idiom of their time, and the richness of the bible is that we don’t take it as literally so, that it was dictated by God.”

Others in this “sanely spiritual” group follow spiritual traditions outside the big three or draw practices from spiritual traditions while considering themselves, on the whole, to be secular:

Many practice methodologies derived from ancient traditions born in India, which we’ve come to call Hinduism and Buddhism, although very few Western practitioners call themselves Hindus or Buddhists. Also in the group are people whose world views are secular and who view practices such as meditation as the applied components of a science of consciousness, or simply as ways to enhance well-being. (“Sane Spirituality”)

In this category Goldberg even places Sam Harris, who has admitted to practicing meditation.

A range of significant figures in contemporary spirituality also fall outside the categories presented by mainstream debate. In dozens of books, Deepak Chopra and Neil Donald Walsch, for example, argue for the importance of spirituality, but are often critical of traditional religions and their notions of God and adherence to scripture. In *How to Know God*, Chopra critiques theological conceptions of God as flawed personifications it is now time for us to move past:

After centuries of knowing God through faith, we are now ready to understand divine intelligence directly. In many ways this new knowledge reinforces what spiritual traditions have already promised. [...]

Our whole notion of reality has actually been topsy-turvy. Instead of God being a vast, imaginary projection, he turns out to be the only thing that is real, and the whole universe, despite its immensity and solidity, is a projection of God’s nature.

[...]

We personify God as a convenient way of making him more like ourselves. He would be a very perverse and cruel human, however, to remain so hidden from us while demanding our love. What could possibly give us confidence in any kind of benevolent spiritual Being when thousands of years of religion have been so stained by bloodshed?

We need a model that is both part of religion yet not bounded by it. (Chopra, *How to Know God*, 14-15).

Part of the value of Chopra's approach (elsewhere, he actually talks about advancing from limited conceptions of God to more sophisticated, mature ones¹⁰) is that it is focused on *the content of theology*—not merely the presence or absence of a limited notion of it (the “Does God exist?” question of popular debate). Neil Donald Walsch also directly emphasizes the importance of the content of theology and the impact of specific theological content on behavior and society:

Humanity's ideas about God produce humanity's ideas about life and about people. Dramatically *different* ideas about God will produce dramatically *different* ideas about life and about people. If the world could use anything right now, that's it.

[...]

If we think theology does not really affect our everyday lives that much, the answer to this question almost wouldn't matter. You would believe what you believe, and I would believe what I believe, and others would believe what they believe, and we'd all go our ways with our beliefs and live our lives. But this is not simply a theological issue.

Theology produces sociology.

A theology of separation produces a sociology of separation.

It is as simple as that. Regrettably, theology too often produces a sociology that produces pathology. (Walsch, *What God Wants*, 2, 61)

Raymond Moody, known for coining the term “Near Death Experience” (or NDE) and popularizing its study, also presents spiritual perspectives that fall completely outside the mainstream categories. Like many who support this kind of theology/spirituality, he talks about an idea of God that is bigger and more sophisticated than others and also less concerned with what it considers the trivial details of human-created religious institutions—in other words, a conception of God that is more like a transcendent being or force and less like a petty, jealous person. In his book *The Light Beyond*, Moody lays out the difference between faith and religion as it is often discussed and God and spirituality as they are experienced by those who have had near death experiences:

The interesting thing is that after the NDE, the effect seems to be the same: people who weren't overtly religious before the experience say afterward that they do believe in God and have an appreciation for the spiritual, as do people who believed in God all along.

Both groups emerge with an appreciation of religion that is different from the narrowly defined one established by most churches. They come to realize through this experience that religion is not a matter of one “right” group versus several “wrong groups. People who undergo an NDE come out of it saying that religion concerns the ability to love—not doctrines and denominations. In short,

they think that God is a much more magnanimous being than they previously thought and that denominations don't count. (Moody 87-88)

Moody suggests that religious backgrounds can color a person's experience of the afterlife (Deepak Chopra suggests something similar, talking about the forms or masks that experience take on for the individual¹¹), but that people return from such experiences less concerned with denomination and, often, completely uninterested in the trivial details over which religions and denominations are bitterly divided as central ideas:

Researchers like Melvin Morse and others have found that the very religious are more likely to think of the being of light as God or Jesus and will most often call the place at the end of the tunnel heaven. But their religious background doesn't alter the core NDE experience. [...] It isn't until later that they put the experience into a religious context.

[...]

By and large though, the very religious come back from NDEs very nondenominational. They report that God is more interested in the spiritual aspects of religion than the dogmatic ones. (Moody 182, 183-184)

Later, Moody mentions researcher Melvin Morse's conclusion, which he says is echoed by other researchers', "that religious background doesn't alter the core experience [of an NDE], only the interpretation of the experience" (Moody 70). Moody titles one section of his "Changed Lives" chapter "Better Developed Spiritual Side"; in it, he notes that while "an NDE almost always leads to spiritual curiosity," "this doesn't mean that they [NDEers] become pillars of the local church. To the contrary, they tend to abandon religious doctrine purely for the sake of doctrine" (Moody 49). In an interview, Moody noted that one staunchly Christian NDE-er who previously "was absolutely convinced that only the members of his very specific denomination were going to be in heaven, and that everybody else was going to hell," told him, "I was very surprised to learn that God wasn't interested in my theology" (Mishlove). Moody explains,

And so generally, I think, the patients who return from this will say that it's not denominational religion that counts, it's the commitment to the basic spiritual truths that are embodied in religion -- the love of oneself and of others, and the attempt to expand oneself and to be harmonious with God and one's fellow human beings (Mishlove)

In America, sanely spiritual perspectives free of literalism, exclusivism, and unsophisticated/immature notions of God have become increasingly common¹². And far from being a recent fad, they can actually be traced back to the theism of *Common Sense* pamphleteer Thomas Paine and, later, the more Eastern approach of Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson. In *Age of Reason*, Paine presents what he considers a theist perspective, which he suggests has a broader and more direct view of theology and spirituality, and uses it to critique the man-made beliefs of organized religions. His core perspective, one of faith and spirituality but simultaneously disdain for the central aspects of the major organized religions, is similar in many ways to the approaches outlined by Goldberg and taken by writers such as Chopra, Walsch, Moody, and others. While he says that he believes "in one God, and no more" and "that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow-creatures happy," Paine also asserts quite starkly what he does not believe:

I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church.

All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.

[...]

EVERY national church or religion has established itself by pretending some special mission from God, communicated to certain individuals. The Jews have their Moses; the Christians their Jesus Christ, their apostles and saints; and the Turks their Mahomet; as if the way to God was not open to every man alike. Each of those churches shows certain books, which they call revelation, or the Word of God. The Jews say that their Word of God was given by God to Moses face to face; the Christians say, that their Word of God came by divine inspiration; and the Turks say, that their Word of God (the Koran) was brought by an angel from heaven. Each of those churches accuses the other of unbelief; and, for my own part, I disbelieve them all. (Paine)

What is especially useful about Paine, and the move made by the other contemporary writers and thinkers I have mentioned but which is often missing from mainstream discussion of theology, is that after critiquing the foolishness he sees in much Christian mythology (and, by implication, the similar mythologies of the other organized religions he has said are comparable), he attempts to explain what a more sensible and productive theology might look like.

In *American Veda*, Goldberg recounts Emerson's views, which he argues were influenced significantly by his reading about Indian religion and reflected, for the time, a striking break from literalism and scriptural adherence of any kind, Christian exclusivity, and notions of God as an anthropomorphized being separate from and disappointed with sinful human beings. Instead, Emerson's views included "the idea that [...] the purpose of human life is for the soul to realize its inherent unity with its source" and "the concept of *maya*, which sees the multiplicity of material forms as a kind of illusion that obscures the knowledge of oneness" (Goldberg, *Veda* 31). He "served briefly as a minister, but 'self-defrocked' because of his growing discomfort with doctrines like salvation through faith and the unique divinity of Jesus" and "[y]ears later [...] linked his departure from Christian orthodoxy to his discovery of Eastern texts, which 'dispelled once and for all the dream about Christianity being the sole revelation—for here in India, there in China, were the same principles, the same grandeurs, the like depths, moral and intellectual'" (Goldberg, *Veda* 31-32). In a May 26, 1837 *Journal* entry, Emerson wrote of the soul and God, "Under all this running sea of circumstance [...] lies the aboriginal abyss of Being. Essence, or God, is not a relation or a part, but the whole" and "As a plant in the earth so I grow in God. I am only a form of him. He is the soul of me [...] in certain moments I have known that I existed directly from God, and am, as it were, his organ. And in my ultimate consciousness Am He" (quoted in Goldberg, *Veda* 34-35). "In place of a fallen, sinful humanity, separate and apart from God, he upheld an ecstatic vision of a divine essence," Goldberg explains, and "[i]n place of salvation through faith in Christ, he proposed what [scholar Robert] Gordon calls 'a new metaphysics of consciousness,' in which the central obstacle to fulfillment is not inherent depravity but ignorance of our divine nature" (*Veda*, 36-37). As Gordon told Goldberg, "Emerson took the revolutionary notion that men are essentially good, not fallen, one step further [...] All human beings are essentially divine" (Goldberg, *Veda* 38).

These approaches, which we might follow Goldberg and collectively dub "sane spirituality," can help our discussions of theology, spirituality, and morality in many ways. For one, their practitioners are often free from literalism and the complete or unreflective adherence

to dogma that completely stalls much theological conversation (once someone believes a specific text to be the sole inerrant word of God which all must obey or face hell, what discussion of any value can we really hope to have about its content?). Instead, they read scriptures selectively and metaphorically. As Goldberg observes, “They don't believe everything that staunch atheists assume they believe; they don't accept all religious dogma as revealed truth; and if they value scripture at all they do so selectively and read it metaphorically, not as history or as an infallible guide to morality.” In a deeper sense, such approaches to spirituality and theology demonstrate a freedom from the belief in religious symbols and metaphors as real things and a recognition of them as symbols, accompanied by a sense that we are perhaps now able to talk directly about spiritual realities as they might be, without the need for such analogies or illustrations. In the conclusion to *Eclipse of Eternity*, Tony Walter explains how symbols intended to illustrate or represent could, over time, have been taken for the real thing:

The old pictures reified the mystical sense of spiritual reality in concrete pictures which were then mistaken for reality. Many medieval theologians believed in the pictures they devised of heaven and hell: they propagated them not as symbols of some unutterable reality but as objectively true. Modern fundamentalists who believe that people are going to heaven or hell likewise see these as objectively real destinations. [...] (194)

Those open to new approaches to spirituality see such symbols as images or illustrations to be used, rather than as literal realities to be worshipped:

Rather than dismissing these religious images, those influenced by Jung argue that for the first time in centuries, perhaps in human history, we may value these pictures for what they really are. Modern mystics, including some who have had near death experiences, know there are other realms than the material and are willing to use images from any tradition, Christian or otherwise, as images to hint at—but not define—these realms. In particular, mystics and New Agers who believe God to be within, may happily use Christian imagery originally intended to describe a God without. (194)

This has obviously liberating potential:

In this view, the twentieth century has liberated us to use these symbols and images for what they truly are. What blocked a true view of eternity is not the institutions of modernity, but the reified images of Christianity, especially those of the Middle Ages and Reformation. Eternity is therefore now *emerging from* eclipse, not entering it. A New Age of enlightenment is a-coming. (194)

In short,

the loss of this literal understanding has actually freed modern people to explore the true spiritual reality to which the symbols of heaven and hell refer. In this view, we are entering a New Age, in which spiritual awareness is being unlocked as individuals tune in to their own spirituality rather than to church dogma. A new experience of eternity is being discovered, or rediscovered. (195)

This view has been mentioned by Moody as well. In some cases, it is not merely freedom from religious symbols (or the view that they are literal realities rather than illustrations) but freedom from religion altogether. In *On Life After Death*, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross echoes the idea that spirituality has now separated itself from religion:

We are now in a new age, and hopefully we have made a transition from an age of science and technology and materialism to a new age of authentic and genuine

spirituality. This does not mean religiosity, but rather, spirituality. Spirituality is an awareness that there is something far greater than we are, something that created this universe, created life, and that we are an authentic, important, significant part of it, and can contribute to its evolution. (39)

There are other advantages to such approaches to spirituality and theology that make voices within them more able to carry out the kinds of actual theological discussions that are needed. One is that they take a more speculative, exploratory, almost scientific approach to spirituality and theology—one less about belief and adherence than about exploration, discovery, and logic. That more uncertain, exploratory approach manifests itself in a different kind of theology—a view of God as less of an anthropomorphic figure about which one can be certain and which one must believe in and obey or appease and more of a force with which to connect. According to Goldberg,

The sanely spiritual do not suppress their doubts; they think logically and accept the testimony of science. Their likely answer to the query "Do you believe in God?" is, "It depends on what you mean by that term." They're wary of the G-word because it's come to be associated with belief in an anthropomorphic father figure in the sky, whereas they're more inclined to postulate a formless, creative power that would not seem out of place in a physics seminar. In short, they are rational, reasonable individuals who regard the spiritual dimension of life as a central feature of human development and pursue it in the spirit of good old American pragmatism. They do what works, placing direct experience and observation over ideology or doctrine. To the degree that they have faith in something, it is the kind of faith that proceeds from evidence and reason, like a scientist's faith in the outcome of an experiment. ("Sane Spirituality")

This group recognizes that the important questions regarding theology have to do with the content of theology and its impact on our behavior, as the quote from Walsch emphasized earlier.

The "sanely spiritual" often excluded from mainstream discussions are also typically pluralists, accepting multiple pathways to the transcendent (even possible spiritual pathways that do not directly include spiritual or religious belief) instead of touting only their god or savior as *the way*. In this way, they are unlike "[t]he fanatics who believe their way—their God, their prophet, their book—is the one true way" ("Sane Spirituality"). In *The Art of Happiness*, the Dalai Lama makes a number of statements about the value of different religions (other than his own) and even the acceptability of disbelief that many traditional religious figures would never be able to make, starkly illustrating the open-mindedness and value of a sanely spiritual approach in comparison to the harsh, unyielding perspectives voiced in mainstream debate. Because there are so many different people, he argues, it is natural that there would be so many different religions:

There are five billion human beings in the world and in a certain way I think we need five billion different religions, because there is such a large variety of dispositions. I believe that each individual should embark on a spiritual path that is best suited to his or her mental disposition, natural inclination, temperament, belief, family, and cultural background. (Dalai Lama 294)

Even his own Buddhist approach is not necessarily the right one for everyone, he admits:

Now, for example, as a Buddhist monk, I find Buddhism to be most suitable. So, for myself, I've found that Buddhism is best. But that does not mean Buddhism is best for everyone. That's clear. It's definite. If I believed that

Buddhism were best for everyone, that would be foolish, because different people have different mental dispositions. So the variety of people calls for a variety of religions. The purpose of religion is to benefit people, and I think that if we had only one religion, after a while it would cease to benefit many people. (Dalai Lama 295)

And this diversity of religious belief, he argues, rather than being something about which to worry, is something to be celebrated:

And I think we can learn to celebrate that diversity in religions and develop a deep appreciation of the variety of religions. So certain people may find Judaism, or the Christian tradition, or the Islamic tradition to be most effective for them. Therefore, we must respect and appreciate the value of all the different major world religious traditions. (295)

But according to the Dalai Lama, religious belief is even only one level of spirituality, one he suggests is ultimately not even necessary for everyone, unlike the second level:

Now regarding religion, if we believe in any religion, that's good. But even without a religious belief, we can still manage. In some cases, we can manage even better. But that's our own individual right; if we wish to believe, good! If not, it's all right. But then there's another level of spirituality. That is what I call basic spirituality—basic human qualities of goodness, kindness, compassion, caring. Whether we are believers or nonbelievers, this kind of spirituality is essential. I personally consider this second level of spirituality to be more important than the first, because no matter how wonderful a particular religion may be, it will still only be accepted by a limited number of human beings, only a small portion of humanity. (306-307)

Here we see a practical acceptance of the fact that not everyone is going to be converted to any particular faith or approach—or even to a belief system at all—and that within one or outside one, a deeper spirituality (which actually appears to be a kind of morality) should be the focus. Goldberg recounts some of Swami Vivekananda's address during the closing of the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, which articulates this point even more forcefully, asserting the folly of hoping for the "triumph" or dominance of a particular religion:

In his final address, at the closing ceremonies, he said that the dream of religious unity could not be accomplished by the triumph of any one faith. "Do I wish that the Christian would become Hindu? God forbid. Do I wish that the Hindu or Buddhist would become Christian? God forbid." The parliament, he said, "has proved to the world that holiness, purity, and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world," adding that he pitied anyone who "dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of the others." (Goldberg, *Veda* 76-77)

This exemplifies the kind of focus on moral evolution I argued earlier should be one of our two primary concerns when we talk about theology, spirituality, and morality. The core questions of mainstream debate (Does God exist? Is religion a force for good? Can we have morality without belief in God/an afterlife? Etc.) the Dalai Lama and Vivekananda here dismiss as irrelevant: Some will believe; some will not; it doesn't matter, since there will never be total agreement, which wouldn't be desirable anyway (since different religions work better for different people), and people can be good outside religion and bad within it. This "basic spirituality" the Dalai Lama claims is as important for those who do not follow a specific

religion: “For those people, I think we can educate them and impress upon them that it’s all right to remain without any religion but be a good human being, with a sense of commitment for a better, happier world” (308). While people often indicate their religious beliefs externally (such as in their garb), he argues this is actually less important:

However, these practices or activities are secondary to your conducting a truly spiritual way of life, based on basic spiritual values, because it is possible that all of these external religious activities can still go with a person’s harboring a very negative state of mind. But true spirituality should have the result of making a person calmer, happier, more peaceful. (308).

The greater inclusiveness, honesty, and humility of such an approach to theology, spirituality, and morality are obvious; as beneficial is that it allows us to speculate about the content of various theologies (since the need to believe intensely in one specific “right” idea of God is removed) and encourages a focus not on simplistic questions but on the deeper issue of how, from any position, to bring about moral improvement.

Lastly, the voices I have included in Goldberg’s “sanely spiritual” category are also beneficial because they actually have connections to both of the sides represented in media debates: with the religious side, they often share the belief that spirituality can be a source of solutions to human difficulties; with atheist critics, they agree that traditional ideas of God, organized religion, and scriptural adherence are deeply flawed (and, crucially, are human analogies, or illustrations, not things in themselves) and need to be transcended. At times, they can sound exactly like either of the other groups: echoing the first’s emphasis on the need for reconnection with spiritual reality, echoing the second’s precise critiques of the damage wrought by religion and traditional theology, as we see in the Deepak Chopra passage quoted above. Along similar lines, contemporary spiritual writer Neale Donald Walsch has suggested in several books that our problems are, at root, spiritual and that a “new spirituality” is necessary, while at the same time offering criticisms of traditional organized religion and theology that could easily be mistaken for the charges leveled by Dawkins and Harris.

We need to pay more attention to these voices of “sane spirituality,” and create more spaces in which the sanely spiritual, atheists, and agnostics can, together, explore questions about transcendence and moral evolution, freeing us from the deadlocked debates in which we find ourselves between those who accept ancient theological models and those who argue against theology altogether as the problem and opening up a new discussion (not necessarily a debate) about transcendence. That discussion could explore, with a sense of freedom and possibility, questions including the following: What is transcendence? What would it entail? How would it reframe everyday life? What would transcendent beings be like? What would their societies look like? How would such beings react to/perceive us and vice versa? With love and kindness, with hatred and the desire to destroy, etc? Would they help us evolve or grow—or demand it? Would they need anything from us or demand anything of us? If humanity did evolve or grow en masse, what would that evolution entail—would we, for example, lose core elements of our humanity in the process? Would that be something to mourn if what we become is better?

We also need to take notice of *artistic* spaces which allow us to explore ideas about transcendence, theology, and moral evolution. One such space in which deep, creative, and fruitful discussion of exactly these issues is thriving, this dissertation will argue, is within the genres of science fiction and fantasy. Because science fiction and fantasy narratives are not taken directly as spiritual texts and they often discuss religion in a more neutral way, they can be free of the problems of literalism and exclusivism that often dominate religious discourse; since

they often present God/transcendence indirectly, they can enable us to discuss, assess, and experiment with a range of conceptions of both.

The Way Forward

The following chapters will argue that contemporary science fiction and fantasy can, and already are, helping us to engage in this kind of speculation and in ways we often do not recognize because we do not have the vocabulary with which to describe it or easily relate it to theological/mythical thinking. In the first chapter, I argue that, as Margaret Atwood has observed, science fiction has become “the last fictional repository for theological speculation” (par. 4). I argue that contemporary fantasy and science fiction are uniquely positioned to explore theological questions (transcendent ideas, transcendence/moral evolution) in creative, open-minded ways because both envision imagined advanced beings and possibilities and because the genres actually function as a form of theological/mythical thinking in the way that they voice/envision transcendent beings and perspectives. A recent strand of science fiction asks directly, “Is there a God?”; more generally, science fiction and fantasy function as theology/myth by contextualizing known existence and envisioning and, more specifically, by voicing “transcendent outsider” figures—beings who are superior to humans and act as critical and comforting outside perspectives on us (what I call “mirrors”) and interesting foils for us, while also enabling writers and readers to think about, in deep and concrete ways, the kinds of theological concerns I’ve listed above.

In the second and third chapters, I argue that, following the theologizing/mythologizing of aliens that writers such as Carl Jung, Brenda Denzler, and Linda Dégh have observed in contemporary culture and which religious conservatives often decry, a range of narratives and films present aliens as godlike transcendent outsider figures in ways that explore, endorse, or critique various theological conceptualizations and notions of the transcendent—in chapter two, the judgmental, punishing god figures of much ancient myth and traditional religion; in chapter three, more loving, peaceful god figures echoing Eastern and New Age theological concepts and progressive spirituality. Because of their role in literature and, as Denzler shows, culture at large as a form of rationalized gods, aliens function smoothly as figures through which we can freely and creatively discuss and explore ideas about theology and transcendence in ways that mainstream, direct discussion of religion and spirituality often fail to allow.

In chapter four, I argue that science fiction and fantasy often depict a kind of flipside of transcendent outsiders I call “aspiring humans,” beings beneath or less than human but envious of our humanity or interested in becoming human/more human. Aspiring humans allow the genres to explore human identity and morality and (because such figures often treat humans as gods) theology and atheism in ways that realistic stories cannot. In his *Wizard Knight* and *Short Sun* series, Gene Wolfe makes striking use of an array of aspiring humans (alongside transcendent outsiders) to ask deep questions about human identity, morality, and theology and to present hierarchical Christian solutions. Ultimately, I argue, the aspiring human figure and the transcendent outsider are actually opposite poles on a single continuum, or levels in a single imagined hierarchy, used by theology, and today by fantasy and science fiction, to situate humanity and human life by providing it with an imagined context.

I conclude by suggesting a fresh approach to theology that sees the need for imaginative, open-minded speculation about transcendence that goes beyond the limitations of the mainstream debate, one focused less on the “Is there or isn’t there a God?” question and on scripture and

more on freely exploring and testing out models of transcendence, and an increased sense of the value of science fiction and fantasy as literary arenas in which important, creative theological speculation is occurring. I also consider some of the implications of finding theological speculation in contemporary fantasy and science fiction. What might (or should) such a recognition change about how we speak about or teach either genre or literature in general? What effects could or should it have on how we think of religion and theology, spirituality and transcendence? What new conversations might it open up in all of these areas?

Chapter One: Science Fiction on Theology; Science Fiction as Theology

In the introduction, I argued that mainstream discussions of theology often focus on debating the answers to simplistic questions, such as “Does God exist?” and “Can we have morality without religion?”, instead of offering deeper speculation about the content and effects of theological perspectives and the possibility of human moral evolution. These more important topics are taken up, however, by the range of spiritual and secular perspectives dubbed the “sanely spiritual.” We need to take more notice of discussions in which such voices are represented, but we should also pay special attention to artistic realms which also explore theology and morality in a similarly sane, open-minded way. As Margaret Atwood suggests in a review of Ursula K. Le Guin, a fictional realm which, perhaps more than any other, has taken up the task of exploring theology is science fiction:

Indeed, some commentators have proposed "science fiction" as the last fictional repository for theological speculation. Heaven, Hell, and aerial transport by means of wings having been more or less abandoned after Milton, outer space was the only remaining neighborhood where beings resembling gods, angels, and demons might still be found. J.R.R. Tolkien's friend and fellow fantasist C.S. Lewis even went so far as to compose a "science fiction" trilogy—very light on science, but heavy on theology, the "space ship" being a coffin filled with roses and the temptation of Eve being reenacted on the planet of Venus, complete with luscious fruit. (Atwood par. 4)

In a similar statement in *A History of God*, Karen Armstrong suggests that, in recent centuries, only science fiction and fantasy writers have dealt directly with spiritual realms:

It must be significant that after *Paradise Lost* no other major English creative writer would attempt to describe the supernatural world. There would be no more Spensers or Miltons. Henceforth the supernatural and the spiritual would become the domain of more marginal writers, such as George MacDonald and C.S. Lewis. (309)

Armstrong’s easy acceptance of a problematic “marginal” genre writer/ “major” writer distinction and hasty categorical dismissal of centuries of work aside,¹³ we can accept the idea that after the takeover of both the scientific worldview (an overall mode of thought Armstrong refers to as “logos”) and the mode of literary realism, fantasy and science fiction (its rationalized form) remain the only genres that can, as myth did in previous eras, *directly* depict theological possibilities: science fiction because it can depict inhuman beings that might be God or godlike, fantasy because it can, without the need for rationalization, depict virtually anything. Any story that even attempts to answer the “Is there a God or afterlife?” question in the affirmative, such as Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, for example, clearly slides out of strict realism and into the supernatural subgenre, if not into outright fantasy. So it is not merely that science fiction and fantasy took on spirituality and theology; it is that, in an era of realism, anything dealing directly with such topics *will be seen as* works in those genres.

In the first section of this chapter, I explore a strand of science fiction which raises theological questions about the existence of God. I argue that this strand, exemplified by two of

the most successful science fiction films of the last decade, uses science fiction to explore theology, but is unhelpful because it essentially mimics the flaws of mainstream debate, reducing all theological discussion to a clash between belief and disbelief and essentially closing off the questions we need to explore and which I've argued we can approach whether we believe that we are coming to understand a real God/spiritual perspective or that we are creating a model for transcendence and evolution. In the second section, I introduce one strategy used by sf/fantasy and shared with myth—the creation of “transcendent outsiders,” which I argue enables science fiction and fantasy not only to explore theology, but to *function as* theology/myth, allowing us to participate in new and essential theological speculation of the kind Atwood touts. In the third section, I pave the way for the next two chapters exploring alien transcendent outsiders by establishing the cultural role of alien beings as god figures.

In Space, Can God Still Hear You Pray?: When Science Fiction Asks, “Is there a God?”

Neville: All right, let me tell you about your "God's plan". Six billion people on Earth when the infection hit. KV had a ninety-percent kill rate, that's five point four billion people dead. Crashed and bled out. Dead. Less than one-percent immunity. That left twelve million healthy people, like you, me, and Ethan. The other five hundred and eighty-eight million turned into your dark seekers, and then they got hungry and they killed and fed on everybody. Everybody! Every *single* person that you or I has ever known is dead! Dead! There is no god!

Neville: [*screaming*] I can help. I can save you. I can save everybody. (“Memorable Quotes for *I Am Legend*”)

Graham Hess: That's why he had asthma. It can't be luck. His lungs were closed. His lungs were closed. No poison got in. No poison got in. His lungs were closed. His lungs were closed.

[...]

Morgan: Dad? What happened? Did someone save me?

[*Graham starts crying*]

Graham Hess: Yeah, baby, I think someone did. (“Memorable Quotes for *Signs*”)

Science fiction and fantasy often have a reputation for “opening” minds. Rosemary Jackson calls fantasy the “literature of subversion”; Richard Mathews subtitles his survey of the genre “the liberation of imagination” (Jackson, Mathews). While science fiction and fantasy often defamiliarize and even denaturalize elements of our society or reality, freeing our minds from slavish adherence to the present reality and opening our sense of possibility to encompass a range of options (among which our way is revealed to be merely one, and perhaps not the best), the genres can also be used to naturalize, to limit and close off possibilities. Along these lines, a strand of what we might consider conservative science fiction uses the genre not to explore theology, but to ask, “Is there a God?” and to assert the validity and power of traditional conceptions of God. This strand of science fiction uses the genre to examine theology but, I argue, merely mimics or reproduces the limitations of mainstream theological debates in narrative form.

This conservative strand of theologically-focused science fiction presents alien figures and distant futures, the broad scopes of space and time in which science fiction specializes, not to *fill* the roles of God/gods or to denaturalize conventional religious notions, but rather to *affirm*

their power and breadth. It uses alien invasions, dystopian futures, and other nova as a way of exploring the possibility or existence of God and the desirability of faith. *Even if* technologically superior aliens invade earth, *even if* millennia pass, *even if* humanity has forgotten earth and traveled galaxies away—*even if* the world is changed completely, this strand of science fiction argues, a specific notion of God or religion (even a specific sacred text) will still be central, and human survival and happiness will depend on individual humans coming to that realization in the face of such obstacles, or entire human communities being led away from whatever false beliefs might have accumulated over millennia and light years and back to conventional religion and God. In such works, the supernatural or science fictional nova (the future, aliens, etc) do not function as substitutes for or challengers to conventional spirituality, nor do the works, like much science fiction (following Asimov's *Foundation* novels, Frank Herbert's *Dune* series, and, more recently, Dan Simmons' *Endymion* novels) emphasize a cynical/critical view of religions as human institutions whose beliefs are shaped by culture and desires for power (and who reshape and reinterpret beliefs and ancient texts to suit this primary aim—as do the oppressive Catholic Church in Simmons and the ruling power in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*). Instead, the science fiction nova are distractions from traditional faith that characters must find ways to eschew—and giant foils against which the size and scope of God and divine intentions can be revealed to be even more immense and permanent than we might otherwise have thought. We can see this overtly in 2002's *Signs* and 2007's *I Am Legend*, two hugely successful science fiction thrillers. Both initially appear to be primarily concerned with a science fictional doomsday scenario, but ultimately reveal themselves to be more interested in what such situations might mean about the possibility of a very traditional God and the importance of traditional faith. This approach is also evident, if in much more complex fashion, in the work of Gene Wolfe, one of science fiction's most praised and overtly literary writers.

M. Night Shyamalan's 2002 film *Signs*, the last of his films to meet with both critical acclaim and box office success, is an alien invasion/first contact narrative fairly consciously following conventions of the subgenre. At one point, speaking about news of the aliens' appearance, a character observes, "It's like *War of the Worlds*." But Shyamalan mostly uses the alien invasion story as a way of discussing faith. Specifically, the story is about the return to faith of protagonist Graham Hess (played by Mel Gibson), a former minister who lost his faith and left his religious role after his wife's accidental death. A shot early in the film subtly reveals a cross-shaped mark on his wall—a literal detail symbolizing his lost faith's conspicuous absence and the emptiness it leaves behind. But the story is also more broadly about people's different approaches to the world, especially what we might characterize as a "faith approach" versus a "nihilistic approach". In a crucial conversation with his younger brother Merrill (Joaquin Phoenix), occurring when television news reports have revealed multiple alien ships hovering in the night sky, Graham proposes that there are basically two groups of people:

People break down into two groups when they experience something lucky.

Group number one sees it as more than luck, more than coincidence. They see it as a sign, evidence, that there is someone up there, watching out for them. Group number two sees it as just pure luck. Just a happy turn of chance. I'm sure the people in Group number two are looking at those fourteen lights in a very suspicious way. For them, the situation isn't fifty-fifty. Could be bad, could be good. But deep down, they feel that whatever happens, they're on their own. And that fills them with fear. Yeah, there are those people. But there's a whole lot of people in the Group number one. When they see those fourteen lights, they're

looking at a miracle. And deep down, they feel that whatever's going to happen, there will be someone there to help them. And that fills them with hope. See what you have to ask yourself is what kind of person are you? Are you the kind that sees signs, sees miracles? Or do you believe that people just get lucky? Or, look at the question this way: Is it possible that there are no coincidences? (“Memorable Quotes for *Signs*”)

Graham, scarred by the loss of his wife, believes that they are alone and that no one will help them. The result of such belief, he feels, and the movie argues, is fear. Merrill believes in purpose, in miracles and signs, something he illustrates with an anecdote in which turning his head to spit out a piece of gum saved him from kissing a girl just as she was about to throw up, an event he says would have scarred him: “I knew the moment it happened, it was a miracle. I could have been kissing her when she threw up. It would have scarred me for life. I may never have recovered.” “I’m a miracle man,” he concludes.

Signs does not explore reactions to atheism; it assumes fear and nihilism are automatic, the only possible reactions. Graham’s lack of faith has left him worried and alone. Nor does the film consider the content of theology: what if one believed in a punishing God? Couldn’t the aliens be the tool of such a God’s wrath, as is suggested in the similar *War of the Worlds*? In addition, what moral improvement, enlightenment, etc, does this God prompt? The God of *Signs* is seemingly only concerned with faith and protection. In this way, Shymalan’s film merely mimics the simplistic approach of mainstream debate.

The film itself ultimately comes down quite obviously on the side of belief, arguing its point through both characterization and plot. We can see Shymalan’s preference even just by observing the contrasts between Graham, who is presented as cold, fearful, and alienated from his children and brother; and Merrill, who takes things in stride, is presented as cool and fun, and is even favored by Graham’s own son Morgan, who tells him, “I wish you were my father.” A tense exchange as the family eats what they fear might be their last dinner starkly illustrates Graham’s bitterness and the effect it has on his children:

Morgan: Maybe we should say a prayer.

Graham Hess: No.

Morgan: Why not?

Graham Hess: We're not saying a prayer.

Morgan: Bo has a bad feeling.

Bo: I had a dream.

Graham Hess: We aren't saying a prayer. Eat!

Morgan: I hate you.

Graham Hess: That's fine.

Morgan: You let Mom die.

Merrill: Morgan...

Graham Hess: I am not wasting one more minute of my life on prayer. Not one more minute. Understood? (“Memorable Quotes for *Signs*”)

The rightness of the faith approach is confirmed by the plot as well. In his final encounter with the invading aliens, Graham is saved, and is able to give his family directions that save them, only because he begins to realize that the seemingly random comments his wife made just before she died (comments which, in an earlier conversation, he dismisses as the results of her disorientation and the firing of random synapses in her brain) are actually communications from God and that the tiniest details of his and his family’s lives are significant, exist to get them

through this encounter: his son's asthma means his lungs are closed when the alien tries to poison him; baseball home run hitter Merrill's tendency to swing for the fences is to enable him to use the bat to hit the alien attacker now; daughter Bo is fastidious about the cleanliness of her drinking water so that glasses of it will be spread throughout the living room to be used to harm the alien, who, in one of the plot elements often criticized as improbable, is allergic. Graham understands what has happened:

Graham Hess: That's why he had asthma. It can't be luck. His lungs were closed. His lungs were closed. No poison got in. No poison got in. His lungs were closed. His lungs were closed.

[...]

Morgan: Dad? What happened? Did someone save me?

[*Graham starts crying*]

Graham Hess: Yeah, baby, I think someone did. (“Memorable Quotes for *Signs*”)

There is purpose, the ending of the film argues, and we are protected—though only, or primarily, it seems to suggest, if we have faith and see signs. The final scene of the film reveals that Graham has returned to the priesthood. Again, the question of the film is simple: to believe or not to believe. It does not consider how to react if you do not believe (not believing is simply “failing” at faith) nor what a God figure might want or what kind of model it provides (God simply wants our belief, and without it, cannot protect us).

As Shymalan's comments on the DVD's making of documentary pieces suggest, the Hess family house, which is painted red, white, and blue, is intended to stand for America, the Hess family for the American family. This suggests the film itself can, at one level, be read as an allegory about the country suggesting that, when attacked by an outside force, we will be saved by our faith. Of course, some critics have joked that what the film really proves is not purpose and the presence of a divine plan in life, but the screenwriter/director Shymalan's control of plot¹⁴.

Shymalan's film uses invading aliens to raise a theological question, but not as spiritual figures or as a replacement for or competitor to some kind of God, not even as a vengeful punishing God (as in the work to which it most directly alludes—*War of the Worlds*), but rather to affirm the existence and primacy of a traditional Christian God and traditional faith. The aliens do not stand in for God so that we can explore the nature and role of transcendent beings, consider and evaluate different possible forms they might take, etc. *Signs* seems unconcerned with the nature of God or any other spiritual or theological questions beyond one: “Does God exist?”. The film asserts that God does—and then assumes that if God does exist, God is obviously just as we have thought, and our response should be simple: pray and trust. In this sense, while *Signs* uses science fiction to explore theology, the film is merely a version of the mainstream religious debate played out in narrative form.

Francis Lawrence's 2007 adaptation of Richard Matheson's science fiction classic *I Am Legend* is strikingly similar in many ways. Unlike in *Signs*, neither religion nor spirituality is mentioned for most of Lawrence's film. We know that Will Smith's scientist/soldier protagonist Robert Neville is remarkably resilient: despite the loss of his wife and child in a helicopter accident during an evacuation that leaves him the only uninfected human being in Manhattan (and, as far as he knows, perhaps the world), he persists, capturing and studying the vicious infected humans called “dark seekers” in the hopes of finding a cure for the disorder we learn sprung from a scientific breakthrough—a cure for cancer. He is also confident in the power of science and his own will and research efforts to bring about change. It is not until he has to kill

his one companion (and essentially the last surviving member of his family), German Shepherd Sam, who has become infected, that Neville reaches utter despair and attempts a suicidal attack on a large group of the infected dark seekers.

Here theological issues come to the fore, and the “Is there or isn’t there a God?” question of *Signs* (and mainstream religious debate) takes center stage. Neville essentially occupies Graham’s role, though he has significantly more reason for doubt: unlike priest Graham, who loses all faith when one person, his wife, dies in an accident, Neville, a scientist, does not believe because God has seemingly allowed virtually all of humanity to be destroyed. Anna, a woman who comes to Neville’s rescue, speaks of God and signs, possibilities he initially rejects vociferously in a scene which closely echoes the conversation between Graham and Merryll in *Signs*. In the highlight of that exchange, Neville angrily rejects the idea that God exists:

Anna: The world is quieter now. We just have to listen. If we listen, we can hear God's plan.

Neville: God's plan.

Anna: Yeah.

Neville: All right, let me tell you about your "God's plan". Six billion people on Earth when the infection hit. KV had a ninety-percent kill rate, that's five point four billion people dead. Crashed and bled out. Dead. Less than one-percent immunity. That left twelve million healthy people, like you, me, and Ethan. The other five hundred and eighty-eight million turned into your dark seekers, and then they got hungry and they killed and fed on everybody. Everybody! Every *single* person that you or I has ever known is dead! Dead! There is no god!

(“Memorable Quotes for *I Am Legend*”)

However, in a key moment very much like scenes near the end of Shymalan’s film, Neville connects a comment made years ago by his daughter to the butterfly tattoo he sees on Anna and decides to trust in God and signs. “I can help. I can save you. I can save everybody,” he shouts at the attacking dark-seekers. It is worth noting that the film does not reject his scientific efforts—they have paid off; his experimentation has indeed produced a cure. But it is only because of his interpretation of signs and his trust in God that he is able to decide to sacrifice himself to protect Anna and Ethan, enabling her to bring his cure to the human community which, just a bit earlier, he didn’t even believe existed. The message, as in *Signs*, is that we are not alone and that trusting in that, believing that we are receiving “communications” through seemingly random comments, is the way to receive that protection. The film ends with Neville’s sacrificial death, Anna’s arrival at the human community she has previously described, and her summary of his heroism that explains the film’s title:

Anna: In 2009, a deadly virus burned through our civilization, pushing humankind to the edge of extinction. Dr. Robert Neville dedicated his life to the discovery of a cure and the restoration of humanity. On September 9th, 2012, at approximately 8:49 P.M., he discovered that cure. And at 8:52, he gave his life to defend it. We are his legacy. This is his legend. Light up the darkness.

(“Memorable Quotes for *I Am Legend*”)

Because the film ends here, it never truly explores the deeper theological questions raised in the earlier conversation between the two characters—what *was* God’s plan or purpose in allowing billions of humans to die? It is easier to imagine a purpose in the untimely death of one man’s wife than in the decimation of most of humanity—though of course, such destructions (as punishments for sins or wrongdoing or merely because humans are being a bother to some of the

gods) are not uncommon in ancient myths, and this can be seen as a science fictionalized presentation of a similar scenario. It is also worth noting that the film's alternate ending, supposedly replaced because of poor audience response, had Neville notice the same sign (the butterfly tattoo), but on the body of the dark seeker on whom he is testing the cure. In this version, he opens the glass door behind which he, Anna, and her son shield themselves from the dark-seekers and returns his test subject to the attackers peacefully. The alternate ending, then, has Neville reading a sign from God and responding with a sign of peace and a recognition of the humanity of his apparently demonic enemies, while the official ending has Neville blow himself up to destroy them. Like *Signs*, *I Am Legend* is a skillfully made mainstream film that uses science fiction to explore theological questions, but it mostly replicates the kind of limited theological debates found in media explorations of theology. Both films ask only if there is a God (not really what such a God would provide aside from protection or desire aside from belief), and both reduce the entire issue to simple belief—one must believe to be protected.

This approach is echoed by 2010's *The Book of Eli*, in which the (possibly blind) protagonist (played by Denzel Washington) is given divine protection to carry out a religious mission in a broken post-apocalyptic world: preserve a copy of the bible and bring it to a place where it can be reproduced. Eli eventually loses his physical copy (which is in brail) but has memorized the entire text; its presence and reproduction, the film suggests, will have the power to heal a broken world. As in *Signs* and *I Am Legend*, the film's emphasis is on faith, adherence, and divine protection, and the presentation of religion and spirituality is Christian-centered. God is merely a kind of anthropomorphized protector. Though none of the films does much to prompt fresh theological or moral speculation¹⁵, *Legend* and *Eli* do, perhaps unintentionally, raise one thorny question regarding the conception of a personal God apparently apart from the world who can choose to intervene to protect us: when that God does not, is it "allowing" or perhaps even intending such devastation and pain? In this sense, we might say that both films, indirectly at least, reveal one limitation of such a theological approach.

We see a similar use of science fiction elements in the fiction of Gene Wolfe, though Wolfe's novels, combining fully realized worlds matching or exceeding the scope of J.R.R. Tolkien's with a densely literary style and complexity comparable to Henry James or Virginia Woolf, are clearly far more sophisticated than either film. Wolfe's major series, the immensely complex and daunting *Sun* novels, and his more recent high fantasy series, *The Knight* and *The Wizard* (together *The Wizard Knight*), are about, in large part, morality and spirituality. Amidst myriad issues and with great stylistic complexity, Wolfe often addresses the traditional topics of who we are (human identity), how we should act (human morality), and who we should worship (religion/spirituality). In a sense, the majority of his *Sun* books (from *Long Sun* on) and all of *The Wizard Knight* are concerned with this last question. In the worlds of both works, humans have fallen into a kind of false worship. Nick Gevers, probably the most astute critic on Wolfe's religious agenda, lays this out extremely well in an excellent article on *Long Sun* (par. 8). In the four novels of *Long Sun* and the *Short Sun* trilogy that continues the same story, the human denizens of a gigantic traveling ship (constructed from a hollowed out asteroid, *Short Sun* protagonist Horn learns from one of the Neighbors, an alien race that occupied the planet Blue before humans arrived), have come to worship the computer remnants of the personalities of the ship's creators, who they take to be a family of pagan-like gods and to whom they sacrifice animals. The bulk of the narrative is concerned with Patera Silk, a young priest in this religion, who, in the opening moments of the first novel, is enlightened by another god unknown to the insiders of the ship—a god called "The Outsider," who the reader eventually discovers is a more

traditional monotheistic God. Patera Silk begins to speak of this God and eventually feels that it is the real God¹⁶ and that it wants those on the ship to depart for two planets to which their voyage has brought them. Much of the challenge faced by Horn, one of Silk's students, in the later *Short Sun* books is preserving Silk's message and enabling humanity to return to "proper" belief in and worship of the Outsider God, without which, Wolfe's narrative holds, human moral improvement cannot occur. Instead, detached from true belief in the real God, humans have regressed to barbarism, war, and enslavement. In the process, Horn "dies" at least once, seemingly twice: in the first situation, he is essentially resurrected; in the second his spirit is transferred into the body of his mentor Silk, facilitating a kind of uneasy combination of the two figures and enabling, in a literal and metaphorical way, Horn to bring the wisdom and guidance of Silk to the people in need of it on Blue.

In the two novels that form *The Wizard Knight* series, which is high fantasy rather than the science fiction or science fantasy of the *Sun* novels, the young boy protagonist and narrator who finds himself in a series of strangely overlapping mythical worlds is sent from one of the lower worlds to convey a message to the humankind of a higher world. The problem, we eventually learn, is that humans are not behaving well, and thus not providing a model for those in the worlds below, who view them as gods. In fact, humans are worshipping what is beneath them rather than the "Most High God" (this is the actual name used in Wolfe's text) who is above in the highest world. Yet again, one of Wolfe's protagonists becomes an enlightened servant of a wrongly neglected traditional God and then even a kind of Christ figure: at one point, Able returns after having died, but on the condition that he cannot use any of his magic in the lower world.

In Wolfe's works, traditional religious beliefs, a traditional God, and the myth structures of Christianity are affirmed rather than replaced. Wolfe uses vast spans of time and extraordinary future/alternate reality situations to emphasize the strength and validity of his traditional Christianity, arguing, in effect, Even in such situations, these will still be the true beliefs, and humanity will be saved by returning to them. What is interesting, in part because it is so counter to what the other strand of works we will explore in a moment are doing, is how Wolfe implies that as time passes and more about the world is known, things will be the same—in fact, what will be needed to save humanity will not be an evolution into something else, one guided by a beneficent alien figure taking on a kind of God role; instead, what will be needed will be a return to traditional belief away from false gods arrogant humans have attempted to create. Wolfe clearly demonstrates an interest in exploring different theological possibilities (in this sense, as in many others, his explorations of theology are far richer and more sophisticated than those of the films alongside which I have placed him for this discussion) but primarily so that the incorrect or lower ideas can be discarded or transcended in favor of the right one.

Ultimately, then, works in this category, especially the three films, demonstrate an approach to theology, religion, and spirituality that is both conservative and bound by the limitations of mainstream debate, which they essentially reproduce in narrative form. Their point isn't to explore a range of theological possibilities, but to convince us to return to the traditional one they take to be correct. These works use science fiction and fantasy to explore theological questions, but like our mainstream debates about theology and religion, they focus only on one question ("Does God exist?") and consider only two possible answers: a kind of bitter, angry or cold atheism which, they subtly suggest, will lead to hopelessness, fear, and the inability to save either those you love (Graham's family) or humanity as a whole (the people who

will be saved by Neville's cure or Eli's bible), and a reverent, empowering faith or belief in a divine protector and traditional Christianity.

Shared Functions of Myth and Literary Fantasy and Science Fiction Contextualizing Human Life: A Core Function Shared by SF/Fantasy and Myth/Theology

Thus far, we have considered science fiction and fantasy asking theological questions, but in a way that merely mimics the limitations of mainstream debate and does not really open up the kind of space for exploring ideas about transcendence and moral evolution I have argued is necessary. But both genres can do more; in fact, they are able to initiate the types of deep, fresh theological discussions I've argued we need to have, because unlike realism, the genres can function as mythology/theology. In a broad but important sense, literary science fiction and fantasy have the same central function *as* myth and theology—contextualizing human life. One of the core features of human existence is obviously that, while we have some understanding of the nature of life itself, we are forced to proceed knowing very little about the *context* of life: what happened before this, where we're going afterwards (if we're going anywhere or if after is even the best way to understand it), what this means, how what is here might compare to what is elsewhere (if there are elsewheres), etc. Realistic narratives typically examine life (what is), partly, perhaps, in the hope of revealing that context. (For example, narratives such as Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Woody Allen's film *Match Point*, in which good characters meet horrible, random ends and villains escape through luck, imply certain things about the context of life: that there is or may be no God or justice, that the world and human life may be meaningless and random—what we might consider a somewhat nihilistic perspective). Myth, theology and contemporary fantasy and science fiction deal with the *content* of life as well, but they also do something that more realistic modes typically do not or perhaps even cannot, at least in the same way—they create/imagine/represent contexts in order to give meanings to life or parts of it. They surround life with imagined stories/creatures/places that give it meaning: the image of heaven above and hell below, of God standing outside, etc. The idea of creation before and heaven/hell are contexts that define life as service to God, good behavior as a way to gain reward later, etc. Change the context, and the whole meaning and role of life changes as well. In all things, thus, context is obviously hugely important.

Some examples from fantasy/science fiction works will illuminate how this operates. One especially good, and rather playful, one is the final shot at the end of the film *Men in Black*, in which the camera (theoretically; the shot is probably entirely special effects) keeps pulling back further and further from earth, each time putting our lives in a new context—ultimately, in keeping with the movie's comic vein, suggesting our entire world is contained within a ball being tossed around by two gigantic alien creatures engaged in some kind of silly game. The final shot of the film is a perfect illustration of what religious myth and fantasy/sf do: imagine contexts which define/redefine the meaning/purpose of parts of life. In a different way, H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* “pulls back” to reveal another larger context which defines or redefines the meaning of what we know about our lives—a context in which we, the dominant species here (and England, the dominant empire at the time) are merely the ants in comparison to a more powerful species. Harlan Ellison's story “Strange Wine” puts its protagonist's tragic life on earth in the context of other dystopian worlds, revealing life on earth to be heaven, earth “the pleasure planet” (Ellison 356). Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* puts England/Europe in context—surrounds them with imagined kingdoms which are not warlike and do not have gunpowder (the

Houyhnhnms) and never lie to denaturalize the dishonesty and violence of European society and show that they are only one of the infinite range of possibilities that exist. The imagined context of these other worlds makes Swift's Europe look different, redefining it as an especially violent, dishonest region among many others that are different.

There are other contextualizing strategies as well, ones we might not immediately recognize as serving that function. Science fiction extrapolation also involves *creating context*, revealing something now to be the beginning of something better/worse in the future. The hierarchies of species in works by J.R.R. Tolkien and Gene Wolfe are contexts that mythically explore who/why we are in much the same way that classical creation myths and golden age stories (*Atrahasis*, Hesiod) did.

One of the ways science fiction and fantasy do theological work, often, is by exploring our ideas about transcendence, by asking, and considering answers to, some of the deepest of spiritual questions: What is transcendence? Are there transcendent *beings*? What would they be like? How and what might they think? How would they see us? What would they think of us—how would they relate to us? Would they treat us with love, patience, and care, as we might treat children—or would they show us the consideration and respect we show uncomprehending animals? Would they expect us to change, or might they demand it? If we accept, what might they wish us to change into, and what would we become? Would a more transcendent/enlightened version of us still be *human*? How would transcendent beings respond if we couldn't change or refused to? How would we see ourselves if we knew we were being observed? Could we see ourselves and our world in the same way if we knew there were superior beings? How might our sense of the meaning and purpose of our lives change? What versions of such an encounter make sense? Which do not? Why? And unlike realism but like myth and theology, science fiction and fantasy can depict, not merely imply, transcendent contexts. Exploring such questions by envisioning transcendent possibilities and voicing transcendent beings, as many science fiction and fantasy works do, is not merely imitating or miming theological speculation. It is *doing* it, taking the notions of transcendence and transcendent beings presented by religious myths and strands of spirituality and testing them out, exploring them, sometimes in ways neither religious myths/sacred texts nor realistic fiction could explore—sacred texts because they are seen as complete and finished and realism because focusing on such matters would be seen as bringing a realistic work into the realm of fantasy. The only things that would keep us from seeing this are a narrow view of religion and spirituality which only recognizes as religious or spiritual that which takes place in a “proper” religious context and dated assumptions about genre and popular culture which have been neatly taken apart by a range of writers and critics¹⁷.

“‘You Humans’: The Transcendent Outsider Move in Religious Myth and Contemporary Fantasy and Science Fiction”

You humans, most of you subscribe to this policy of an eye for an eye, a life for a life, which is known throughout the universe for its... stupidity. Even your Buddha and your Christ had quite a different vision. But no one's paid much attention to them, not even the Buddhists and the Christians. You humans—sometimes it's hard to imagine how you've made it this far. (“Memorable Quotes for *K-Pax*”)

Kirk: “Spock, everybody’s human.”

Spock: “I find that remark... insulting.” (*Star Trek IV*)

The works we’ve explored so far, I’ve argued, essentially replicate the limitations of mainstream discussions of theology and spirituality—arguing only over whether or not there is a God. In addition, while they use science fiction to explore that question, they don’t really do much that a realistic narrative could not. The alien invasion of *Signs*, the vampire/zombie plague of *I Am Legend*, and the post-apocalyptic earth of *The Book of Eli* are merely more extreme versions of real phenomena, used to test the presence of God and the faith of protagonists, in much the same way that we find in, say, the biblical story of Job. But science fiction and fantasy can do more than simply raising the stakes; by replicating tactics of theology and myth, the genres can also function as theology, envisioning and voicing (and thus also examining, testing, sometimes endorsing or critiquing) transcendent beings and ideas about transcendence. The first of the two roles, that of an outside commentator or transcendent voice/position, is a role common in theology/myth and in science fiction and fantasy but, to my knowledge, rarely discussed as a specific technique or move and never given an especially helpful or memorable name. In what follows, I’m going to call such figures “transcendent outsiders” and the use of them the “transcendent outsider move,” both as a handy way of referring to the strategy and to emphasize the similar functions such figures perform even when they might seem to wear different clothes, spring from very different traditions, or appear in types of texts we don’t typically see in the same light.

Throughout the history of narrative, transcendent outsiders have worn very different clothes indeed, as a few such examples will demonstrate. They have appeared as parents of beloved superheroes:

They can be a great people, Kal-El. They wish to be. They only lack the light to show the way. For this reason above all, their capacity for good, I have sent them you, my only son.

Your leadership can stir others to their own capacity for moral betterment. The human heart is still subject to monstrous deceptions. Our destruction has been foretold. I could embrace you in my arms. Your help will be called for endlessly. Leave them to those tasks which human beings can solve for themselves. Remember me, Kal-El, remember me. (*Superman Returns*)

Transcendent outsiders have spoken, with very different voices, as God:

Difficult as it is for truly enlightened beings to understand, most people on your planet believe in this philosophy, and that is why most people don’t care about the suffering masses, the oppression of minorities, the anger of the underclass, or the survival needs of anyone but themselves and their families [...]

This fear of anything leading to unification and your planet’s glorification of All That Separates produces division, disharmony, discord—yet you do not seem to have the ability even to learn from your own experience, and so you continue your behaviors, with the same results.

The inability to experience the suffering of another as one’s own is what allows such suffering to continue [...]

The level of consciousness could best be described as primitive. (Walsch, *Uncommon Dialogue* 239)

They have come as aliens:

“You have a mismatched pair of genetic characteristics. Either alone would have been useful, would have aided the survival of your species. But the two together are lethal. It was only a matter of time before they destroyed you [...]

“You are intelligent,” he said. “That’s the newer of the two characteristics, and the one you might have put to work to save yourselves [...]

“You are hierarchical. That’s the older and more entrenched characteristic [...]. When human intelligence served it instead of guiding it, when human intelligence did not even acknowledge it as a problem, but took pride in it or did not notice it at all [...]. That was like ignoring cancer.”

“We can make anything your people could,” it said. “Though we would not want to make most of their things.” (Butler 36-7, 61)

The picture, of course, was alarming. We could tell you were in deep trouble. But the music told us something else. The Beethoven told us there was hope. Marginal cases are our specialty. We thought you could use a little help... Last night, we looked inside you. All five of you. There’s a lot in there: feelings, memories, instincts, learned behavior, insights, madness, dreams, loves. Love is very important. You’re an interesting mix. [...] You’ve got hardly any theory of social organization, astonishingly backward economic systems, no grasp of the machinery of historical prediction, and very little knowledge about yourselves. Considering how fast your world is changing, it’s amazing you haven’t blown yourselves to bits by now. That’s why we don’t want to write you off just yet. You humans have a certain talent for adaptability—at least in the short term. (Sagan 359-360)

Some transcendent outsiders have been kings:

As for yourself (continued the King) who have spent the greatest part of your Life in traveling, I am well disposed to hope you may hitherto have escaped many Vices of your Country. But, by what I have gathered from your own Relation, and the Answers I have with much Pains wringed and extorted from you, I cannot but conclude the Bulk of your Natives, to be the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth. (Swift 123)

Others are talking animals:

The *Houyhnhnms*, indeed, appear not to be so well prepared for War, a Science to which they are perfect Strangers, and especially against massive weapons [...] But instead of Proposals for conquering that magnanimous Nation, I rather wish they were in a Capacity or Disposition to send a sufficient Number of their Inhabitants for civilizing *Europe*, by teaching us the first Principles of Honour, Justice, Truth, Temperance, Public Spirit, Fortitude, Chastity, Friendship, Benevolence, and Fidelity. (Swift 268-9)

One of the oldest is a goddess:

Shiduri said, “Gilgamesh, where are you roaming?
You will never find the eternal life
That you seek. When the gods created mankind,
they also created death, and they held back

eternal life for themselves alone.
 Humans are born, they live, then they die,
 this is the order that the gods have decreed.
 But until the end comes, enjoy your life,
 spend it in happiness, not despair.
 Savor your food, make each of your days
 a delight, bathe and anoint yourself,
 wear bright clothes that are sparkling clean,
 let music and dancing fill your house,
 love the child who holds you by the hand,
 and give your wife pleasure in your embrace.

That is the best way for a man to live. (Mitchell 168-169)

Here we have lines of dialogue from a 21st century film, comments purportedly made by God in a twentieth century New Age spiritual text, words spoken by alien characters in two American novels written in the nineteen eighties, comments on European society and human beings made by an imagined ruler and a highly rational talking horse in an eighteenth century satirical fantasy, and advice given the protagonist of an ancient epic, generally considered to be the oldest surviving work of literature, by the “Goddess of brewing and wisdom,” who is also the barkeep of a “tavern at the edge of the world” (Mitchell 289). What is clear is that, in depicting superior, critical, and (most importantly) transcendent voices/perspectives, these diverse works are essentially employing the same device, one of the most interesting strategies human storytellers have used, apparently from the very beginnings of literature in myth all the way to contemporary works within the genres of fantasy and science fiction. It might be tempting to think of this device as the “God move,” but since many of the figures presented are, while beyond our reach, not necessarily God, or even gods, it is clearer not to invoke such a name. Instead, I propose we call such figures transcendent outsiders, a term which highlights their superiority as well as their typically distant origins and objective position. Works which make use of the transcendent outsider move create or depict a figure in some way outside, beyond or above humanity to observe and comment on us, often to serve two primary purposes: criticism and comfort.

In creating/depicting transcendent outsiders, we attempt to envision ourselves through the eyes of superior beings. We imagine what they would see and what they might say—what criticisms they might level (sometimes bordering on misanthropy) and what comforts they would provide (sometimes to the point of sentimentality and escapism). Criticism and comfort are not mutually exclusive—while transcendent outsiders can often present criticism so harshly it veers into misanthropy, as in *Gulliver’s Travels* or Agent Smith’s “humanity is a virus” speech in the first *Matrix* film, even fairly profound criticism can serve a comforting, affirming function when it suggests that there is someone else who cares and knows better.

As a technique, transcendent outsiders have an interesting set of advantages and limitations. One advantage is that they appear to look upon humanity with a level of objectivity that we ourselves cannot possess. They are not aligned with any one Earth nation or any specific political perspective; though their beliefs might match those of human groups, cultures, or parties, they do not actually belong to them and have, thus, seemingly reached their beliefs through their own experience. In some cases, they have no earthly political agenda. But there are interesting complications. For example, if we look at transcendent outsiders skeptically, we might conclude simply that they are merely grandiose mouthpieces for the ideas of their authors. What better way to validate one’s own opinions than to present them as emanating from a

superior advanced being—a sophisticated alien, an imagined creature from a more advanced society, a god or God? Along the same lines, if we are able to envision the perspectives of these transcendent outsiders, in what sense can their messages be considered transcendent? In the second chapter of his study of British “scientific romance,” Brian Stableford discusses a number of works which make use of what I’m calling transcendent outsiders and observes that these figures, while convincing, do not, in the strictest sense, actually provide outside perspectives:

The imaginative power of scientific romance is, of course, insufficient really to give us the gift of seeing ourselves as others might see us. Nor can it show us how *Homo sapiens* will one day be superseded by some other species whose way of life might be reckoned a transcendence of our own. In all the stories described in this sub-chapter we are being observed only by ourselves, albeit with the aid of the distorting mirror of the imagination. (Stableford 272)

And immediately after saying that, Stableford points out the connection between how transcendent outsider figures in fiction of a specific era see humans and how people see themselves during the same period. When people are especially critical of themselves (or of their nation), transcendent outsiders tend to share their pessimism:

These supermen and aliens report so harshly on our progress because in the period which produced them, many people in Britain had come to think very harshly of themselves. Their victory in the Great War tasted oddly like defeat, and that taste became more bitter as a second great war – promising to be even more destructive than the first – became ever more likely. The history of scientific romance between the wars is testimony to a dramatic loss of morale which spread like an epidemic through the British intelligentsia. [...] writers came to take it for granted that the future would not be and could not be a simple ‘linear’ extrapolation of the present, but must involve some kind of essential qualitative change in the human condition. This is why it makes sense to speak of ‘the transcendent tomorrow’ in attempting to summarize and isolate the patterns and trends within the genre. (Stableford 272-273)

One might make more of a claim for those figures whose works are connected to religious belief systems, since in those cases there is supposed to be a sense in which the outsider figure is real and is inspiring the writing (rather than being created by the writer as an exercise or to make a point), but we might question the degree to which these are separate things: is there not an element of creation in the first and an element of inspiration in the second? And if we are able to imagine cultures, beliefs, ideas, approaches, ways of life, etc, superior to or more evolved than our own, why have we not been able to implement them? Why are authors still invoking transcendent outsiders in contemporary science fiction and fantasy as frequently (seemingly) as ever before in myth and theology?

Transcendent outsiders tend to address us in the same way (“You humans,” they often say) and diagnose similar problems and suggest similar remedies. Perhaps more repeatedly than they have any other topic, transcendent outsider figures have commented on our tendencies toward violence and war, particularly our relative acceptance of both as means of authority and methods for resolving conflicts (“Might is Right,” as Merlin of T.H. White’s *The Once and Future King* characterizes it, might be the most apt phrase) and our escalation of the scope of both through destructive forms of technology (White 225). This Message is delivered by multiple outsider figures in Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, by the time traveling wizard Merlin of T.H. White’s *The Once and Future King*, by the advanced alien Oankali of Octavia Butler’s

Dawn, and by *K-Pax*'s Prot and strongly implied by the words and experiences of the protagonist of John Carpenter's *Starman*.

One of the more vivid examples in Swift's satire comes during Gulliver's conversations with the gigantic king of Brobdingnag. Recounting the early portions of their conversation about Europe, Gulliver observes of the Brobdingnagian king that, "Above all, he was amazed to hear me talk of a mercenary standing Army in the midst of Peace, and among a Free People" (Swift 122). The king's even more damning ultimate assessment of European society slides into outright misanthropy: "I cannot but conclude the Bulk of your Natives, to be the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth," he tells Gulliver (123). When, as part of an attempt "to ingratiate myself farther into his majesty's favor," Gulliver enthusiastically introduces the king to the wonders of gunpowder, which, when used in canons, can "rip up the Pavements, tear the Houses to Pieces, burth and throw Splinters on every side, dashing out the Brains of all who came near," Gulliver prompts an even harsher response:

The King was struck with Horror at the Description I had given of those terrible Engines, and the Proposal I had made. He was amazed how so impotent and grovelling an Insect as I (these were his Expressions) could entertain such inhuman Ideas, and in so familiar a manner as to appear wholly unmoved at all the Scenes of Blood and Desolation, which I had painted as the common Effects of those destructive Machines, whereof he said, some evil Genius, Enemy to Mankind, must have been the first Contriver. As for himself, he protested, that although few Things delighted him so much as new Discoveries in Art or in Nature, yet he would rather lose half his Kingdom than be privy to such a Secret, which he commanded me, as I valued my Life, never to mention any more (125).

It is not merely Gulliver's numbness to and even enthusiasm for violence and war which offend the Brobdingnagin king, but also the idea of developing and disseminating, taking pride in, technology intended to accomplish catastrophic violence. The same points arise in Gulliver's conversation with his Houyhnhnm master later in the narrative, though here Gulliver has switched sides and worries over whether or not he will be able to "do Justice to" his "Master's Arguments and Expressions," which he fears will suffer in the "Translation into our barbarous *English*" (226). When Gulliver explains the myriad just causes of war and how "the Trade of a *Soldier* is held the most honourable of all others: Because a *Soldier* is a *Yahoo* hired to kill in cold Blood as many of his own species, who have never offended him, as he possibly can," the Houyhnhnm master find this shameful, but thinks "the Shame is greater than the Danger" because "Nature hath left you utterly incapable of doing much Mischief." Humans cannot bite each other easily and possess only very short claws, he reasons. Gulliver corrects his error, giving him,

a Description of Cannons, Culverins, Muskets, Carabines, Pistols, Bullets, Powder, Swords [...] Twenty thousand killed on each Side, dying Groans, Limbs flying in the Air [...] And to set forth the Valour of my own dear Countrymen, I assured him, that I had seen them blow up a Hundred Enemies at once in a Siege, and as many in a Ship, and beheld the dead Bodies come down in pieces from the Clouds, to the great Diversion of the Spectators (Swift 228).

Like the Brobdingnagian king, Gulliver's Houyhnhnm master does not want to hear anymore, frightened that "his Ears being used to such abominable Words, might by Degrees admit them

with less Detestation” (228). Again a transcendent outsider is shocked by our tolerance for violence and war—but even more so by our use of technology to up the stakes.

This criticism of human violence is echoed by several more contemporary transcendent outsiders. One example is the alien Oankali Nikanj of Butler’s *Dawn*, who, when Lilith says, “It can’t be that you don’t have—or can’t make—writing materials,” answers, “We can make anything your people could [...] Though we would not want to make most of their things” (Butler 60). Our tendencies toward war and violence are also discussed by the time traveling Merlyn of T.H. White’s novelization of the King Arthur story who, along with an array of animal characters he enlists to educate Arthur, function as transcendent outsiders. Through his guidance of Arthur, Merlyn attempts to move humanity away from the principle of “might makes right,” a task which proves to be an enormous challenge. The novel depicts Arthur’s efforts to realize these ideals, moving through various stages, each of which is revealed to be a failure. The visiting alien figures of the films *Starman* and *K-Pax* make similar observations. When the first is asked about his own world, he replies, “It is beautiful. Not like this, but it is beautiful. [...] And there is no war, no hunger; the strong do not victimize the helpless.” Prot in *K-Pax* criticizes our eye-for-an-eye mentality, which he says is “known throughout the universe for its stupidity.” “Even your Buddha and your Christ had quite a different idea, but no one’s paid much attention to them, not even the Buddhists and the Christians,” he observes.

If transcendent outsiders have condemned our tolerance for war and violence, they have also critiqued less obvious forms of our tendencies towards selfishness and separation—in a deeper sense, our tendency to regard each person, group, or nation as separate. This includes our use of concepts such as “an eye for an eye” or “every man for himself” as well as our lack of concern for the less fortunate. This Message is delivered in various forms by multiple ghosts of Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* and by the “God” of Neale Donald Walsch’s *Conversations with God*. The ghost of Jacob Marley, the first of several visions that appear to Dickens’ protagonist, chides Scrooge (and, in the story’s didactic agenda, those who think like him) primarily for his failure to recognize and acknowledge his connection to other people. “Mankind was my business,” Marley wails at Scrooge (62). Marley and others like him view helping others through charity as an exercise of power, one they are now denied: they can watch people suffer but do nothing about it, since they lack the power to help (65). The perspective of this especially memorable transcendent outsider defamiliarizes both power and charity, reframing the second as an exercise of the first. It also emphasizes the practice of empathy, which Scrooge does incidentally as he begins to explore his own past, a practice Dickens suggests almost forces comparisons to others: as Scrooge views his own past more sympathetically, and explores his own emotions and experiences of hurt and errors, it is easier, and even almost automatic, for him to begin to empathize with others. The “God” of Neale Donald Walsch’s *Conversations with God* series, another transcendent outsider, though of a text that is an explicitly spiritual text of New Age/contemporary spirituality (rather than a broadly but somewhat unobtrusively Christian work of fantasy fiction), stresses the same point, arguing repeatedly that our incorrect belief that we are separate from each other, and from God, is the source of most of our moral and social problems. The solution, one of several “remembrances” Walsch’s conversation yields, is to accept instead that we are one, with God and with each other. In *What God Wants*, a later book not written in the same conversation format, Walsch argues that our sense of separation from each other springs from our sense of separation from God: “Theology produces sociology. A theology of separation produces a sociology of separation. It is as simple as that. Regrettably, theology too often produces a sociology that produces pathology” (Walsch, *What God Wants*

61). Similar criticisms of our selfish attitudes, our sense of separation from each other, come from the alien figure in *Starman*, whose description of his own world implies, by contrast, these flaws in our own: “There is only one language, one law, one people.”

Perhaps the primary global example of our separation from each other is our valuing of nationalism over a broader perspective—the kind labeled “a one world perspective” in Carl Sagan’s *Contact*. Transcendent outsiders often criticize our tendency towards nationalism and the unhelpful divisions it creates, the way differences in religion and nation keep us from recognizing common connections and from empathizing. The transcendence of the separation brought about by our nationalistic identifications is perhaps the central Message of *Contact*. In Sagan’s novel¹⁸ a number of factors push Earth nations to move past nationalism—not to abolish nations themselves, but to see separate national identification as secondary to our shared humanity and residence on Earth. Receiving the “Message” and, later, building the machine, both require international cooperation: the Message cannot be received by only one nation or understood if incomplete; the Machine cannot be built without resources possessed by multiple nations. These practical realities and the tendency humans begin to develop of examining their world and their practices (even, physically, their planet) from an outside perspective, from the perspective of superior beings, prompt a movement away from divisive nationalism and towards what is called a “planetary perspective” and what, after the development of the machine, becomes a new philosophy entirely—“Machinado,” “the increasingly common perspective of the Earth as a planet and of all humans sharing an equal stake in its future. Something like it had been proclaimed in some, but by no means all, religions” (315).

Alongside broad criticisms of human violence, selfishness, and separation, transcendent outsiders often offer diagnoses of an array of social problems. Connected to our sense of separation is our materialism and interest in money and ownership, which transcendent outsider figures frequently condemn in favor of sharing and the abolishment of private ownership. Likewise, transcendent outsiders tend to point out the flaws and corruption evident in our legal and political systems. The transcendent outsider figures of *Gulliver’s Travels* have more to say about, and even harsher criticisms to level at, this than at our penchant for violence and war. The God of *Conversations with God* also critiques our systems of government, suggesting transparency and a form of one-world government modeled after the structure of the United States. They also point out weaknesses in our systems of education and, in cases such as the Houynnhms of *Gulliver’s Travels*, what they consider to be our unnecessary and illogical feelings of shame about our bodies (exemplified by our wearing of clothes and taboos about nudity) and sex. And the failing which causes many of the others and, perhaps more than anything else, enables them to continue, according to transcendent outsiders, is our dishonesty (our unwillingness to look at what actually works) and our neglect of reason. As Thomas Hardy wrote, “if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst” (Hardy 14).

If transcendent outsiders find something about humans which impresses, it is often our capability for love, even if they recognize we do not live by it often enough. The alien of *Contact* explains that he appreciates our “lovingkindness”; Yvaine, a star in human form in the 2007 film adaptation of Neil Gaiman’s novel *Stardust*, notices the same problems other transcendent outsiders do but, from her position in the heavens, also sees love:

I know a lot about love. I've seen it, centuries and centuries of it, and it was the only thing that made watching your world bearable. All those wars. Pain, lies, hate... It made me want to turn away and never look down again. But when I see

the way that mankind loves... You could search to the furthest reaches of the universe and never find anything more beautiful.

And yet, typically, though not always, transcendent outsiders limit themselves to observing and suggesting, holding back from requiring or demanding such changes. This is not always the case, obviously, as the vengeful Old Testament God and to an even greater degree the Ooankali of Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* series exemplify, but such beings usually want us to advance on our own. Jor-El's words to Superman in *Superman Returns* are emblematic: "Leave them to those tasks which human beings can solve for themselves," he warns, perhaps explaining why Superman does not involve himself in political matters or attempt to preach to or lecture humans en masse about how we should act or treat each other. Brian Stableford suggests that the figures in the period he is exploring rarely provide solutions to the problems they notice in humanity because that is not actually their purpose:

But this is not the point. Despite the earnest intentions of men like Wells and Stapledon, the achievements of scientific romance in finding solutions to problems (whether the problems be social or philosophical) are utterly negligible. What is interesting about scientific romance is not that questions are answered but that they are asked, and that the manner of their asking embodies an attitude to the *possibility* of their being answered. (Stableford 309)

Despite the flaws they diagnose in human society, transcendent outsider figures are often loving and supportive. Intense criticism is usually followed by a sense of understanding or compassion. While we humans may appear vile and cruel, transcendent outsiders often conclude that we are, instead, merely mistaken and childish. Instead of evil, brutish creatures, human beings are foolish children, such outsiders tell us after presenting their criticisms. We are children capable of change and improvement, an evolution towards something greater—towards something more like them, not because they wish to conquer and assimilate, but because this is a better, kinder, more honest, more loving, more rational way to live and be.

Transcendent Outsiders, Narrators, and Transcendent Rhetoric

Transcendent outsiders as we are discussing them also possess some obvious connections to omniscient third person narrators, who are also notable for both their outsider status and their apparent superiority or elevated position and access. In a sense, we can see the similarity between these two roles, one a staple of narrative generally, the other a feature common to mythology/theology and science fiction and fantasy, if we think for a moment of the career of Academy Award-winning actor Morgan Freeman. After doing so most notably in *The Shawshank Redemption*, Freeman has played a similar role as a kindly, enlightened narrator of other people's stories in so many movies, it has become (to some viewers) a bit of a joke: Roger Ebert, writing about *The Bucket List*, in which Freeman narrates the story of a character played by Jack Nicholson, joked that, for once, he'd like to see another character tell Freeman's story. The connection between transcendent outsider and narrator becomes a bit more obvious if we consider that, alongside his many roles as enlightened narrators, Freeman has, in two movies in the "Almighty" franchise (*Bruce Almighty* and *Evan Almighty*) played the most notable of transcendent outsiders: God.

Transcendent outsiders are, to a degree, like omniscient narrators and even merely wise characters that we suspect are aligned with an authorial perspective, but they are also different from both¹⁹. Unlike the first, they exist within the narrative as actual figures, and unlike the second, they are not only individual characters; they are also often representatives of entire worlds or realms which we are led to believe transcend ours in wisdom and understanding. In

the sense in which Stableford writes, of course transcendent outsiders are us, but in another sense, they are not. They are ideas and possibilities we can perhaps glimpse or sketch out, or if we think of the spiritual parallel, they are things we are inspired to envision or aspire to—but they are not actually us, not who we are, not what we can (or have thus far been able to) do. We can say of transcendent outsiders that they exist, as God and gods have throughout human history, to put a divine or superior stamp on human ideas as a way of authenticating or solidifying them—as ancient works of theology and mythology did by putting cultural values and even basic health rituals into the mouths of God or gods. But we might also consider the possibility that such ideas also work in the opposite direction, whether we view that as a spiritual or artistic process (or some form of both): we might put our ideas in the mouths of superior figures to validate our ideas, but inspiration of some kind brings us the ideas (ideas that may be beyond us in many ways) in the first place.

Much as writers of myth, fantasy, and science fiction can embody transcendent ideas and perspectives in imagined beings, writers and speakers in other discourses often draw on that same approach to cast themselves (even if merely momentarily) as enlightened, objective observers of humanity. We might call this use of the language, criticisms, and perspective of transcendent outsiders “transcendent rhetoric” or the adoption of a “transcendent pose,” though one could debate whether, from situation to situation, its use²⁰ is simply a tactic or an approach springing from a genuine enlightened or ego-less perspective.

Creating and voicing transcendent outsider figures is one of the core ways in which science fiction and fantasy function as myth/theology. In envisioning such figures (and listening to their opinions, seeing through their perspectives as readers) writers and readers engage in speculation about transcendence. Even more so than it does by asking theological questions, science fiction/fantasy opens up a space for theological contemplation by enabling theological play. This theological play allows writers and readers/viewers to attempt to envision transcendence, which can be seen as either an attempt to uncover and understand what a spiritually transcendent God might be like or, if one does not believe in that possibility, at least to sketch out, artistically, imagined models for human moral evolution. In the following two chapters, I will argue that this theological play, especially the use of alien characters as godlike transcendent outsiders, enables a deep and useful assessment of different theological/spiritual possibilities.

Take Me to Your Churches: The Cultural Invasion of Alien Gods

[T]here is a tendency all over the world to believe in saucers and to want them to be real, unconsciously helped along by a press that otherwise has no real sympathy with the phenomenon. [...] In the threatening situation of the world today, when people are beginning to see that everything is at stake, the projection-created fantasy soars beyond the realm of earthly organizations and powers into the heavens, into interstellar space, where the rulers of human fate, the gods, once had their abode in the planets. (Jung 309, 320)

In his 1958 book *Flying Saucers*, Carl Jung devotes several pages of his epilogue to recounting the abduction narrative of Orfeo M. Angelucci, author of *The Secret of the Saucers*. At the time of Jung’s writing, Angelucci “makes his living [...] by preaching the gospel revealed to him by the Saucers,” continuing a “career as a prophet” which “began with the sighting of a supposedly authentic Ufo on August 4, 1946” (Jung 418). In *Secret*, Angelucci claims to have

encountered aliens who, functioning much like the transcendent outsider figures I discussed in the last chapter, deliver a message of criticism and comfort: “The people of your planet have been under observation for centuries,” they tell him, “but have only recently been re-surveyed. Every point of progress in your society is registered with us. [...] With deep compassion and understanding we have watched your world going through its ‘growing pains.’ We ask that you look upon us simply as older brothers” (quoted in Jung 419). “‘Cosmic law’ forbade spectacular landings on earth,” which, the aliens tell Angelucci, is “at present threatened by greater dangers than was realized” (Jung 420). Like countless other transcendent outsiders, Angelucci’s aliens, acting as moral judges, find fault with human morality and culture: “Weep, Orfeo...we weep with you for earth and her children. For all its apparent beauty earth is a purgatorial world among the planets evolving intelligent life. Hate, selfishness, and cruelty rise from many parts of it like a dark mist” (qtd. in Jung 421). Angelucci’s encounter provokes a feeling of transcendence: “After these revelations Angelucci felt exalted and strengthened. It was ‘as though momentarily I had transcended mortality and was somehow related to these superior beings’” (Jung 420). Additionally, he learns that the aliens have chosen him for a mission: “The voice entertained him with more explanations concerning the attitude of the higher beings to mankind: man had not kept pace morally and psychologically with his technological development, and therefore the inhabitants of other planets were trying to instill into the earth dwellers a better understanding of their present predicament and to help them particularly in the art of healing” (Jung 421). Echoing elements of Eastern and New Age spirituality, the aliens tell him that “Everyone on earth has a ‘spiritual, unknown self which transcends the material world and consciousness and dwells eternally outside of the Time dimension in spiritual perfection within the unity of the oversoul’” and that “[t]he sole purpose of human existence on earth is to attain reunion with the ‘immortal consciousness’” (Jung 422). In an echo of Christianity, the aliens next offer Angelucci, who in their presence sees himself as a “‘crawling worm—unclean, filled with error and sin,’” a baptism:

The voice spoke and said: “Beloved friend of Earth, we baptize you now in the true light of the worlds eternal.” A white flash of lightning blazed forth: his life lay clear before his eyes, and the remembrance of all his previous existences came back to him. He understood “the mystery of life.” He thought he was going to die, for he knew that at this moment he was wafted into “eternity, into a timeless sea of bliss.” (Jung 422)

According to Jung, after his encounter Angelucci explicitly saw himself as an “evangelist”: “He became a witness not only of the word but of the Ufo, and was exposed to the mockery and disbelief that are the lot of the martyr” (422). “Without having the faintest inkling of psychology,” Jung sums up, “Angelucci has described in the greatest detail the mystic experience associated with a Ufo vision. [...] It could even be regarded as a unique document that sheds a great deal of light on the genesis and assimilation of Ufo mythology” (423). From a psychological perspective, Jung suggests, what is important is “the vision of the *rotundum*, the symbol of wholeness and the archetype that expresses itself in mandala form” (423). “Mandelas,” he explains, “usually appear in situations of psychic confusion and perplexity” and represent “a pattern of order”: “As our time is characterized by fragmentation, confusion, and perplexity, this fact is also expressed in the psychology of the individual [...] this archetype is of central importance, or rather, that it gains in importance to the degree that the importance of the ego is lost” (423-424). Brenda Denzler also discusses the Angelucci narrative in her 2001 study *The Lure of the Edge*. She categorizes it as an “Adamski type” account, which, after the

prototypical abduction story of George Adamski, had become shorthand for “religiously oriented ‘contactee’—a person who claimed to have had contact with friendly ‘space brothers’ who, playing the role of cosmic saviors, were here to warn humanity about various dangers and in some cases to try to save us from them” (40-41).

As the Jung epigraph suggests, many people *want* to believe in transcendent alien figures, what Jung calls “a regular legend” and “a *living myth*,” as real possibilities (322, 323). In *Legend and Belief*, Linda Dégh suggests that, in an era in which legends spread more rapidly than ever before (and, she warns, irrationalities are often taken seriously if they appear in the guise of rationality),

The poly-vocality of the mass media has helped legends achieve unprecedented proliferation. [...] Over the last fifty years following World War II, we could trace the chronology of the emergence, spread, blossoming, and decline of principal legendary themes under the impact of technological advancement. Several examples come to mind: the cyclic conglomerates of Bigfoot and other anomalous creatures; the stories inspired by religion, mythology, and science fiction about aliens and their flying machines (UFOs). [...] The career of the latest phase of the traditional “Heavenly Messengers” legend (Bullard, 1977) is phenomenal. It has snowballed into an international alien-consciousness complex over the course of half a century, creating its own institutionalized system of belief, ritual, philosophy, and mythology informed by a set of stereotypical exempla. Today, an estimated one-third to one-half of adults believe in the existence of UFOs, along with another third who are uncertain about their existence [...]. (Dégh 112, 113, 213)

Briefly examining the purpose and role of that belief in aliens, especially as spiritual figures, in the culture will help to illuminate its functions in science fiction, where I argue it allows the genre to engage in deeply useful theological speculation and play. Drawing together points made by writers including Jung, Dégh, and Denzler, I argue that alien figures have taken on spiritual roles for three main reasons: the problems experienced by religion in the contemporary world, which include its displacement from its former role as arbiter of truth, the increased value of secularism, and the desire of many to find spiritual possibilities that eschew or transcend the divisions, conflicts, and in some cases prejudices (such as sexism and homophobia) associated with organized religion; the dominance of the rational/scientific worldview (what Karen Armstrong refers to as “logos”), which makes even religion attempt to operate as a form of science and which creates a desire to envision rational/scientific gods; and lastly the convenient potential aliens provide to fulfill almost all of the roles and functions of God/gods/angels/saints/demons.

Clearly one of the factors behind the emergence of aliens as spiritual figures is the changed, and in many cases diminished, position of traditional organized religion in the modern world. We already discussed Tony Walter’s analysis of how religion has lost its hold over aspects of life, such as death and the afterlife, that previously fell under its sole purview. Brenda Denzler argues that the Enlightenment, the Reformation, and the dominance of science open a gap which alien figures can potentially fill:

Since the Reformation depopulated the saint-filled cosmos of the Middle Ages, followed by the gradual abstraction and then elimination of God from the cosmos by rationally enlightened, scientific minds, a newly orphaned humanity has been asking, “Are we, then, alone?” The UFO experiences reported by thousands of

people are one hint that the answer to that forlorn question may be, “No. We are not alone. [...] In the end, at every turn science leaves humanity essentially alone in the universe. The UFO movement, however [...] want[s] to suggest that not only are we not alone but we have been and can be and are in contact with alien forms of intelligent life. We are not alone, and we have an ongoing relationship with that which accompanies us on our billion-year sojourn through the universe. (Denzler xviii, 159)

Denzler also discusses a number of other figures who suggest a similar paradigm, including philosopher Paul Davies, who believed that, “if not a new religion, belief in alien life was [...] ‘at rock bottom, part of an ancient religious quest’” (Denzler 153). According to Denzler, Davies saw public interest not only in UFOs and alien contact but also in the SETI program as stemming, in part,

from the need to find a wider context for our lives than this earthly existence provides. In an era when conventional religion is in sharp decline, the belief in super-advanced aliens out there somewhere in the universe can provide some measure of comfort and inspiration for people whose lives may otherwise appear to be boring and futile. This sense of a religious quest may well extend to the scientists themselves. (Denzler 153)

In *Flying Saucers*, Jung speaks specifically of Christianity, suggesting the loss of belief in God as Jesus creates a psychic need for a “mediator” figure:

The dominating idea of a mediator and god who became man, after having thrust the old polytheistic beliefs into the background, is now in its turn on the point of evaporating. Untold millions of so-called Christians have lost their belief in a real and living mediator [...] No Christian will contest the importance of a belief like that of the mediator, nor will he deny the consequences which the loss of it entails. So powerful an idea reflects a profound psychic need which does not simply disappear when the expression of it ceases to be valid. What happens to the energy that once kept the idea alive and dominant over the psyche? A political, social, philosophical, and religious conflict of unprecedented proportions has split the consciousness of our age. When such tremendous opposites split asunder, we may expect with certainty that the need for a savior will make itself felt. [...] Similarly, between the psychic opposites there is generated a “uniting symbol” [...] Should something extraordinary or impressive then occur in the outside world, be it a human personality, a thing, or an idea, the unconscious content can project itself upon it, thereby investing the projection carrier with numinous and mythical powers. Thanks to its numinosity, the projection carrier has a highly suggestive effect and grows into a saviour myth whose basic features have been repeated countless times. (414-415)

In the introduction, I discussed the increased value of secularism, and the desire of many to find spiritual possibilities that eschew or transcend the divisions and conflicts associated with organized religion. To some, traditional organized religions appear divisive and narrow, too focused on conflict over dogma and sacred texts. One appeal of alien god figures is that they appear to exist outside of such conflict and to be free of the baggage of literalism and exclusivism. Considering the appeal of Superman, one of the most famous alien figures, Gary Engle writes,

In America, cultural icons that manage to tap the national religious spirit are of necessity secular on the surface and sufficiently generalized to incorporate the diversity of American religious traditions. Superman doesn't have to be seen as an angel to be appreciated, but in the absence of a tradition of national religious iconography, he can serve as a safe, nonsectarian focus for essentially religious sentiments, particularly among the young.

In the last analysis, Superman is like nothing so much as an American boy's fantasy of a messiah. (745).

Engle's argument highlights one of the crucial appeals of all alien spiritual figures. Denzler recounts how, in one situation, an alien encounter brought a man along precisely this path, from literalist Christianity to something closer to a pluralistic SBNR perspective or what, *In American Veda*, Philip Goldberg associates with both Vedanta and perennialism (the view that "while religious customs, rituals, and dogmas vary, all traditions, *if taken deep enough*, can bring practitioners to essentially the same place"):

"My views do not mesh with anyone that I know as they relate to religion. I do not believe in literal interpretation of the Bible. I believe much of what was originally in the New Testament has been left out, much of what would now be classified as New Age. I have read a number of books on karma and reincarnation and feel much more comfortable with these beliefs than with a burning hell. I also do not feel that this belief conflicts with what is in the New Testament. When Jesus said, 'In my father's house there are many mansions,' I feel he was referring to the various levels of spiritual development that we may find ourselves at when we die....I believe all religions are working toward the same goal, that of spiritual development; we each just take different paths....I don't know how much the UFO experience has affected my religious beliefs. I think probably a lot more than I would like to admit. One thing these experiences have taught me are that nothing is ever as it appears on the surface. One should always be open to alternate explanations of reality." (Goldberg 11-12; Denzler 126)

In general, according to Denzler, alien encounters often prompted, or paralleled, movements away from traditional religion to SBNR or New Age perspectives:

Abductees' experiences were often the stimulus for a radical rethinking of their religious as well as their physical and psychological identities. [...] 55 percent reported a "decreased" or "strongly decreased" concern with organized religion; 56 percent reported that they had changed the way they practiced their religion; and 77 percent said their concern with spiritual matters had "increased" or "significantly increased." For their part, the aliens, while seeming to encourage belief in God, often discouraged an overinvestment in institutional forms of religious expression. [...] But that did not mean that the aliens were without a sense of the divine. [...] "The beings are very spiritual," reported another abductee. "They believe all that exists is of God and is God." (136-137)

Clearly, then, one of the core appeals of aliens as spiritual figures is their freedom from direct religious associations, a kind of secularism which enables them to serve as spiritual figures for those who seek to pursue spirituality outside of the trappings or alignments of traditional organized religion.

Alongside the diminished role of religion, and the desire of some to find ways to escape its more negative associations, we find an almost exact opposite trajectory for science and rationality. The dominance of the rational/scientific worldview (what Karen Armstrong refers to as “logos”), which makes even religion attempt to operate as a form of science²¹, also creates a desire to envision rational/scientific gods and to find ways of speaking about transcendent experiences in language closer to or inclusive of scientific language. In a sense, this is similar to the way that fantasy elements, to survive the takeover of science and realism, concealed themselves as science fiction (putting on a guise of science and rationality to survive an era in which outright fantasy was no longer acceptable in the way it had been before). As Denzler explains,

Such is the strength of science as arbiter of Reality and thus conferrer of legitimacy that we struggle to find some point of accommodation, if not of outright confirmation, for our beliefs within a scientific framework. One manifestation of the effort to reconcile the truths of science with the truths of our beliefs can be seen in “creation science.” Another manifestation is the study of UFOs—a particularly compelling manifestation because it involves not only belief in something but for many in the UFO community an unarguable experience of something. (xviii)

The UFO community, she suggests, is “a liminal community”—“a place where people could discuss ‘religious feelings in seemingly scientific terms’” (106). Jung notes that “[i]t is characteristic of our time that the archetype, in contrast to its previous manifestations, should now take the form of an object, a technological construction, in order to avoid the odiousness of mythological personification. Anything that looks technological goes down without difficulty with modern man” (328). From a perspective which sees science as the source of legitimacy and equates fantasy and myth with the superstitions of a naïve past, concepts which appear mythic or fantastic have negative associations; desires for the same functions remain, but images to fill them must cloak themselves in science or rationality or, in this case, a product of both: technology. Dégh suggests that the appeal of contemporary legends, including UFOs, is not merely that they “address the unknown, especially about the hereafter,” but also that they do so “in the two main domains of trust—religion and technology—applying and mixing the languages of both rational and irrational philosophies” (Dégh 114). Spiritual alien figures, thus, are plausible gods, filling similar roles and carrying out similar functions, but all, seemingly, within the realm of scientific possibility.

A final factor behind the presence of aliens as spiritual figures is that, as the Angelucci story attests, the nature of aliens allows them to fill almost all of the roles of God or gods, including those of saints, angels, and demons. They are superior beings from above and beyond. They can serve as morally and spiritually superior guides and judges or, when necessary, even provide punishment for human sin and failure. They can warn and coach. They can choose certain among us to be followers or preachers of a new religion or spirituality or to be taken up into a kind of afterlife or heaven. They can be a source of a feeling of transcendence or wonder and awe and also someone in whom to believe or have faith, someone to seek but whose failure to appear directly or leave evidence can be explained: God “works in mysterious ways”; aliens don’t want to violate a “cosmic law” or “prime directive” by interfering in our development. Without much of a stretch, we can (as some have) even imagine aliens as our creators, as Denzler discusses in the writing of Dr. Francisco J. (Joe) Lewels:

What humanity would learn by taking up these two approaches to UFOs, Lewels called “the God hypothesis”: the knowledge that UFOs and their occupants had always been here, that they had taken a hand in the creation of the human species through genetic engineering of higher primates indigenous to Earth, and that they had also been the architects of most or all world religions. [...] “Yet he did not see humanity as the “crowning glory of God’s creation.” Rather, he suggested, humanity was a mere prototype for a “more advanced model yet to be unveiled.” (143)

Or in other cases, alien beings can be seen as angels or as a kind of midway point to divinity. Denzler writes, “For some [...] the scriptures were less problematic if one postulated that UFOs and their occupants sometimes acted as agents of God” (128). “Presbyterian minister and ufologist Barry Downing,” for example, spoke of “the alien/angelic reality” and “found cause for hope in the idea of alien-connected scriptures,” believing that ““UFOs are simply giving us a course correction [by carrying out] deceptively simple actions in human society which have significant long term consequences”” (Denzler 128-129). Paul Davies, whom Denzler quotes, also suggests that aliens can sometimes function not simply *as* God but as a medium or channel that leads us to the divine, a

Half-way house to God... This powerful theme of alien beings acting as a conduit to the Ultimate... touches a deep chord in the human psyche. The attraction seems to be that by contacting superior beings in the sky, humans will be given access to privileged knowledge, and that the resulting broadening of our horizons will in some sense bring us a step closer to God. (qtd. in Denzler 154)

As Jung says of Angelucci’s aliens, “The Ufo vision follows the old rule and appears in the sky. Orfeo’s fantasies are played out in an obviously heavenly place and his cosmic friends bear the names of stars. If they are not antique gods and heroes they are at least angels” (425). Of a similar being in Fred Hoyle’s novel *Black Cloud*, Jung comments, “it knows as little about a metaphysical Supreme Being as we do. Nevertheless its intelligence proves unendurably high for human beings, so that it comes suspiciously near to having a divine or angel-like nature. Here the great astrophysicist joins hands with the naïve Angelucci” (430).

The appeal of aliens as spiritual figures, the fact that they can, at least potentially, inhabit all major divine roles and carry out all godly functions, combined with the advantage they have in at least appearing scientifically plausible, mean that in a very real sense, they represent threats (or, depending on one’s view, opportunities) theology cannot afford to ignore. The appearance of aliens in such roles often prompts a questioning of God and a reevaluation of religious beliefs. If they exist, aliens must somehow be incorporated, or, more drastically, they might supersede current beliefs and become a more literal and empirically real replacement. They necessarily raise other questions as well. If they exist, for example, how does that affect notions of God or creation? If they are far superior to us, are they closer to God, as Davies and others have suggested? If a God also created them, would that make God bigger (and less focused on us) than we might have thought? How might that affect the accounts of various scriptures and the importance of specific human savior figures? Their intrusion into theological space is appealing to some but deeply threatening to others, who view aliens as forces which could distract from God (as devils or false idols) or as realities which could further damage literal belief in their worldviews. For example, Denzler quotes a writer who suggested that “the whole Christian idea of God’s plan of salvation would be severely problematized” if aliens were to be discovered:

The Christian religion would be particularly compromised by the discovery [of extraterrestrial life] since it makes so much of the Incarnation as an historical event and of knowledge of the good news of Jesus Christ's Passion, Ascension, and Atonement as the sine qua non of salvation. It would either have to maintain that the incarnation and crucifixion of the Son of God has occurred on innumerable worlds, or embark on a vigorous missionary campaign of broadcasting the good news throughout the universe. The latter would be a vain effort, for the distant galaxies are receding from us faster than the speed of light and could never be contacted, so their inhabitants presumably would be eternally damned: a fact surely irreconcilable with any idea of Divine Providence. (qtd. in Denzler 149)

While some religious figures, such as the late Monsignor Corrado Balducci, view aliens positively as perhaps "very good beings who aim to bring us nearer to God," others see them as a threat to their beliefs, calling aliens "potential sources of idolatry" and, in the case of Pat Robertson, suggesting abductees "ought to be stoned because such individuals were in fact trafficking with demons" (Denzler 150-151). In the article "Aliens as Cosmic Saviors," written for *American Vision*, an organization whose stated aim is "restoring America's biblical foundation from Genesis to Revelation," Gary Demar astutely analyzes the spiritual/theological roles and parallels of alien figures in film but dismisses them as mistaken and dangerous attempts to find or create secular/scientific alternatives to the "true" biblical God and "escape final judgment on God's terms" (Demar par. 22).

Chapter 2: Aliens as Traditional Gods

Science fiction also commonly uses myth to novel effect. Extraterrestrial visitors usually appear as either munificent mythic gods or nightmarish demons. Steven Spielberg's *E.T.*, for example, revealed a gentle, Christ-like alien recognized by innocent children, but persecuted by adults. E.T. even healed the sick, fell into a deathlike coma, and was resurrected. (Kennedy and Gioia 987)

The profound theological, spiritual, and moral questions raised in the culture by the possibility of actual spiritual alien figures make it quite clear why alien characters would be extraordinarily useful for exploring similar avenues within science fiction narratives. This chapter and the next will focus on different depictions of aliens as gods in contemporary science fiction, with a focus on making three main arguments. First, I suggest, following chapter one, that aliens are commonly used as transcendent outsiders who critique and comfort humanity by serving as both mirrors (figures important for how they/their culture see us) and foils (characters important for how we look/our culture looks in comparison to them/theirs). Second, I argue that they also often play divine/godly roles in stories which essentially operate as modern forms of myth/theology, sometimes as almost direct echoes. Third and most important, I argue that in depicting different kinds of alien god figures, sf not only functions as theology/myth; it also, directly or indirectly, examines (endorses, critiques, explores) different ideas about theology/transcendence (what kind of gods make sense) and moral evolution—exactly the kind of speculation which, in the introduction, I argued we need to engage in. In short, aliens are ideal transcendent outsiders that let us explore ideas about God, transcendence, and moral evolution.

This chapter will argue that a number of works are, directly or indirectly, using alien god-figures to embody and explore relatively traditional concepts of God as an anthropomorphized figure separate from us who functions primarily as a strict, punishing moral judge, producing human moral improvement through force and destruction or threats of the same, more so than through enlightenment or experiences of transcendence. I begin with the classic film *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, which I argue attempts to support such a model but indirectly exposes some of the problems with that theological vision and its approach to moral change. Because the film supports the traditional religious order, it simultaneously allegorizes the Christian account of Jesus quite precisely but also takes pains to differentiate between its aliens and the actual God. Next, I look at H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, which I argue directly echoes myths of divine punishment for human moral failings (such as the flood stories in *Gilgamesh* and the Old Testament), but by using the alien invaders to embody the destructive, punishing aspects of God, allows God to function merely as the protector of humanity (similar to *Day*, it grapples with theological problems relating to a separate, anthropomorphized God's multiple, seemingly contradictory roles as judge/enforcer and loving protector). Then I turn to Robert Reed's short story "Decency," which I argue endorses aliens as the force of divine judgment (but at the level of the individual rather than all of humanity), applying somewhat troubling values. The story is focused more on the morality of the individual chosen and the kind of pseudo-heavenly reward he will win, but, through the alien-gods, presents a striking dismissal of scientific, creative, and

intellectual values. Finally, I argue that Lisa Goldstein's short story "Midnight News" satirizes the aliens-as-divine-judges scenario of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, accepting and augmenting the criticisms such works typically level at humanity (with a focus on the treatment of women) but directly questioning the fairness of a transcendent outsider judging all of humanity and the value of human moral evolution prompted merely by threats and fear of destruction.

Speak Softly but Bring Along a Big, Bad Robot: Conflicting Theological Roles and Dubious Moral Motivations in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*

Klaatu: For our policemen, we created a race of robots. Their function is to patrol the planets in spaceships like this one and preserve the peace. In matters of aggression, we have given them absolute power over us. This power cannot be revoked. At the first sign of violence, they act automatically against the aggressor. The penalty for provoking their action is too terrible to risk. [...] I came here to give you these facts. It is no concern of ours how you run your own planet, but if you threaten to extend your violence, this Earth of yours will be reduced to a burned-out cinder. Your choice is simple: join us and live in peace, or pursue your present course and face obliteration. We shall be waiting for your answer. The decision rests with you. ("Memorable Quotes for *The Day the Earth Stood Still*")

The classic 1951 film *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, which placed fifth on the American Film Institute's list of top ten science fiction films and was remade in 2008, is a model example of the sf subgenre of the first-contact story. It also utilizes a number of the science fiction tactics typical of literary science fiction, specifically presenting what I've called a transcendent outsider figure (the alien Klaatu), who can defamiliarize human behavior and society by providing an outside perspective on us (what I've called a "mirror") and by embodying an alternate approach which can serve as a foil for elements of human nature and society. In addition to serving as a typical science fiction transcendent outsider, Klaatu and his experiences on earth also serve as a very overt echo of the Christian narrative of Christ, for which the film can be seen as an allegory. At the same time, *Day* also carries out the kind of theological speculation I've discussed, depicting and endorsing a traditional idea of God as a distant anthropomorphized figure who functions as a strict judge, but indirectly revealing problems with the theology and morality of such an approach.

The core of the film is Klaatu's examinations of and comments on human politics, culture, and behavior from the position of a superior transcendent outsider. His first interaction with humans in an early scene foreshadows his main criticism of human behavior and previews many of the problems that this encounter will produce. Klaatu, who is very tall, emerges from his ship and says, "We have come to visit you in peace, and with good will" before taking out a device seeming to resemble a *Star Wars* light saber. When spikes suddenly protrude from it, one soldier, thinking the device a weapon, shoots it out of Klaatu's hand, injuring the alien and destroying the device. A large robot we later learn is called "Gort" emerges from the ship and shoots out a beam which causes the guns and tanks to disappear. "It was a gift for your president—with this he could have studied life on the other planets," Klaatu explains when he rises. His statement of peaceful intentions and his attempt to give us a gift of knowledge meet with suspicion and violence, human traits Klaatu will continue to criticize as the film progresses. This scene illustrates, in short form, our core problem (according to Klaatu and the film).

Very much like the superior alien figures in other works and transcendent outsider figures in general, Klaatu makes sweeping criticisms of our practices and ideas. One of the primary areas he evaluates and criticizes is human politics, especially our national divisions. Speaking to the president's secretary about meeting with leaders of all earth nations at once, Klaatu explains, "This is not a personal matter, Mr. Harley; it concerns all the people on your planet." Klaatu apparently opposes the concept of nationalism, viewing such divisions, and the way they hinder even the simple cooperation he is requesting, as backwards and foolish. Harley suggests a meeting of all nations would not be possible, explaining, "Our world at the moment is full of tensions and suspicions." "What about your United Nations?" Klaatu asks, explaining, "We've been monitoring your radio broadcasts for a good many years." Klaatu's frustrations with human nationalism emerge again when his efforts to initiate a meeting of national leaders fail (each will only attend the meeting if it is in his/her own country). "I will not speak with any one nation or group of nations. I don't intend to add my contribution to your childish jealousies and superstitions," he complains.

A good part of the film is concerned with Klaatu's examination of humanity, which, while conducted with pleasant curiosity, is ultimately revealed to be the kind of assessment we would expect to find in stories about a judgmental God or gods. "Before making any decisions," Klaatu explains, "I think I should get out among your people and become familiar with the basis for these strange, unreasoning attitudes." Klaatu's journey outside the confines of the hospital in an attempt to understand the reasons for humanity's frustrating behaviors thus functions in a fairly conventional way, allowing this transcendent outsider to defamiliarize human nature and customs through his outside perspective and by comparison, direct or implied, to his own society. To do this, Klaatu takes on a human identity, not by changing his shape in any way, since aside from his health, he is apparently humanoid, but by adopting the garb of the typical man and altering his exotic name. In the next scene, we see him walking down the street wearing a perfect suit and briefcase. His human name, we learn, is "Carpenter," which aside from being extremely inconspicuous, is also mildly suggestive of Jesus, whose profession as a humble carpenter is often stressed.

Klaatu's primary problem with humanity, and ultimately the one about which he has come to warn us, is our tendency towards violence, destruction, and war. This is especially evident in a sequence in which he volunteers to watch Bobby, a young child and fellow boarder whose father, we learn when the two visit Arlington Cemetery, died during World War II. Looking at his gravestone and then the seemingly endless field of others, Klaatu/Carpenter asks Bobby, "Did all those people die in wars?" When Bobby asks Carpenter if they have cemeteries where he is from as well, he replies, "They have cemeteries, but not like this one. You see, they don't have any wars." "Gee, that's a good idea," says Bobby. Part of the point is of course that the harmful consequences of war, and the superiority of a society that moves past it, is obvious even to a young child (though in this case a child who, though very young, has already suffered the cost of war by being deprived of one of his parents). This is obviously fairly standard science fiction defamiliarization: the idea that great numbers of people would have died in conflicts between different groups of humans is so normal to us it hardly registers as an oddity—Klaatu's naïve questioning about it and his presentation of his own, very different culture enable us to see this anew and to reconsider what we probably typically dismiss as utopian: the idea that there could be another way.

Another strand of criticism suggested by the film throughout has to do with our tendency towards acting on fear and suspicion rather than rationality. This charge is voiced primarily by

Klaatu in a scene, in which, ironically, he is asked by a reporter what he thinks about the alien ship. When a reporter says, “I suppose you’re just as scared as the rest of us,” the outsider replies, “In a different way, perhaps. I am fearful when I see people substituting fear for reason.” Sensing a subject breaking from the predetermined narrative into which he hopes to squeeze events, the reporter cuts him off with fake politeness: “Thank you, Mr. Carpenter—thank you very much.” Klaatu’s comment and the reporter’s reaction, in addition to remaining extremely relevant to contemporary criticisms of the mainstream media for excluding perspectives which do not fit into its predetermined narrative, implies our unwillingness to listen to the truth or to unexpected opinions—and our hostility towards outsiders (and each other) when we are afraid and uncertain. This idea that we avoid the truth and act out of emotion and prejudice rather than rationality, is another fairly standard observation of transcendent outsider figures, voiced often in *Gulliver’s Travels*, for example, and by Neale Donald Walsch’s “God.”

Like Prot in the film *K-Pax*, who praises Buddha and Christ for transcending “eye for an eye” thinking, Klaatu is impressed by the level of enlightenment of *some* humans—though the prime example is a human of the past. Reading a quote at the Lincoln Memorial, he says, “Those are great words—he must have been a great man [...] That’s the kind of man I’d like to talk to—Bobby, who’s the greatest man in America today?” The more enlightened humans with whom it might be possible to communicate and among whom truth and cooperation are valued (and trump suspicion and nationalism), Klaatu quickly discovers, are members of the scientific community. The person Bobby suggests and whom they visit next is Professor Barnhardt. In stark contrast to the president’s secretary, who tells Klaatu that political leaders will never gather in the same place, Barnhardt has little trouble bringing together an international community of scientists, and Klaatu decides to convey his message to them instead.

In addition to serving as a typical science fiction transcendent outsider, Klaatu, and his experiences on earth, also serve as a very overt echo of the Christian narrative of Christ, for which the film has been seen as an allegory. The most obvious parallel is obviously Klaatu’s human name “Carpenter,” which suggests fairly explicitly Jesus’ profession. A less obvious parallel is his apparent dual nature as a being both strikingly similar to and superior to us. In form, he is apparently completely humanoid: nothing is ever said about any true physiological difference; the film does not deal at all with the thread in many of the other first-contact stories of overcoming alien difference, and we are never told that, as in *Contact* and *Starman*, the alien figure has taken human form to facilitate interaction. And yet one brief exchange emphasizes Klaatu’s superiority. When he is hospitalized for injuries sustained during the initial encounter, the doctors seem to see little difference, physiologically, between Klaatu and an ordinary human—except that this seemingly 35-year old alien is in his seventies and says the average life expectancy for his race is 130. In addition, Klaatu apparently heals more quickly than a human would: thanks to a balm he has with him, his bullet wound heals in a day. Discussing his interaction with the alien, one doctor observes, “He was very nice about it, but he made me feel like a third class witch doctor.” Another is similarly discouraged and jokes about giving up.

Klaatu is also revealed to have seemingly magical powers over life and death. In a plot twist we will later see echoed in John Carpenter’s *Starman*, humans respond to the peaceful alien figure with thoughtless violence and persecution, shooting Klaatu (in an earlier scene, a military leader already said they want him dead or alive and are now less concerned which). At one point, a military officer confirms that Klaatu is dead. But the robot Gort brings his body back to the ship (like Christ being buried in a tomb), where we see that Professor Barnhardt’s group of scientists has gathered for the meeting planned earlier. He says the army gave him permission

for it, meaning the military has apparently used it as a trap (if science comes off the best in this film, the military and politics come off the worst). The machine inside the ship seems to bring Klaatu back to life. He rises to greet Helen, who has come to find him, and says “Hello,” but still has prominent bloodstain on his jacket.

Very likely because the allegory here becomes the most explicit, when Klaatu is most obviously like Jesus in the Christian narrative (returned to life with his wound still visible, appearing only to a woman), Klaatu gives a strangely unclear answer to Helene’s question and makes an unexpected, ambiguous reference to God. Helen says she thought he was dead; he says he was, and she asks, “You mean, he has the power of life and death?”, which leads to this exchange: “No, that power is reserved to the almighty spirit. This technique, in some cases, can restore life for a limited period.” “But, how long?” “You mean how long will I live? That no one can tell.” First, Klaatu’s answer about what power the ship has and whether or not he has been restored, etc, is oddly confusing. It doesn’t have power over life and death, yet it has apparently restored him to life. He says it is only for a limited period, but then is rather unclear about how long that limited period is—seeming to suggest it is unknowable. Second, the film seems to go out of its way to differentiate here between this god-like alien figure and God. Perhaps this line is here precisely to protect the film against potential charges of featuring a replacement God. It is interesting, of course, that at the exact moment the film’s Christian allegory angle becomes most clear and Klaatu’s Christ-figure status most overt, the film also has to back away a bit from the idea—though it does so in a confused and awkward manner.

What is most interesting about *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is that, with its presentation of the combination of Klaatu and Gort, it can be seen as exploring and seemingly endorsing a fairly traditional God-as-anthropomorphized-judge theological model. But at the same time, by breaking that model down into two separate figures, the film also (probably indirectly) exposes both some of the contradictions between the different roles occupied by such a God figure and the dubious value of moral improvement brought about by the threat of destruction. In the context of the Christian allegory element, the film can be seen as reflecting the divide some have historically observed between the punishing God of the Old Testament and the more loving Jesus of the New—and even, in some cases, between the parts of the New Testament which emphasize love and forgiveness and those which stress judgment and hellfire as punishment for sinners.

In part, on the surface, the film depicts and endorses the kind of judgmental, punishing God-figure outlined earlier. Even the initial scene establishes a number of the godly functions Klaatu will serve. He is a superior being descending from on high, bringing with him advanced knowledge we assume he hopes will bring about human improvements. One may be reminded of the *Old Testament* story of Moses returning from the mountain with God’s commandments. And yet the emergence of the robot Gort and its striking demonstration of power (it only vaporizes weaponry in this scene, but one cannot help but wonder if it can do the same, or worse, to people themselves if so commanded) also suggests the possibility of a godly level of destruction as enforcement or punishment.

Much as a traditional God is often portrayed as monitoring our thoughts and behaviors from afar (even while we are unaware), Klaatu admits, when asked how he knows about the United Nations, “We’ve been monitoring your radio broadcasts for a good many years.” We’ll find a similar scenario in *Contact*, in which the aliens who contact us have also followed our progress (and lack of it) through radio broadcasts. At one point in Sagan’s novel, the alien figure Ellie encounters tells her that alien observers found a broadcast of Hitler broadcast “alarming” (Sagan 359). A key difference, and one which reflects the different approach in a larger sense, is

that while in *Contact* the aliens send us a message instructing us in how to build a machine to reach them, in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, the alien figure comes directly to us. It is not so much a matter of us being ready to “graduate,” as Ellie often sees the experience in Sagan’s novel, but rather of our violent tendencies spreading beyond our own borders. Thus, Klaatu has arrived, essentially, to check or threaten misbehaving children—not to reward the progress of ones who have succeeded.

Like a judgmental deity out of The Old Testament or ancient Greek or Eastern myth, Klatuu levels sharp criticisms and supports them with considerable threats. As I’ve noted, he is especially critical of our tendency toward nationalism and divisions. “I intend to explain, to all your nations, at the same time,” he says, dismissing our nations’ suspicions of each other and interest in making sure meetings happen in specific countries as “your petty squabbles.” When Harley repeats the idea that the leaders would not all sit down together, Klaatu respond, “I don’t want to resort to threats, Mr. Harley. I merely tell you that the future of your planet is at stake. I urge that you transmit that message to the nations of the Earth.” Clearly, Klaatu is functioning as more of a force of judgment and punishment. His role appears to include judging and critiquing as well as threatening and punishing, which makes him closer to more traditional kinds of God or gods and less like the more hands-off, nurturing New Age alien gods of later works. If those aliens are content to lead humans slowly, Klaatu wants us to change right now or else, as one exchange shows:

“Our problems are very complex, Klaatu—you mustn’t judge us too harshly.” “I can judge only by what I see.” “Your impatience is quite understandable.” “I’m impatient with stupidity. My people have learned to live without it.” “My people haven’t—I am very sorry. I wish it were otherwise.”

Klaatu ultimately delivers a message that is also a form of judgment accompanied by a threat very similar to those issued by the God of The Old Testament or the gods of other mythologies, a threat which demands obedience or promises destruction. Klaatu first reveals his mission to Dr. Barnhard, revealing as well why his people are intervening now and, on a different level, what the apparent focus of the film actually is. “We know from scientific observation,” Klaatu explains, “that your planet has discovered a rudimentary kind of atomic energy. We also know that you’re experimenting with rockets. So long as you were limited to fighting among yourselves with your primitive tanks and aircraft, we were unconcerned. But soon one of your nations will apply atomic energy to spaceships. That will create a threat to the peace and security of other planets. That, of course, we cannot tolerate.” The apparent contradiction of affirming a peaceful way of life by threatening those who do not adhere to it with violence already begins to appear. “What exactly is the nature of your mission, Mr Klatuu?” Dr. Barnhard asks, seemingly for no reason aside from naturalizing more exposition. Klaatu answers, “I came here to warn you that by threatening danger, your planet faces danger—very grave danger. I am prepared, however, to offer a solution.” But again he says this must be said to all and not to one individual. The stakes for Klaatu’s judgment are presented as incredibly high. “You hold great hope for this meeting?” Helen asks Klaatu at one point. “I can see no other hope for your planet. If this meeting should fail, then I’m afraid there is no hope,” he responds. Later, when Tom, her suitor, tries to intervene, Helen tells him, “I’m not going to let you do it, Tom, this is the most important thing in the world.” Klaatu’s final speech, with which the film concludes, leaves the question open for answer in the real world outside of it:

[*last lines*]

Klaatu: I am leaving soon, and you will forgive me if I speak bluntly. The

universe grows smaller every day, and the threat of aggression by any group, anywhere, can no longer be tolerated. There must be security for all, or no one is secure. Now, this does not mean giving up any freedom, except the freedom to act irresponsibly. Your ancestors knew this when they made laws to govern themselves and hired policemen to enforce them. We, of the other planets, have long accepted this principle. We have an organization for the mutual protection of all planets and for the complete elimination of aggression. The test of any such higher authority is, of course, the police force that supports it. For our policemen, we created a race of robots. Their function is to patrol the planets in spaceships like this one and preserve the peace. In matters of aggression, we have given them absolute power over us. This power cannot be revoked. At the first sign of violence, they act automatically against the aggressor. The penalty for provoking their action is too terrible to risk. The result is, we live in peace, without arms or armies, secure in the knowledge that we are free from aggression and war. Free to pursue more... profitable enterprises. Now, we do not pretend to have achieved perfection, but we do have a system, and it works. I came here to give you these facts. It is no concern of ours how you run your own planet, but if you threaten to extend your violence, this Earth of yours will be reduced to a burned-out cinder. Your choice is simple: join us and live in peace, or pursue your present course and face obliteration. We shall be waiting for your answer. The decision rests with you. (“Memorable Quotes for *The Day the Earth Stood Still*”)

Klaatu’s speech, with its criticisms and threats, suggests an Old Testament model and echoes stories in which God or gods decide to punish humans for their sinfulness. Yet as Klaatu’s near-resurrection and discovery by a female figure, his arrival as a kind of messenger for a stronger force, his generally peaceful demeanor, and his human surname imply, Klaatu is also a kind of Christ-figure, a position which in some ways seems to be at odds with his tendency towards judgment and threats. It is not hard to miss the contradiction in his people’s apparent practice of enforcing peaceful and responsible behavior by threatening total annihilation of those who disobey, even if the story as Klaatu outlines it here separates out the peace and the enforcement, leaving the latter to the “race of robots” with “absolute power.”

And yet, in a sense, this contradiction is the same theological contradiction, or confusion, reflected in Christianity between the vicious God of The Old Testament and Jesus in the New, and, even simply within The New Testament, between the peaceful and enlightened recommendations of Jesus in some gospels and the fiery words of judgment and hellfire in others—a confusing divide puzzled over by Thomas Jefferson (who cut out New Testament passages he thought rang false); translator Steven Mitchell, whose *The Gospel According to Jesus* attempts to separate Jesus the spiritual teacher from the “Christ” he says is a creation of bible writers; Deepak Chopra in a book titled *The Third Jesus*; and most recently and controversially, fantasy writer Phillip Pullman, whose new book on the issue is provocatively titled *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*. If there is tension in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, then, it derives from the tension between the theological models the film depicts in translated form. As a result, the film partly serves as a depiction and exploration of theological ideas that aims to integrate the two, but also, read in a certain way, reveals the inconsistencies between the idea of a punishing God and threats of annihilation and a peaceful transcendent figure who stresses peace and rationality.

Significantly, in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, the alien figure's intentions for and assessment of us are never questioned—nor is his right to make such a judgment. Is there anything Klaatu merely misunderstands? Anything his own society, by becoming more “advanced,” has lost? Anything he notices about human behavior that is at least quaint and endearing, any ways our less advanced or enlightened lives are, if not as utopian, somehow possessed of a vitality or passion or excitement that others might not have? People fear Klaatu to an extreme and irrational degree, but no one seems to question his right to judge us, his right to bully or threaten us into a system we have not chosen but his people have. We can choose to join or choose to be destroyed. What is the value of the kind of peace his people have brought about, one might ask, if it is peace chosen primarily to avoid the wrath of a race of super-powered robots who punish all aggression with destruction? In *What God Wants*, spiritual writer Neale Donald Walsch articulates this problem:

Most people, except perhaps the most stubborn apologists, see the contradiction in all of this. They understand perfectly well that no people are truly free who face the most horrendous outcomes imaginable if they don't do what they're told. Only a hypocrite or a fool would call such a choice “free.” (Walsch 50).

When Aliens Do God's Dirty Work: The Theology of *The War of the Worlds*

Extraterrestrial visitors usually appear as either munificent mythic gods or nightmarish demons. (Kennedy and Gioia 987)

While religious mythology often presents god-figures as creators and as guides to morality, one need only recall *The Odyssey* or the godly floods and other punishments in *Gilgamesh* and The Old Testament to realize that it also often presents them as violent, destructive, even oppressive forces that use their powers to correct, punish, and humble humanity. In some cases, gods, like jealous, angry, or immature, people, merely lash out because they can. In some mythologies, the positive forces and negative forces may be divided up, one God, the other demons or some overtly evil force; in others the morality of the gods is more dubious and inconsistent, or both good and evil forces are presented as aspects of God. The function of such stories of divine destruction is typically to show humans, or even merely a particular individual, such as Gilgamesh or Odysseus, their place—to correct and punish human folly and arrogance. The human “crimes” can only be observed, and punished, by someone outside and above us, and so God/the gods step in. This is part of their role, one of their narrative functions. And it is another kind of spiritual/divine role frequently taken on, and thus explored and illuminated, by aliens as gods in science fiction.

One of the best examples of alien figures functioning as a punishing God in a narrative attempting to criticize human folly and arrogance is H. G. Well's *The War of the Worlds*, which Brian Stableford, in his history of scientific romance, calls “the ultimate future war story and the first of countless horror stories about alien invasions of our world” (63). *The Day the Earth Stood Still* presents Klaatu in the divine role of morally superior judge, diagnosing our flaws and threatening us with destruction if we don't improve, but does not actually present such destruction (the film leaves open the question of whether or not humanity can change course) and takes pains both to separate Klaatu from robot policeman Gort, onto whom the film essentially maps the punishing function of God, and to excuse/justify Gort's possible destruction

(Klaatu explains that they have given these robots complete power over them to ensure peace; humans, of course, have never really had a vote on the robot police issue). That the film needs to divide these divine functions up into two separate beings at some level illustrates the role conflict that exists in the traditional conception of God as both loving protector/guide and ruthless enforcer (in addition to, through the film's allegory, the conflict between the loving Jesus and the punishing Old Testament God). That Gort's strict enforcement must be justified with a significant excuse suggests an uncertainty about the idea of such destructive punishment coming from a figure who can decide whether or not to unleash it. *The War of the Worlds*, in which destruction is carried out and not merely threatened, can be seen partly as an echo of theological stories in which god figures decide humans are past all hope and actually carry out that threatened destruction, attempting to destroy much of humanity, in the process teaching us humility and giving us (or at least those humans that remain living) a kind of second chance to start over and be better. Like *Day*, Wells' novel on one hand appears to endorse the model of a traditional God as judge and protector, but on the other takes pains to separate this role from the actual God, again illuminating a sense of role conflict at the heart of this conception of divinity.

The invasion and colonization effort depicted in the novel functions, much like divine punishment in myths and theology, to chasten and correct Britain specifically, and humanity generally, for their many flaws—and to teach humility. Perhaps the central human failing which the invasion exposes, and for which it acts as a kind of divine punishment, is the arrogant human notion of ourselves as special, as masters of the earth, existing above every other form of life (and, more specifically, the similar assumption of the English that they are above those races and beings they deem “inferior”). Wells hammers this point home throughout the novel, defamiliarizing our power position with so many similar analogies and role reversal situations that (at least to the contemporary reader) it may at times border on self parody. The opening paragraph already repeats the idea twice, explaining the hard to believe fact that “as men busied themselves about their various concerns they were scrutinized and studied, perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinize the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water” (1). “With infinite complacency men went to and fro over this globe about their little affairs, serene in their assurance of their empire over matter. It is possible that the infusoria under the microscope do the same,” the narrator continues, then using the same comparison again: “minds that are to our minds as ours are to those of the beasts that perish” (1). A mere page later, he repeats, “And we men, the creatures who inhabit this earth, must be to them at least as alien and lowly as are the monkeys and lemurs to us”; earth, in the Martians' minds, is “crowded only with what they regard as inferior animals” (2). The narrator, whose role (revealed only near the end) as a philosophical writer makes him close to Wells himself and thus a kind of mouthpiece for the author, then notes,

And before we judge of them too harshly we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals, such as the vanished bison and the dodo, but upon its own inferior races. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit? (Wells 3).

The clear suggestion is that we *deserve* such behavior, that it is essentially just punishment, and given the scale perhaps a kind of divine retribution, for our wrongs. At the very least, the

narrator asks, how can we complain when we have done the same ourselves to animals and even other humans we've dubbed "inferior races"?

When, after the first alien attack, the narrator recovers a sense of comfort and normalcy at home, he describes his sentiments with a similar analogy: "So some respectable dodo in the Mauritius might have lorded it in his nest, and discussed the arrival of that shipful of pitiless sailors in want of animal food. 'We will peck them to death to-morrow, my dear'" (24). Later, when humans make an attempt to communicate via "a man in a ditch with a flag on a long pole," the narrator speculates that "The Martians took as much notice of such advances as we should of the lowing of a cow" (27). When the narrator observes one of the alien tripods and tries to figure it out, he says, "I began to compare the things to human machines, to ask myself for the first time in my life how an iron-clad or a steam-engine would seem to an intelligent lower animal" (38). Later, he observes, "But the Martian machine took no more notice for the moment of the people running this way and that than a man would of the confusion of ants in a nest against which his foot had kicked" (48). He returns to this exact same analogy, speculating about how the Martians must think:

No doubt the thought that was uppermost in a thousand of those vigilant minds, even as it was uppermost in mine, was the riddle—how much they understood of us. Did they grasp that we in our millions were organised, disciplined, working together? Or did they interpret our spurts of fire, the sudden stinging of our shells, our steady investment of their encampment, as we should the furious unanimity of onslaught in a disturbed hive of bees? (Wells 67)

Just a bit later, he says, "So, setting about it as methodically as men might smoke out a wasp's nest, the Martians spread this strange stifling vapour over the Londonward country" (70). After explaining how the Martians, instead of eating or digesting on their own, "Instead [...] took the fresh, living blood of other creatures, and injected it into their own veins," something the narrator admits he could not bear to continue watching, he notes, despite his horror at it, that, "The bare idea of this is no doubt horribly repulsive to us, but at the same time I think we should remember how repulsive our carnivorous habits would seem to an intelligent rabbit" (Wells 100).

The effect of such an analogy is twofold: First, the comparison to the rabbit helps us register exactly how horrible and small and weak a position it is in which humans find themselves, and thus increases the horror of the novel. Second, it asks us, instead of merely feeling bad for humanity's plight in the story, to consider how this is really no worse than what we do to animals—and to imagine if one could understand what we are doing to it. The human horror thus functions not merely as a device for excitement or terror, but as a pathway to empathy, essentially telling us, "This, you see, is what it is like for those we exploit." The narrator returns to the rabbit image later on, when he notices the scope of the Martian's takeover and observes,

I found about me the landscape, weird and lurid, of another planet.

For that moment I touched an emotion beyond the common range of men, yet one that the poor brutes we dominate know only too well. I felt as a rabbit might feel returning to his burrow and suddenly confronted by the work of a dozen busy navies digging the foundations of a house. I felt the first inkling of a thing that presently grew quite clear in my mind, that oppressed me for many days, a sense of dethronement, a persuasion that I was no longer a master, but an animal among animals, under the Martian heel. With us it would be as with them,

to lurk and to watch, to run and hide; the fear and empire of man had passed away. (Wells 116)

Later, the narrator translates this repeated analogy (the Martians are to us as we are to animals) directly into a message. After uttering real prayers and “pleading steadfastly and sanely, face to face with the darkness of God,” he says that he “crept out of the house like a rat leaving its hiding-place—a creature scarcely larger, an inferior animal, a thing that for any passing whim of our masters might be hunted and killed” (Wells 120). “Perhaps they also prayed confidently to God,” he continues; “Surely, if we have learned nothing else, this war has taught us pity—pity for those witless souls that suffer our dominion” (120). Thus the novum of alien invasion has defamiliarized our own domination of other races and beings by revealing its true horror.

Wells’ narrator is not the only person to characterize the situation through this same defamiliarizing analogy. Telling the narrator that “We’re down; we’re beat,” the artilleryman explains,

“This isn’t a war [...] It never was a war, any more than there’s a war between men and ants. [...] And even if there’s a delay, how can it alter the end? It’s just men and ants. There’s the ants builds their cities, live their lives, have wars, revolutions, until the men want them out of the way, and then they get out of the way. That’s what we are now—just ants. Only [...] We’re eatable ants.” (Wells 122-123)

The effect of this is to humble humanity—to take us down a notch. This is part of the role of the other alien gods we have discussed, though in those works humans are humbled and frightened by the *capability* of such aliens (and mostly imagine the dangers themselves) and by what the alien figures show or tell them. And it is clearly part of the role of God/gods in conceptions which emphasize fear and awe and obedience and which involve brutal punishment.

This humbling effect of the aliens’ arrival is amplified when they first attack with their heat ray. The description of the ray itself, a weapon of light and fire, also suggests parallels to forms of divine punishment:

Suddenly there was a flash of light, and a quantity of luminous greenish smoke came out of the pit in three distinct puffs [...]

[...]

Forthwith flashes of actual flame, a bright glare leaping from one to another, sprang from the scattered group of men. It was as if some invisible jet impinged upon them and flashed into white flame. It was as if each man were suddenly and momentarily turned to fire.

[...]

I stood staring, not as yet realizing that this was death leaping from man to man in that little distant crowd. All I felt was that it was something very strange. An almost noiseless and blinding flash of light, and a man fell headlong and lay still [...]

It was sweeping round swiftly and steadily, this flaming death, this invisible, inevitable sword of heat [...]

All this had happened with such swiftness that I had stood motionless, dumbfounded and dazzled by the flashes of light. Had that death swept through a full circle, it must inevitably have slain me in my surprise. But it passed me and spared me, and left the night about me suddenly dark and unfamiliar. (Wells 17)

The aliens' weapon, its elemental powers as light and flame, its movement from person to person as "death leaping from man to man [...] this flaming death, this invisible, inevitable sword of heat" suggest something supernatural, a kind of godly punishment. The weapon is, in the narrator's description, not a mere weapon, but death itself. And the narrator is, in a less obvious or positive way than other characters in the godly alien encounters we will discuss, chosen or saved.

The result of this God-like attack is, for the narrator, humbling. Afterward, he says,
 It came to me that I was upon this dark common, helpless, unprotected,
 and alone. Suddenly, like a thing falling upon me from without, came—fear.
 [...]

The fear I felt was no rational fear, but a panic terror not only of the Martians, but of the dusk and stillness all about me. Such an extraordinary effect in unmanning me it had that I ran weeping silently as a child might do. Once I had turned, I did not dare to look back.

I remember I felt an extraordinary persuasion that I was being played with, that presently, when I was upon the very verge of safety, this mysterious death—as swift as the passage of light—would leap after me from the pit about the cylinder and strike me down. (18)

Interestingly, in a sense, this feeling small, this fragility, the way in which a human begins to think of himself as a child, is similar to the feelings experienced by Ellie in *Contact* and to the feelings of other characters in stories of more positive encounters with alien beings.

The invasion also serves to expose, critique, and brutally punish two other, related human/British failings—tendencies toward parochialism and complacency. Early on, the narrator notes that "Few of the common people in England had anything but the vaguest astronomical ideas in those days" and that "'Extra-terrestrial' had no meaning for most of the onlookers" (Wells 10). This parochial ignorance of the outside world is matched by a form of complacency, highlighted by one particular incident in which the narrator finds soldiers are having trouble convincing a group of people of their danger:

We saw one shriveled old fellow with a huge box and a score or more of flower-pots containing orchids, angrily expostulating with the corporal who would leave them behind. I stopped and gripped his arm.

"Do you know what's over there?" I said, pointing at the pine-tops that hid the Martians.

"Eh?" said he, turning. "I was explainin' these is vallyble."

"Death!" I shouted. "Death is coming! Death!" and leaving him to digest that if he could, I hurried on after the artillery-man. At the corner I looked back. The soldier had left him, and he was still standing by his box, with the pots of orchids on the lid of it, and staring vaguely over the trees. (Wells 45)

Ironically, the narrator and many others initially assume the first capsule contains some kind of message and that the aliens are, perhaps like those in *Contact*, trying to communicate. The narrator says he "still believed that there were men in Mars" and that "My mind ran fancifully on the possibilities of its containing manuscript, on the difficulties in translation that might arise"; an early edition headline reads "'A MESSAGE RECEIVED FROM MARS.' 'REMARKABLE STORY FROM WOKING'" (Wells 10-11). Similarly, the narrator's neighbor comments, "'It's a pity they make themselves so unapproachable [...] It would be curious to know how they live on another planet; we might learn a thing or two'" (27). Of course humans

do indeed learn more than a thing or two from the Martians, but from their violent invasion and colonization rather than from any efforts at peaceful communication.

One exchange in particular, between the narrator and the curate, lays bare the way that the aliens can be seen as punishing gods, while also marking out a possible in-between role for alien figures as, in the loosest sense, messengers from the divine. As we will see in a number of works, the portrayal of aliens in god-roles sometimes takes a shift or becomes more specific by revealing or suggesting that the aliens, while above us, are actually themselves beneath some divine force—and in some cases serving as a bridge of sorts between the two. One of the ways that such science fiction and fantasy works function similarly to myth and theology is in their creation of imagined hierarchies to contextualize and explain human life. Divine punishment is in fact exactly what the curate sees when he attempts to interpret events. “What does it mean?” he asks; “What do these things mean?” (53). He continues, his questions going further and becoming more pointed, prompting the narrator to respond by asking the question that is really the core concern of the entire novel:

“Why are these things permitted? What sins have we done? The morning service was over, I was walking through the roads to clear my brain for the afternoon, and then—fire, earthquake, death! As if it were Sodom and Gomorrah! All our work undone, all the work—who are these Martians?”

“What are we?” I answered, clearing my throat.

[...]

“All the work—all the Sunday-schools—What have we done—what has Weybridge done? Everything gone—everything destroyed. The church! We rebuilt it only three years ago. Gone! —swept out of existence! Why?”

[...]

“What are we to do?” he asked. “Are these creatures everywhere? Has the earth been given over to them?”

[...]

“Only this morning I officiated at early celebration—”

“Things have changed,” I said quietly. “You must keep your head. There is still hope.”

“This must be the beginning of the end,” he said, interrupting me. “The end! The great and terrible day of the Lord! When men shall call upon the mountains and the rocks to fall upon them and hide them—hide them from the face of Him that sitteth upon the throne!”

[...]

“Be a man!” said I. “You are scared out of your wits! What good is religion if it collapses under calamity? Think of what earthquakes and floods, wars and volcanoes, have done before to men! Do you think God has exempted Weybridge? He is not an insurance agent.” (Wells 53-54).

When the narrator tells him that he saw one of the aliens killed, the curate is shocked: “‘Killed!’ he said, staring about him. ‘How can God’s ministers be killed?’” (Wells 55).

We are surely not intended to take the curate’s interpretation (or the curate himself) seriously. It seems clear his harsh characterization is intended by Wells to dramatize the failures of a certain approach to religion in an actual existential crisis. Seemingly voicing Wells’ own questions, the narrator explicitly asks the curate, “What good is religion if it collapses under calamity?” and notes that God “is not an insurance agent” (54). Yet Wells’ novel clearly does

intend the attack to function as a kind of corrective for human failure/sins—the narrator constantly hammers this home, and at the end, suggests it works—we do change for the better. So while on one hand, Wells' narrator mocks the curate's notion of the aliens as God's messengers, sent to punish the sins of humanity, the novel itself adheres to a similar structure, presenting human failings; punishment of a kind by an extremely powerful, seemingly near-divine transcendent outsider; and after the attack has ended, the possibility of human moral and spiritual growth and development.

Complicating this situation, especially the idea mentioned a moment ago of the aliens in this novel and some other stories functioning as beings between humans and God in a kind of hierarchy, is the nature of the aliens themselves and Wells' intentions in presenting them. In a number of senses, they are intended to be highly advanced beings and more specifically, a glimpse into where evolution might take us. The narrator says of a satirical piece in *Punch* which apparently proposed that as evolution continues, only the brain and the hand would remain,

There is many a true word written in jest, and here in the Martians we have beyond dispute the actual accomplishment of such a suppression of the animal side of the organism by the intelligence. To me it is quite credible that the Martians may be descended from beings not unlike ourselves, by a gradual development of brains and hands (the latter giving rise to the two bunches of delicate tentacles at last) at the expense of the rest of the body. Without the body the brain would, of course, become a mere selfish intelligence, without any of the emotional substratum of the human being. (Wells 102)

While the aliens here have evolved in intelligence, it is apparently a completely cold intelligence—and involves no moral or spiritual advances (seemingly) of the kind exemplified by the more overtly spiritual alien figures of other works. In fact, the extra-terrestrials are in this sense more comparable to destruction-focused aliens in the *Aliens* series, in *Signs*, and in *Independence Day*, the last of which, when asked what it wants, merely says, “Kill.”

While the aliens in *The War of the Worlds* carry out some of the roles of God and gods, a traditional God is brought in as well to save us from the aliens. In a sense, Wells splits the central godly role, mapping the destructive, punishing functions onto the Martians, and the saving, protective, all-will-be-better-part onto the actual God. This has the effect of making *The War of the Worlds* a more pleasing rewriting of stories of divine punishment, in which we are to believe that one God goes from such destructive punishment to a promise never to do the same again, or something close to the flood story of *Gilgamesh*, in which Ea attempts to save humans while other gods seek our destruction. Seeing the dead Martians returns the narrator's thoughts to God. In the film *Signs*, humans are protected by God (the Hess family, which stands in for the American family, by their belief in communications from God; everyone else to a lesser degree by the aliens' allergy to water); in Wells' novel, the humans are protected by God, seemingly, but, in a more scientific twist, by the scientific structures God has put into place on earth:

a dozen of them stark and silent and laid in a row, were the Martians—dead!—slain by the putrefactive and disease bacteria against which their systems were unprepared; slain as the weed was being slain; slain, after all man's devices had failed, by the humblest things that God, in his wisdom, has put upon this earth. (Wells 136)

The feeling is that humans have been saved from destruction by a number of forces—by the intention of God, which the narrator seems to use, despite the personalizing language, in a not

especially religious way; by the science of natural selection; and, finally, by our own efforts, which he suggests have bought us the right to this place:

But by virtue of this natural selection of our kind we have developed resisting power [...] By the toll of a million deaths man has bought the birthright of the earth, and it is his against all comers; it would still be his were the Martians ten times as mighty as they are. For neither do men live nor die in vain. (Wells 136)

There are religious overtones to this ending, and overtones which emphasize a distinction between the alien destroyers and the God who has seemingly saved humanity (at least in the eyes of the narrator):

Whatever destruction was done, the hand of the destroyer was stayed [...] At the thought I extended my hands toward the sky and began thanking God. In a year, thought I—in a year....

With overwhelming force came the thought of myself, of my wife, and the old life of hope and tender helpfulness that had ceased for ever. (Wells 138)

Wells does not really have the narrator take this very far; if the narrator accepts that God has saved them, does he also accept that curate's view that the alien attack somehow serves as God's vengeance or punishment—especially since he clearly accepts that we have learned lessons from it? Shifting the focus to a traditional God as it does, the ending does not erase the sense in which, for most of the novel, the alien figures have functioned in the same manner (and to accomplish the same literary purpose) as a vengeful God. If anything, the novel, in this way like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and the films discussed in chapter one, illuminates a kind of role conflict present in this theological conception. Wells' novel seemingly affirms the value of destructive punishment as a spur for human moral and spiritual improvement, but maps the punishment part onto the alien figures, leaving God only the role of protector.

The brutal invasion in *The War of the Worlds*, as well as all of the destruction and panic it causes, also provides a benefit: giving us a chance to start anew and thus creating the same kind of new hope and possibility that typically emerges in myths/theological stories after God/gods have punished humanity (and the kind of utopian new hope that emerges in the apocalyptic genre generally). At the end of the novel, we see the emergence of forms of moral and spiritual improvement whose emergence is a direct result of humanity's interaction with the aliens—or, we might say, a result of this near-divine punishment.

The first stages of this moral/spiritual evolution are evident throughout the novel. The violent invasion of Wells' aliens reveals practically as much about humanity as the verbal critiques of more peaceful, talkative transcendent outsiders in other works. Wells' narrator discusses the "lessons" of the experience quite overtly throughout, especially near the end. Humans have learned the folly of their complacency and parochialism, traits the novel reveals to be especially common among the British people. "We have learned now that we cannot regard this planet as being fenced in and a secure abiding-place for Man; we can never anticipate the unseen good or evil that may come upon us suddenly out of space," Wells' narrator tells us (144). "The broadening of men's views that has resulted can scarcely be exaggerated. Before the cylinder fell there was a general persuasion that through all the deep of space no life existed beyond the petty surface of our minute sphere. Now we see further," he continues (144). Humanity can no longer think of itself as central, special, entitled. In fact, perhaps the largest lesson of the experience would appear to be humility, a lesson we will find echoed in the far different alien/human encounter of Sagan's *Contact*:

It may be that in the larger design of the universe this invasion from Mars is not without its ultimate benefits for men; it has robbed us of that serene confidence in the future which is the most fruitful source of decadence, the gifts of human science it has brought are enormous, and it has done much to promote the conception of the commonweal of mankind. (Wells 144)

The narrator's feeling afterward, at one point, is strangely spiritual. Describing himself as "a man of exceptional moods," he says, "At times I suffer from the strangest sense of detachment from myself and the world about me; I seem to watch it all from the outside, from somewhere inconceivably remote, out of time, out of space, out of the stress and tragedy of it all. This feeling was very strong upon me that night" (22).

One of the more noticeable ways in which the alien invasion functions as a kind of spiritual catalyst, a cleansing-by-fire punishment of humanity that ultimately leads to our improvement, is in the way it produces changes, and seemingly improvements, in the morality and enlightenment of people. The benefits are many. According to Wells' narrator, humanity has lost much of its arrogance and parochialism:

At any rate, whether we expect another invasion or not, our views of the human future must be greatly modified by these events. We have learned now that we cannot regard this planet as being fenced in and a secure abiding-place for Man; we can never anticipate the unseen good or evil that may come upon us suddenly out of space. It may be that in the larger design of the universe this invasion from Mars is not without its ultimate benefit for men; it has robbed us of that serene confidence in the future which is the most fruitful source of decadence, the gifts to human science it has brought are enormous [...] (198)

Wells' narrator gives perhaps the more interesting moral element of what humanity has learned surprisingly short shrift, when one considers how much of the novel seems intended to expose the evils of empire and human mistreatment of animals. Have our attitudes on any of those points changed? We don't really find out, though the narrator does tell us vaguely that "it has done much to promote the conception of the commonweal of mankind," which we can imagine to be, at least potentially, somewhat similar to the "one earth" philosophy that develops in Sagan's *Contact*—there as a result of beneficent first contact with superior (morally as well as militarily) aliens.

Almost paradoxically, another product of the experience is a greater sense of confidence and broader sense of possibilities in terms of human technological exploration, a sense which is, we might note, also tinged with an acceptance of what we might eventually have to do to survive:

The broadening of men's views that has resulted can scarcely be exaggerated. Before the cylinder fell there was a general persuasion that through all the deep of space no life existed beyond the petty surface of our minute sphere. Now we see further. If the Martians can reach Venus, there is no reason to suppose that the thing is impossible for men, and when the slow cooling of the sun makes this earth uninhabitable, as at last it must do, it may be that the thread of life that has begun here will have streamed out and caught our sister planet within its toils. (Wells 145)

Like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *The War of the Worlds*, “Decency,” a direct and (as the moralistic titles implies) overtly didactic first contact story by Robert Reed from 1996, also places alien figures in somewhat traditional God-roles as moral judges. This time, however, the alien gods neither speechify about human failings en masse nor bring about catastrophic, seemingly divine destruction. Instead, they function as moral judges by choosing one man to join them on a cosmic journey with rewards that appear very close to immortality and a heavenly afterlife. Marine guard protagonist Caleb interacts with the alien figures and comes to their attention partly because, like characters interpreting divine signs or messages, he is able to interpret their communications and understand signals others miss. The alien beings demonstrate godly powers in the rewards they provide Caleb for his good deeds and, by choosing him from among the entire population, serve as moral judges who, from a transcendent position, endorse certain human values as superior to others. While *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *The War of the Worlds* raised, sometimes indirectly, interesting questions about contradictory divine roles and the moral value of divine punishment, “Decency” asks what values and attributes a godlike alien would prefer and, in the answers it provides, presents a troubling and contradictory dismissal of rationality, creativity, and intellect in favor of the title virtue.

In Reed’s story, Caleb performs the merciful act that earns him the aliens’ approval (and, for the next twenty years of his life, rejections of many kinds by humanity), partly because he is able to interpret a kind of communication or sign: he is the only one who correctly understands the downed alien’s cry, what Reed’s narrator initially describes as “a clear, strong, and pitiful wail that was heard in a billion homes. A horrible piercing wail. The scream of a soul in perfect agony” (Reed 219). Caleb understands intuitively something others around him do not. Even from his position guarding the security perimeter surrounding “*The bug*, as he dubbed it, without a shred of originality,” Caleb is somehow sensitive to the meaning of its cry, receptive to a kind of communication others miss:

Despite the constant drone of moving air, Caleb could hear the bug now and again. A wail, a whimper. Then another, deeper wail. Just for a moment, the sound caused him to turn his head, listening now, feeling something that he couldn’t quite name, something without a clear source. An emotion, liquid and intense, made him pay attention. But then the bug fell silent, or at least it was quieter than the man-made wind, and the guard was left feeling empty, a little cold, confused and secretly embarrassed. (Reed 220)

When he is brought into the alien’s presence by Dr. Hilton (“She was one of the nation’s top surgeons, although he didn’t know or particularly care,” the narrator tells us), who assumes he is simply curious about the alien like everyone else, he hears it wail again and seems to feel a kind of empathetic connection no one else does: “Caleb stopped in midstride, his breath coming up short, a bolt of electricity making his spine straighten up and his face reflexively twist, as if in agony” (Reed 220, 221). Hilton, who apparently does not have the same reaction, is confused: “Turning, showing the oddest half-grin, Dr. Hilton inquired, ‘Is something wrong?’” (Reed 221). Coming closer to the alien, Caleb hears more and again reacts:

Now and again, at unpredictable moments, the bug would roar, and again Caleb would pause, feeling a little ill for that terrible moment when the air itself seemed to rip apart. Then just as suddenly there was silence, save for the clicking machines and hushed, respectful voices. (Reed 221)

When he is finally in its presence, “and once more that gruesome critter” gives “a big roar...!” Caleb knows what it is saying and what questions to ask:

“It’s in pain,” Caleb muttered afterward.

The doctor looked at him, then away. “Are you sure?”

What a strange response. Of course it was in pain. He searched for the usual trappings of hospitals and illness. Where were the dangling bags of medicine and food? Are you giving it morphine?” he asked, fully expecting to be told, “Of course.”

But instead Hilton said, “Why? Why morphine?”

As if speaking to an idiot, Caleb said each word with care. “In order to stop the pain, naturally.” (Reed 223).

Caleb asks a series of questions which demonstrate his sharp mind and military experience, show Hilton’s knowledge of the science of the situation, and, in the style of much traditional science fiction, function to naturalize a great deal of scientific exposition. Their exchange ends with Hilton’s admission that they don’t know how the alien is feeling (they rely on evidence, and there is none) and Caleb receiving all the information he needs to know to act:

“[...] We can’t measure its moods, or how it feels. Empirical evidence is lacking—”

As if to debate the point, the alien screamed again. The eyes kept shaking afterward, the closing mouth making a low wet sound. Watching the eyes, Caleb asked, “Do you think it means, ‘Hi, how are you?’”

Hilton didn’t respond. She didn’t have time.

Again the alien’s mouth opened, black eyes rippling as the air was torn apart; and Caleb, hands to his ears and undistracted by nasty gray abstractions, knew exactly what the horrible noise meant.

Before Hilton can stop him, Caleb fires a shot near the alien’s brain and then, seemingly with the alien’s help, fires the remainder of his clip into the brain: “Two bullets managed to do what bits of relativistic dust couldn’t, devastating a mind older than civilization. And the eyes, never human yet obviously full of intelligence, stared up at the tent’s high ceiling, in thanks, perhaps, seeing whatever it is that only the doomed can see” (Reed 226). Throughout, clearly, Caleb is the only one to intuit and understand the alien’s feelings and desires. Only he can tell it is crying in pain; only he knows that it wants to be put out of its misery.

Much like the alien gods in other works, the extraterrestrials of “Decency” demonstrate powers typically attributed to divine figures; however, in Reed’s story, the alien figures demonstrate godly powers less through their own strength or their ability to punish humanity but rather through their capability to reward. To that end, the aliens of “Decency” appear to be endowed with almost miraculous powers of healing and enhancement, powers which Caleb, as their chosen figure, will receive. Hilton, once again naturalizing exposition, explains to Caleb what being chosen by the aliens means:

“You’re going to be young again.” Hilton said the words as if delivering a curse. “It’ll take her some time to learn our genetics, but she’s promised me that she can reverse the aging process. A twenty-year old body again.”

[...]

“As for being smart,” she said, “don’t worry. She’s going to tease your neurons into dividing, like inside a baby’s head. By the time you leave us, you’ll be in the top ninety-nine percentile among humans. And as creative as can be.” (Reed 229-230).

Caleb's youth will be restored, and qualities he has never even possessed will be added. In an echo of New Age/contemporary spirituality's vision of people's existences in the afterlife, which often include the ideas that one will become a kind of ideal version of oneself, and that normal human limitations will be transcended, the aliens will be able to turn Caleb into a super-powered, idealized version of himself. As if restored youth and perfected intelligence and creativity are not enough, they will also provide Caleb with a seemingly eternal life (or something close to it) and a vast adventure of exploration comparable to that promised believers in spiritual NDE's and the theology of New Age writers like Neal Donald Walsch. Hilton explains: "I would do anything—almost—for the chance to go where you're going. To live for aeons, to see all those wondrous places!" (Reed 230). As a reward for or recognition of his morality and independence, Caleb is chosen, or, in a sense, "saved", and given his youth, enormous enhancements to core aspects of his identity, a chance to live for a vast amount of time, and an opportunity to take part in an unimaginably vast adventure of exploration. The alien figures, though strikingly mortal and vulnerable in the earlier portion of the story, are here revealed to have miraculous powers and to operate in ways very similar to more overtly religious or spiritual figures, rewarding moral behavior or enlightenment with an unimaginably wonderful experience, in that sense combining both very traditional and more new age spiritual visions.

In addition to providing super powers and a seemingly eternal life of travel and exploration, like the aliens in *Day and War*, those in "Decency" also function as godlike judges, endorsing certain human values and critiquing others. In Reed's story, however, they do this through their choice of Caleb, implying that his values are the most important and, similarly, that whatever he lacks is inessential or unimportant. Through their choice of Caleb, the aliens weigh in as transcendent moral judges as clearly as others we've discussed do through speeches or destructive punishment. Since Reed's story is, as the unironic title implies, a very overtly didactic one, it is explicit about why Caleb has been chosen and what makes him special. In addition to being explicit about what is special about Caleb, the story is clear that he does not understand it himself—that he is humble and unassuming. Alone with Hilton, he asks, "with a soft, careful voice," "I don't understand. Why me?" (Reed 229). Serving once again as primarily a device to naturalize exposition, Hilton explains his selection:

"Why not you?" Hilton growled.

"I'm not smart. Or clever. Not compared to everyone else up here, I'm not."

She lifted her eyebrows, watching him.

"These aliens should pick a scientist. Someone who cares about stars and planets...." (Reed 229)

When Hilton tells him directly, "I would do anything—almost—for the chance to go where you're going. To live for aeons, to see all those wondrous places!" Caleb's response infuriates her and pushes her into explaining exactly why he was chosen (and spelling out Reed's didactic moral):

In a quiet, almost conspiratorial tone, he said, "I'll tell her to take you instead of me."

Hilton knew that he meant it, and she grew even angrier.

Then again, Caleb asked, "Why *me*?"

"They think they know you, I guess. They've been studying our telecommunications noise for years, and you've certainly earned their attention." Her withered face puckered, tasting something sour. "You acted out of a kind of

morality. You didn't hesitate, and you didn't make excuses. Then you accepted the hardships of prison, and the hardships that came afterward. Being able to live alone like you did...well, that's a rare talent for our species, and it's invaluable...."

He gave a little nod, a sigh. (Reed 230)

Once again, an additional component of what seems to make Caleb special is his humility, his lack of any sense that what he has done is special, that he is himself special: "'What I did for that alien,' he confessed, 'I would have done for a dog.' She opened her mouth, but said nothing. After a moment, he continued: 'Or a bug. Or *anything*'" (Reed 230).

In a sense, we could say that "Decency," like many other similar stories, uses the alien figures as a kind of transcendent standard. Not only do the aliens provide a superior outside perspective which can criticize or praise humanity; they also provide a superior standard by which we can be judged (even by ourselves) and a kind of foil against which to pose our own moral/spiritual level. The story also echoes a number of tropes we often find in various religious myths, such as stories in which God or gods choose a certain human being for abilities or values that human does not see in him/herself. Like many Moses in The Old Testament and many other saintly figures and reluctant heroes, Caleb doesn't think he deserves his chance and is willing to offer it to others. Reed's story is also somewhat similar to stories in which god figures appear in the disguise of other forms (that of a poor person or beggar, for example, or in this case the first alien), and the person who encounters them is judged and rewarded or punished based on how they treat this other form. In his treatment of the alien, Caleb is in a sense like the "Good Samaritan" of Jesus' parable.

I suggested that *Day* and *War* illuminate, partly indirectly, some of the contradictions and problems associated with the theological conception of God as an anthropomorphized judge and punisher; Reed's "Decency," in somewhat similar fashion, reveals problematic aspects to the elevation of "decency" as the primary, or only, value by which a transcendent judge would evaluate human morality. The alien judges value decency, alongside acting quickly (perhaps even hastily) and being independent over curiosity or creativity, which, strangely, the aliens can actually add into Caleb before sending him off on his journey. Apparently, curiosity, creativity, and rationality are somehow less fundamental aspects of someone's identity than a kind of basic decency—the former can be added without making Caleb into a different person, as if they are merely extra features one can choose to have added when purchasing a new car. The prizing of decency over curiosity, imagination, and intelligence, also leaves the troubling impression that these attributes are separate or antagonistic, when many would argue that intelligence, creativity, and curiosity, rather than operating counter to decency and morality, can actually fuel it and, in some cases, be necessary for its operation, since empathy and critical thinking are, in actuality, difficult imaginative work. Also emphasized and stressed by Reed as a positive is Caleb's absolute certainty and confidence in his own moral sense, which is not based on evidence or what he observes but rather his intuition (what Steven Colbert, satirizing such certainty, would refer to as "the gut") and which he does not feel the need to explain to anyone else. His intuition and immediate action is overtly contrasted with Hilton's reliance on evidence and, thus, her uncertainty. The story stresses that Caleb's emotional intuition and decisive (or rash and ignorant?) action is superior; scientist Hilton is not even given the benefit of being moral but wrong, but is revealed to be condescending, ambitious, and envious. Does it make sense for an alien god (or an actual one) to value hasty action and gut reactions over rationality, inquiry, and a

desire to act upon evidence? Is it fair for people to be judged on seemingly innate qualities (Caleb's decency and independence) rather than on their efforts (Hilton's years of work)?

By positioning aliens as divine moral judges who reward ("choose" or "save") those who meet their transcendent standard, Reed's story raises questions about exactly what values would be considered transcendent, what attributes a superior intelligence or morality would deem most important. In this way, the story indirectly focuses on some of the deeper issues (what would be transcendent or morally evolved) I've suggested would help our discussions of theology, spirituality, and morality. Yet the answers he provides are, I would argue, a bit confused and contradictory. Caleb's characterization itself is oddly contradictory. Reed's narrator repeatedly emphasizes that Caleb is not curious or imaginative, yet it is obviously some degree of both that urges him to become involved in the initial situation and, when he does, enable him to empathize with the alien. Reed's story seems to assert that some form of old-fashioned, Midwestern, small town decency is the moral ideal, and that the smart and educated (such as Hilton) lack this and are envious of it, which seems to fall more into stereotypes than reality. It is also a bit strange for a science fiction story to devalue intelligence, curiosity, and imagination. Putting this into more theological terms, the choices of the aliens here perhaps reflect the very traditional image of a God who prefers the childlike and simple, people who don't ask questions and simply, or blindly, follow orders. It's also possible part of their choice is to give the story an element of irony: partly from our reading of other similar stories, we'd expect the aliens to choose scientists; their choice of an incurious soldier is thus unexpected. Ultimately, by having his alien gods choose only one figure, and by setting up Caleb and Hilton as such polarized opposites, Reed winds up devaluing traits which would appear to be quite valuable. "Decency" is an odd mixture—presenting traditional judgmental aliens whose role is not questioned and who prize a somewhat conservative morality, but who reward their chosen hero with the kind of cosmic journey and extreme enhancements typical of the kind of New Age aliens we'll explore in the next chapter.

"Midnight News" and Questions for Our Alien Judges

Lisa Goldstein's "Midnight News," a 1990 short story anthologized in *The Norton Book of Science Fiction*, is a satirical take on the type of first contact scenario depicted in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Here too, superior aliens appear and, in an almost godly sense, judge Earth and its inhabitants, threatening our destruction if they find us wanting. Yet while Goldstein's story matches elements of this paradigm, and can in some ways be seen as a kind of revisionist parody of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*'s scenario, it also departs from, and even challenges, that pattern in ways that are interesting and ultimately as important. In so doing, the story questions the very notion of an all-powerful outsider intervening in and judging human affairs, even subtly connecting such a relationship to gender oppression.

While it eventually challenges such a scenario in ways we'll examine, Goldstein's story initially adheres very closely to the kind of judgmental alien-gods paradigm and makes use of many standard science fiction strategies for defamiliarization and moral critique of human behavior and society. The alien figures in "Midnight News" act rather overtly as judges, wasting no time in telling us their roles and demonstrating their power to carry out a harsh punishment if we fall out of line. In fact, in their first appearance, they skip past Klaatu's pleasantries and jump right to a far more concise version of his concluding speech:

“Good afternoon,” the alien said. Its voice sounded amplified, but Stevens could see no microphone anywhere. “Hello. We are your judges. We have judged you and found you wanting. Some of us were of the opinion that you should be destroyed immediately. We have decided not to do this. We have found a representative of your species. She will make the decision. At midnight on your New Year’s Eve she will tell you if you are to live or die.” (Goldstein 820)

The alien figure here is indeed far less verbose than other aliens-as-gods figures (and this speech feels partly like a parody of those in similar works), which perhaps makes their willingness to judge and destroy us seem a bit unfair and arbitrary. At the same time, however, the decisiveness of Goldstein’s aliens actually connects them quite directly to theological models they depict, since unlike Klaatu or other aliens-as-gods figures, gods of myth and traditional religion do not always spend a great deal of time detailing and diagnosing human failings before unleashing threats or punishment. More like the anthropomorphized god figures in ancient texts, these aliens have made their judgment and are willing to act immediately. Goldstein does still manage to squeeze in quite a bit of conventional moral critique and defamiliarization, as we shall see in a moment, but it does not come directly from the mouths of the aliens, as we might expect.

Goldstein’s aliens also waste no time in demonstrating their power to carry out their threats. They begin with a simple demonstration, which is extended when humans attempt to interfere:

“[...] And there is one more thing. Brian Capelli, will you stand please?” Capelli stood. His face was as white as his shirt. The alien made no motion that Stevens could see, but suddenly there was a sharp noise like a backfire and Capelli’s chair burst into flames. Capelli moaned a little and then seemed to realize where he was and stopped.

“We have power and we will use it,” the alien said (820-821).

When, later, we’re told that humans in Denver attempt to attack one of the alien ships, their effort is easily repelled, with only two humans surviving and those being burned on 50% of their bodies and needing skin grafts—affirming that the visitors do indeed have the power to destroy us (823). (We might note that, in another, if small, divine parallel, the aliens’ punishment comes in the form of fire). Humans are treated to another show of the aliens’ force (and more light and fire) when reporter Nichols disobeys the rules and tries to see Helena Johnson on his own:

“He tried to get inside her room last night,” Capelli said. The guards said they were reaching for their guns when they saw this bright flash of light go off. He was practically unrecognizable—they had to check his dental records to make sure it was him.”

“He’d been Denverized,” another reporter said, trying to laugh.

“He wanted to commit suicide, you ask me,” Capelli said. His hands were shaking.

“You see?” Stevens couldn’t resist saying to Gorce. “You see what I mean?” (825)

In addition to appearing from on high and declaring themselves our judges, the aliens of Goldstein’s story also provide the kind of moral critique of human failings that is typical of traditional deities as well as the aliens of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. As in many other stories, the alien encounter functions partly to expose human cruelty and selfishness; the sf novum of the superior alien defamiliarizes our values and make them stand out as deeply flawed,

humans as rather childish. But perhaps the key difference is that the seemingly superior alien figures of “Midnight News,” while presented in flashback and while critical of humanity, actually do little direct lecturing about us (beyond their comment that we have been “found [...] wanting”). Most of our cruelty and selfishness is revealed indirectly through two other devices—the behavior and attitudes of the group of reporters the story follows, especially Gorce and Stevens, and the life story told by Helena Johnson, the elderly woman chosen by the aliens as our representative, a figure suddenly plucked from obscurity and made the center of human attention (the only attention she has gotten in most of her life, it appears) because she will decide our fate. Instead of coming directly from the mouths of aliens-as-gods, a damning portrait of humanity emerges more indirectly through Helena Johnson. Her life story, the reactions it provokes in the hardened, cynical reporters who follow her, and the defamiliarizing oddity of the very idea of a seemingly ordinary elderly woman becoming the center of all human attention, suggest a stinging diagnosis of human shallowness and cruelty.

Goldstein’s story begins with an odd scene, striking not because of the direct presence of any science fictional novum, but because of the wholly human but very unusual situation that appearance has created—a bar full of people watching, transfixed, as, on television, an unattractive and seemingly unremarkable elderly woman tells the story of her life. “Helena Johnson’s face nearly covered the screen,” we are told (Goldstein 819). “Snow drifted across her face and then covered the screen, and five or six people in the bar raised their voices. The bartender quickly switched the channel, and Helena Johnson’s face came on again, shot from the same angle” (819). The opening paragraph subtly reveals two strange details: those at the bar are very intent on watching Helena Johnson, and her interview is being covered on multiple channels at the same time.

While she has clearly been ignored and mistreated for much of her life, Helena Johnson now has the attention of the entire world: she is the top story, the sole television audience, and almost a president or figure of state. “‘I lived at home for a long long time,’” Helena Johnson was saying in her slow scratchy voice. The reporters sat at the bar or at round tables scattered throughout the room and watched her raptly,” we’re told (819). The tension is greater when the reporters are in her presence, we see when Stevens watches himself with her on television: “Stevens saw himself and Gorce and all the rest of them. He remembered how tense he’d been, how worried that she wouldn’t call on him” (819). Helena Johnson is both the top story *on* television and the sole audience *for* television:

She granted interviews with twenty reporters daily, then screened the tapes and deleted anything she didn’t like. The world discovered to its dismay that Helena Johnson’s life hadn’t been an easy one, and everything possible was done to make it easier. Television programs now played for an audience of one: stations showed *The Nutcracker Suite* over and over again because she had talked about being taken to see it as a child. Newspapers stopped reporting crime and wars—crime and wars had, in fact, nearly disappeared—and ran headlines about the number of kittens adopted. She got an average of ten thousand letters a day; most of them came with a gift and about a third were marriage proposals (821).

She is also a kind of replacement head of state; when important events happen, her response is central, we learn when two humans survive an attempted bombing of the alien ship:

“‘Government sources say the bombs were not nuclear weapons,’ the anchorman said. ‘There is no radioactive fall-out at all from the bombing. Miss Johnson has sent both the survivors a

telegram expressing her wishes for their speedy recovery.” (823) Similarly, her every action or comment is subject to an incredible level of analysis, as one exchange illustrates:

“Oh yes, that’s right,” Helena Johnson said, looking at it. “I wanted to tell everyone not to get me a Christmas present. I know a lot of people have been worrying about what to get me, and I just want to tell them I have everything I need.”

So give a contribution to charity instead, Stevens thought, but Helena Johnson seemed to have finished. Did she neglect to mention charity because she knew there would be no charities, or anything else, in a few weeks? It was amazing how paranoid they had all become, how they analyzed her slightest gesture. (826-827)

Naturally, there is also a deep irony here, especially in Stevens’ last thought: they now analyze every tiny act of this woman who, previously, no one cared about or even knew existed.

Helena Johnson’s status immediately before the aliens choose her, as well as the rest of her difficult life story, serve as a damning indictment of humanity. Before the aliens’ arrival, we learn, she could hardly have been the subject of *less* interest or attention—or, in fact, a victim of more serious neglect:

Not surprisingly, with every state and federal organization mobilized to look for her, Helena Johnson was found within two hours. She lived in a state-sponsored nursing home. She was asleep when the FBI agent found her and when she woke she seemed unable to answer the simplest question. What is your name?” the agent asked. Helena Johnson gave no sign that she had heard him.

But within a month she seemed to have accepted the situation as her due. The government put her up in the best hotel in Washington and hired nurses, hairdressers, manicurists, companions. She had an ulcer on her leg that had never been seen to at the home, and the government sent out a highly paid specialist to treat it. Another specialist discovered that she wasn’t so much disoriented as hard of hearing, and she was fitted with a hearing aid. (821)

Already, an image of our values emerge: this elderly woman whom humans will soon learn has, in a way, led a quietly heroic life amidst struggle and great suffering, is viewed as essentially a non-entity—unworthy of treatment, companionship, or even a working hearing aid so she can communicate.

While Helena Johnson’s story exposes human cruelty, our alien judges have apparently chosen her for her moral virtues and her quiet heroism—and because she represents an example of such virtues being ignored and punished rather than rewarded by cruel, shallow humanity. Johnson, we learn, lived through the Depression and supported her family on her own for a time:

“Well, it was the Depression, you know, and I couldn’t move out,” the old woman said. “And girls weren’t supposed to live on their own back then—only loose girls lived by themselves. My father had been laid off, and I got a job as a stenographer. I was lucky to get it. I supported my family for two years, all by myself.”

She stopped for a moment, unwilling or unable to go on (819).

She also enabled her younger brother to go to college:

“Well, of course I was proud,” Helena Johnson said. “I was putting my younger brother through college, too. He had to stop after two years, though, because I lost my job” (820).

Later, Johnson is forced to choose between performing sexual favors for her boss and losing her job; she decides to appease her boss, only so she can continue to support her family, but is rebuffed and loses her job anyway:

“So my co-worker, Doris, she said the boss would let you stay on if you would, well, do favors for him,” Helena Johnson was saying. “You know what I mean. And I decided that I’d rather starve. But then the next day I thought, well, it’s not just me that’s depending on the money I earn. It’s my parents, and my brother who I was putting through college—did I tell you about that?—and I decided that if he asked me I’d do it. I’m not ashamed to tell you that that’s what I thought [...] He was standing behind his desk—I can see it now, as clear as day—and he opened his mouth to say something. And then he shook his head, like this, and he said, ‘Forget it, girl, go home. You’re too ugly.’” (821)

Her husband and son are also disappointments, we learn:

“I got married at the beginning of the war,” Helena Johnson said. “World War Two, that was. I was thirty, a bit old for those days. My husband met one of those female soldiers over there in Europe, one of those WACs, and left me for her. Left me and our baby son.” (822)

[...]

“And then you had to raise your baby all by yourself,” Gorce said.

“That’s right, I did,” Helena Johnson said, smiling at her. “And he left me too, soon as he could get a job. He was about seventeen. Seventeen, that’s right.”

We then learn that the son has been “traced to that trailer camp in Florida” and “has a record as long as your arm—assault, armed robbery, breaking and entering” (Goldstein 822).

While Helena Johnson receives almost their full attention, the reporters, especially Stevens, react to her story and the attention she is receiving with cynicism and, at times, outright hatred towards her. Gorce, however, feels more sympathy. Their varied reactions to their sole subject are revealed as they watch her interview replayed on television:

“Yes, Mr.—Mr. ___” Helena Johnson said.

“Look at that,” Stevens said in the bar. “She’s senile, on top of everything else. How can she forget his name after two months?” (819)

Stevens also unsympathetically criticizes her lack of formal education, seemingly failing to recall (or merely consider) the conditions of her life:

Her manner was poised, regal. She reminded Stevens of nothing so much as Queen Victoria. And yet she hadn’t even finished grade school. “Look at her,” he said in disgust. He raised his glass in a toast. “This is the woman who’s going to save the world.”

He also cynically assumes that Johnson is herself merely exploiting the situation. Stevens and Gorce speculate about Johnson’s thinking:

“Who knows what she seems? Who knows what she’s thinking? Look at her—she looks like the cat that ate the canary. She’s going to play this for all it’s worth.”

[...]

“Because she wants to talk about herself, that’s why, Gorce said.

“Good God, she’s the most boring woman in the world!” Stevens said.

Why do we have to sit through this drivel again?”

“You know why,” Gorce said. “In case she’s watching.” (822-823)

From Stevens we see an intense hatred; Gorce, in sharp contrast, feels a connection:

“Bully for her,” Stevens said.

“Come off it,” Gorce said. “She’s not that bad.”

“She’s a horror. She hasn’t called on me once the last three days, and you know why? It’s because I accidentally called her Ms.”

“I feel sorry for her. What a hard life she’s had.”

“Sure you do—she loves you. Look at the way she beamed at you all through the interview today. But I guess you’re right. I guess she’s been lonely. She was only married a year before her husband was called up.”

“I didn’t just mean her marriage—“

“Now don’t go give me that feminist look,” Stevens said, though in reality Gorce’s steady gaze hadn’t changed. “You know what I meant. If they’re not married usually they have a career, something they’re interested in. Like you. But this woman had nothing.” (823)

The world’s sudden, but temporary, interest in unsung hero Helena Johnson is echoed by male reporter Stevens’ interest in super-competent female colleague Gorce. When Johnson calls on Stevens and he asks her a question about her hobbies, he finds himself repulsed by her, but then reminded of Gorce’s value:

“She smiled at him almost flirtatiously. He was surprised at how much hatred he felt for her at that moment. [...] Gorce was right, he thought. She does like talking about herself. If they survived New Year’s Eve, he’d have to keep in contact with Gorce—she was one smart woman” (826).

Though here Stevens feels hatred toward Johnson at the same moment he thinks well of Gorce, the two women are actually connected: during this situation, when they are suddenly made important (their support or assistance is needed by others for survival), they receive attention, but before or after, we see with both, they are cast aside. Later, once Helena Johnson refuses to do the aliens’ bidding, they leave, and the crisis has been averted, Stevens’ attitude toward Gorce undergoes a sudden shift:

“Congratulations,” he said, happy for her. Outside he heard police sirens and what sounded like firecrackers.

“Thanks,” she said. “Do you want t-t-to go out somewhere and celebrate?”

“He looked at her with surprise. He had never known her to stutter before. She wasn’t bad-looking, he thought, but too bony, and her chin and forehead were too long. She had to have gotten her job through her mad bravery and sharp common sense, because she sure didn’t look like a blow-dried TV reporter.

“Sorry,” he said. “I told my girlfriend I’d call her when this whole thing was over.”

“You never told me you had a girlfriend.”

“Yeah, well, it never came up,” he said. See you Gorce.” (Goldstein 828-829)

After the threat has passed, Stevens ignores Gorce as we imagine the world will once again ignore Helena Johnson. It is interesting, and of course bitterly funny, that his conclusion that she is where she is because of bravery and common sense does nothing to make him more interested in her—it seems in matters of romance, he would have preferred a “blow-dried TV reporter.” It is merely a footnote, an explanation of how she has managed, in her career at least, to overcome

the cardinal sin of being not attractive enough. Bravery and common sense are also traits Helena Johnson possessed, but as we remember, they were ultimately not enough to make her important or even to enable her to keep her job by sleeping with her boss: the power that mattered, and that she did not have, was that of conventional attractiveness. Gorce's response, which concludes the story, makes the connection between the two women more explicit and, somewhat didactically, hammers home the moral of the story:

She looked at him a long time. "You know, Stevens, you better start being nicer to me," she said. "What if the aliens pick me to save the world next time?" (Goldstein 829).

Goldstein's story is interesting in part for how it uses an alien invasion scenario to expose this unfair gender dynamic, but interwoven with that is the way in which it challenges the kind of alien-judge paradigm of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and thus, by extension, the kind of theological model that film embodies. The unusual thread of "Midnight News," one introduced right from this initial encounter scene and flowering only at the very conclusion, is that one human figure, reporter Stephanie Gorce, challenges the aliens, and later their chosen representative, about their right to judge humanity. Her challenge inspires Helena Johnson's (again, a connection between these two women). Thus, Goldstein's story, while clearly endorsing *the moral critique* facilitated by the aliens-as-gods (but coming from the mouth of Helena Johnson), questions *the right* of such figures to intervene and punish us for our failures. The story asks whether or not the theological model of a punishing, judgmental God-figure makes sense, even if the criticisms leveled by that figure are accurate. During the alien's first appearance, Gorce (her first name is only revealed much later) is apparently the only person bold enough to ask a question; what is even bolder, perhaps, is that she challenges their authority over humanity:

No one spoke. Then a bony young woman, her thin black hair brushed back and away from her face, jumped up from her seat. It was the first time Stevens saw Gorce in person, though he had heard of her from his colleagues. He held his breath without knowing it. "Why do you feel you have the right to sit in judgment over us?" she asked. Her voice was level.

"No questions," the alien said. "We will give you the name of the woman who is to represent you. Her name is Helena Johnson. She lives in Phoenix, Arizona. (820)

Throughout the story, Gorce is essentially the only person who questions the aliens' right to judge us, and who comes to the conclusion that their doing so is not some form of rightful judgment, but rather something cruel and invasive, even sadistic. Her thoughts emerge in one especially interesting exchange with Stevens:

"You know what I was thinking?" Gorce said. Have you thought about the aliens? I mean really thought about them?"

"Sure, Stevens said. "Like everyone else in America. I've got a new theory, too. I bet it's a test."

[...]

"[...] It doesn't matter what the old bitch chooses, whether she wants us destroyed or not. It's like a laboratory experiment. They're watching us to see how we act under pressure. It[sic] we do okay, if we don't go all nuts, we'll be asked to join some kind of galactic federation."

[...] "You ever read comic books when you were a kid, Stevens?"

“Huh? No.”

“That’s what it always turned out to be in the comic books. Some kind of test. All these weird things would happen—the super-hero might even die—but in the end everything returned to normal. Because kids reading the comics never liked it when things changed too much. The only explanation the writers could come up with was that it had all been a test. But I don’t think these tests happen outside of comic books.”

“Ok, so what’s your theory?”

“Well, think about what’s happening here. These guys have set themselves up as the final law, judge, jury, and executioner all rolled into one. Sure, they picked the old woman, but that’s just the point—*they* picked her. They probably know how she’s going to vote, or they have a good idea. What kind of people would do something like that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Pretty sadistic people, I’d say. If there was some kind of galactic federation, wouldn’t they just observe us and contact us when we’re ready? I mean, we were on our way to blowing ourselves up without any outside help at all. Maybe these people travel around the galaxy getting their jollies from watching helpless races cower for months before someone makes the final decision. These aliens are probably outlaws, some kind of renegades. They’re so immoral no galactic federation would have them.”

“That’s a cheerful thought.” (824-825)

This connects in at least two ways to Carl Sagan’s *Contact*, which we’ll explore later in the next chapter as an exploration of a different theological paradigm. In that work, too, humans speculate about the aliens and how they might view us, and do so in ways that are obviously comparable to human theological speculation (What is God like? How would God see us? Etc). One interesting difference is the metafictional tinge of this exchange: Gorce specifically compares this encounter to science fiction scenarios (or perhaps more accurately, sci fi scenarios) she has seen in comic books. To her, those are the writers’ fantasies, attempts to give readers what they want (repetition, returns to the status quo), while this is a very different reality²². Her comment, though, suggests the difference between comforting escapist science fiction and challenging, denaturalizing works. Another interesting difference is that while Ellie in Sagan’s novel expects the alien figure she encounters to fit the god figure-as-anthropomorphized-judge paradigm and has trouble believing otherwise even when corrected, Gorce, seemingly trained by the science fiction she has read, expects something closer to a loving New Age alien, one who would “just observe us and contact us when we’re ready” (825).

But Gorce’s criticisms clearly target the idea of an authority who judges and punishes without giving reasons, suggesting that this is inferior to or less respectable than the newer model, and further that such judgment and punishment is not right or good at all but, instead, something cruel and unfair. While the story uses Helena Johnson’s account of her life to depict, unflinchingly, the cruelty and shallowness of human behavior, through Gorce, Goldstein appears to reject the idea that an improvement in humanity should come through threats of destruction. Shouldn’t we advance on our own, the story seems to ask? And further, what would be the value of moral or spiritual advances prompted only by threats of destruction? As the story shows, such advances dissipate the moment the threatening force leaves the scene. The world will probably display no more interest in Helena Johnson once the aliens are out of orbit just as Stevens

suddenly loses all interest in Gorce once the calamity is over and she is no longer important (suddenly he realizes that she is “bony” and not conventionally attractive—or, rather, suddenly these physical flaws trump her other virtues).

Gorce’s defiance of this judgmental-God paradigm is ultimately what prompts Helena Johnson’s similar change of heart. Gorce asks Johnson a question (repeating what she asked the aliens themselves earlier) that initially seems to make little impact on her but ultimately causes Johnson to rethink (and reject) her role as the aliens’ decision-maker:

I’m grateful to them,” Helena Johnson said. “If it wasn’t for them I’d still be in that dreadful old age home.”

“But what do you think of the way they’ve interfered with us? Of the way they want to make our decisions for us?”

Capelli wasn’t the only reporter who became visibly nervous at this question. Stevens felt he could have cheerfully strangled her.

“I don’t know, dear. You mean they want to tell us what to do?”

“They want to tell you what to do. They want to force you to make a choice.”

“Oh, I don’t mind making the choice. In fact—” (826)

We might note that Gorce is defiant and even practically heroic in asking this question—and her heroism winds up saving us: the heroism of this ignored woman paired with the thinking of this older woman.

At the end of the story, the alien/human confrontation that might end a more typical first contact/aliens-as-gods story is replaced by a different confrontation, or, rather two of them—the confrontation of humanity by this woman it had neglected and discarded (and then suddenly elevated to importance when it knew she would have power) and the less direct confrontation between that same woman and the alien figures who have plucked her from obscurity to render their judgment. The story ends with a speech by Helena Johnson, who is, in her own way, a kind of transcendent outsider:

“I have been chosen by the aliens to decide Earth’s future,” she said. I don’t understand why I was chosen, and neither does anyone else. But I have taken the responsibility very seriously, and I feel I have been conscientious in my duty.”

Get on with it, Stevens thought. Yes or no.

“I have to say I have enjoyed my stay here at the hotel,” she said. “But it is impossible not to think that all of you must consider me very stupid indeed.” Oh, God, Stevens thought. Here it comes. The old lady’s revenge. “I know very well that none of you were interested in me, in Helena Hope Johnson. If the aliens hadn’t chosen me I would probably be at the nursing home right now, if not dead of neglect. My leg would be in constant pain, and the nurses would think I was senile because I couldn’t hear the questions they asked me.

“So, at first, I thought I would say yes. I would say that Earth deserves to be destroyed, that its people are cruel and selfish and will only show kindness if there’s something in it for them. And sometimes not even then. Why do you think my son hasn’t come to visit me?” The yellow eye had filled with tears.

Oh, shit, Stevens thought. I knew it would come to this. He had heard her son was dead, killed in a bar fight.

“But then I remembered what this young lady had said,” Helena Johnson said. “Miss Gorce. She asked me what I thought about the aliens interfering with our lives, my life. Well, I thought about it, and I didn’t like what I came up with. They have no right to decide whether we will live or die, whoever they are. All my life, people have decided for me, my parents, my teachers, my bosses. But that’s all over with now. My answer is—no answer. I will not give them an answer.” (828)

The immediate result of her speech is that the alien ships leave. What is perhaps most interesting is that this paradigm is rejected precisely by two people who, seemingly, would most benefit by it. Helena Johnson has been ignored and mistreated throughout her life as Gorce has been ignored or underestimated by men. And yet both of them realize that a system which gives them a greater position through force and authority is not a solution, is not a fair system, that, in a sense, this would merely be turning to a higher, more powerful bully to correct the behavior of those on Earth. Even if the criticisms of humanity are valid (and indeed few could have felt their impact more strongly than Helena Johnson), there is still, to these two characters, and apparently to Goldstein, something wrong about the idea of an outside force coming in to judge and punish—and something unsatisfactory about moral change motivated by such threats.

Recognizing the connection Goldstein subtly establishes between these two woman reveals the story’s thematic emphasis on gender. Both have names which are partly concealed until the conclusion: only at the end of the story do we find out that Gorce’s first name is actually Stephanie (only then, perhaps, is Stevens thinking of her as a person and a woman); only when she is making her final statement do we learn that Helena Johnson’s middle name (appropriate for her role here, if ironic in the context of her unpleasant life) is Hope. At the conclusion of the story, as I have mentioned, Stevens rejects Gorce’s expression of interest for reasons similar to those which once caused Johnson’s boss to reject her willingness to perform sexual favors in order to keep her job—with a summary rejection because she is not pretty enough. Partly, Goldstein makes a somewhat predictable moral criticism of humanity for not valuing, but instead ignoring or marginalizing, those we should praise. But the focus on Johnson and Gorce (who, together, in essence save the world) suggests the point is more gendered: it is not merely that humanity fails by ignoring the unattractive, but more specifically that it ignores women of heroism and struggle or smarts and bravery if they are so. At the end of the story we learn that Gorce is going to ghost write Helena Johnson’s autobiography; Stevens, fittingly, says no one will read it. Goldstein’s story doesn’t simply lay blame at the foot of humanity; it directs it more at men, presenting only a negative male figure and two sympathetic female figures who save the world with their challenges to blind authority. The story could almost be renamed “The Women Men Don’t See”—if that were not already the name of another story in the same Norton collection.

In the works discussed in this chapter, we can see a continuum of science fictional approaches to traditional theology and its approaches to moral improvement, demonstrating the genre’s ability to engage in deep and useful theological play that raises, and explores answers to, questions about spirituality and morality that mainstream debate often cannot. If the films and stories I’ve discussed here reveal, directly or indirectly, some of the problems and limitations of traditional theology, the works we turn to in the next chapter use aliens as gods to explore an alternative approach closer to the paradigms of New Age theology and progressive spirituality.

Chapter 3: Making *Contact* with New Age Alien Gods

She explored her discomfort further. How...theological...the circumstances had become. Here were beings who live in the sky, beings enormously knowledgeable and powerful, beings concerned for our survival, beings with a set of expectations about how we should behave. They disclaim such a role, but they could clearly visit reward and punishment, life and death, on the puny inhabitants of Earth. Now how is this different, she asked herself, from old-time religion? The answer occurred to her instantly: It was a matter of evidence.... This one was fact, not hearsay and hocus pocus. (Sagan 370-371)

Although Spielberg is frequently accused of sugarcoating the fantastic, the second act of *Close Encounters* depicts these same everyday visionaries as the secular equivalent of religious pilgrims whose glimpse of infinity wrecks their lives. (*Taxi Driver* screenwriter Paul Schrader, who did uncredited work on the film's script, envisioned the heroes' encounter with a higher life-form as a biblical event akin to Paul's revelation on the road to Damascus.) (Seitz 70).

No longer quaking as the disc descended,
That glowing wheel of lights whose coming ended
All waiting and watching. When it landed

The ones within it one by one came forth,
Stalking out awkwardly upon the earth,
And those who watched them were confirmed in faith:

Mysterious voyagers from outer space,
[...]

Light was their speech, spanning mind to mind:
*We come here not believing what we find—
Can it be your desire to leave behind*

*The earth, which even those called angels bless,
Exchanging amplitude for emptiness?
And in a single voice they answered Yes,*

[...]
Come then, the Strangers said, and those who were taken, went. (Martin, "Taken Up" 4-10, 13-18, 21)

So far we've discussed two angles from which science fiction has approached religious/theological debate. In the first chapter, I argued that works such as the film *Signs* use

aliens (and other science fictional nova) merely to echo mainstream debate, asking the same unproductive question that unfortunately tends to dominate popular discourse about religion, theology, and spirituality (“Does God exist?”) instead of exploring deeper, more useful questions about the possible nature of God or transcendence or the possibility of human moral evolution. In the last chapter, I argued that some science fiction narratives go further and, picking up on the spiritual/religious role Carl Jung, Linda Dégh, Brenda Denzler and others have shown aliens have come to occupy in the culture, position alien transcendent outsiders in god roles or as god-figures in stories that echo religious myth. These narratives allow the genre to explore and assess (sometimes endorsing, sometimes critiquing) different notions of God, transcendence, and morality. I argued that the works in chapter two used alien god-figures to embody and assess what we might consider a rather traditional, and perhaps primarily Western, view of God as an anthropomorphized judge, a figure like God of The Old Testament or the gods of much ancient Greek and Eastern myth. Such a deity is primarily a figure of judgment, threats, and punishment—the “jealous” or “angry” God we often hear mentioned by more traditional or conservative religious believers, a God we should fear and before whom we should tremble, one who sometimes appears to want us to behave better not because we have *become* better but because we’re afraid to do otherwise²³. On psychologist James Fowler’s “stages of faith,” such a theology/spirituality would place only at the second stage, “Mythic-Literal” faith, in which “God is anthropomorphic and stories and symbols are taken literally,” or the third, “Synthetic-Conventional,” in which “the believer is governed by unexamined ideology and precepts received from authority figures” (Goldberg, *Veda* 345-346). I argued that Lisa Goldstein’s “Midnight News” challenged that model, essentially asking of such figures, “What gives you the right?”, and that even works which appear to affirm such an approach to theology, spirituality, and morality often unintentionally (but usefully) highlight its limitations and contradictions. Science fiction’s more significant contribution to our theological debate, however, is its use of alien transcendent outsiders to embody and explore more sophisticated spiritual and theological perspectives.

In this chapter, I argue that many science fiction narratives use first contact scenarios as a way to explore (and in some cases, endorse) theological possibilities more in line with the positive trends in contemporary (or progressive) spirituality I outlined in the introduction as part of a phenomenon of “sane spirituality.” For one, they present aliens as larger, more sophisticated, less obviously anthropomorphized god-figures (or as creatures who enable humans to envision or come into contact with such a type of God), thus carrying theological speculation beyond the “no God vs. dated God” dynamic of typical mainstream debate²⁴. The alien figures themselves embody, or interaction with them facilitates an understanding of, a broader, more sophisticated spirituality free of literalism and exclusivism (sometimes free even of religion), which are replaced by a pluralistic, perennialist, or universalist approach illustrating elements of Fowler’s fifth and sixth stages, including “vulnerability to the strange truths of those who are other...freed from the confines of tribe, class, religious community or nation” (quoted in Goldberg, *Veda* 346). These works consider spiritual/theological approaches less focused on faith or belief and more on having or seeking transcendent spiritual experience, what Fowler describes as part of stage six, “Universalizing faith,” in which one has “a taste for transcendent moral and religious actuality” (quoted in Goldberg, *Veda* 346). They explore spiritual/theological perspectives which focus on moral growth, development, and evolution rather than on sin and punishment, what Fowler also describes as part of stage six: “devotion to universalizing compassion...enlarged visions of universal community” (quoted in Goldberg,

Veda 346). Lastly, these works use alien god-figures to explore spiritual/theological possibilities that, unlike much traditional religion, can be compatible with science or at least appealing to those who require a spiritual or theological possibility to have scientific or rational elements (to this end, their protagonists are often scientists). I begin by exploring *Contact*, which I argue uses alien god figures and first contact in general to present an alternative spirituality/theology which it suggests transcends narrow traditional religion while appealing to the scientific view of its protagonist. Next, I argue that a range of contemporary films follow a similar pattern, using alien god-figures to explore elements of progressive and New Age spirituality, both for the sake of theological speculation and, at times, the comforts of escapism and wish-fulfillment. Finally, I argue that Octavia Butler's *Dawn*, the first novel of her *Xenogenesis* series, and the 2007 film *The Invasion* use alien figures to challenge the ideas the other narratives affirm—the first calling into question the motives of alien god-figures and both challenging the desirability of alien-guided human moral evolution of the kind many other works endorse.

Perhaps more explicitly than any other work I'll discuss, Carl Sagan's *Contact* places alien transcendent outsiders in spiritual roles and uses their arrival (even their very nature) to facilitate a deep exploration of broader, Eastern-influenced progressive spirituality which it suggests can satisfy both its scientist protagonist and open-minded religious believers and which it contrasts favorably with the traditional approaches to religion and spirituality it critiques. Essentially, Sagan uses alien transcendent outsiders as embodiments of, and catalysts for, theological revolution and spiritual advances, in the process showing science fiction's ability to transcend the "Does God exist?" question to explore and assess the depth and value of different approaches to theology, spirituality, and moral evolution—exactly the kind of exploration often missing from mainstream discourse²⁵.

Ellie, Sagan's protagonist, is an atheist scientist who, from an early age, rejects the literal, conservative bible teaching she receives, and which she appears for much of her life to understand as the whole of religion and spirituality. Frustrated by the constant fighting between the high school-aged Ellie and her stepfather, Ellie's mother asks Ellie to attend Bible class, which she believes "would help instill the conventional virtues" and show "that Ellie was willing to make some accommodation" (Sagan 29). Ellie approaches the Bible with cynical expectations but also a scientific spirit of open-mindedness:

Ellie had never seriously read the Bible before and had been inclined to accept her father's perhaps ungenerous judgment that it was "half barbarian history, half fairy tales." So over the weekend preceding her first class, she read through what seemed to be the important parts of the Old Testament, trying to keep an open mind. (Sagan 30)

Yet her scientific approach immediately yields significant problems with literal readings of both the Old Testament and the New: "She at once recognized that there were two different and mutually contradictory stories of Creation in the first two chapters of Genesis. She did not see how there could be light and days before the Sun was made, and had trouble figuring out exactly who it was that Cain had married" (Sagan 30). She "found herself amazed" by the stories of Lot, Abraham and Sarah, Dinah, Jacob, and Esau:

She understood that cowardice might occur in the real world—that sons might deceive and defraud an aged father, that a man might give craven consent to the seduction of his wife by the King, or even encourage the rape of his daughters. But in this holy book there was not a word of protest against such outrages. Instead, it seemed, the crimes were approved, even praised. (Sagan 30)

Reading the New Testament, Ellie is struck by the different accounts of Jesus' ancestry in Matthew and Luke and wonders, "How could both Matthew and Luke be the Word of God?" (30). "The contradictory genealogies seemed to Ellie a transparent attempt to fit the Isaianic prophecy after the event—cooking the data, it was called in chemistry lab" (30). Ellie attends class "eager for a discussion of these vexing inconsistencies, for an unburdening of God's Purpose, or at least for an explanation of why these crimes were not to be condemned by the author or Author" but instead finds that "[t]he minister's wife blandly temporized" and "[s]omehow these stories never surfaced in subsequent discussion" (30). In response to one of her questions, "the teacher blushed deeply and asked Ellie not to raise unseemly questions"; Ellie is "reduced to shouts and tears after the instructor twice sidestepped her questions on the meaning of 'I bring not peace but the sword'" (30, 31). Finally, "[s]he told her despairing mother that she had done her best, but wild horses couldn't drag her to another Bible class" (31).

Ellie's later encounters with similar types of believers do little to change her mind about traditional religion, but do suggest strands of connection between her scientific approach and the more spiritually progressive Palmer Joss. Meeting with Joss and Reverend Billy Jo Rankin at the "Bible Science Research Institute and Museum," Ellie criticizes Rankin's skepticism toward science and articulates her problems with his kind of religion. Skepticism, she says, is "the way you avoid the mistakes, or at least reduce the chance that you'll make one [...] You test the ideas. You check them out by rigorous standards of evidence" (Sagan 167). Such skepticism is what the religions of the world require, she suggests:

"The major religions on the Earth contradict each other left and right. You can't all be correct. And what if all of you are wrong? It's a possibility, you know. You must care about the truth, right? Well, the way to winnow through all the differing contentions is to be skeptical. I'm not anymore skeptical about your religious beliefs than I am about every new scientific idea I hear about. But in my line of work, they're called hypotheses, not inspiration and not revelation."
(Sagan 168)

Rankin's trouble, she argues, "is a failure of the imagination":

"These prophecies are—almost every one of them—vague, ambiguous, imprecise, open to fraud. They admit lots of possible interpretations. Even the straightforward prophecies direct from the top you try to weasel out of [...] You only quote the passages that seem to you fulfilled, and ignore the rest. And don't forget there was a hunger to see prophecy fulfilled." (168)

How easy it would be for their kind of God to "leave a record" that would "make his existence unmistakable" by saying "Anything they couldn't possibly have known three thousand years ago," Ellie argues, later comparing God's communications to the much clearer Message, which she says has, despite coming from the less powerful Vegans, managed to be perfectly clear. "God for you is where you sweep away all the mysteries of the world, all the challenges to our intelligence. You simply turn your mind off and say God did it," she tells Rankin (172). Ellie says that she considers herself a Christian on the basis of her admiration for the Sermon on the Mount and "Love your enemy" but says she sees Jesus as "an admirable historical figure," "only a man. A great man, a brave man, a man with insight into unpopular truths," but not "God or the son of God or the grandnephew of God" (173). While she says "for the time being I'd call myself an atheist," she admits that "if a single piece of evidence was discovered that doesn't fit, I'd back off from atheism" (174-175). The encounter concludes, however, with Ellie acknowledging science and religion's common interest and beginning to be charmed by

Palmer²⁶. “Look, we all have a thirst for wonder. It’s a deeply human quality. Science and religion are both bound up with it. What I’m saying is, you don’t have to make stories up, you don’t have to exaggerate. There’s wonder and awe enough in the real world. Nature’s a lot better at inventing wonders than we are,” Ellie says, to which Joss replies, “Perhaps we’re all wayfarers on the road to truth” (178). Leaving, Ellie notes that “Joss is a very attractive man” and jokes, “he almost converted me” (179).

Ellie’s search for alien life through her SETI work becomes a spiritual quest, seemingly filling the absence left both by the death of her beloved father and her lack of spiritual or religious belief. Her entire experience in *Contact*, from her identification and interpretation of the aliens’ radio transmission message to her dazzling trip to the center of the galaxy, is presented as the equivalent of a spiritual experience. Though Ellie herself, until the end, emphasizes the differences between her alien encounter and typical spiritual experiences, we can see throughout that her experience is fulfilling similar desires, serving similar functions, even fitting the same patterns. As Roger Ebert observes in his review of the film adaptation,

With her father (David Morse), she shared the excitement of picking up distant stations on a ham radio outfit. He died while she was still young, and she became convinced that somehow, someday, she could contact him. This conviction is complicated by the fact that she does not believe in God or the supernatural; perhaps her SETI is a displaced version of that childhood need. (Ebert par. 3,4)

Throughout the novel, Sagan implies parallels between Ellie’s experiences and the near death experience that shaped Palmer Joss’ religious/spiritual beliefs.

Ellie herself is not unaware of the connections between the feeling she is pursuing and the desire that drives the religious. After reading about Otto Rank and the “numinous,” she begins to understand a connection between her feelings and what the religious describe: “Now if that’s what the religious people talk about when they use words like sacred or holy, I’m with them,” she says. “I felt something like that just in listening for a signal, never mind in actually receiving it. I think all of science elicits that sense of awe” (Sagan 159). In some sense, her interest in science has or provides a kind of religious fascination for her. Learning about transcendental numbers in the novel, she finds that “It seemed to her a miracle that the shape of every circle in the world was connected with this series of fractions [...] She had caught a glimpse of something majestic. Hiding between all the ordinary numbers was an infinity of transcendental numbers whose presence you would never have guessed unless you looked deeply into mathematics” (Sagan 21). But it is the more specific topic of alien life about which she comes to be almost a kind of religious believer. She considers this the most important question for humanity (45).

Ellie’s experience is also linked to that of religious believers and spiritual seekers through the similar mockery and criticisms she receives from others for her interests and devotion. Mentor David Drummlin’s criticisms of her SETI work are almost perfect echoes of the criticisms leveled at religious believers by atheist critics: he complains that they will search endlessly, and then when they discover nothing, demand more money for more and broader searches. With the vehemence of the “New Atheist” critics attempting to dismiss the notion of God, Drummlin seeks to prove that there are no aliens anywhere. Much as critics question why, if there is an all-powerful creator, that being chose to leave no proof of its existence, Drummlin asks why, if superior aliens capable of so much exist, they have left no visible signs. In the film version, when Ellie is working at the Very Large Array in New Mexico, she is mockingly called “the high priestess of the desert.” In a later scene in which Bryant Gumbel (as himself)

interviews her and challenges her about the dangers of the mission, which he says even some scientists have suggested is beyond human abilities, Ellie responds, “Well, this message is from a civilization that may be anywhere from hundreds to millions and millions of years ahead of us. I have to believe that an intelligence that advanced knows what they’re doing.” “Now all it requires on our part is,” she attempts to finish, but Gumbel interrupts her, “—faith?” “I was gonna say a sense of adventure.” Ellie herself remains unaware of, or aware of but uncomfortable with, the comparison, but the film and novel nudge us to recognize the similarity—Ellie is not as afraid of the dangers as others might be because she does have “faith” in the alien messengers. Ellie’s explanation for why she is going, when Joss questions her in the film, also suggests a kind of spiritual interest: “For as long as I can remember, I’ve been searching for something, some reason why we’re here. What’re we doing here? Who are we? If this is a chance to find out even a little part of that answer, I don’t know, I think it’s worth a human life, don’t you?”²⁷

Ellie’s journey and her eventual encounter with the alien Caretaker are presented as deeply spiritual experiences. Her actual adventure in *The Machine* (whose name comes to be capitalized as does that of *The Message*, suggesting a similar significance to divine messages), in both the novel and the film, present her with a dazzling light show and a miraculous vision she feels she cannot describe. In the film’s abbreviated version of the journey, which is less like a slow guided tour than a rapid rollercoaster ride with occasional brief stops, Ellie observes from the very beginning, when the floor of the pod becomes translucent, “I can’t describe it; I can’t even explain it.” Later, when she sees that she has left her chair and witnesses what she calls “some celestial event,” she laughs in happiness as she says, “No, no words to describe it. Poetry, they should have sent a poet—so beautiful. So beautiful, so beautiful. I had no idea, I had no idea, I had no idea.”

During the novel’s depiction of the actual encounter, it occurs to Ellie that her experience has significant spiritual or religious elements to it:

She explored her discomfort further. How...theological...the circumstances had become. Here were beings who live in the sky, beings enormously knowledgeable and powerful, beings concerned for our survival, beings with a set of expectations about how we should behave. They disclaim such a role, but they could clearly visit reward and punishment, life and death, on the puny inhabitants of Earth. Now how is this different, she asked herself, from old-time religion? The answer occurred to her instantly: It was a matter of evidence.... This one was fact, not hearsay and hocus pocus. (Sagan 371)

For Ellie, and it would appear for Sagan, this *is* a religious experience—but also, significantly, a spiritual experience superior to those experienced in typically religious contexts. This is an improved version of the religious experiences others have had because Ellie will have proof (or so she imagines at this point). Another of her realizations is also clearly spiritual. “There was,” she now understands, “a hierarchy of beings on a scale she had not imagined. But the Earth had a place, a significance in that hierarchy; they would not have gone through all this trouble for nothing” (Sagan 364). And it has not been without the kind of personal moral transformation one would expect from a deep religious or spiritual experience, for we are told that, after it, Ellie feels “more capable of love than she had ever been” (Sagan 407). In the film version, Ellie explains why she can’t withdraw her testimony despite the fact that she doesn’t have any proof her experience is real:

Because I can't... I had an experience. I can't prove it, I can't even explain it. But everything I know as a human being, everything that I am tells me that it was real. I was given something wonderful, something that changed me forever, a vision of the universe that tells us undeniably that we are not, that none of us, are alone. I wish I could share that. I wish that everyone, if even for one moment, could feel that awe and humility and hope, but... that continues to be my wish.

If the alien figures presented in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and critiqued in "Midnight News" can be seen as embodiments of very traditional religion and theology, the kind that throughout *Contact* Ellie has rejected but which she has trouble replacing, the alien "Caretaker" she encounters provides her with a different, more sophisticated model for God. Contrary to her expectations of traditional religion/theology (judgment, intervention, commandments, etc), her encounter, while in surface ways similar to most human/transcendent outsider interactions, is far more in line with progressive and New Age spirituality than those we have discussed earlier.

On the surface, Ellie's encounter with the alien Caretaker adheres to the conventions of human interactions with transcendent outsider figures. Like other transcendent outsiders, the alien explains and corrects human error and limitations from a vastly superior moral and spiritual vantage point. In the film version, Ellie's answer to a key question (what will she ask of the aliens if she is allowed only one question) already hints at her expectation that they will play this kind of role: "I suppose it would be, how did you do it? How did you evolve, how did you survive this technological adolescence without destroying yourself?" Humanity will be the child, the adolescent just beginning to grow up, and the superior alien figure the wise parent or elder helping us grow and evolve past our childhood and (if possible) toward something more like them. The actual discussion, when it happens, plays out in a way common to many of the works which feature aliens as godly transcendent outsiders. The alien/Ellie's father provides, with little prompting, a fairly standard outside alien assessment of us. We are troubled, a "marginal case," "backward":

The picture, of course, was alarming. We could tell you were in deep trouble. But the music told us something else. The Beethoven told us there was hope. Marginal cases are our specialty. We thought you could use a little help... Last night, we looked inside you. All five of you. There's a lot in there: feelings, memories, instincts, learned behavior, insights, madness, dreams, loves. Love is very important. You're an interesting mix.

When Ellie presses him to say what he really thinks of us, he says he is amazed we have done as well as we have:

You've got hardly any theory of social organization, astonishingly backward economic systems, no grasp of the machinery of historical prediction, and very little knowledge about yourselves. Considering how fast your world is changing, it's amazing you haven't blown yourselves to bits by now. That's why we don't want to write you off just yet. You humans have a certain talent for adaptability—at least in the short term"

In the film, he merely says,

You're an interesting species, an interesting mix. You're capable of such beautiful dreams and such horrible nightmares. You feel so lost, so cut off, so alone. Only you're not. See, in all our searching, the only thing we found that makes the emptiness bearable is each other.

Ellie, apparently because of her Judeo-Christian background, expects the tests, challenges, rewards and punishment associated with traditional religion and theology (even after their conversation, she thinks of their relationship in these terms), but the Caretaker explicitly avoids them:

‘It isn’t like that,’ he said. ‘It isn’t like the sixth grade.’ [...] ‘Don’t think of us as some interstellar sheriff gunning down outlaw civilizations. Think of us more as the Office of the Galactic Census. We collect information. I know you think nobody has anything to learn from you because you’re technologically so backward. But there are other merits to a civilization’ (Sagan 358).

Not only does the Caretaker avoid a judge/lawman role; he mocks it, suggesting, with his comparison to “the sixth grade,” that it is a somewhat childish view (358). Instead of judgment and punishment, he is in the business of observation and information. He talks about love and dreams: “Oh, music. Lovingkindness. (I like that word.) Dreams. Humans are very good at dreaming, although you’d never know it from your television. There are cultures all over the Galaxy that trade dreams” (358). When Ellie asks if they care about violent civilizations developing spaceflight, he responds, “I said we admire lovingkindness” (358). But her conventional religious expectations, not easily dispelled, return. “That’s it?” she asks; “No commandments? No instructions for the provincials?” (371). “It doesn’t work that way, Presh,” he responds; “You’re grown up now. You’re on your own” (371). Even after the interaction concludes, Ellie cannot shake her traditional reading of their interaction and her expectations for the future; we’re told that “She preferred a fifty-two-year-long leeway between unacceptable behavior on Earth and the arrival of a punitive expedition” and that, despite what the alien told her, she suspects this is a transition to “microintervention” (370).

The emphasis in Ellie’s interaction with the Caretaker is growth, expansion, and development—humans have reached a point where they are on their own. They have reached a new stage. In the film, especially, the encounter is depicted as a kind of rebirth. Ellie travels through a winding, convoluted tunnel—and when she emerges and travels down to the simulated beach setting (plucked from the image of her childhood painting of Pensacola), she floats down from the ship in a kind of fetal position, suggesting her youth (and humanity’s in relation to the alien Caretakers). And since the alien takes the physical form of her deceased father, and plays the role out fully, as if the creature actually is him, the entire scene has the feel of a father-child meeting, stressing not merely the relationship between Ellie and her father, but the loving parent role to be played by the superior alien figures. The superior alien is akin to a loving parent helping a child to grow up to maturity and independence. This version of Ellie’s father repeats the exact words her actual father used, when she was a child, to teach her patience: “Small moves, Ellie,” he says to her repeatedly.

While in many ways the alien Caretaker Ellie encounters appears to be a kind of god-figure, the aliens ultimately function less as replacement gods and more as catalysts, higher beings who, in many ways, lead Ellie (and much of humanity) to moral, theological, and spiritual evolution. Ellie’s discussion with the Caretaker about his role suggests that the aliens are in fact closer to engineers (like her father) on a grand scale, coordinating vast cooperative projects between galaxies, such as Cygnus A, “the brightest radio source in the skies of Earth” (362). “Oh, it’s not just us,” he tells Ellie; “This is a...cooperative project of many galaxies. That’s mainly what we do—engineering. Only a...few of us are involved with emerging civilizations” (363). The universe, which he tells her is not “a wilderness” but “cultivated,” is getting “run-down” and will “be boring”: “So in Cygnus A we’re testing out the technology to make

something new. You might call it an experiment in urban renewal [...] It's good honest work" (363-364). While their creative projects are vast, they are not responsible for the "transit system" that has brought Ellie to this meeting; it was the work of, in Ellie words, a "Galaxy-wide civilization that picked up and left without leaving a trace"; "we're just caretakers," the alien tells her, but "Maybe someday they'll [the tunnel builders] come back" (365). Like humans, the aliens seek the numinous; the Caretaker tells Ellie about their attempts to find a message hidden deep inside pi, providing her with a clue that later leads her to discover an intelligence behind the universe in a very literal way.

Ellie's alien encounter places her on a spiritual path, the first stage of which involves becoming a spiritual seeker focused on defending the reality of her transcendent experience and allowing herself to be transformed by it. After her return, she is interrogated by Assistant Secretary of Defense Michael Kitz, who highlights the religious/spiritual underpinnings of her experience in an attempt to make her admit it was a fantasy: "'Our Father Who art in Heaven...'? This is straight religion. This is straight cultural anthropology. This is straight Sigmund Freud. Don't you see that? Not only do you claim your own father came back from the dead, you actually expect us to believe that he made the universe—" (378-379). Her story is obviously derivative, a patchwork of elements of her cultural heritage and mythology, Kitz continues, leveling charges at her she herself has previously aimed at the traditionally religious: "Meeting your father in Heaven and all that, Dr. Arroway, is telling, because you've been raised in the Judeo-Christian culture. You're essentially the only one of the Five from that culture, and you're the only one who meets your father. Your story is just too pat. It's not imaginative enough" (Sagan 379). If the aliens wanted to be clear, wouldn't they have kept her for a week and let her keep her evidence, turned off the Message later on, he demands? In the film version, Kitz (played by James Woods) uses evidence, science, and facts (weapons Ellie has used) against her, arguing that her situation is an example of a self-reinforcing delusion. After he challenges her to apply Ockham's razor to her story (as she applied it earlier to Joss' belief in God), another member of the council jumps in and asks her, "Dr. Arroway, you come to us with no evidence, no record, no artifacts, only a story that, to put it mildly, strains credulity. Over half a trillion dollars were spent. Dozens of lives were lost. Are you really going to sit there and tell us we should just take this all... *on faith*?" Yet Ellie defends the reality of her experience and, showing the depth of her enlightenment, attempts to understand and sympathize with her questioners. The events are so threatening to Kitz, she reasons, because the existence of the Caretakers must be, for him, "an unspoken rebuke": "He was a lineal descendent of a progression of leaders, American and Soviet, who had devised the strategy of nuclear confrontation, while the Caretakers were an amalgam of diverse species from separate worlds working together in concert. Their very existence was an unspoken rebuke" (388). Ellie foresees the transformations that are taking place and intuits that Kitz's fear is related to failure and being left behind, which enables her to feel sympathy for him: "And what account could Kitz give the extraterrestrials of his stewardship of the planet, he and his predecessors? Even if no avenging angels came storming out of the tunnel, if the truth of the journey got out the world would change. It was already changing. It would change much more. And she regarded him with sympathy. For a hundred generations, at least, the world had been run by people much worse than he. It was his misfortune to come to bat just as the rules of the game were being rewritten" (388). Later, as she is parting from the other members of The Five, Ellie notes that she "felt more capable of love than she had ever been" (407).

Despite the doubt and skepticism they face (as well as threats that they will be discredited if they speak out), Ellie and the others of “The Five” attempt to protect the memories of their experience and figure out a plan by which they can, eventually, safely spread their form of “good news.” They also appear to have adopted the morally/spiritually advanced position of the alien outsiders. Sounding something like Gulliver after his time with the Houyhnmymys, Vagay tells Ellie,

This planet is run by crazy people. Remember what they had to do to get where they are. Their perspective is so narrow, so...brief. A few years. In the best of them a few decades. They care only about the time they are in power [...] Therefore, we must convince them. In their hearts, they wonder, ‘Could it be true?’ A few even want it to be true. But it is a risky truth. They need something close to certainty...And perhaps we can provide it. [...] Ellie, we will change their minds [...] Think of what else they’ve made people believe. They’ve persuaded us that we’ll be safe if only we spend all of our wealth so everybody on Earth can be killed in a moment—when the governments decide the time has come. I would think it’s hard to make people believe something so foolish.
(Sagan 403)

“It doesn’t matter what they tell us to do,” he says. “All that matters is that we stay alive. Then we will tell our story—all five of us—discreetly of course. At first only to those we trust. But those people will tell others. The story will spread. There will be no way to stop it” (404). While Westerners Ellie and Vagay are both transformed, even enlightened, by their transcendent experiences, they are still scientists and, Ellie especially, fear that until they have convincing evidence, they cannot attempt to convince others. When Ellie speaks to Devi, however, she finds that there is another approach. “Whether they believe us is not very important for me. The experience itself is central. Transforming. Ellie, that really happened to us. It was real. The first night we were back here on Hokkaido, I dreamt that our experience was a dream, you know? But it wasn’t, it wasn’t” (405). “I will not permit anyone to trivialize this experience. Remember,” she admonishes Ellie, “It really happened. It was not a dream. Ellie, don’t forget” (406).

The second stage of the spiritual journey initiated by Ellie’s alien encounter is her recognition that her experience and the lessons it teaches about theology and our place in the universe have connections to, and perhaps are even compatible with, Palmer’s progressive spirituality, which she finds allows for a broader view of God and the universe to some degree free of the problems Ellie has found within traditional religion. In their final meeting in the novel, Ellie explains her work on pi, which she is scouring for a message that can’t be a fluke. Ellie gives him an account of her experience to release if something happens to her, but Palmer asks why she doesn’t just tell her story now. Ellie explains she wants to find the message first—this would be a real unambiguous message from God, a path towards a true religion that could convince everyone: “Then there are no sectarian divisions. Everybody begins reading the same Scripture. No one could then argue that the key miracle in religion was some conjurer’s trick, or that later historians had falsified the record, or that it’s just hysteria or delusion or a substitute parent for when we grow up. *Everyone* could be a believer” (419). Ellie assumes Palmer is skeptical of her story, that its message won’t appeal to him because it’s not about Jesus or the bible and doesn’t make humans central figures in the universe: “The story I have to tell isn’t exactly about Punishment and Reward. It’s not exactly Advent and Rapture. There’s not a word in it about Jesus. Part of my message is that we’re not central to the purpose of the Cosmos.

What happened to me makes us all seem very small” (419). To her surprise, Palmer says he’s a believer:

“It does. But it also makes God very big.”

“I’ve been searching, Eleanor. After all these years, believe me, I know the truth when I see it. Any faith that admires truth, that strives to know God, must be brave enough to accommodate the universe. I mean, the *real* universe. All those light-years. All those worlds. I think of the scope of your universe, the opportunities it affords the Creator, and it takes my breath away. It’s much better than bottling Him up in one small world. I never liked the idea of Earth as God’s green footstool. It was too reassuring, like a children’s story...like a tranquilizer. But your universe has room enough, and time enough, for the kind of God I believe in.

“I say you don’t need any more proof. There are proofs enough already. Cygnus A and all that are just for the scientists. You think it’ll be hard to convince ordinary people that you’re telling the truth. I think it’ll be easy as pie. You think your story is too peculiar, too alien. But I’ve heard it before [...]

“Your story has been foretold. It’s happened before. Somewhere inside of you, you must have known. None of your details are in the Book of Genesis. Of course not. How could they be? The Genesis account was right for the time of Jacob. Just as your witness is right for this time, for our time.

“People are going to believe you, Eleanor. Millions of them. All over the world. I know it for certain....” (Sagan 419-421)

Joss’ articulates a more progressive vision of spirituality—one less exclusive or literal and one that is compatible with, if not the same as, Ellie’s scientific approach and the universe it reveals. Ellie’s discovery, in this exchange, is the existence of a different approach to religion, theology, and spirituality, essentially a third option.

If the alien Caretaker has provided Ellie with an experience of transcendence that has transformed her view of the world and enabled her to find common ground with a progressive spirituality of which she had previously been unaware, the clue he provides her about a message hidden within pi ultimately leads Ellie to the final stage in her spiritual journey: the discovery of an intelligence behind the universe. Even before her studies reach a conclusion, Ellie already accepts she is engaged, at least partly, in a project as much theology as science: “If there was content inside a transcendental number, it could only have been built into the geometry of the universe from the beginning. This new project of hers was in experimental theology. But so is all of science, she thought” (Sagan 426). Contact ends with its scientist protagonist receiving two messages that we are apparently intended to see as parallel: the first, delivered to her by the man she sees as her stepfather (John Staughton), turns out to be a letter from her mother telling Ellie that her stepfather is in fact her real father. The other message, arriving by telefax from the Argus computer Ellie is using to decipher the signal the Caretaker told her existed in pi, is, for Ellie, proof that another figure she has dismissed is real—it shows the message in pi to be a circle, proof that there is an intelligence behind the universe:

Hiding in the alternating patterns of digits, deep inside the transcendental number, was a perfect circle, its form traced out by unities in a field of noughts.

The universe was made on purpose, the circle said. [...] In the fabric of space and in the nature of matter, as in a great work of art, there is, written small, the artist’s signature. Standing over humans, gods, and demons, subsuming

Caretakers and Tunnel builders, there is an intelligence that antedates the universe.

The circle had closed.

She found what she had been searching for. (Sagan 430)

In both cases, Ellie learns, she has spent her life rejecting her misperception of something. The father she thought was not really hers turns out to be real and, she now realizes, since he allowed her to disbelieve in him and instead accept Ted Arroway as her father, quite heroic: “The imposter had turned out to be the real thing. For most of her life, she had rejected her own father, without the vaguest notion of what she was doing. What strength of character he had shown during all those adolescent outbursts when she taunted him for not being her father, for having no right to tell her what to do” (429). Similarly, the God she thought was merely the limited image presented to her by traditional Christianity (and whom she rejected in favor of seeking alien beings), she has proven is both real and far vaster than she had thought. Like her true father, this larger version of God did not judge or punish her for her disbelief or disrespect.

In addition to its impact on Ellie and the other Chosen, the alien Message and the entire project to interpret it and build the Machine brings about a deep moral and spiritual evolution on Earth. Before it is understood, the Message is interpreted through a traditional religious prism. Once it is determined that the message has been sent intentionally and that it is sizeable, it begins to be called “the Message,” the second word capitalized as we capitalize the “G” in God, suggesting a similarity to divine communications or sacred texts. Many consider the possibility the aliens have sent the message as a kind of test—suggesting the aliens’ actions are interpreted through the prism of our sense of the roles God/gods can or have played. When characters in the film discuss what information the thousands of pages might contain, Drummlin cracks, “Moses with a few billion additional commandments.” In the novel, someone suggests, “Maybe it’s a tightly cross-referenced religious manual”—“The Ten Billion Commandments,” someone else adds (147). In a conference with political figures in the film version, Ellie unleashes her frustration with the comments of a representative from the religious right, saying that the message is “in the language of science, not the language of religion” and adding, mockingly, “If it were in the language of religion it would have come in the form of a burning bush or a booming voice from the sky.” Palmer, who enters at that moment, looks past Ellie’s sarcasm, suggesting, “But a voice from the heavens is exactly what you’ve found, Dr. Arroway...”

While the Message does become a kind of “Good News,” providing comfort and a sense of hope and possibility, it also prompts significant moral and spiritual advances, including humanity’s transcendence of nationalism and self interest and movement towards a greater form of cooperation and mutual interest, a sense of “one world,” the symbol for which Ellie notices on the hat of a worker as she enters the pod to begin her journey. Its mere existence is seen as “exercising a steadying influence on the quarrelsome nation states”; it is “taken by the whole population as a reason for hope” and “the best news in a long time” (125). “Now,” many begin to think, “there might be a better future after all” (125). This sense of humanity as being part of a sequence of spiritual and moral improvement, growing up or graduating thanks to the appearance of superior alien figures, is connected to perhaps the most significant element of the novel left out of the film—the way that the alien message and the building of the machine (the cooperation they force, the contemplation of the aliens and their views of us they prompt humans to engage in) bring about the beginnings of a global spiritual and moral evolution on their own, even separate from what the aliens tell the Five in their actual encounter. The US president’s comments about her faith when presenting Ellie the National Medal of Freedom suggests that the

Message and the Machine have helped to increase both a pluralistic view of religions and an expanded theological conception of God:

We had discovered that we are not alone, that intelligences more advanced than ours existed out there in space. They had changed forever, the President said, our conception of who we are. Speaking for herself—but also, she thought, for most Americans—the discovery had strengthened her belief in God, now revealed to be creating life and intelligence on many worlds, a conclusion that the President was sure would be in harmony with all religions. (Sagan 409)

We see stirrings of this moral and spiritual evolution in the way that Ellie and others begin to reassess humanity through alien eyes. Even before the aliens have appeared or said anything specific, Ellie and others carry on a practice that is, essentially, an exercise carried out by readers and writers of science fiction (and fantasy, myth, and theology)—assessing humanity and our world by attempting to envision how superior outside figures might examine it. Ellie and Vagay wonder if the aliens will know how “backward” we are and be accepting, but sometimes fear that we might seem to them as ants do to us (the kind of analogy proposed repeatedly by Wells’s narrator and other characters in *War of the Worlds*) (37, 46-47). At one point, Ellie wonders what the Vegans might think of our mass culture (132). She anticipates the specific weaknesses she imagines they will notice. For example, she wonders if we can get past “this penchant for dehumanizing the adversary” and if, perhaps, the idea of the individual is, in actuality, “maybe just another Earth chauvinism” (154). Ellie imagines these new perspectives are signs that humanity is growing up and transcending its adolescence: “Mankind has been promoted to high school [...] There were other intelligent beings in the universe. We could communicate with them. They were probably older than we, possibly wiser... There was a widespread anticipation of imminent secular revelation” (165?). Ellie considers that the Vegans will, in two decades, be able to see the progress we are making. At one point, she examines a statue of Napoleon and thinks, “From the long view, from an extraterrestrial perspective, how pathetic this posturing was” (207). Ellie alternates between this positive image of us as growing up and a negative image, from Vagay, of the aliens looking down upon us as ants or provincials, Earth as a kind of ghetto. When their journey deposits the Five at what Ellie calls “Grand Central Station,” she takes this as vindication for human beings, as a cause for hope: “What a vindication for the human species, invited here at last! There’s hope for us, she thought. There’s hope” (340). Walking on the shore of the beach in the earth simulation, Ellie is reminded of the first colonization of Earth’s land four hundred million years ago and sees this as a new age in human history: “they had crossed the ocean of interstellar space and begun what surely must be a new age in human history. She was very proud” (345). After her experience, Ellie compares this to a kind of graduation for humanity:

At the Station, she had learned a new kind of humility, a reminder of how little the inhabitants of Earth really knew. There might, she thought, be as many categories of beings more advanced than humans as there are between us and ants, or maybe between us and the viruses. But it had not depressed her. Rather than a daunting resignation, it had aroused in her a swelling sense of wonder. There was so much more to aspire to now. It was like the step from high school to college. (Sagan 427).

In multiple ways, this experience and these feelings have spiritual or theological parallels. Humans have, in a way, been “saved,” and feel the comfort of loving approval from a vastly superior being. But the realizations Ellie is reaching and the vision she has of transcendence and

of the relationship between humans and transcendent beings is reflective of the ideas and structures of strands of New Age theology and Eastern-influenced progressive spirituality.

This awareness of the alien observers, even before they have said anything or anything about them is known, also prompts moral progress. Again and again we are told how the building of the machine and the act of imagining the aliens' perspectives on our actions prompts human nations to cooperate and advance in ways that previously would have been unthinkable outside of a utopian fantasy scenario. Feuding religious leaders Joss and Rankin reunite, a coming together of apparent enemies echoed on a larger scale: "The signs of rapprochement between the United States and the Soviet Union were having worldwide ramifications in the arbitration of disputes" (165). Nationalism is increasingly replaced with a notion of us as one world, one race:

But there was also a notable decline in many quarters of the world of jingoist rhetoric and puerile self congratulatory nationalism. There was a sense of the human species... collectively presented with an unprecedented opportunity... it seemed absurd for the contending states to continue their deadly quarrels when faced with a nonhuman civilization of vastly greater capabilities. (Sagan 187).

Weapons systems are dismantled, "something the experts had called impossible and declared 'contrary to human nature'"; delegates to the "first plenary session of the World Message Consortium were predisposed toward cordiality to an extent unparalleled in recent decades"; Russian and Chinese scientists meet for the first time in twenty five years; a new organization, the "Institute for Peace Studies," is formed (188, 189, 190, 193). The "Advent" brings about greater efforts to end world hunger (222-223). The president doesn't want to send anyone who has worked on nuclear weapons on the journey in the Machine, and more and more progress is made in disarmament. The United States and the Soviet Union now have more trouble pushing their views on others, even when they agree—"The enterprise was now widely touted as an activity of the human species" (242). Ellie views this as a turning point in human history, coming just when a unifying force is needed:

It's hard to think of your primary allegiance as Scottish or Slovenian or Szechaunese when you're all being hailed indiscriminately by a civilization millennia ahead of you. Suddenly, distinctions that had earlier seemed transfixing—racial, religious, national, ethnic, linguistic, economic, and cultural—began to seem a little less pressing. (265).

Statements like "we are all humans" and the phrase "global civilization" become more common. In sum, "The existence of the Message—even apart from its enigmatic function—was binding up the world. You could see it happening before your eyes" (265?). Those who experience spaceflight, which becomes more common in the future of the novel, begin to feel a "planetary perspective," which replaces nationalism and trickles down to earth leaders. All of this results in an advanced, partly new human philosophy that takes the name of the Machine—"Machinado," "the increasingly common perspective of the Earth as a planet and of all humans sharing equal stake in its future. Something like it had been proclaimed in some, but by no means all, religions. Practitioners of those religions understandably resented the insight being attributed to an alien Machine" (315). Ellie sees this as a theological revolution, "If the acceptance of a new insight on our place in the universe represents a religious conversion" (315).

Ultimately, Sagan's novel uses alien figures to challenge both traditional religion and Ellie's atheism and to explore and endorse a movement towards a broader progressive form of spirituality that is free of literalism and exclusivism, which has an expanded sense of theological

possibilities which allow for conceptions far more sophisticated than the traditional God-as-anthropomorphized-judge, which focuses on transcendent experience more than faith, emphasizes growth and moral evolution rather than sin and punishment, and which is potentially compatible with scientific approaches to the world. The novel can be seen as a kind of positive exploration of this theological approach, which the novel endorses (and contrasts sharply with narrow traditional belief) but one that also acknowledges the difficulties many people can have accepting aspects of such a different, and in many ways more wide open, theology.

Getting to Know New Age Aliens

While *Contact* provides perhaps the ideal example of alien encounters as spiritual experiences and superior alien beings as loving, New Age gods who lead people from disbelief or traditional religion to Eastern-influenced progressive spirituality, in this section I argue that a range of popular, and in some cases acclaimed, science fiction films of the last four decades also use alien transcendent outsiders as god-figures to explore, assess, and endorse aspects of progressive spirituality and New Age theology. Drawing on the cultural phenomenon of UFOs Denzler described, these narratives depict first contact as a spiritual experience involving characters interpreting “signs” similar to divine communications and being “taken up” or chosen; they envision alien beings who possess magical powers and perform secular/scientific miracles; they put contactees in the position of spiritual seekers or religious believers; and in select cases these films consider the possibility that alien beings might be our creators. While these narratives do feature traces of traditional religion and some direct echoes of Christian myth, I argue that, like *Contact*, they also signal an interest in a movement away from the traditional judgment/punishment-focused traditional god-figure of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* to a more peaceful, loving transcendent being who, echoing New Age theology and literature on NDE’s, often appears as a being of light leading characters into an afterlife of continuing exploration (rather than a static heaven). In line with progressive spirituality, these alien god-figures typically focus on moral/spiritual evolution rather than sin and punishment and the direct experience of transcendence/enlightenment rather than belief or faith, while the works in which they appear attempt to present spiritual/theological possibilities that would be compatible with science and which are broader and more open in their notion of a transcendent being.

As in *Contact*, these films often present alien encounters as spiritual experiences involving aliens associated with a kind of heavenly light into which they depart, taking “chosen” humans with them on an afterlife-style journey. In Steven Spielberg’s 1977 blockbuster *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, protagonist Roy (Richard Dreyfus), is initially seared by light in his first encounter with the aliens. *New York Press* film critic Matt Zoller Seitz, in his article on the film for *The A List: The National Society of Film Critics’ 100 Essential Films*, explains the symbolism:

In the first act, the film’s hero, Roy Neary (Richard Dreyfuss), a suburban electrician and family man, crisscrosses the Indiana countryside in his battered pickup, attempting to restore order (light) to a state plunged into chaos (darkness) by UFO visitations. At a crossroads, his truck is nuked by otherworldly light so intense it sunburns half his face. (Seitz 70)

In this sense, it is also obviously significant that his more conventional, even conformist wife (played by Terri Garr) worries over how to hide his apparent sunburn so he will not look unusual. Enlightenment may have value, but it also sets one apart in uncomfortable ways; Roy’s

half-burned face aptly physicalizes his internal difference and symbolizes that it is at that point only a partial enlightenment: he knows that his thoughts mean something and are important (“This is important; this means something”, he says at one point), but he does not know what that meaning could be, or if he has simply gone crazy. When the aliens eventually emerge from the largest craft in the film’s concluding sequence, they appear flooded with light, seemingly angelic. As Seitz observes,

Throughout the finale, Spielberg cloaks the aliens in ethereal light and presents them in suggestive flashes. Like characters in a dream, their motives and actions are never explained—yet the director’s beatific images and increasingly sweet music tell us they mean no harm and that humanity is elevated by their presence. (Seitz 71)

The leader of a prayer service being conducted for those astronauts set to accompany the aliens mentions “God’s angels,” and though he seemingly does not mean the phrase to apply to the aliens, we cannot help but notice that *they are* in fact the beings that will be taking the astronauts away—and to wonder if the aliens are, or can be viewed as, emissaries from God or heaven or perhaps as replacements. The film concludes with Roy having his wish—like the figures described in the Martin poem excerpted in the epigraph to this chapter, he is taken, joyfully, into the light to accompany the aliens into space.

A number of other significant science fiction films of recent decades present alien encounters as spiritual experiences and align aliens with light, which (following Seitz’s analysis of the symbolism of *Close Encounters*) we might consider partly a symbol of knowledge and enlightenment. In John Carpenter’s *Starman*, from 1984, the eponymous alien initially appears as a ball of light flying away from his downed ship—the woman he encounters, and miraculously impregnates with a child that is both his and her deceased husband’s, asks to be taken up with him, but cannot. In Ron Howard’s later *Cocoon*, from 1985, the alien figures are *beings of* blazing light. The film emphasizes the sadness of aging and death as experienced by its elderly main characters. The aliens, at first unintentionally but ultimately willingly, provide an escape—youth and the possibility of eternal life for those they can take away, who they claim will live forever and explore and be teachers/learners. At the end of the film, they are taken up into a seemingly heavenly glow. In a scene echoing the one described in *Close Encounters* in which a priest speaks of “God’s angels” and we notice that the aliens are essentially functioning as such, the religious figure speaking at the funeral for *Cocoon*’s main characters (outsiders assume they died in a shipwreck) talks about them living eternally with God, but *we* know they are having the kind of afterlife experience he describes with the alien figures who have taken them into the light. Curiously, the film never once mentions the possibility of God or has the aging characters consider the religious implications of choosing to live forever with the aliens. That absence and the structure of this final scene position the aliens and the life they offer the characters as a kind of replacement. Or perhaps it is simply that aliens are a new form in which to wrap an essentially escapist fantasy of transcending death. In Iain Softley’s 2001 film *K-Pax*, based on a novel by Gene Brewer, protagonist Prot, who presents himself as an alien from the titular planet but may merely be Robert Porter, a man who broke down after killing the murderer of his wife and child, appears at the beginning of the film in seemingly heavenly light. When he is put into a mental facility, he eventually invites one of the many patients who have become almost his spiritual followers to return with him, like many other aliens-as-gods figures. At the film’s ambiguous conclusion, Prot either suffers some kind of breakdown, or his personality leaves the Porter body behind and ascends into the heavens in the beam of light that flashes into his room.

In Brian DePalma's 1999 film *Mission to Mars*, the surviving astronaut characters enter the inside of an alien ship near the conclusion of the film and find an interior filled with white light; while two of them wish to return home after their encounter, the protagonist, Jim (played by Gary Sinise), decides to stay, realizing he has been invited to journey with them. Like someone entering heaven or having a spiritual near death experience, Jim sees moments of his life flash by before the journey begins. The beings in *Knowing*, from 2010, whom director Alex Proyas calls "strangers"²⁸, also ultimately appear to be beings of light, revealing wings in the film's conclusion, though wings more like those of a butterfly than a typical angel. In a very direct religious parallel, they save two children and deposit them on an Edenic planet with a giant tree, perhaps starting the cycle of humanity again. As Roger Ebert, the film's most supportive critic, asks, "A new Adam and Eve in a new Garden of Paradise? [...] Or do they travel back through time, and start the process on earth all over again?" (Ebert, "Knowing").

In addition to their associations with light and their ability to choose certain humans to accompany them on heavenly journeys, these alien god-figures also often possess supernatural powers of a more obvious physical kind, performing apparent secular or scientific miracles. In *Starman*, the title character, disturbed to see a dead deer slung across the back of a hunter's vehicle in a diner parking lot, returns during the meal and begins to heal the animal, eventually resurrecting the creature to the sounds of miraculous music. He also has a perfect memory and the ability to manipulate machines simply by moving his hands. Later, when Jenny (Karen Allen) is critically shot, he heals her. Finally, he fathers a miracle child with her, though we have been told she is infertile, and tells her the child will be both his and the child of her deceased husband (whose form he has taken on). Of course, on one level, like *Cocoon*, *Starman* can be seen as an escapist fantasy—in this case a kind of science fiction romance novel in which a woman who has lost her husband miraculously encounters a super-powered version of him who can romance her again, run away with her, save her life, and impregnate her with a child that is his and her late husband's—in essence giving her a romantic experience that is both new and old, exciting and exotic yet familiar. In *Cocoon*, the visiting aliens possess enormous healing powers and seemingly miraculous immortality they can also share with the elderly community they encounter. Prot of *K-Pax* is responsible for miraculous healings as well, though in his case they are psychological rather than physical—like an especially perceptive therapist or wise spiritual teacher, he is able to discern exactly what some of the various mental patients in the facility need to do to heal themselves.

In her examination of the UFO phenomenon in the culture, Brenda Denzler explains that some considered aliens in the godly role of creator; alien god figures in this strand of films sometimes explore the same possibility, in this way potentially positioning aliens as complete replacements for God. In the concluding encounter of *Mission to Mars*, the astronaut characters learn from a tearful CGI alien that its race actually "seeded" earth and thus are not only responsible for our potential evolution, but also for our origins in the first place. Strangely, the tagline from the film's advertisements actually places even greater emphasis on this element of their role, playfully using a biblical passage: "Let there be life," it reads. In Alex Proyas' *Knowing*, this is also a possibility, since the film ends with the alien/angel beings beginning humanity again by planting two children on an Edenic planet which could also, if they have traveled through time, be the beginning of humanity on Earth.

Also like Sagan's *Contact*, many other works present belief in aliens as a kind of spiritual quest. Matt Zoller Seitz explains this was part of the point in *Close Encounters*:

Although Spielberg is frequently accused of sugarcoating the fantastic, the second act of *Close Encounters* depicts these same everyday visionaries as the secular equivalent of religious pilgrims whose glimpse of infinity wrecks their lives. (*Taxi Driver* screenwriter Paul Schrader, who did uncredited work on the film's script, envisioned the heroes' encounter with a higher life-form as a biblical event akin to Paul's revelation on the road to Damascus.) (Seitz 70).

That spiritual quest typically involves the interpretation of signs similar to divine communications. As in *Contact*, if the characters who encounter alien figures are often presented as spiritual seekers or religious believers, the messages they decode are also treated as, and have the qualities of, signs or divine communications. In *Close Encounters*, the aliens communicate through sounds and visions which only some see and hear. In scenes in locations across the globe, we see various peoples singing/chanting the musical sequence the aliens will later blast from their ship. More central to the plot, both Roy and Jillian experience inexplicable visions they ultimately learn are intended to bring them to Devil's Tower and guide them to the precise landing site when they arrive. Roy says of an early attempt at depicting his vision in mashed potatoes, "This means something. This is important." In *Mission to Mars*, Luke tells astronauts who arrive to rescue him about messages and signs in the sounds transmitted by the location and ultimately determines that it is a communication and a test—when the humans prove their humanity by solving a puzzle, they will be granted entrance.

The spiritual quest upon which these characters embark also typically involves enduring the skepticism and doubt typically associated with religious belief. As in *Contact*, Roy and the others who have seen the aliens or feel called by them are criticized as if they are religious believers. In one scene, the government official attempting to silence them levels criticisms often leveled at the religious, comparing their belief to children's belief in Santa Claus and suggesting they believe what they feel because it is comforting and makes life more exciting, not because it is true. Roy himself has great difficulties with his experience—"I didn't ask to see this," he says at one point. The results of his experience are a near breakdown and a traumatic isolation from his wife and family. Yet he can't shake his vision of the mountain, which feels to him like a kind of mission. Later, explaining to a military official why Roy and others like him who have gathered at the Devil's Tower, Wyoming site should be allowed to remain, Francois Trauffaut's Lacombe suggests they have been called. "We didn't choose this place. We didn't choose these people. They were invited," he says through his translator. In *K-Pax*, Prot begins to collect a ragtag group of believers (almost apostles) from among the other patients in his mental facility. The film makes much of the dilemma of whether or not to believe in Prot's otherworldly claims, which at one point are even challenged by a sinister group of scientists, even leaving viewers with a choice at the end. Like *Close Encounters*, then, the film is partly about a kind of faith and especially about the experience of enlightenment or transcendence—the call to it that the person feels and then the challenges of knowing what to do with that new perspective or belief afterward (and how to deal with the world, and especially the close individuals, who have not shared the experience). The therapist character played by Jeff Bridges wavers; when he begins to believe in Prot, his interest causes separation from his skeptical family. In *Mission to Mars*, Luke, the one astronaut who survives the first Mars mission, becomes like a crazed believer in his time alone on the planet.

While the films I'm discussing here feature traces of traditional religion and echoes of Christian myth, like *Contact*, they primarily use alien encounters to explore, assess, and to some degree endorse, aspects of New Age theology and progressive spirituality. When they echo

elements of Christian myth, their focus is on specific New Testament elements—not Jesus the fiery judge who will return to assess humanity and rule the world in some kind of Second Coming, but the peaceful, transcendent Jesus whose focus is on love and forgiveness, but whose message prompts misunderstanding and violent rejection. The epigraph quote from Seitz mentions that Spielberg’s *ET*, by being persecuted, dying in a sense, then coming back and ascending into the heavens, can be considered a kind of Christ figure. In *Starman*, the peaceful alien figure is persecuted by frightened humans and returns by ascending into the heavens, leaving behind a miracle child with Jenny (who had previously been infertile), which can be seen as a variation on the miraculous virgin birth of Christian myth. Similarly, Prot of *K-Pax* is challenged and questioned and not believed. The scene in which the scientists demand that he prove his knowledge with some striking demonstration echoes New Testament scenes in which Jesus is questioned and called upon to prove his supposed divinity. At the ambiguous end of the film, the question of Prot’s nature is left somewhat open—we can believe that he ascends into the light (and somehow brings with him the one patient who has gone missing) or that he has merely suffered some kind of stroke, and the Prot personality of Ray Porter has simply disappeared. Mark’s voiceover narration at the conclusion hints at the possibility that Prot may return, suggesting a kind of second coming also echoing the Christ myth.

Despite such echoes, like *Contact*, these films primarily use alien encounters to explore, assess, and to some degree endorse, aspects of New Age theology and progressive spirituality, including New Age emphasis on light and its depiction of the afterlife and progressive spirituality’s focus on moral evolution rather than sin and punishment, direct experience of transcendence over faith and belief, interest in compatibility with science, and a broader, more uncertain approach to the possible nature of the divine. Many of the films associate alien beings with light or present them as beings of light and depict them emerging from, and taking chosen humans into, blinding light. Being taken into an almost blinding light and encountering beings of light are features of the near-death experiences, or NDE’s, Raymond Moody has documented, beginning with his 1975 book *Life after Life* (and others, such as George Anderson, with *Lessons from the Light* and other books, have explored)—a feature which, through its repetition, has become a cliché of New Age or contemporary spirituality, as has the “life review,” which the quick flash of memories Jim experiences at the end of *Mission to Mars* represents in abbreviated form. Similarly, if these films present being “taken up” by aliens as a kind of replacement for or reenvisioning of transcendence or the afterlife, this is close to notions of the afterlife presented by much contemporary or New Age spirituality and writing about NDE’s, which replace more traditional notions of heaven as simply a place of reward with a broader idea of the afterlife as a deeper exploration or greater adventure, of which mortal earthly life is only a prelude or small part. That the characters have such experiences while alive rather than after death also echoes forms of Eastern and progressive spirituality which emphasize transcendence as an earthly possibility now and which focus on having actual transcendent experience rather than on believing or having faith.

Perhaps the most important function of New Age aliens-as-gods, and one that sharply differentiates the progressive spirituality they echo from the judgment/punishment focused traditional religion explored by works like *Day*, is that they often take on the role of a loving parent who, seeing us as foolish but promising children, attempts to guide and facilitate our moral and spiritual development. In such works, the alien figures typically hold forth about humanity, diagnosing, as a kind of transcendent outsider, our flaws, limitations, and misconceptions, either implying or directly stating how we can improve our “primitive,”

“barbaric,” or merely “childish” ideas and approaches. In *Starman*, the protagonist talks about us as a civilization that is really just beginning. We are “primitive,” he says, attempting to correct our moral approaches. Later, he talks about his own civilization, how much more civilized it is, but, and this is common as well, suggests they have lost something we, in our childishness, have. Prot of *K-Pax* says many of the same things²⁹. Our ideas are primitive and stupid, at least in the eyes of more sophisticated civilizations. We have heard but not listened to our best teachers, Buddha and Christ. “You humans,” Prot says, “sometimes it’s hard to imagine how you’ve made it this far.” But unlike the alien figures of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, these New Age transcendent outsiders rarely threaten or punish. In fact, they are even temperate in their criticisms, often softening them as a careful parent might temper criticisms leveled at a young child. We can and will become better, can grow and improve, even evolve, they seem to believe, with their encouragement, love, and insight. In line with progressive spirituality, the alien god-figures in the films I’ve discussed typically focus on moral/spiritual evolution rather than sin and punishment. In footage accompanying the dvd version of *Close Encounters*, Spielberg and star Richard Dreyfus suggest that part of the appeal of the story when they began the project was that it would be the first film to suggest we have nothing to fear from superior aliens. While the alien figures in the film have chosen certain human beings to hear their message and accompany them and perhaps embark on some greater journey or ascend to a higher spiritual level, there is no indication that they will judge or punish anyone else. Their focus appears to be on communicating and taking up those who have a desire to transcend, not on dictating behavior or unleashing punishment on others. At the end of *Knowing*, the more ambiguous alien/angel figures save two children from the destruction of earth, but there is nothing to suggest that they are behind the destruction or that it is intended as some form of divine punishment. These aliens, then, present the idea of a god-figure less concerned with punishment and judgment and more interested in connecting to those who seek them out.

Earlier I discussed how a key part of progressive spirituality is the desire for compatibility with science and even, in some cases, an almost scientific, exploratory approach to spirituality and theology. In some sense, it is about finding a form of spirituality and theology that would work with, rather than defy, the scientific worldview. *Contact* emphasizes this through the difference between Rankin and Joss—the latter is excited about the broader possibilities Ellie’s discoveries create for God; Ellie is excited that she is able to use science as a route to discovering and proving the existence of the divine, which she thinks will make it possible for all to believe, without faith or the divisions of religion. This is also on view in some of the films in the strand I’m discussing, many of which feature scientist characters finding a spiritual experience through their alien encounter. *Knowing* follows the *Contact* model perhaps most explicitly, featuring an atheist scientist protagonist finding a form of faith or spirituality he can believe in. Koestler, distanced from his religious parents (a mother named Grace and a preacher father), finds a belief system that is compatible with his scientific approach and, at the end, is in a position the director’s co-commentator refers to as “almost like prayer.” In some sense, this is like *Signs* or *I Am Legend*, which depict characters returning to faith, except here the main character does not return to traditional religion—as in *Contact*, through interactions with superior alien beings, he finds something closer to progressive spirituality, a belief system that fits into his scientific worldview. However, while Ellie clearly finds that the aliens are not God but that God does exist, Koestler does not need to know the exact nature of the saving beings, whose carefully maintained ambiguity Roger Ebert observes in his review and Proyas emphasizes in his commentary:

You know, it was about making it a celestial event, and making it feel like God's chariot and angels as opposed to all the same things that we've seen in films before, you know. I wanted there to be some ambivalence in the audience's mind about whether or not they were seeing angels or whether they were seeing spacecrafts or what exactly it was. The fact is, to me, again, it's an element of symbolism. These creatures come from somewhere else. We don't know what they are. Maybe they came to earth early on, and maybe that's the basis of Christian myth about angels, you know, or maybe they really are angels, or maybe they are aliens. Who knows? It's just that they are messengers, and they are guides to a better place, you know. They offer salvation to mankind, uhm, and that's what they're there to do, you know. They can't save the entire planet, but they can make sure that we get a chance to save a small part of us, perhaps the best part of us. So that's what their function is, and I wanted the visuals to convey that and to continue the mystery and not be overly expositional at that point [...] If back in the times of Ezekial, if this specific craft appeared to Ezekial, he would certainly have assumed it something sent by God, you know. And so, I wanted it to have that quality but at the same time in this modern day and age we have to have something that feels like it can function and it can work within the physics that we understand, you know. Nick Cage, John Koestler still reacts to it like it is a religious event that's just, that's happening in front of his very eyes because to him it sort of is. To him the notion that at this point in time a craft can appear that can possibly transport them elsewhere, to him it is virtually a religious event, and even though he understands that he's looking at something that probably has some sort of scientific origin to it, you know [...] I wanted to tread a line between whether or not this is something that is scientifically based or is something that is religiously based, and I think in the end, it really doesn't matter, in the end it's still functioning in the same way. It's just how you interpret it really."

This suggests an approach to theology which takes a more exploratory approach toward God and which accepts a degree of uncertainty about the nature of divinity and transcendence—exactly the kind of approach of progressive spirituality.

Earlier, I mentioned Gary Demar's article "Aliens as Cosmic Saviors," written for *American Vision*, whose aim is "restoring America's biblical foundation from Genesis to Revelation," in which he astutely observes religious elements in works including *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *Contact*, *Close Encounters*, *E.T.*, and *Knowing*. As a result of his literalist perspective, however, he sees the valuable theological speculation in such works merely as mistaken attempts to find or create secular/scientific alternatives to the "true" biblical God and "escape final judgment on God's terms" (Demar par. 22). He is at least half right: this strand of science fiction *does* reflect efforts to explore, and in some cases eschew, critique, or transcend, traditional or scriptural theological conceptions. But that is precisely why it is valuable and important, why it can be such a positive force. Of course it is natural that traditionalists, who are more concerned with perfect adherence to their specific scriptural vision of God or gods than with theological speculation or exploration, will be opposed—as, perhaps, will some from the opposite perspective who might see such works as rationalized religion. But for everyone neither devoted to a specific text nor certain there is nothing, opening up space for new theological assessment and challenging/exploring ideas about God/spiritual possibilities is

exactly what's needed to break us out of the false choice mainstream debate often presents between "believers" or "people of faith" who "know" God is exactly like their specific sacred text tells them it is (even if that figure hardly fits our idea of a compassionate and enlightened human, much less a transcendent being) and "nonbelievers," who reject religion (and with it, typically, any spiritual possibility) entirely on the basis of those flaws. The fact that traditionalists like Demar see the need to engage with and critique such works suggests a belief on their part that they do indeed have influence. These narratives open theological doors that literalist/exclusionist thinkers like Demar wish to keep closed, as the final line in *American Vision's* mission statement makes clear: "We realize that this task requires a strategy to 'Make disciples (not just converts) of all nations and teach them to obey and apply the Bible to all of life' (Matt. 28:18-20)".

Angels, Demons, or Both: Ambiguous Superior Aliens in Octavia Butler's *Dawn*

"The differences will be hidden until metamorphosis [...] Our children will be better than either of us [...] We will moderate your hierarchical problems and you will lessen our physical limitations. Our children won't destroy themselves in a war, and if they need to regrow a limb or to change themselves in some other way they'll be able to do it. And there will be other benefits." "But they won't be human [...] You can't understand, but that *is* what matters" (Butler 247).

In the second chapter, I argued that *The Day the Earth Stood Still* explored and endorsed a form of traditional theology that, much later, Lisa Goldstein's "Midnight News" challenged. In this chapter, I've argued that *Contact* and a range of similar films have used alien god-figures to explore and endorse aspects of New Age theology and progressive spirituality, including transcendent encounters with alien beings who help to facilitate moral and spiritual evolution for individuals and, in some cases, humanity en masse. It should not be surprising, then, that other works have used alien figures to question and challenge this paradigm. In this section, I argue that Octavia Butler's *Dawn*, the first novel of her *Xenogenesis* series, and the 2007 film *Invasion* use alien figures to challenge the ideas the other narratives affirm—the first calling into question the motives of alien god-figures and even challenging the very possibility of a transcendent outsider, both challenging the desirability of alien-guided human moral evolution of the kind many other works endorse.

Might moral and spiritual evolution be, in reality, difficult matters to judge? Haven't human civilizations themselves claimed to be bringing advances, "superior" cultures and practices and beliefs as a ploy merely to conquer, use, and exploit? Would vastly superior aliens necessarily be any better? Octavia Butler poses exactly these questions in her *Xenogenesis* novels, whose series title explicitly evokes strangers or foreigners, the concept of cross-species interaction, and the biblical creation. *Dawn* explores the promises, but also the potential problems, of a human encounter with a seemingly divine, godlike alien race who, like a divine creator, begins humanity on Earth anew.

In many ways, the alien race in *Dawn* fits the pattern established for aliens as gods. Section titles of the novel ("womb," "family," "nursery,") emphasize the sense in which the alien figures are facilitating a rebirth of humanity with the alien Oankali as our "parents." Speaking to Butler's protagonist, who in overt biblical symbolism is named Lilith, alien Jdahya specifically mentions the "rebirth of your people and mine" as the rationale for this "trade with humanity"

(41). Talking about our world, he explains, “Your Earth is still your Earth, but between the efforts of your people to destroy it and ours to restore it, it has changed [...] You’ll begin again. We’ll put you in areas that are clean of radioactivity and history. You will become something other than you were” (32). Like the aliens in the other works discussed in the previous sections, they comment on us from a morally and spiritually superior position, diagnosing our problems (especially what Nikanj calls our “hierarchical problem”) and physically healing and restoring us and even the earth itself (Butler 247).

In presenting a human encounter with godlike aliens, however, Butler forces us to consider possibilities that works with more utopian interactions with God-like aliens neglect. For example, if humanity can be made to change or evolve, if we are “improved,” as Ellie observes humanity is in the aftermath of the Message in *Contact*, might not something, perhaps our humanity itself, be lost as part of that process? This is partly a metaphor for and an extrapolation from human imperial efforts by supposedly “superior” civilizations—wouldn’t an interaction with a superior alien, Butler asks, raise some of the same problems? Couldn’t it become a kind of enslavement? The Oankali claim, perhaps arrogantly, to know more about our world than we do. “How can you teach us to survive on our own world? How can you know enough about it or about us?” Lilith asks (Butler 31). “How can we not? We’ve helped your world restore itself. We’ve studied your bodies, your thinking, your literature, your historical records, your many cultures.... We know more of what you’re capable of than you do.’ Or they thought they did. If they really had two hundred and fifty years to study, maybe they were right” (Butler 31). Lilith learns that the Oankali have improved her immune system and observes, “This was one more thing they had done to her body without her consent and supposedly for her own good” (31). “We used to treat animals that way,” she says; “We did things to them—inoculations, surgery, isolation—all for their own good. We wanted them healthy and protected—sometimes so we could eat them later” (31). Then, finally, “It scares me to have people doing things to me that I don’t understand” (31). This argument recurs a bit later on when Lilith and Kahguyaht discuss changes the Oankali have made to a carnivorous plant. “How did you make them stop eating people?” Lilith asks (Butler 53). Kahguyaht replies, “We altered them genetically—changed some of their requirements, enabled them to respond to certain chemical stimuli from us,” prompting Lilith to answer, “It’s one thing to do that to a plant. It’s another to do it to intelligent, self-aware beings” (53). Later, Lilith considers her position and concludes,

In a very real sense, she was an experimental animal [...] Human biologists had done that before the war—used a few captive members of an endangered animal species to breed more for the wild population. Was that what she was headed for? Forced artificial insemination [...] Removal of children from mothers at birth...Humans had done these things to captive breeders—all for a higher good, of course. (Butler 58)

Lilith’s reflections here position the Oankali as predators, as imperialists with native peoples or scientists with animals—the very analogies Wells presents in *War of the Worlds*. This debate comes to a head when ooloi Nikanj plans to “make small changes—a few small changes” to Lilith to improve her memory (73). When she asks what changes, the ooloi responds, “Very small things. In the end, there will be a tiny alteration in your brain chemistry,” which infuriates Lilith:

‘I don’t want to be changed’ [...]
‘*I don’t want to be changed*’ [...]

‘I don’t have a disease! Forgetting things is normal for most humans! I don’t need anything done to my brain!’

‘Would it be so bad to remember better? To remember the way Sharad did—the way I do?’

‘What’s frightening is the idea of being tampered with.’ (Butler 74)

Human Paul Titus tells Lilith that the Oankali “will always be watching” and says they have “made” more humans, causing Lilith to think of rebellion (Butler 92-93). Later, when beginning to “Awaken” humans for the Oankali, Lilith conceives of her mission:

Her job was to weave them into a cohesive unit and prepare them for the Oankali—prepare them to be the Oankali’s new trade partners. That was impossible.

How could she Awaken people and tell them they were to be part of the genetic engineering scheme of a species so alien that the humans would not be able to look at it comfortably for a while? How would she Awaken these people, these survivors of war, and tell them that unless they could escape the Oankali, their children would not be human? (Butler 117)

Lilith’s interaction with the Oankali clearly echoes that between Ellie and the alien figure in *Contact*, though with some striking differences. In that encounter, the alien’s initial appearance elicited Ellie’s love, coming as it did in the form of her long lost late father; this interaction in *Dawn* has come only after a long period of preparation enabled Lilith even to look at the Oankali. (Butler emphasizes the awkwardness presented by the physical differences between humans and the aliens, something stressed by dystopian works about alien oppressors but typically ignored by more utopian works, which tend to depict aliens appearing in human forms anyway, as we have seen). In *Contact*, the idea that the alien figure understood our culture was assumed and accepted—that he had entered Ellie’s mind and was simulating the person she most cared for in order to facilitate this interaction was unquestioned, not considered to be manipulation or violation. In Butler’s novel, the alien figure’s superior knowledge of us is questioned, seen as arrogant and unlikely—the possibility that it did things to Lilith without her consent is treated as a violation. Ellie considers the idea that, to the aliens, she and other humans will seem like ants, but she takes this as her fault (and ours) for being so lowly—Lilith takes it as a fault of the arrogant, cold perspective of the Oankali that they would treat us as we have treated animals.

An even bolder implication of Butler’s ideas is the possibility that cultures, worlds, and creatures can be so different, it may even be impossible to determine with certainty whether an encounter is loving aid or the cruelest oppression. Protagonist Lilith spends much of *Dawn* alternating between those two interpretations, and much of the plot of the subsequent novels in the *Xenogenesis* series involves feuds between divisions of humanity that crop up based on assessments of the beneficence of the aliens’ plans. The ideological assumptions of different creatures, as well as the physical features and needs of each, can be so different, such an understanding and agreement about the terms of an exchange might not be possible³⁰.

Butler’s aliens have a plan that will enable us to advance (and without them, we would be nothing at all, having destroyed ourselves and made the Earth uninhabitable in a final destructive war), but Lilith gradually comes to realize that they are dependent upon us as well—and that their interest in us is, in strange ways, akin to a kind of sexual attraction or fascination. Their help can easily become, or can be seen as, oppression of the worst kind, since it involves permanently altering the nature of humans in a biological and sexual way (making the aliens

appear as the type of the mad scientist running amuck, violating nature, etc, common since the beginnings of science fiction with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*).

But throughout, Butler refuses to decide for us who is correct, forcing readers to consider, or reconsider, all of the issues at play—defamiliarizing each by combining them in new and unexpected ways. For example, it is also possible that Lilith's frequent rebellions against the Oankali are motivated by a kind of instinctive racism, a revulsion at this alien other which is indicated from the very beginning of the novel. In early scenes, it takes quite some time for her even to be near an Oankali, much less to touch one. Later, after one of their many heated arguments over the strings attached to their renewal of humanity, what Lilith refers to as the "price" or "cost," we are given access to some of her other, less noble reasons for opposing the change—a potentially racist fear of miscegenation: "'I think I wish your people had left me on Earth,' she whispered. 'If this is what they found me for, I wish they'd left me.' Medusa children. Snakes for hair. Nests of night crawlers for eyes and ears" (Butler 41). Lilith's thoughts here suggest her concerns are not entirely principled—as much as she may oppose what the Oankali have done on principle, she is also afraid of a kind of physical corruption of humanity, afraid of physical difference and that difference becoming part of her and her kind.

"'You do something to me, something that simply mystifies me': Aliens as Sex Gods in Butler's *Dawn*

Another element of the superior alien God figure/human interaction complicated by Butler is the alien race's attraction to humanity. In other works, their interest in us is motivated by curiosity or a kind of parental love and concern. There are, at least in *Cocoon* and *Starman*, sexual interests that also develop: in *Cocoon*, the ship's captain character is attracted to the beautiful human form of one of the aliens, then repelled when he sees her true light form, then attracted and led into a kind of sexual intimacy in a later scene; in *Starman*, Jenny gradually becomes attracted to the alien in the form of her late husband, and, as we have mentioned, during their sexual encounter, he impregnates her.

But Butler introduces at least two complications. First, there is not merely one isolated sexual encounter between a human and one of the superior Godlike aliens—we are given the impression that the Oankali's *entire interest* in humanity, as a race, springs in part from a kind of sexual attraction to us. The rhetoric is initially similar to the paradigm scene in *Contact* and in other works, with the superior alien being expressing interest in our unusual combinations of traits, but then it is taken one step further, and we see that this interest is not dispassionate, not parental or platonic, but sexual or romantic. At one point in *Dawn*, Nikanj explains to Lilith that humans are what they call "partner-species" and goes further, casting their race as courtly lovers unable to shake the spell under which humanity has bewitched them:

Nikanj spoke very softly. 'We revere life. We had to be certain we had found ways for you to live with the partnership, not simply to die of it.' [...] 'We...do need you.' [...] A partner must be biologically interesting, attractive to us, and you are fascinating. You are horror and beauty in rare combination. In a very real way, you've captured us, and we can't escape. (Butler 153).

In a later exchange, the Oankali's sexual interest is made even clearer—and the aliens are portrayed as overtly lecherous figures. While some Oankali felt it would be wiser to wait to bond with the humans until they reached New Earth, Nikanj explains why others, like himself, decided against such a delay: "'But most of us couldn't wait,' it continued. It wrapped a sensory

arm around her neck loosely. ‘It might be better for both our peoples if we were not so strongly drawn to you’” (Butler 202).

In addition to making this alien race’s overall interest in humanity romantic and sexual, this complicates the ambiguous power dynamic of the novel—are the alien figures oppressors, or have we somehow, as Nikanj’s rhetoric implies, “ensnared” them? Of course, such rhetoric has often been used in human sexual/romantic situations, in the stereotypical scenario by male figures, as a way of justifying rape or harassment. But Butler’s strategy throughout the novel is to present both alternatives: the alien’s behavior *might* be oppression of the worst kind, or it could be incredibly enlightened behavior necessary in dealing with childlike humans. She reintroduces this dilemma when Joseph and Lilith are made to have intercourse through ooloi Nikanj. Again, the aliens “improve” a human experience: as they earlier improved Lilith’s weak human memory, here they increase the level of sexual connection and stamina between her and Joseph. And again it is uncertain whether this is beneficent evolution, or oppressive intrusion and violation, a duality clarified by the end of the exchange, in which Lilith, finding out that Joseph was “meant” for her, asks, “‘You... You chose him for me?’”, and Nikanj answers, “‘I offered you to one another. The two of you did your own choosing’” (Butler 165). And here, disturbingly, this change to human sexuality is seemingly permanent; when, later, Lilith and Joseph attempt to touch without the mediation of ooloi Nikanj, the experience is odd and repulsive:

Instead, he drew away. Worse, if he had not drawn away, she would have. His flesh felt wrong somehow, oddly repellant. It had not been this way when he came to her before Nikanj moved in between them. Joseph’s touch had been more than welcome [...] But then Nikanj had come to stay. It had created for them the powerful threefold unity that was one of the most alien features of Oankali life. Had that unity now become a necessary feature of their human lives? If it had, what could they do? Would the effect wear off? (Butler 219-220).

Lilith finds out later that the repulsion at direct male/female touch would go away when humans have been away from the Oankali for a while, but the product of human sexuality has been affected more permanently—now humans cannot reproduce, sperm and egg will not unite, without the Oankali.

The dilemma foregrounded by Butler and elided by other works depicting a more glorious and uncomplicated human/godlike superior alien interaction explodes most articulately at the very end of *Dawn*. Of the child it has given her, Nikanj says, in an effort at consolation, “The differences will be hidden until metamorphosis [...] Our children will be better than either of us [...] We will moderate your hierarchical problems and you will lessen our physical limitations. Our children won’t destroy themselves in a war, and if they need to regrow a limb or to change themselves in some other way they’ll be able to do it. And there will be other benefits” (Butler 247). “But they won’t be human,” Lilith responds; “You can’t understand, but that *is* what matters” (247). But again, is Lilith’s complaint sound, or is it a reaction born of prejudice?

Ultimately, if *Contact* and other narratives use alien encounters to endorse New Age god-figures and progressive spirituality’s emphasis on unification and moral evolution, Butler uses a similar scenario to complicate and challenge their perhaps utopian assumptions about transcendence, intervention, communication, difference, and moral/spiritual evolution. For Butler, it can never be entirely clear that a certain perspective transcends another or that an

evolution or transformation of some kind would be an entirely beneficial occurrence. The intervention of a transcendent outsider could easily be oppression or exploitation; human evolution could also involve deep and permanent identity loss. With the help of a superior god-like alien species, we may be able (or may be forced) to evolve and change—but the creature produced by that change and evolution will no longer be human. For this reason, *Dawn* ends with Lilith envisioning herself as a kind of freedom fighter dedicated to giving future humans a chance to escape the Oankali, even if she herself will not be able to. “*Learn and run,*” she thinks repeatedly (247).

Just Too Much Peace, Love, and Togetherness: *The Invasion* and the Costs of Transcendence

Yorish: All I am saying is that civilization crumbles whenever we need it most. In the right situation, we are all capable of the most terrible crimes. To imagine a world where this was not so, where every crisis did not result in new atrocities, where every newspaper is not full of war and violence. Well, this is to imagine a world where human beings cease to be human. (“Memorable Quotes for *The Invasion*”)

Like Octavia Butler’s *Dawn*, the 2007 version of *The Invasion* uses an alien encounter to question the role of such transcendent figures and the possibility, as well as the desirability, of human transformation or evolution. If transcendent outsiders of all kinds criticize us for our selfishness and needless divisions and the violence they produce, and the aliens in works like *Contact* help us to transcend them in favor of a kind of “one world” philosophy, not everyone is convinced such a change would be an improvement and that the alien figures bringing it about have our best interests at heart. *The Invasion* suggests that human transcendence of violence and division, exactly the kind of moral and spiritual evolution produced by the alien encounter in *Contact*, would turn us into an emotionless collective species, much like the Borg of *Star Trek*, and even moments in *Starman* and *K-Pax* suggest that, in transcendence, something, some life or passion or vitality, is lost.

The Invasion is partly a critique of the idea that human evolution and unification are necessarily good things and that seemingly negative aspects of our nature can or should be stamped out. Early on in the film, the protagonist, Dr. Carol Bennell (Nicole Kidman), whose role as a psychiatrist allows her to represent the general quest of humans to understand our nature and behavior, has a profound discussion with a Russian named Yorish, who explains he has little faith in civilization or belief in the possibility of change:

Yorish: All I am saying is that civilization crumbles whenever we need it most. In the right situation, we are all capable of the most terrible crimes. To imagine a world where this was not so, where every crisis did not result in new atrocities, where every newspaper is not full of war and violence. Well, this is to imagine a world where human beings cease to be human. (“Memorable Quotes for *The Invasion*”)

In response, Carol expresses her belief, related to her work, that things have improved and there is greater hope for the future:

Carol: While I’ll give you that we still retain some basic animal instincts, you have to admit we’re not the same animal we were a few thousand years ago.

Yorish: True.

Carol: Read Piaget, Kohlberg or Maslow, Graves, Wilber, and you’ll see that

we're still evolving. Our consciousness is changing. Five hundred years ago, postmodern feminists didn't exist yet one sits right beside you today. And while that fact may not undo all of the terrible things that have been done in this world, at least it gives me reason to believe that one day, things may be different.
 (“Memorable Quotes for *The Invasion*”)

In a later scene in the film, as Carol and her friend Ben (Daniel Craig) confront the reality of the invasion and the threat of those who have been transformed, Ben suggests that this is actually an evolution, people becoming like one because there is no other, and mentions a time when she suggested it would be great if people were as peaceful as she thought trees were. The alien invasion of the title, then, functions to prove her wrong; the film is a cautionary tale warning against thinking, as she does initially, that things will improve, that we can evolve, and that humanity would be better off if we were more peaceful and unified. The result of such an evolution, it suggests, would be the kind of nightmare scenario which occurs, the new humanity a mass of emotionless, indistinguishable beings. The end of the film is a return to the status quo. Carol sits at breakfast with Ben, who reads the newspaper and complains about all of the violence he sees, but since the film has shown us that a different way, evolved humans, would be worse, we are supposed to find it comforting (as Carol apparently does) to see that things are back to normal. As Ben speaks, Carol recalls what Yorish said earlier about how an ideal world is one in which “human beings cease to be human.” The film’s didactic message is that the problems we have are not that bad, that we don’t need or want an evolution or growth or change in humanity, because our positive traits are inextricably tied to our failings.

Like the transcendent outsiders of other works, even the much different invasion of Wells’ *The War of the Worlds*, the novum of the alien invasion scenario here defamiliarizes human failings. But in *The Invasion*, the purpose is the opposite of what it is with the transcendent outsiders of *Contact* or those in similar narratives. Those works assume we are unable to see or have become desensitized to our arrogance, separation, and violence—superior alien figures either tell us how bad we have been or, in the case of *The War of the Worlds*, reveal it by giving us a taste of our own medicine and treating us as we treat our victims. The point of these works is to show how we can be better, how we can evolve. They point the way to change, which they suggest is either necessary or simply desirable: In *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, we must change or be killed; in *Contact*, if we don’t change, we might blow ourselves up, as the alien figure says violent races typically do. In their emphasis on change and evolution as positive or even necessary developments, these works can be seen as progressive. *The Invasion* can be viewed as a conservative response to or critique of this approach. It assumes that we, like Carol and Ben, are aware of and lament our separation and tendency toward violence and imagine human moral evolution could bring peace and togetherness—or at least the film is directed at those who do. By depicting such an evolution as a nightmarish loss of emotion and individuality, essentially of our core humanity, the film defamiliarizes the current state of things, in which there is war and violence but also compassion and individuality, suggesting it is, after all, not that bad, and an evolution or change might be worse. Like Butler’s *Dawn*, *The Invasion* challenges the ideas about transcendence and evolution suggested by many of the works which present New Age alien gods, though it obviously challenges them from a different direction.

In a sense, works like *Dawn* and *The Invasion* reflect a genuine uncertainty about, and attempt to challenge or question, dominant positive utopian notions of what we would be like if we evolved or changed. This kind of dialogue should not be at all surprising; while for simplification’s sake, we often think of early science fiction as optimistic about progress and

later generations as more skeptical, throughout its history science fiction has reflected, depending on the writer, the period, and the subject matter, belief in or skepticism about the idea of progress on different fronts. The skepticism of Butler and *The Invasion* can be seen as partly a conservative perspective, if not in an obvious political way—a kind of skepticism about change and about the assumption that change will necessarily be good, a fear or sense that it must be questioned and examined. In Butler, that skepticism seems to emerge from an awareness that evolution and growth and “knowing better” have been excuses for the worst kinds of oppression and conquest. In its valorization of the present and dystopian presentation of an “evolved” future, *The Invasion* reflects a more obviously conservative belief that the status quo is superior or should not/cannot be changed. In some conservative thinkers, this may be a desire to adhere to the status quo, but others simply do not believe in the idea of human evolution or progress en masse, thinking instead that this only happens on an individual level and, perhaps, given their religious beliefs, is not meant to happen here on earth. Along the same lines, conservative thinkers might suggest that attempts at moral evolution en masse have sometimes led to disaster and that the kind of “one world” philosophy of *Contact* is thus neither possible or appealing.

In fact, even works which do support the possibility of human evolution or progress sometimes concede that something might be lost in the process. The transcendent outsider alien figures of both *Starman* and *K-Pax* admit to a sense that their more evolved societies lack some of the passion and vitality of the human life they observe. In part, this hesitation is also a reminder that, in attempting to envision transcendent beings and societies, we often struggle. The whole point is to envision what we do not know and have not done and, perhaps, cannot now experience. So it is not surprising that in this effort we sometimes have genuine trouble envisioning what such a transcendent life or society might be like—or more specifically in discerning how a life free of the problems of our own could still provide pleasure and challenge or (in the narratives of its fiction and of the lives of its beings) what conflict or drama there might be. What would the life of an evolved species be like, and would it be so different as to not even be human at all? One wonders at the purpose and life in such lives, as Prot and Starman do a bit when they see our more passionate lives.

What thinkers like Demar consider the danger of alien god-figures in science fiction narratives is actually their contribution, and the genre’s, to theological speculation and our discourse about it. The value of alien god figures is not, as Demar fears, that they will become permanent literal replacements for God, but that imagining sophisticated alien god figures, their nature and perspectives and their attitudes towards us, can help to do precisely what it does for Ellie and Joss and the world of Carl Sagan’s *Contact*—by providing a kind of model or stepping stone to more advanced theological thinking (and a way to assess and critique theological ideas), lead to grander, broader, more sophisticated conceptions of spirituality, God, and transcendence that highlight the narrowness, literalism, and simplistic theology we are often led to believe comprise, with atheism, the only two choices. And as works like Butler’s *Dawn* and *The Invasion* demonstrate, science fiction can just as easily, and helpfully, provide the tools with which to question and challenge those same possibilities, making the genre a kind of theological laboratory or spiritual playground.

Chapter 4: Voices from Below: Aspiring Humans and “Hierarchies of Beings” in Gene Wolfe’s
Short Sun and *Wizard Knight*

David: Mommy, don't! Mommy if Pinocchio became real and I become a real boy can I come home?

Monica: That's just a story.

David: But a story tells what happens.

Monica: Stories are not real! You're not real! [...]

David: Why do you want to leave me? Why? I'm sorry I'm not real. If you let me, I'll be so real for you! (“Memorable Quotes for *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*”)

“I’m going to become one of you, and in fact I already have. I did it when I borrowed your clothes. So now I have to act like one of you and walk, even though walking’s hard for me.” He smiled bitterly. “Do I look like a real boy to you?”

I shook my head. (Wolfe, *Blue’s Waters* 210)

Gigolo Joe: I *am*.

[*Being taken into custody*]

Gigolo Joe: I was! (“Memorable Quotes for *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*”)

I remind myself I was lucky to have had any time with him at all. What I'm not sure about, is if our lives have been so different from the lives of the people we save. We all complete. Maybe none of us really understand what we've lived through, or feel we've had enough time. (*Never Let Me Go*)

“I’m sorry I’m not real”: Pinocchio, Robots, and other Aspiring Humans

At least to adults, the moral lessons of the beloved Pinocchio story are fairly obvious: the importance of truth-telling and good behavior and the dangers of dishonesty and youthful rule breaking. The story suggests that the former will be rewarded with love, safety, and the preservation of one’s essential (and best) self, while the latter will result in terrifying transformations of character, even potentially the permanent loss of humanity³¹. The literal, visual transformations that happen to Pinocchio stand in for the less overt transformations of character the story is condemning; his extending nose and donkey ears and tail are vivid examples of fantasy’s “literalization of metaphor,” to use Ursula K. Le Guin’s useful phrase, enabling the story to function as a frightening cautionary tale for children about what can happen to them on the inside if they lie and behave badly (“Introduction” 30-31). Yet there is obviously more; what I’ve said so far covers the transformations Pinocchio endures but which, because of his eventual heroism, do not become permanent (his nose does not remain large; he does not ultimately become a donkey), but what purpose is served by having him be a doll or toy in the first place? How does his quest for full humanity (“I want to be a real boy”) function—what

didactic message does that aspect of the tale offer children? Wouldn't Pinocchio be more identifiable and his successes and failures more easily transferrable to the child audience if he were simply a real child in the first place?

The deeper didactic message and the nature of the device the Pinocchio story uses are less obvious and, I'd like to argue, illuminate another core strategy fantasy and science fiction use to explore not only human identity, but also theology and morality. If we apply our sense of how literary fantasy and science fiction typically work, we might observe that Pinocchio, as a nonhuman character (at least until the very end), is the novum of the story and thus that his purpose is likely to defamiliarize other real elements for the child viewer. I'd argue that the purpose of the story's focus on a nonhuman character desperately seeking what the film's human viewers have and take for granted (the chance to be a real child) is to defamiliarize humanity (especially for child viewers) as something to be prized—something which must be earned and maintained. Children take for granted what they are; the story of Pinocchio suggests, by showing us the perspective of someone who wants more than anything what they are privileged to have, that humanity is something special, something wondrous, something to be earned—and, most frighteningly, something that can be lost. Pinocchio can, through struggle, rise to the status of a real human boy, but through failure, he can become deformed and, even worse, sink beneath his present status as an imitation of a human to an even lower level of being entirely—an animal³². This is, in a sense, the story's deeper lesson for children as well as adults: that we should be grateful for the high position we occupy (think of the others beneath us, like Pinocchio, who would give everything to be where we are) and that it is our duty to maintain that position or status through moral behavior. Our humanity, and what comes with it, can be lost through failure; it is not ours to take for granted. The message of the Pinocchio story, and even more so the function of the nonhuman Pinocchio as a fantasy device, is important for two reasons. First, as the epigraph quotes already begin to attest, neither Pinocchio nor his function in his story is unique; in fact, there are so many Pinocchio characters in fantasy and science fiction, it is worth giving them a name and exploring how they work. Second, I'd like to argue that this device is, alongside the transcendent outsider figures I have explored in the previous two chapters, one of the main ways that science fiction and fantasy carry out deep and creative speculation about theology, human identity, and morality.

Because the dominant desire of characters like Pinocchio is either to become human or to *be recognized as* fully human, I argue that they can best be called “aspiring humans.” Since they are often beings below us, created by us, less real than us, or oppressed by us, in some ways aspiring humans can be seen as the flipside of the transcendent outsider figures. If transcendent outsiders comfort and criticize us from above, often revealing how small and childlike we are and how much room there is for us to grow, aspiring humans sometimes reveal our power and privilege and the responsibility that comes with them. Both, however, are outside figures functioning as mirrors, foils, and metaphors whose perspective on us, place next to us, or depiction of us urge us to be better—in the case of transcendent outsiders to be better because we can aspire to be more like them; with figures like Pinocchio, better because they aspire to be us (and we are lucky enough to have the opportunities they do not). The two techniques, common to myth, theological thinking, as well as much contemporary fantasy and science fiction, function together when writers create what we might call, following the phrase Sagan uses in *Contact*, “hierarchies of beings” (364). Creating transcendent outsiders and aspiring humans, and placing humans in imagined contexts with both, is yet another way that science fiction and fantasy, following myth and theology, contextualize human life. So as we envision “transcendent

outsiders” who comment on humanity from positions above us, we also create and voice “aspiring humans,” who comment on and defamiliarize humanity from a position, that is, in many senses, below us.

Aspiring humans come in many forms. As the close connection between Pinocchio and the robot (or “mecha”) child David of *A.I.* suggests, they often appear as robots or androids, cyborgs, artificial intelligences, or simulated beings. Both David and Gigolo Joe of *A.I.* are intriguing aspiring human figures, the first an abandoned child longing (like Pinocchio) to be real in order to regain a parent’s love, the second a sex mecha who, perhaps in defiance of his programming, has come to realize he is better at many things than his human creators. Some of the most interesting aspiring human figures appear in various iterations of *Star Trek*: Data, from *Next Generation*, whose ongoing quest involves understanding human feelings and eventually experimenting with an emotion chip and (involuntarily) real skin to experience them for himself; Seven of Nine of *Voyager*, a former Borg who goes through a similar journey herself; and the EMH (emergency medical hologram) Doctor from the same series, a holographic persona who gradually develops the ability to leave the sick bay and to create a genuine personality and identity. Similar aspiring human robot figures abound elsewhere in science fiction literature, cinema, and television. There is Sonny, of *I, Robot*, Andrew of *Bicentennial Man*, the replicants of *Blade Runner*, Primus and Helena of *R.U.R.*, and sympathetic artificial beings in several *Twilight Zone* episodes, some of whom discover to their surprise that they are not real and that the memories they think define them are merely “memory tracks” given to them at their creation. *Terminator Salvation*’s Marcus Wright, from 2009, is the personality of an executed killer from the past embodied (unknowingly) in a new form of Terminator—as a robot, he winds up achieving greater humanity than he did as a man, heroically saving savior/protagonist John Connor by donating his heart³³. In a more fantastic and mythical vein, the golem characters in Terry Pratchett’s satirical fantasy *Feet of Clay* go through almost the same cycle as such robot figures. On the villainous side, we find Agent Smith of the *Matrix* films, who memorably calls humans a “virus” and relishes the greater freedom he attains at the end of the first film; Hal 9000 of *2001*, and similar characters such as Vicki of *I, Robot* and ARIIA of *Eagle Eye*.

Other aspiring human figures are also less “real,” but are not robots in a physical sense: Rhexa and other copies created by the title planet in *Solaris*; McCabe, the simulated therapist character played by Kurt Russell in *Vanilla Sky*, who, finally faced with the reality that he is merely a character in the protagonist’s fantasy world when he discovers he cannot name his own children, protests pathetically, “I’m real”; and the virtual reality avatar played by Vincent D’Onofrio in *The Thirteenth Floor*, who likewise discovers his nature. In the class of aspiring humans we might also consider other toys alongside Pinocchio, such as the characters in the *Toy Story* films, whose lives are almost entirely focused on devotion to the child owners they hope more than anything will play with and value them; and the toys on the island of misfit toys in *Rudolph: The Red-Nosed Reindeer*, whose imperfections keep them from the chance to be loved.

A number of stories feature genetically created or modified beings, even human clones, as aspiring humans. The monster in Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is an early science fiction aspiring human figure. Dren, from the 2009 film *Splice*, which draws heavily on the structure and themes of Shelley’s novel, is even more clearly an aspiring human. Less obviously, clone characters in a number of narratives, while technically human, function as aspiring human figures because, in the context of their stories, they are seen as less. Kathy H. and other “students” in *Never Let Me Go* are human beings created from “possibles” to live short lives before their “donations,” after a series of which they eventually “complete” or die. The cloned “donor” or “student” characters in

Ishiguro's novel and Mark Romanek's film adaptation are technically fully human, but are not treated as such by their worlds, and their limited lives enable them to serve the functions of typical aspiring humans: defamiliarizing the power, privilege, and responsibility afforded most of us and, seemingly paradoxically, metaphorically representing our own limitations and weaknesses (in this case the fact that few of us actually do more with our longer lives than the cloned donors do with their more overtly proscribed ones). Cloned astronaut Sam Bell in *Moon*, from 2009, finds that he is not the original of himself (who has died) and that the memories he thinks he has of a wife and child are not really his. Likewise, the "Precogs" of *Minority Report* are human beings and eventually have their full humanity reinstated, but for much of the film, they are treated as mere tools or pieces of technology; as one character points out, "It helps if you don't think of them as human." There are alien aspiring humans as well, such as those in films including *Dark City* and *The Forgotten*, who try but fail to understand humanity.

It should be clear even from this far-from-exhaustive list that the aspiring human category often overlaps with others and that such characters can serve multiple functions in even individual works. There is overlap between aspiring humans and animals, for example. Many of the animal figures discussed by critics including Sherryl Vint and Carol McGuirk in a *Science Fiction Studies* issue focusing on "Animals and Science Fiction," for example, are in some ways similar to aspiring humans, such as the "companion-animals as judges of human values" McGuirk explores and those beings who, according to Vint, "remain in the category of animal, yet whose newly acknowledged capacities for cognition and communication position them for more equitable exchanges with human beings" (McGuirk 282; Vint 179). Vint's comment about the role, limitations, and value of animal perspectives could be applied to aspiring humans as well: "In sf, the animal can be given a voice to address and to look back at the human. It is important to remember that this voice of the animal in sf is, of course, a voice speaking *for* the animal, yet this need not make us reject the insights of writers attuned to animal behavior and human/animal interactions" (179). "Too often," Vint notes, "we construct animals as mirrors for ourselves" (181). Aspiring humans serve a similar function as such animal characters, though perhaps less problematically, since they are more fully imagined beings than animals. Aspiring humans also often overlap with monsters; some of the characters we will consider in Gene Wolfe's writing, for example, can be seen as monstrous threats (and at times are) and also as sympathetic, and sometimes even tragic, figures aspiring to a humanity that, despite their efforts, they can never possess (in this sense, his "inhumi" partly fit into all three categories: aspiring humans, animals, and monsters). In some narratives, characters transition from monster to aspiring human (the creature in *Frankenstein*, perhaps the most obvious example of this, appears as the former until we are presented with his own perspective) or, as in the case of Hal 9000, progress in the opposite direction. Aspiring humans can also become human, as in the case of *Pinocchio*, or reach some level of recognition for their personhood, as do the *Star Trek* characters I've mentioned.

Just as they appear in a diverse array of forms, aspiring human characters carry out a range of functions, partly because they can be mirrors and foils for us, important for how they see us and how we look in relation to them, and, at the same time, also function as metaphors for our experiences. Because they can voice or simply imply a critique of us from below on the basis of how humans have treated them, they often prompt explorations of human morality. In them, we often see the consequences or reflections of our actions. Additionally, their oppression or exploitation, even their denial of full humanity, can stand in metaphorically for the oppression and dehumanization of certain humans by others (in this way, some have suggested the clones of

Never Let Me Go partly reflect slavery). Often aspiring human figures are used to show humanity's prejudice, bigotry, and intolerance and the struggles of disempowered or minority groups to overcome them. This is sometimes the case with robot figures—such as those in the world of *A.I.*, in which robots are cruelly destroyed in “flesh fairs,” and in the film version of Asimov's *I, Robot*, whose clever ironic opening (accompanied by Stevie Wonder's “Superstition”) presents black police detective Spooner misidentifying a robot character as a criminal because of his anti-robot bias. The holographic doctor in *Star Trek Voyager* endures a series of struggles against bias and prejudice in his quest to be acknowledged as a person. Interestingly, the treatment of such aspiring human figures often matches the treatment of transcendent outsiders—we noted that, in works like *Starman* and *K-Pax*, peaceful transcendent outsiders are treated harshly, even attacked and brutalized, carrying on the Christ-motif of the peaceful loving superior being whom humanity, in its foolish ignorance and brutality, tries to persecute or destroy rather than listen to and learn from.

If transcendent outsiders explore theology by embodying god-figures, aspiring humans do the same by putting *us* in theological roles as their creators/gods/moral exemplars. Stories exploring what aspiring humans expect from us and how we should treat them allow writers to explore how we might envision, and what we might expect from, a god-figure. When aspiring humans put us in the roles of god-figures to explore theology, they play our parts and so their plights can stand in for ours. Their incompleteness or unreality can express our own disappointment with our mortality; their search for recognition or full humanity, our desire for an afterlife or immortality. For example, the cloned “students” of *Never Let Me Go* and those who support them hope that they will be given extra time or that conditions might change because they possess souls, can create art, or can fall in love—exactly the reasons why humans often reason we are different from other creatures and cannot simply disappear into nothingness upon death. In their experiences of confusion (Who are they? Where do they belong?) and abandonment, aspiring human figures also reflect our fears about being creators and parents and, often at the same time, our own feelings that we have been abandoned by parents who failed to prepare us for the world. When mother Monica leaves mecha boy David in *A.I.*, she apologizes for failing in her role: “Let go, David! Let go! I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the world.” As in *Frankenstein*, humans have made or obtained such creatures but then abandoned them without educating them about the world, leaving them to face the harshness of human cruelty and to learn about their natures on their own. Works such as *Frankenstein* and the film *Splice* clearly express anxiety about humans adopting the role of a creator, since we seem incapable of properly preparing our creations for the world in which they will find themselves aberrations, and, rather obviously, anxieties about scientific experimentation and its possible repercussions. Robot characters especially can reflect our fears about technological advances and the moral challenges they will raise if technological creations come close to being like living beings, if apparent lines are crossed or divisions muddled. Such scenes with aspiring human figures can also be seen as reflecting our sense of being abandoned by our parents—our recognition that no matter how much parents love us and attempt to prepare us, we eventually always wind up facing the world ourselves and finding we are not fully prepared for all that entails.

In some cases, aspiring human figures' disappointment at their creators, their experience of abandonment can serve as metaphors for similar human frustrations: anger at a God/gods who appear(s) to have left us on our own or, perhaps, not to have existed in the first place. In this way, such stories can explore atheism and reactions to it. Steven Spielberg's *A.I.* is a prime example of this; as Gigolo Joe tells David at one point, making the parallel quite clear, “The ones

who made us are always looking for the one who made them.” Another exchange between David’s creator, Professor Hobby, and a colleague suggests the same analogy:

Female Colleague: It occurs to me with all this animus existing against Mechas today it isn't just a question of creating a robot that can love. Isn't the real conundrum, can you get a human to love them back?

Professor Hobby: Ours will be a perfect child caught in a freeze-frame. Always loving, never ill, never changing. With all the childless couples yearning in vain for a license our Mecha will not only open up a new market but fill a great human need.

Female Colleague: But you haven't answered my question. If a robot could genuinely love a person what responsibility does that person hold toward that Mecha in return? It's a moral question, isn't it?

Professor Hobby: The oldest one of all. But in the beginning, didn't God create Adam to love him? (“Memorable Quotes for *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*”)

Steven Greydanus, Catholic film critic for *decentfilms.com*, perceptively suggests mecha David’s quest is intended as, or at least serves as, a metaphor for the human quest for God. Greydanus argues that the film presents an atheistic or nihilistic worldview: David’s quest is obviously futile; all the promises and images of God or spiritual help (and icons of Christianity in particular) prove fruitless, and it is only through the advanced robots who arrive millennia later that David is given some kind of consolation, though it is brief, and the film’s ending, often taken as a sentimental Spielbergian gloss on a harsher Kubrick conclusion, is at the very least somewhat ambiguous³⁴. As Greydanus argues convincingly of *A.I.*, aspiring human figures can metaphorically depict our human experiences of feeling abandoned or left alone without a visible or involved mentor or creator figure and of being flawed or unreal (in that we are mortal and die)—we will die and disappear or become useless as robot characters fear they will. Often, as with David, Frankenstein, Pinocchio or Olivine, a “chem” child in Gene Wolfe’s *Book of the Short Sun*, the aspiring human figure is created but abandoned and unfinished and thus pitiable and sad and incomplete. This structure is perhaps so common because it plays out, metaphorically, our own sense of having been abandoned by our maker (if we have one) and our sense, as adults, that we are on our own and beyond the help of parents who, during childhood, sometimes appear capable of fixing all problems. And herein also lies both a potential escapist pleasure and a source of theological speculation: if we are to play the God-role for beings below us, we can play the role of the God/parent we wish we had, which can provide escapist pleasure but also prompt us to ask and consider what that ideal creator/God/parent would be like.

We might say that aspiring humans often send the opposite message of transcendent outsiders: if the first group humbles us, aspiring humans suggest our power, privilege, and responsibility and thus urge us to use that power well (morally) and to value the privileges we have (and often they lack)—in essence, to *earn* our humanity as Pinocchio and many other aspiring humans must. But as aspiring humans sometimes stand in for us as well, they can also humble us as transcendent outsiders do, making us aware of our fragility and vulnerability. For example, the novel and film version of *Never Let Me Go* partly operate in the way that *Pinocchio* does: by showing us characters who will not have the length of life or freedom many of us do, the story urges us to see what we take for granted as privileges we should value. In essence, the story defamiliarizes length of life and freedom as things to be prized by causing us to empathize with beings like us who cannot attain them and who, even more powerfully, mostly seem resigned to their position and exist in a world which has essentially accepted their exploitation as

the cost of progress. We might feel, as a shocking wakeup call, a sense of the importance of using the privileges of time and freedom we are lucky enough to possess. Yet, the novel also clearly intends to challenge us on that same point—to ask us how many of *us* do more than live the lives others have chosen for us until our brief time here is complete. The film version has Cathy H. spell out this point directly in the closing narration, in which she says she thinks most of us are probably not much different and that all of us wish we had more time. This second shock, then, comes in the form of the realization that the beings with whom we have sympathized, but whose fate we do not think we share, are essentially also merely a different, more overt version of most of us. Whatever horror or sadness we felt for their fate we now see we must feel for our own since, though we often manage to push the thoughts aside, we are also mortal and have a limited amount of time and freedom. Of course, one can obviously react to that realization pessimistically as cause for existential despair (and find the narrative depressing) or more optimistically as a wakeup call to make better use of one's time and to ensure that, as much as possible, one is doing more than simply living the life others have laid out for him or her (in which case one might see the story as an affirmation of the value of seizing life and making it count, etc). Aspiring humans thus allow for, and sometimes force, deep explorations of human identity: in the eyes of such figures, or in relation to them, who are we? What is our position? Where do we fit?

Often, this fluidity in the roles of aspiring humans, and the uncertainty they create about human identity, causes human characters to wonder if they are inferior or superior beings, if they are above or below us—ruminations which typically prompt deep and valuable reflections about human identity as well as morality, theology, and spirituality. While typically aspiring humans are presented as sad figures who aspire to be more like us, they would not be such a useful device for philosophical and theological/spiritual speculation if it were not sometimes unclear what they (and as a result, what we) truly are—if we are above or below them, less or more. Thus at times, works featuring aspiring humans ask if, instead, they might actually be superior to us in certain ways. In the *A.I.* exchange above, Professor Hobby, who we learn in the film lost his own human son, implies a mecha child is perhaps better, “a perfect child [...] Always loving, never ill, never changing.” David will never change or sicken or die, so in that sense, his love is superior to Monica's, and even perhaps to her human son's. As Gigolo Joe tells an abused woman he romances, “Patricia... once you've had a lover-robot you'll never want a real man again.” “Are these the wounds of passion?” he asks, noticing she has been beaten by an inferior human lover. “You... are a goddess, Patricia. You wind me up inside. But you deserve so much better in your life. You deserve... me.” Unlike the abusive human man who has made her afraid of love, he will never hurt her, and he is better at what he does than any man. Later, he tells David, “There are girls your age that are just like me. We are the guiltless pleasures of the lonely human being. You won't get us pregnant or have us to supper with mommy and daddy. We work under you, we work on you and we work for you. Man made us better at what we do than was ever humanly possible.” In fact, he implies later when speaking of David's mother, humans fear mechas precisely because of their superiority, which means that, in addition to being better at certain things, they will outlast us:

She loves what you do for her, as my customers love what it is I do for them. But she does not love you David, she cannot love you. You are neither flesh, nor blood. You are not a dog, a cat, or a canary. You were designed and built specific, like the rest of us. And you are alone now only because they tired of you, or replaced you with a younger model, or were displeased with something you said,

or broke. They made us too smart, too quick, and too many. We are suffering for the mistakes they made because when the end comes, all that will be left is us. That's why they hate us, and that is why you must stay here, with me.
 (“Memorable Quotes for *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*”)

Similarly, in *Terminator 2*, Sarah Connor suggests that the T-800 might make a more consistent and reliable (essentially, better) father for her son than a human man, who might be cruel or abusive and who, regardless, will ultimately die (an interesting reversal, given that aspiring humans typically appear as children and transcendent outsiders parents). *R.U.R.* concludes with robots outlasting us and beginning a new creation as a new Adam and Eve. At times there is even confusion about whether beings are transcendent outsiders or aspiring humans. Some figures seem to fit elements of both categories or to oscillate between them at different points. Professor X of the *X-Men*, for example, is presented in the film series as something close to a transcendent outsider, if one more directly active in human affairs than many of those we discussed. Yet at the same time, as a mutant, he is also a persecuted member of a minority group that can be seen (perhaps unfairly) as aspiring humans.

Inhuman novum almost always raise a question, “Our betters or our inferiors?”. This contemplation, this questioning of our role and our place and our nature, this kind of reconsideration of it, is perhaps one of the primary purposes of this overall device of creating imagined hierarchies in myth and fantasy/science fiction. Aspiring humans and transcendent outsiders enable us to step back and explore our place, to contemplate what we are, where we stand and fall, how we are lowly, like animals, and how we reach higher. It is a way to take, for a moment, a God’s eye view, or merely a transcendent perspective, of ourselves. One could potentially do this without fantasy elements or novum at all, simply by contemplating our position in nature, among other species, and in space/time, and most of us would probably assent readily to the idea that this is, in quite a large part, what science and scientific speculation and thinking already do for us—what a trip to the planetarium does, for example. Imagining beings without aspects of human identity, but with some of the same elements or many of the same longings, facilitates unique and challenging discussions of what is and is not central to humanity, to personhood. In *The Book of the Short Sun*, a character who has lived her life under the water and outside of human society asks the protagonist, “Tell me. Tell us both. What does it take to make a person for you?” (Wolfe, *Blue’s Waters* 338). Aspiring humans facilitate such explorations of human identity.

In simpler terms, if transcendent outsiders function in many ways as parental figures who, gently or sternly, attempt to correct, motivate, comfort, and guide our development, aspiring humans function as children whose condition and behavior reflect our successes and failures in caring for them and serving as an example. Aspiring humans remind us that our behavior has consequences for others and that we are looked upon as models for emulation. Human characters in works featuring aspiring humans, and readers as well, are expected to relate to them in ways vaguely similar to how we relate to children. Much as it is typically considered a parent’s responsibility to educate and instruct and form a child, and the child’s failings or misbehavior are often seen as reflections of problems with the parent (ways in which the parent has failed to be an ideal example, etc), this is the case with aspiring human figures. The creature in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* makes this point eloquently himself—arguing essentially that his flaws are the flaws of his parenting, of his neglect and mistreatment at the hands of his scientist “father” Victor. And as we will see in this chapter, aspiring humans in Gene Wolfe’s *Short Sun* and *Wizard Knight* do so as well. Aspiring humans are also like children in the way that they

aspire to be us, or emulate us—as children unthinkingly emulate, and when they are young often long to be, adults. Aspiring humans are often tragic children, however, since what they long for usually cannot happen, at least without the intervention of magic, as for Pinocchio, or in the more limited way David's fantasies play out in *A.I.*

In general, aspiring humans help us to understand, and urge us to value, our humanity (as *nova*, they defamiliarize it as something to be treasured) and urge us to carry out our responsibilities (as gods, creators, and models for) those below us. Considered together, transcendent outsiders and aspiring humans are actually part of a single phenomenon—that of creating or imagining hierarchies of beings to contextualize human life and human nature, an endeavor literary fantasy and science fiction share with religious mythology and theological thinking. Both the conventional functions of aspiring human characters and the use of imagined beings for the purposes of theological speculation are apparent in the intensely literary science fiction and fantasy of Gene Wolfe, a writer more intensely focused on theology, and more didactically inclined, than most.

Two Genres, One Story: *The Book of the Short Sun* and *The Wizard Knight* as Explorations of “Proper” Theology, Human Identity, and Morality

At a glance, Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the Short Sun* and *The Wizard Knight* do not seem to have much in common. The first, a science fantasy series, concerns Horn, a father living with his wife and sons on Blue, a distant planet to which he and many others have journeyed from earth on a hollowed out asteroid they refer to as “the whorl.” It continues the events of Wolfe's earlier series *The Book of the Long Sun*, in which Horn is a child on the whorl mentored by enlightened priest Silk, and eventually connects to and precedes the events of Wolfe's even earlier *Book of the New Sun*, which takes place on a far-future earth hundreds of years after the whorl has been sent on its voyage. The two planets and the alien creatures of *Short Sun*, it has been noted, also echo elements of Wolfe's much earlier novella *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*. In contrast, the two books of the *Wizard Knight* series fit into the genre of high fantasy, connect directly to no other books Wolfe has written, and feature a protagonist from contemporary America who begins the series as a boy. So while *Short Sun* is the story of a father, something John Clute has noted is unusual in science fiction, *The Wizard Knight* is at least partly a more traditional coming of age story (“Stirring”). Yet these differences are less significant than they might appear, since Able spends much of *The Wizard Knight* as an adult (his actual age, like much of his identity, is often somewhat uncertain) and still plays a fatherly role throughout most of the second book, mentoring younger figures as Horn does throughout *Short Sun*.

Despite the surface differences, a closer look at Wolfe's series reveals that in countless ways, the two mirror each other enough to be considered subtly different retellings of the same narrative, articulating in similar didactic style almost the same thematic aims. Each series focuses on a Christ-figure hero who has died and been resurrected and who has a complex identity and seemingly magical powers (Horn/Silk is thought to be a witch; Able is called a wizard); the assistance of beings above him to whom he has some kind of allegiance or connection (Able to the warrior god Valfather, Horn/Silk to the alien Neighbors); and an ever-growing set of human and nonhuman companions, including a dog with special powers, a beautiful woman from another world, and an array of human mentors/protégés and adopted nonhuman followers or subjects. Wolfe structures both as first person accounts written by the protagonists to family members from whom they are separated: Horn writes a journal to his wife

Nettle, Able a letter to his brother Ben. Each protagonist becomes engaged in a moral and spiritual quest to improve his fallen world and also understand his identity (individually and the identity and nature of humans generally): Horn's community needs good seed for crops and, as crucially, moral leadership—he has been sent by town leaders to return to the whorl to find the first and bring back Silk to provide the second; Able's land, Celidon, is on the brink of war, and he has been given a mission from the Aelf, a race from a world beneath his, to reform humanity. Protagonists in both series aspire to figure out who they are (where we fit in the world), how they should act, and whom they should worship, or, put in another way, Wolfe's three central concerns: human identity, theology/spirituality/religion, and (what, for Wolfe, comes as a result of a proper understanding of the first two) human morality.

In their journeys, protagonists of *The Book of the Short Sun* and *The Wizard Knight* discover and express deep disappointment over human failings and, on a larger scale, the moral regression they see in the worlds they occupy. Each finds that the source of such bad behavior is false/mistaken worship in their human communities—and, connected, a false understanding of human identity: Horn/Silk's world has fallen because it has lost its connection to the true Outsider god who enlightened Silk in the opening moments of *Long Sun* (instead, people still worship the artificial gods of the whorl) and fallen back without the moral and spiritual leadership of Silk; Able's is in danger because of King Arnthor's poor leadership and humanity's loss of connection to the gods above them (the Valfather and Overcyns in the world directly above and the Most High God in the top world) and mistaken worship of the aelf below. Both protagonists attempt to find, understand, and worship the divine: Horn/Silk goes from not knowing what god he believes in to encountering, worshipping, and passionately preaching for the Outsider as the only real god; Able starts by aspiring to reach the Valfather's castle and worshipping Michael of the even higher world Skai but, at the very end of the series, is called directly to serve the Most High God.

Both Horn and Able eventually attempt to correct their worlds' bad behavior, mistaken sense of their identity, and false worship—even publically lecturing about all three: Horn/Silk during a service before his son's wedding, Able with King Arnthor at dinner. In both series, Wolfe presents proper worship and moral behavior as the keys to fallen humanity's redemption. In *Short Sun*, ideal behavior consists primarily of sacrifice for others, as symbolized by Horn/Silk's giving of one of his eyes to Pig; in *The Wizard Knight*, probably because it is a story of knights and high fantasy, the model, the heroism of knightly service and courage in battle in emulation of the worlds above, is a more martial one. Protagonists in both series help lead their human communities against threats that represents humanity's own moral failings—thus a kind of literal battle against humanity's own demons. In both, these efforts succeed: the battle against the inhumis at the end of *Short Sun* is won; *The Wizard Knight* ends with Celidon saved from the Osterlings and the Angrborn, whose leaders are both killed. In each case, at the end of the series an account of the protagonist's story is spread: Horn/Silk's story (the book we have been reading) is completed and published by his family as he and wife Nettle wrote and published Silk's; at the end of *The Wizard Knight*, Able has found a way to get his story (the book) to his brother in America. Lastly, both works end with the protagonist's acceptance/understanding/revelation of his true identity: Horn/Silk, who has previously protested that he is only and truly Horn, accepts that he is Silk; Able tells us his real name, which he had long forgotten.

As Nick Gevers, one of Wolfe's most perceptive critics, has observed, Wolfe's novels can, without denying his artistry, partly be seen as a form of Christian propaganda and Wolfe

himself as “a very subtle but also very emphatic Roman Catholic propagandist” (par. 8). In his article on *The Book of the Long Sun*, the trilogy which directly precedes *Short Sun*, Gevers explains:

The entire 1400 page text, with its hundreds of characters, scores of voices, and countless veering twists of plot, is an exhaustive proof by Wolfe of the need to obey a simple injunction: transcend the material world. As a very subtle but also very emphatic Roman Catholic propagandist, Wolfe is commanding us to perceive our bodies and our physical surroundings for the pale mortal envelopes that they are, and rise into the divine light. Any godless secular world, he declares, is Hell, a place where any solutions are temporary, partial, empty. The *Whorl* is a reflection of contemporary Earth, that fallen spiritual wasteland. [...] False deities govern the *Whorl*, their worship, Lemur tells Silk, designed as a parody of an older, truer religion. Monstrous tyrants like Viron's Councillors abuse temporal power. And as its life-support mechanisms decay, the *Whorl* is doomed, a short-lived exercise in hubristic blasphemy. The way out is not fruitless secular endeavour, but rather an ascent back towards God, an exodus into His Creation, a stepping into Briah. (par. 8)

Gevers' analysis of Wolfe is both exhaustive and convincing, especially the point that religion is at the center of Wolfe's aims. I would suggest that Wolfe's major series, while far-ranging and complex, ultimately have three primary concerns: who we are, how we act, and whom we should worship—or human nature, human morality, and human religion/spirituality. Gevers does an excellent job of explaining the meaning and purpose in *The Book of the Long Sun* but has yet to deal with *The Book of the Short Sun*. To explore how it continues Wolfe's focus on his three primary concerns, and especially to show how Wolfe makes extensive use of what I'm calling the “aspiring human” figure, I'd like to focus on this series here.

In this section, I argue that in both series, Wolfe uses an array of aspiring human figures, who are sometimes also partly monsters or animals, but rarely only that, to facilitate this deep spiritual, theological, metaphysical speculation about human identity, morality, and spirituality/religion. In *Short Sun* the vampiric inhumis at first appear to us (and to Horn) as mere monsters, but as Horn develops deep relationships with them, they eventually come into focus as intriguing aspiring human figures whose brutality echoes and mirrors our own—in a metaphorical and literal way, they are our demons, and, like a moral barometer, what is wrong with them reveals what is wrong with us. They are to be understood, but also fought, on two fronts: physically in battle and morally through the redemption of humanity. In *The Wizard Knight*, the role of the inhumis has been split off into an entire array of aspiring humans that range from the monstrous Angborn to the brutal human Osterlings to the aelf, who are the most traditional aspiring human figures in the series. Like the inhumis and more traditional aspiring human figures, the aelf reflect our theological ignorance and resulting immorality and want us to be better models for them. My aim here will be twofold: to explore the themes and structures of these two series by one of science fiction's most acclaimed writers, and to use Wolfe as an example to illustrate how the devices of aspiring human figures and hierarchies of beings, in the hands of skilled writers, can be used to explore theology and contextualize human life.

While they have significant differences from each other, and as complex figures they display elements that would fit into many categories, both the inhumis of *Short Sun* and the aelf of *The Wizard Knight* can best be understood as aspiring human figures. The inhumis initially appear, both to Horn within the narrative and to us as readers of it, as mere monsters—

specifically an intriguing variant of vampires who fly, feed on human blood, and change their shapes but also appear to have scientific basis as a form of reptilian creature. Early mentions of them in the first novel, *On Blue's Waters*, suggest they are a serious threat, and that human life on Blue is partly structured around the periods (called "conjunctions") when Blue and Green are close enough in space for the inhumis to journey from the former to the latter. The early portions of the first novel also establish that, on an individual level, the inhumis threat has deeply affected the lives of Horn, Nettle, and their entire family. While the full truth that inhumis Jahlee created her son Krait from blood drawn from Horn's son Sinew is not revealed until late in the series, from the beginning, we know that this attack, and the inhumis threat it represents, has scarred the family.

Horn/Silk's relationships with the inhumis throughout the series enable them to come into focus for Wolfe's protagonist (and for readers) as aspiring human figures. First, on the most obvious level, the inhumis imitate us physically, shaping their bodies to be like ours and not merely to function as better predators. In one scene in *Return to the Whorl*, Jahlee, who has at this point become, in some sense, Horn/Silk's adopted daughter (later he speaks of her to his son Hide as "your sister"), asks him to assess her human appearance:

She rose to go, the very picture of a good-looking young woman herself in white furs. "Do you think I'm better as brunette?"

"Possibly." I considered her. "No, you couldn't be better. No conceivable change would be an improvement."

"Bigger breasts?" She tossed her hips, what Vadsig calls *wiggling*.
"Smaller waist? I want your honest opinion."

"Bad thing!" This from Oreb.

"My honest opinion is that you shouldn't try it. You might break in two."

[...]

[...] She raised her skirt higher to display her legs. "Pretty, aren't they?"

"Very."

"But not strong. They're as strong as I can make them, though." (*Whorl* 344, 265)

Connecting their physical differences to their minds, Horn/Silk tells his son Hide more about the inhumis:

"Most of all, be careful of anyone whose fingers seem clumsy [...] Hands are not natural to them, you see; because they are not, their minds never develop in that way as much as ours do. Imagine a baby who had no hands until he was old enough to make crude ones for himself."

"You said they were like leeches." Hide looked thoughtful.

"No doubt I did. Certainly there are marked similarities."

[...]

"You said they made their hands. Could they make paws instead? Like dogs or something?"

"I suppose they could. I've never seen it." (*Green's Jungles* 344-347).

On a deeper level, the inhumis seek to convince us (and themselves) that they *are* us. After traveling by spirit to the Red Sun Whorl in *Return to the Whorl* and finding that, there, she is physically the human woman she has always longed to be, Jahlee is pleased to describe herself as utterly normal and Horn/Silk as pleased to hear it: "I don't [have special powers]," Jahlee told the apprentice. "I am a perfectly ordinary human woman." The happiness she had in saying it

warmed my heart” (267). In his interaction with Juganu, another inhumu who takes on human form when he travels in spirit, Horn/Silk learns even more about the depth of their aspirations towards humanity. Like Jahlee, Juganu is excited to find himself in a fully human shape; Hide narrates, “This man was looking at his hands, and then he bent down and felt his knees, and hit one too, pretty hard with the side of his fist. He told Father, ‘I would never try this!’ (*Whorl* 346). Horn/Silk’s response, “Yet this is what you are. Try to remember,” suggests his recognition of the human spirit he addresses and perhaps hints at the possibility that the inhumu can be redeemed in some way. Later, Juganu tells Hide that “it was what he was in his heart, that the blond man on the deck of the big ship was the real Juganu, the man he was in his dreams” and then Horn/Silk that the experience of his humanity then was “the high point of” his “life” (*Whorl* 349, 351). “I knew you were human in spirit,” Horn/Silk tells him; “Remember that I had an adopted daughter—one I mourn. I had an adopted son once, too” (*Whorl* 352). The inhumu’s human aspirations go even further, however; Juganu’s description of their breeding practices reveal that even for each other, in their most intimate interaction, they pretend to be humans. The process, we learn, is a complicated drama which begins with the man building an elaborate hut to attract the woman. He builds it, Juganu explains “for decency’s sake,” choosing “a private place” and weaving branches to shape the hut even though, as Juganu notes, “Weaving is difficult for us but we can do it, and if a man wishes to mate that is what he must do.” (*Whorl* 385) When the woman appears, the two shape themselves physically and craft stories explaining their arrival and human roles for them to play:

“He knows. He reshapes himself, then, becoming a man both young and strong. Within—”

I said, “You can’t do that.” It got me a look from Father.

“She has made herself such a woman as young men dream of. You have told me about your daughter Jahlee, how lovely she was. Your son has told me, too. That is how the woman looks when he sees her in the dimness of the hut he built and made beautiful for her. [...]

[...]

“In this hut they love as men and women love. There is a game they play. I think, Rajan, that you can guess what that game is.”

His pet said, “Tell bird.”

“He is a human man for her, and she is a human woman for him. He tells her that he came to Green on a lander, as human men do, and she tells him that she ran away from her father’s house and happened upon his beautiful hut. It is not a lie.”

I wanted to say that it was, but Father said, “No, it isn’t. I understand. It is a drama.”

“Exactly. They are the audience as well as the actors. I have been an actor, Rajan.”

Father said, “I understand,” again.

“This lasts all night. In the morning, when the sun’s hot kisses fall on the water, they say, ‘We must wash ourselves after so much love.’ They swim together, and she releases her eggs and he his sperm, and it is over.” (*Whorl* 385-386)

In a deep sense, the inhumu’s mating ritual is an act of imitation—a “drama” as Horn/Silk calls it and Juganu accepts, but one which involves the inhumu playing out the parts of the humans they

wish they were, the humans that, in spirit, they actually are. They reproduce by pretending to be other than what they are—by pretending to be fully human³⁵. The inhumis's striving to be (and be seen as) the human selves they feel they are is, ultimately, painful and tragic in its futility. Ultimately, we learn that they draw their minds from us; this, the “secret” of the inhumis hinted at throughout the series, is revealed when Jahlee confesses it to Nettle, who holds her as the inhumis is dying:

“Without blood, our children have no minds.”

I shouted, “*Don't!*”

“Closer, Rani. It's a great secret.”

“You're betraying your own kind,” I told her.

“I hate my kind. Listen, please, Rani.”

“Yes,” you whispered. “I hear you.”

[...]

“We take their minds from your blood. Their minds are yours. Here, long ago, I drank the blood of your small son. Krait was my son, the only one who lived with the mind it took from yours.”

She gasped, and when she spoke again I could scarcely hear her, although I bent as close as you did. “Without you, we are only animals. Animals that fly, and drink blood by night.” (*Whorl* 317)

Similarly, the aelf of *The Wizard Knight* are modeled after us, are less “real” than we are, shape themselves to look like us, and desire our approval and attention. Like the inhumis, the aelf at times make use of human blood; though they can be mischievous, and though Wolfe suggests humans do themselves great harm by worshipping them, the aelf are not the predatory, monstrous figures the inhumis are. In an echo of Jahlee's attempts to shape herself into an attractive woman, aelf Baki flirts with Toug to see if she can pull off an imitation of a human woman:

He tried to comfort her, as Ulfa had tried sometimes to comfort him.

When her sobs had subsided to gulps, she said, “I knew I could if you could. I—I made my fingers more clawy. But I was not careful enough.”

Toug nodded, wanting to say it didn't matter, but not knowing how to say it.

“I want to be like you. The other half.”

He did not understand. When she began to change he jumped, more frightened than when it seemed both must fall.

Obscured by swirling smoke, her coppery skin turned pink and peach. “Do I look right now, Lord?”

“You—you're...”

“Naked. I know. We do not wear clothes.” She smiled. “But I am the other half. This is what Queen Disiri did for Sir Able to m-make him love her, and I can do it too. See?”

Toug managed to nod.

“We will have to find clothes and boots. Here.”

It was his sword belt. He buckled it on, then took off his green cloak and put it around her.

“Thank you, Lord. It is the wrong color, but I know you mean well.”

“It's green.”

She nodded. “Disiri’s color. But I cannot go around this castle naked, though the men are blind.”

“You still have red hair. Redheads look nice in green.” His mother had told him that once.

“Do we? Then it will be all right. And I look...”

“You’re beautiful!”

She laughed, wiping away the last tears. “But am I of your kind? Do I look right in every way?”

“Well, your teeth aren’t exactly like ours.”

“I know. I will try not to show them.” (*Wizard* 93)

Like the inhumis, the aelf are also less real than we are. In one scene, Baki explains what materials Kulili, their creator, used to shape them:

“Have you ever built a house?”

Toug shook his head.

“But you must have seen all the things that are left over when the building is done, the odds and ends of wood, the warped shingles, and the cracked stones.”

Slowly, Toug nodded.

“We are what was left when the Highest God finished building your world. What He piled together and buried.” (*Wizard* 50-51)

The inhumis, though appearing as humans, are merely flying animals with minds and spirits they have taken from humans; the aelf are elemental spirits shaped into people out of cosmological refuse. As Bold Berthold tells Able, explaining why he would sometimes give them a drop or two of blood when aelf came and begged for it, “They aint’s but mud, that kind” (*Knight* 35). Able notices this difference when viewing or holding Disiri, despite her beauty and his attraction to her:

By the time she got out, I had noticed something so strange that I was certain I could not really be seeing it, and so hard to describe that I may never make it clear. The afternoon sun shone brightly just then, and the leaves of the fallen tree (which I think must have been hit by lightning), and those of all the trees around it, cast a dappled shade. Mostly we were in the shade, but there were a few splashes of brilliant sunshine here and there. I should have seen her most clearly when one fell on her.

But it was the other way: I could see her very clearly in the shade, but when the sun shone on her face, her legs, her shoulder, or her arms, it almost seemed like she was not there at all. At school Mr. Potash showed us a hologram. He pulled the blinds and explained that the darker it was in the room the more real the hologram would look. So when we had all looked at it, I moved one of the blinds to let in light, and he was right. It got dim, but it was stronger again as soon as I let the blind fall back. (*Knight* 56)

Not only is Disiri in some way unreal, like a hologram; Able finds she is also very light: “I picked her up. I have held little kids who weighed more than she did, but she felt warm and real in my arms, and she kissed me” (*Knight* 56). In addition, while the aelf live longer than humans, they are not immortal as we are. Garsecg explains this difference to Able:

“What will become of your spirit when you die?”

I tried to remember.

“Will it die too?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Mine will.” Garsecg pointed to the Khimairas. “So will theirs. You have been aboard a ship, Sir Able. What becomes of the wind, when the wind dies?” (*Knight* 154-155)

Later, Able explains the difference to Toug:

Kulili was thousands of creatures, but she had no friends. She made the Aelf to keep her company, shaping bodies of vegetable and animal tissues and chaining elementals in them to speak and think. They’re long-lived.”

[...]

“Much longer-lived than we are. But short-lived as we are, we’re immortal. Our spirits don’t die. It’s not like that for the Aelf. Dead, they’re gone completely.” (*Wizard* 45-46)

Even more fully than the inhum, who can also be seen as monsters or animals or mere echoes of human spirits, the aelf of *The Wizard Knight* are aspiring humans: beings modeled after us, aspiring to be like us, but less real.

Because we are their sources (in the case of the inhum) or role models (as we are to the aelf), Wolfe’s aspiring humans imitate or echo human failings, especially the theological, moral, and philosophical errors that are his focus: what we worship, how we act, who we think we are. Their imitation or echo reveals our error to Wolfe’s protagonists, enabling them to diagnose the problems to which they will eventually find spiritual and philosophical solutions. Throughout the series, the immorality Horn/Silk sees in the inhum reveals to him (with his knowledge of the secret that they are our echoes) the immorality of humans, and he realizes the comparison faults us more than it does them. As Rajan of Gaon, the city to which Horn/Silk agrees to be taken by citizens who believe he is Silk, Horn/Silk contemplates the differences between the threats inhum pose to humans and the threats humans pose to each other and concludes, surprisingly, that humans are more dangerous to each other:

An inhum drinks blood until his veins are full and his flesh is nourished again; thus satisfied, he goes his way, like a tick that falls off when it has drunk its fill; but there are men here where land is free for the working who want land, and more and better land, and others to work it for them, and they always believe that someone else’s land is better. They would crush the small farmers if I let them.

[...]

We have the inhum to prey on us, yet we prey on each other. (*Blue’s Waters* 246)

Hearing cases in Gaon and attempting to bring to Blue the kind of justice and rationality that he associates with Silk, Horn/Silk sometimes finds it hard to see the Outsider god in the people he judges:

I try hard to be fair, and to point out to everyone that if only they themselves had been fair, they would not have to come to me for justice. This I say in one fashion to one, and in another to another. Still, I thank the Outsider, and all the lesser gods, that I had no criminal cases today. The impressions of his fingers are on all these quarreling, handsome, mud-colored people; but the light is so bad on such days as this, and it can be terribly hard to see them. (*Blue’s Waters* 251).

Later, when Gaon is to fall in war, Horn/Silk plans to flee and tells one of his wives, who has been given to him from Han, that “I hoped that Han would welcome her back if Gaon fell” (*Blue’s Waters* 289). Her answer causes him to ponder, again, human morality: “She insists that

her sister-wives would surely kill her the moment they heard I was dead, and that if they did not her own people would cut off her breasts. What is the matter with us? How can we do such things to each other?" (*Blue's Waters* 289). At one point, Horn/Silk learns of humans kept by the inhumani as slaves:

"[...] Sinew's prisoners are or were their slaves?"

"Yes, we call them inhumans."

"Those men at the gate were afraid we were inhumans. Is that correct?"

They wanted to see my wrists; they were looking for the marks of shackles, I suppose." (*Green's Jungles* 368).

What might appear to be the most striking example of inhumani cruelty and immorality is actually, Horn knows, a mere echo of human behavior, of what we are doing to each other: at the beginning of his journey, Horn noted with surprise and disappointment, that Gyrfalcon, a wealthy merchant and one of the town leaders who sent Horn off to find Silk, kept a slave as his clerk. Horn has also observed that while humans enslave each other in overt, physical ways, there are all kinds of less literal obvious slaves.

Typically, Horn draws his own conclusions, the inhumani mirror focusing his attention on human failure and cruelty, but at times, inhumani point things out to him directly. Krait, the inhumani echo of his son Sinew Horn/Silk eventually adopts, notices humans' tendency toward dishonesty and Horn's tendency to settle for easy answers:

"[...] The thing that I like is that I can never tell when you're being truthful. Most of you lie constantly, as Seawrack does. A few of you are practically always truthful, this Silk you like to talk about seems to have been one of those. Both are boring, but you aren't. You make me guess over and over."

I asked what his own practice was, although I knew.

"The same as yours. That's another reason to like you. Seriously now, you need to think about your woman, not as I would but as you would. She's a human being, exactly as you are. Don't settle for an easy answer and put it out of your mind."

"I do that too much."

"I'm glad you know it." (*Blue's Waters*, 307).

In another conversation, Jahlee argues that humans are losing the battle with the inhumani and that our cruelty strengthens them:

"We'll win. We're winning on both whorls already."

[...] "Because you fight among yourselves more than you fight us [...]"

[...]

"You sell your own kind to use for weapons and treasure, she told him almost apologetically, "and the more numerous you are, the crueler and more violent you are. Your cruelty and your violence strengthen us."

[...]

"You took part in the war Soldo fought with Blanko. Who do you think won it?"

"Blanko," Hide said.

"You're wrong. We did." (*Green's Jungles* 381).

While Horn initially sees the inhumani as a monstrous threat, his experiences with them (and with more of humanity) facilitate his recognition of our own inhumanity. The inhumani may be "vile creatures," he says at one point, "but how can they help it, when we are as we are?" (*Blue's Waters* 241). "I wish sometimes that Krait had not told me," he adds, referring to the

secret that the inhumis' minds are our own, their evil merely a reflection of ours (*Blue's Waters* 241). Speaking of the brutality of the men and the inhumis aboard the lander he boards thinking it will take him back to the whorl (he learns it is instead an inhumis trap heading for Green), Horn notes, "but most of the men on the lander were as bad or worse, and more than a few were much worse. Were the inhumis who controlled it monsters? Yes. But so were we" (*Blue's Waters* 346). "We flatter ourselves with our horror of them," Horn/Silk writes at one point, "but are we really much better?" (*Whorl* 55). In his confession to Patera Remora near the end of the series, Horn/Silk says that the inhumis he has known "have been no worse than we" (*Whorl* 404). As Jahlee responds when he says she does not care about her race, "You are my race. You know that, why don't you admit it? Inside, I'm one of you. So was everybody who fought for you at Gaon" (*Green's Jungles* 376).

Horn challenges Jahlee's point by asking her if the inhumis that destroyed the Vanished People/Neighbors were also human, but the conversation that follows between him and two visiting Neighbors emphasizes the close connection between humans and the inhumis that plague them. Horn begins with a question:

"[...] Will the inhumis really drive us away as they did you?"

The first shook his head. "You cannot go where we are."

The second asked, "Back to your ship, you mean?"

I had forgotten the word, and repeated it.

"To your starcrosser, to the hollow asteroid that you call the Long Sun

Whorl."

"That isn't possible, I said. "There are very few landers in working order, and more of us every day."

The first said, "Then they cannot drive you away as they did us."

Oreb bobbed to that. "No go!"

"We must stay and fight." I felt my heart sink. "Is that what you're telling me?"

"We have nothing to tell you. We fought our inhumis a thousand years ago, exactly as you are fighting yours. Why should you listen to us?" (*Green's Jungles* 382).

The Neighbor's "our" and "yours" make clear that the inhumis are not merely, or even primarily, outside threats. They are not a common threat that the Neighbors faced while on Green and Blue and that the humans now must face as well, or at least not primarily. The more important element of them as a threat is their connection to the race they threaten. They belong, the "yours" and "our" suggest, to those they threaten—they are a part of them. This is an internal battle, a fight each race has had to endure with a part of itself, a part of itself the inhumis merely enhance, embody, and throw back at them. The inhumis the Neighbors faced were like themselves—in their form, with personalities and faults and powers derived from the Neighbors (it is implied that the inhumis have retained some of the powers of the Neighbors as well—this is Horn/Silk's explanation for how they have the ability to facilitate, with him, the kind of spirit travel that the Neighbors seem to perform). The inhumis the humans face are versions of themselves, our own weaknesses and flaws, the flaws Jahlee has listed and Horn/Silk has spent much of the trilogy scrupulously observing—projected by and then directed back at us. The inhumis, then, are ours to deal with, Horn/Silk realizes with sadness in this conversation, in the sense that a person might say that he must deal with "his demons." The inhumis are not an outside threat, really, but a metaphor for human evil—our struggle with them in the series is

another literalized metaphor (something that, in a work of realism, or even in conversation, would be said figuratively, is made literal and real—and is, in the course of the work, both real thing and simultaneously metaphor). (Le Guin, “Introduction” 30-31). The entire series, then, is about humans battling their demons—battling their own failings. Of course, for Wolfe, the source of the human immorality mirrored by the inhumani is our separation from the Outsider and, in his view an automatic consequence to that, our loss of a true sense of who we are³⁶.

The aelf of *The Wizard Knight* also mirror human moral, theological, and philosophical error, but while *Short Sun* emphasizes moral inhumanity to imply the other two failings, *The Wizard Knight* emphasizes theological and philosophical failings directly. As Horn/Silk spends a good deal of time observing human immorality, which we learn is echoed by the inhumani, Able notices human theological ignorance and mistaken worship (ignorance of our own identity and of true theology/spirituality), which he eventually learns is mirrored by the aelf. While the people of *Short Sun* worship the gods of the whorl, who are merely the personalities of humans, and are unaware of the Outsider god, the people of *Celidon* worship the aelf (who have become their “new gods”), beings beneath them, and have forgotten the higher (old) gods above. When Sir Ravd questions Brega, a woman of Glennidam, we learn that she, and probably others like her, have worshipped the aelf by offering sacrifices. In response to her giving him the name of one of the outlaws who attacked her, Ravd replies,

“Thank you, Brega, you’ve taken an oath, the most solemn oath a woman can take. You’ve acknowledged Duke Marder as your liege, and sworn to obey him in all things. If you break that oath, Hel will condemn your spirit to Muspel, the Circle of Fire. The sacrifices you’ve offered the Aelf can’t save you. I take it you know all that.” (*Knight* 52).

Later, Ulfa, of the same town, speaks to Able with embarrassment about their relationship to the Aelf:

Hesitantly, Ulfa said, “We try to stay on good terms with the Hidden Folk.”

“Do you succeed?”

“Oh, a bit. They heal our sick sometimes, and watch the forest cattle.”

“As long as you speak well of them, and put food out for them?”

She nodded, but would not meet my eye.

“Bold Berthold and I leave them a bowl of broth and a bite of ash-cake now and then.”

“We sing songs they like, too, and—and do things, you know, in places we can’t ever talk about.” Ulfa’s needle was fairly flying.

“Songs that can’t be sung for strangers, and things you can’t speak of even amongst yourselves? Bold Berthold told me something about it.”

After a long pause, she said, “Yes. Things I can’t talk about.” (*Knight* 62)

Even worse, the Osterlings, a race of cannibalistic humans described at one point as “what we may become,” worship, and sacrifice people to, even lower beings than the Aelf (*Wizard* 420). When Able tells Garsecg he sometimes dreams about the Osterlings, Garsecg responds, “So do I—they sacrificed to us while they held the Mountain of Fire [...]” (*Knight* 162). Later, describing the Mountain of Fire, Able illuminates the Osterlings’ motives:

It had belonged to the Osterlings, and they had pushed people into the opening at the top because it bypassed Aelfrice and went straight to Muspel where the

dragons are. If it had just been their own people, we probably would not have cared, but they raided, and ate people they captured the way they do, and pushed in the ones they would have liked to eat most so the dragons would help them.

(*Knight* 177)

At the same time, many in Mythgarthr are ignorant of the gods above them, whose existence they doubt or misremember. When Toug asks Able, “Only who’s the Valfather?” Able explores his protégé’s theological ignorance:

“Some people in your village pray to Disiri. Your sister told me.”

[...]

“When I talk about Overcyns, I don’t mean Disiri or her people. How many Overcyns do you know?”

“Well, there’s Thunor...” Toug hesitated. “And the Thunderer.”

“They’re the same guy. Name some more.”

After a long pause: “Mother says Nerthis.”

I laughed. “Now you’ve got me. I’ve never heard of him.”

“It’s her.”

“Let’s have some more.”

“I don’t know any more, Sir Able. [...].”

“You’ve heard a great deal of swearing since you came in here, and that may be as good a way as any to find out what men ought to revere. What names have you heard?”

“Uh...Frigg. And Forcetti? Is that an Overcyn, sir? I thought it was a place.”

“It’s both. The city was named for the Overcyn, because people hoped for justice there. Is that all? You don’t seem to have been paying much attention.”

“Fenrir and Sif, sir. And the Wanderer.”

“Nice going. The Wanderer is the Valfather. Now pay attention. You saw Saki reflected in a pool. But that pool and everything around it, all our world of Mythgarthr, is the reflection of Skai. Lord Beel gave me the white horse that we left behind when we climbed on the griffin. Maybe I told you.”

“Yes, sir.”

“The Valfather gave me Cloud, just like that [...].” (*Wizard* 35-37)

In an encounter with the Bodachan, or Earth Aelf, in which they give Able Gylf, a dog from the Valfather’s pack, a male and female Bodachan debate human knowledge about the Valfather.

When Able asks what they know about him, they answer:

“Nothing!” (That was the male voice I had first heard.)

“Nothing at all, really.” (This was the female voice.) “You know much more about him than we do. A lot of you think him the Most High God.”

“Thus they know less. [...].” (*Knight* 81)

Much as the inhumis of Short Sun both mirror and echo the moral failings of humans on Blue and Green, the aelf of *The Wizard Knight* replicate and amplify the theological/spiritual errors of the humans of Mythgarthr. As humans look down and worship and sacrifice to the aelf, forgetting or turning their back on their “proper gods” above, the aelf turn to dragons from Muspel, the world below them, and attempt to drive out their creator, Kulili. One such dragon is Setr, whom Able initially encounters in disguised form as the aelf Garsecg. When Able first

meets fire aelf Uri and Baki, their worship of Setr has turned them into monstrous Khimairae, as Garsecg explains:

“They are not black birds. They are Fire Aelf—or they were. These Fire Aelf are Khimairae now.”

“Bad news?”

“They serve Setr. We are shapechangers, we Aelf.”

I remembered Disiri and how she had been a bunch of different girls for me, and I said, “Yeah, I know.”

Setr cast those into the shape you see. He is a shapechanger himself, so potent that he can lend great strength to others. As they are, he made them. They cannot break his spell.”

High above a shrill voice screamed, “*Will not!*”

“They guard his tower still,” Garsecg told me, “or try to.” (*Knight* 144-145)

Near the end of *The Knight*, when Able prepares to fight Grengarm, another Muspel dragon, he encounters aelf:

Sea-green, many-colored, and fiery were the marching, singing Aelf who poured from the passage to hail Grengarm; but black was the robe of the bound woman they laid on his altar: long and curling black hair that did not quite veil her nakedness. Under it, her skin was as white as milk.

I stared, dazzled by her beauty, but by no means sure she was human.

One of the Aelf, robed and bearded, indicated her by a gesture, made some speech to Grengarm that was lost in the music and singing, and fell to his knees, bowing his head to the rocky floor.

Grengarm’s mouth gaped, and a voice like a hundred deep drums filled the whole grotto. “You come with spears. With swords.” The curved fangs his open mouth showed plainly were longer than those swords, and as sharp as any spear. “What if Grengarm finds your sacrifice unworthy?”

The singers fell silent. The harps and horns and flutes no longer played. From far away came the thud of mridangas, the chiming of gold thumb cymbals, and the jingle of sistra. My heart pounded, and I knew then that I had danced once like the dancers that were coming.

These were Aelfmaidens, twenty or more, naked as the woman on the altar but crowned with floating hair, leaping and turning, dancing each to her own music, or perhaps all dancing to music beyond music, to a rhythm of sistrum, cymbal, and mridanga too complex for me to understand. They twirled and dipped, stepped and capered as they played; and I saw Uri among them.

Folding his wings, Grengarm moved the way a big snake moves, advancing toward the altar. The dancers scattered, and I, almost unconsciously, drew the sword I had just found. (*Knight* 422-423)

The Aelf’s mistaken worship of creatures from a world below them in the spiritual hierarchy (Baki refers to them at one point as “the new gods”) has serious consequences (*Wizard* 51). As Garsecg explains to Able, “Grengarm was neither the strongest nor the worst. They plotted to seize this fair world and despoil it. I tried to dissuade them, for the Aelf should be objects of our reverence, as the Overcyns are yours. I tried, as I say. I failed” (*Wizard* 318). Setr himself poses a similar danger, as Able explains to Idnn once he has been defeated:

Svon muttered, "He'd been your friend, you said."

"He had been. But there was another reason. It was because I knew Setr had to die [...] We humans—we knights, whether we're called knights or not—get to Skai sometimes. Suppose that one of us, the best of us, tried to seize its crown."

They did not understand; I waved Skai and its crown aside. "Setr had to die. For him to die, my friend Garsecg had to die too, because Garsecg was Setr by another name [...]" (*Wizard* 333)

The aelf's mistaken turning from their proper gods to these "new gods" thus endangers the entire hierarchical world structure. But the fault lies not entirely with them; their error, and its consequences, are the result of, and thus serve to point out, similar humans failures to fill our proper roles. Baki reveals the motives behind the aelf's blasphemy, and explains how humans have failed them, in a conversation with Able, Toug, and Mani:

"I wouldn't judge you," Toug said miserably.

"You must! You are our gods! Try to understand."

Toug could only gape at her.

When several seconds had passed, Mani said kindly, "The gods of each world are the people of the next one up. That's Skai for us, and us for Aelfrice."

I added, "Aelfrice for Muspel, the sixth world."

Baki signed [*sic*] again. You know all about it." There was resignation in her voice.

[...]

"[...] You renounced Setr and accepted Toug. What harm can my knowledge do after that?"

"I am ashamed for my people. For the Fire Aelf."

[...]

Baki shrugged. "There is not much to tell. You know we can visit your world?"

Toug nodded. "The Queen of the Wood did."

"And your kind can visit our Aelfrice?"

He nodded again. "I've been there."

"We came up here, and saw how rarely you heeded our prayers. How foolish you were, and how cruel. We visited the world below our own. It is a beautiful place, a place of fire, and there are wondrous beings there, beings powerful and wise. We proclaimed them our gods."

"You can do that?" Toug's eyes were wide.

"We did. We prayed to them, sacrificed our own folk on their altars, invited them to come to Aelfrice to aid us in our struggle against Kulili.

Toug said softly, "Your mother."

"Our mother, yes. We were trying to kill her, as we had for centuries. The gods from Muspel were to help us in that, forging a unified plan."

Toug shivered.

"But it wasn't all of you, was it?" I said. "It was only you Fire Aelf at first."

"We were the leaders, and we followed Setr."

"And Grengarm?"

Baki raised her eyebrows. She was squatting in the straw with her knees pressed to her breasts; yet it seemed that she was about to flee.

Toug said, “Did you know that Sir Able killed Grengarm?”

“No.” When no one else spoke, Baki repeated, “No...”

“You weren’t among those who danced for him here in Mythgarhr,” I said. “Where were you?”

“It was hard for him to come here.” It seemed she spoke to herself. The yellow fire in her eyes was smoky. “Some of us still prayed up, even after we worshipped them. It was a triumph for him that he could get here at all.”

“The Osterlings sacrificed us to the dragons,” I told her, “casting the victims into the Mountain of Fire. I saw their faces screaming in Grengarm when I killed him.” (*Wizard* 49-50)

Later, Baki explains to Toug and Ulfa, “We no longer paid reverence to this world of Mythgarthr and you who dwell in it. You, we felt, were dull and sleepy and stupid, unworthy gods who no longer credited us even when we stood before you. There was no help to be had from you, he said. I doubt there was anyone who did not agree” (*Wizard* 114). When Ulfa attempts to bow to Baki as her people have done, Baki corrects her: “She helped Ulfa to rise. ‘It was very wrong, what you were doing. I am greatly honored, but honors one does not deserve are only crimes by another name. In my heart I kneel to you’” (*Wizard* 111). To Toug Able explains, “I didn’t want to believe I was a god to anybody [...] In the same way that the Aelf have refused to be gods to the world below theirs, preferring to give them the worship they owe you” (*Wizard* 56).

In this sense, we can say that Wolfe’s aspiring humans act as a kind of moral mirror or barometer. In addition to exposing human failure, Wolfe’s aspiring humans also create or amplify its consequences, acting as a karmic echo that sends our confusion and inhumanity back at us and out into the world (or, more precisely, across multiple worlds). The inhumis of *Short Sun* send our own predatory behavior (violence, enslavement, etc) back at us (in this way the inhumis destroyed the Neighbors, our predecessors on Blue and Green, or we might say the Neighbors destroyed themselves). Similarly, the aelf create a kind of chaos in their world (the feuding, the aelf’s driving out of Kulili and connection to Setr, etc) which is creating great danger for other realms, possibly enabling lower beings to ascend and become more real in higher worlds.

If Wolfe’s aspiring humans expose human failings by serving as moral barometers and, as karmic echoes, create or deepen the repercussions of human mistakes, they also provide an incentive (and in the case of the aelf, an actual call) for people to change. In *Short Sun*, humans of Blue and Green need to become better so they can apply the inhumis’s secret and turn them back into mere “Animals that fly, and drink blood by night,” as Jahlee describes her race (*Whorl* 317). Characters *must* think deeply about who they are, how they act, and what they believe and *must* find a way for humanity to improve—because if they do not, collapse is a certainty. In *The Wizard Knight*, Mythgarthr will fall to the Angrborn or the Osterlings, and dragons of Muspel will take over Aelfrice; in *Short Sun*, humans will be destroyed by their inhumis as the Neighbors were by theirs.

In *Short Sun*, the inhumis provide a strong incentive for humans to change their ways because, as Horn/Silk learns, if they do not, humans will likely find themselves on the same path as the Neighbors before them. As Horn/Silk learned in the conversation with the Neighbors discussed earlier, humans cannot go where the Neighbors went, and so they must stay and fight. But the Neighbors, who Horn/Silk concedes were “wiser and stronger than we are,” lost their

battle with the inhumis, perhaps, it appears from Horn/Silk's speculations, because they focused on becoming stronger and smarter, not better (*Green's Jungles* 352). As he explains to Hide, "[...] Eventually the vanished People found some means of crossing the abyss to Green. [...] They went there, and the inhumis, too, became both powerful and wise, so powerful and so knowing that they hunted the Vanished People almost to extinction. The strengths of the Vanished People became their enemies' strengths, you see. They tried in their desperation to become stronger still, to know more and more, and succeeded, and were doomed by that success." (*Green's Jungles* 353)

Horn speculates further that the Neighbors may have doomed themselves by making the same mistake Horn/Silk himself made in Gaon—using the inhumis as weapons:

"On Green, the Vanished People had done what I had done in Gaon, Hide. They made the inhumis serve them; and as time passed they had become more and more dependent upon their servants, servants whom they permitted to come here and feed. I myself had allowed my own inhumis to feed upon the blood of the people of Han, you see. It was war, I told myself, and the Man of Han would surely have done the same to us; but I had set my foot upon that path, and I was determined to leave it." (*Green's Jungles* 355)

At one point, Horn/Silk surmises, too few Neighbors remained on Blue for the inhumis to bother coming; Horn does not say what he thinks happened at that point, but it would seem at least one possibility is that the inhumis on Green turned on their masters. Horn tells Hide he realizes he could have used the inhumis to consolidate his power, to make himself and his sons into a ruling family, but he did not because he understands that the lust for power and control and the predatory behavior towards their own kind is what doomed the Neighbors.

The secret which Horn/Silk learns from Krait, which Jahlee reveals to Nettle, and, we assume, the publication of the story by Horn's children will spread, is the key weapon. Speaking to Evensong, one of his Gaon wives, Horn/Silk admits its destructive power: "Yes. I couldn't kill them here and now, if that's what you mean; but I know how they might be returned to the mere vermin they once were—mindless, hideous, blood-drinking animals seeking their prey in Green's jungles." (*Blue's Waters* 372). Further on, he explains why Krait revealed the secret and how it could be used:

"Krait told me why they have to have it [human blood] as he lay dying. He didn't intend to give me power over them, you understand. I'm certain he wasn't thinking of that in his final moments. He was thinking of the thing that linked him to me, and me to him—of the bond of blood between us" [...]

"If only we cared about each other sufficiently. If only all of us loved all the others enough, they would go back to that. We would still think them horrible creatures, and they would still be dangerous, as the crocodiles in this lower river water are. But they would be no worse."

"That is the secret. What you said?"

"No. Of course not." (*Blue's Waters* 375).

As Horn/Silk notes at another point, "But what a thought! If only we protected one another, they would all be idiots or worse. As it is, they always get enough to keep them going" (*Blue's Waters* 350).

But the secret is a weapon as challenging to use as it is powerful. Approximately midway through the present day strand of the narrative, Horn/Silk knows what a weapon the

secret is but is not yet confident we can actually use it. Speaking to Inclito's family, Horn suggests it is beyond our abilities:

At the time of which I speak, Krait revealed the secret that has permitted me, at times, to command them, the secret that they dare not let us learn, thinking that we could employ it to ruin them.

I do not believe we can. I tell you that openly and fairly, all of you who hear me now, and all of you who will read the account of our dinner that I intend to write. It is a great secret, truly. If you will, it is a great and terrible weapon. That is how the inhumis themselves see it, and I will not call them wrong. But it is a weapon too heavy for our hands. The Neighbors, whom you name the Vanished People, knew it; but they could not wield it against the inhumis, who drank their blood in their time as they drink ours today. If they could not wield it, there is little hope that we human beings can. Or so it seems to me. (*Green's Jungles* 125).

But as this strand of the narrative progresses, Horn seems to find hope. The battle against their inhumis will include a physical component, but merely being stronger or more brutal will not help; a new morality is necessary. Horn explains the first part of this to Hide, whose instinct is to fight force with force. If the inhumis can destroy them, Hide argues, then perhaps they should kill Jahlee right there:

"It would help!"

"It would not. If anything, it would do more harm. Never forget, Hide, that what we are the inhumis quickly become. Jahlee was an ally in Gaon, and a friend at the farmhouse. She had fought for me and slain my foes, and learned their secrets too, so that she might meet with them in the garden or whisper them at the window of my bedroom. Suppose that I were to wait until her back was to me, draw the long sharp blade I have not got, and plunge it into her back."

[...]

"And a hundred years from now, every inhumis in the whorl would be a little harder, a little more cruel and proud, because of what we did here tonight. Remember—what we are, they must become." (*Green's Jungles* 353-354)

Humans will be saved from their inhumis, if they will, only through a mass moral improvement connected to a return to proper theology. At one point, when Hide asks him why he is certain the inhumis will not be able to kill all of the humans on Green as they killed all of the Vanished people there long before, Horn/Silk speaks of his true moral mission and his hope for the success of humanity in their battle with the inhumis. "Because of something we did?" Hide asks, and the exchange continues:

I said, "Of course not. Do you think that we can save an entire whorl, my son? Just you and I?"

"It isn't just us. There's Sinew and Bala and their children, and Maliki, and a lot of others."

"Ah! But that's a very different question. In that case, yes. Green will be saved because of things we've done and things we'll do. So will Blue. The Vanished People know it already, and I should have known it too when they asked my permission to revisit Blue. If the inhumis were to enslave humanity here, the Vanished People wouldn't want to come back; and if they were to exterminate it, no such permission would be needed." (*Green's Jungles*, 379).

Horn/Silk's use of the word "saved" is hardly accidental, since the battle that plays out between the human residents of Blue and Green and the inhumis threatening them is really a literalized metaphor for a moral and spiritual question: will humans be "saved" from their demons through their own moral improvement?

Horn/Silk himself embodies this new morality, which replaces predation with sacrifice. If his spiritual quest begins as his quest alone (at the beginning of the narrative, if not his telling of it, he is only Horn, Silk's disciple, and not yet the amalgam of his own spirit and his master's body and being), and begins with a despairing recognition of human moral regression and failure, it ends with the discovery of a solution. This solution, which is perhaps somewhat simple, is the opposite of the human predatory behavior reflected by the inhumis. Horn/Silk embodies this different approach through both his efforts to love others, such as Olivine, Marble, and Pig (for each of whom he sacrifices or undertakes a quest) and the inclusion of others into one's family, as he does with Krait and Jahlee along with many other figures throughout the series. An alternative to the cycle of bloodshed, predation, and exploitation is presented by Horn/Silk's attempts to love others, which in some ways culminates in the sacrifice he makes for Pig, giving him one of his own eyes. Horn/Silk's one-eyed visage becomes a symbol of a different way of treating other people.

Horn/Silk's experience with the inhumis (and thus with humanity's demons) appear to inspire his parables and moral lessons, which we can assume the book his children compile about him (and very likely will publish and disseminate widely as Horn and Nettle did their "Book of Silk") will lay out for others. Horn/Silk's moral lessons, as well as his role as a kind of spiritual teacher whose message will be preserved/spread by the book about him, becomes clearer in the sections of the final novel that continue after his own narration has ended. Initially, his son Hoof picks up the narration; what we get from him is an outside perspective on Horn/Silk from the young man who grapples with this strange, impressive figure his brother Hide tells him to call "Father": "Let me say right here where I am the only one writing that he had the best smile I ever saw. It made me like him and trust him the first time I saw him in Wapen's, and I do not believe anybody was proof against it" (*Whorl* 337). Hoof recounts that Horn/Silk questions him and tells didactic stories:

He used to tell stories about two men trying to cheat each other. In most of the stories they both lost, but the one who first set out to cheat his friend was the only loser sometimes. He said, 'If you rob someone who would help you if you needed help you only rob yourself.' He said that again and again. He said stealing only made you poorer, and asked people to tell him an old thief who was rich. (*Whorl* 338)

Another of his lessons is even more directly the result of his experience with the inhumis—in a sense, it is the lesson he has learned from them, the lessons humans should learn from them, and in another sense their function as science fictional novums:

He also said that our cruelty stored up pain for us. "Do you imagine you can be cruel without teaching others to be cruel to you? You glory in your cruelty, because you believe it shows you are master of your victim. You are not even your own."

Uncle Calf's wife is making a collection of these sayings, and I have told her all I can remember. (*Whorl* 339)

It seems quite obvious that this is one of the themes of the novels—and that, in a sense, the lesson Horn/Silk has learned from his interactions with the inhumis (and he is apparently the

person who has had a deeper and more personal connection with them, and thus with humanity's demons, than anyone else in the work) is also the lesson that we are intended to learn from the novel's presentation of these figures.

As the people on Blue and Green must improve their morality through love and sacrifice to transform their inhum, on a smaller, more literal scale, the people of New Viron also need to band together physically to fight the inhum swarm that attacks at the wedding ceremony near the end of *Return to the Whorl*. The attack is an all out battle between the human community of New Viron, most of which appears to be at the wedding, and attacking inhum, and so can be read as a symbolic fight in which the town fights against its demons, against itself (especially if one considers the criticism that Horn/Silk has leveled at his town earlier: that they are worse than the other towns because they are bad people and that they would only ruin a good leader). Daisy, who appears to narrate this sequence, describes the violence of the battle and the size of the forces involved:

No coherent description of that famous fight is possible [...]

It would be possible and even easy to multiply such reports to fill a hundred pages. Because they are omitted from all the other accounts, what we must emphasize here are the indescribable noise, the welter of blood, and the wild confusion. Everyone was screaming. Everyone was fighting, even those who would have fled if they could. No count of the numbers of the inhum was or is possible. It has been said that half the inhum on Blue at the time took part in the attack, but the assertion rests upon their own testimony, and of what value is that?

Those skilled in war report that an attacking force will scarcely ever sustain its attack when it has lost a third of its number. The best count of the dead inhum (that of Legume, who was charged with burning their bodies) is one hundred and ninety-eight. If it is correct, and they fought as crack troopers do, their number was about six hundred. It seems probable, however, that it was considerably larger. We would propose one thousand.

What seems certain is that without the azoth, Gyrfalcon's needler, and the slug guns of his bodyguard, the subject of this volume would have perished, and the wedding party with him. (*Whorl* 401)

The series ends, then, not simply with Horn/Silk's own new understandings, understandings which will be disseminated through the book Wolfe's reader is actually holding, but also with his community uniting to face its demons, which are, in truth, echoes of their own predatory behavior. It ends with new life, new community, and restored religious faith. This battle is yet another way in which the inhum, here more as a threat than an aspiring human class, provide an incentive for human change and growth: if the people of New Viron don't literally band together here, they won't survive, just as if they do not band together in a larger sense more generally, they will be destroyed gradually by the inhum as the Neighbors were by theirs (and we can only do this in Wolfe through a return to the true god and the morality that can result from that, as well as from the guidance of one, like Silk, who knows the true God).

Aspiring humans serve as incentives or calls for change in *The Wizard Knight* as well; the humans of Mythgarthr need to become proper role models and gods to the aelf so they worship us as they are supposed to and the hierarchy is maintained. Unlike the inhum of Short Sun, who try to conceal the "secret" which would impel us to become better, the aelf *want* the people of Mythgarthr to improve so they have role models and judges, and they specifically steal and train/prepare Able so that he will one day be able to give Arnthor their "message" about the

proper hierarchy and our role and how we are failing in it. In this sense, the aelf fit more completely into the aspiring human category than the inhumi, who are also monsters. (Additional creatures in *The Wizard Knight*, such as the Angrborn and the Osterlings, fill some of the other, more sinister roles taken on by the inhumi in *Short Sun*).

The aelf's failures in worship and need for proper gods to inspire and judge them motivates Able, and is intended to motivate people in general, to improve, to fill their proper role by judging the aelf and serving as models for emulation. Able begins to heed this call even before he fully understands the system or accepts the idea of himself as a god when he attempts to get two Khimairae, who later become Uri and Baki, to renounce Setr and worship him:

I was still mad. I said it [Setr's plan to force the aelf to live virtuously] sounded like a tall order to me, that even though there were a lot of things I liked about the Aelf I had met, everybody said you could not trust them and they could lie birds out of the trees. I thought Garsecg was going to climb all over me for that, but he looked kind of sad and nodded.

I said, "Well, we're not exactly the most honest people in the whole world either."

Then he said something that surprised the heck out of me. He said, "Yet you are the gods of Aelfrice."

I had never heard anything like that before. (Okay, really I had, but I did not remember it.) I knew he was serious from the way he said it, and I did not know how to react. (*Knight 148*)

Able does not yet fully accept or understand this concept, but he begins to act on the idea that the aelf are his responsibility. Discovering that they work for Setr, he threatens them and compels them to work for him instead:

"Okay. Quit. From now on you're going to work of [*sic*] me."

"We cannot renounsse Ssetr!" They both said that.

"Then you're gonna die. I'm gonna break your wings and throw you off this thing."

Garsecg came up behind me, not being the alligator anymore. "They are evil creatures, Sir Able, but I ask you to spare them." (*Knight 146*)

Despite Garsecg's request and his claim that she cannot renounce Setr, Able proceeds, not yet because he realizes the theological import of what he is doing, but only because of how the Khimaira looks:

I owed him a lot and I knew it, but he was beginning to bug me. I thought about things a little, and then I said, I owe this whateveryoucallit, too. If it hadn't been for him, I'd be dead. So I'm going to take him away from Setr so he doesn't have to look like this anymore."

After that I bent the Khimaira some more, and it said, "I reounsse him!"

I eased up a little. "That's good. Say it again."

"I renounsse him."

"Say the name. Who are you renouncing?"

"Ssetr. I renounsse Ssetr forever."

I kind of looked over my shoulder at Garsecg. "What do you think of that?"

He shrugged. "Are you pleased with a breath?"

"You don't think it means it?"

“I do not know. Nor does it matter—anyone can say anything. She cannot renounce Setr, as I told you. If a prisoner renounces his chains, do they fall from his wrists?”

“What could she swear by that would make it real?”

Garsecg shook his head. “There is nothing.” (*Knight* 147)

Again despite the difficulty and Garsecg’s discouragement as well as the fact that he does not really know what he is doing or why, Able proceeds, eventually requesting the two Khimairae as his gift from Garsecg in place of a promised weapon:

I sort of shrugged. “That’s the only one I want, and you were going to let me take something anyhow, so I could fight Kulili for you. I think I’ll take these two instead. They’re quitting Setr, so they ought to take off his uniform. That’s how it seems to me.”

“One has renounced Setr, as you say, and the other has sworn to serve you. Will you fight Kulili?”

“I said I would. I don’t go back on my word, Garsecg.”

“Then there is no reason not to have these two to assist you—if you really want them. Make no mistake. When a man owns a slave, the slave owns a master.”

I said I could live with that.

“Never say you were not warned. Their new uniform will be...?”

“Their natural shapes, I said, “their Aelf shapes. If they won’t change for me here, I’m taking them to the top of this skyscraper. That ought to do it.”

(*Knight* 148-150)

Able does not know exactly what he is doing, but his desire is for these Aelf to be themselves, what they are intended to be. The transformation of the two Khimairae is risky (Garsecg says it could kill them) and painful:

Right then one them [*sic*] screamed, and I got up and went to look. Behind me, Garsecg called, “Was that Uri or Baki?”

I could not tell, but the second one screamed too soon as the sunlight touched it, so it did not matter. They were shaking, and their jaws were working, and their eyes looked like they were going to pop right out of their heads. I watched them a little while and called out to Garsecg, “Come look! Their wings are getting smaller!”

[...]

One of the Khimairas was trying to say something. Her tongue was hanging out to where it would have licked her belly, but she was trying to talk just the same. The black stuff was falling off, too, and under that she was red. She made me think of a log in a fire. You whack it with a fresh stick, and the old burned stuff falls off, and you see the fire that was inside.

“They’ve got tits!” I called to Garsecg.

They did, and they did not have claws anymore, either. Their lips covered up their teeth, too. (*Knight* 155)

The transformation succeeds; when Able returns to look at Uri and Baki, he explains, “I called them Aelfmaidens instead of Khimairas because that was what they were. There was no Khimaira left in them” (*Knight* 157). Able thinks that he has freed them (and that that would be

the best thing he could do for them) but discovers that while they are no longer loyal to Setr, they are now loyal to him:

I could see she did not understand, so I said, “You’re free again,” and let her hold the goblet of water.

“No, Lord.” She tried to smile, and seeing it like that I just about cried. “Not free, nor do I want to be. I have a new master.”

“Your slave,” Garsecg explained, “as I warned you.”

“I don’t believe you ever promised to work for me,” I told her, “or if you did, it was just a promise. You never swore or anything.”

“L-Lord, you are wrong. I swore it in my heart, where you could not hear me.” (*Knight* 158)

This scene plays out, on a small scale, the role of the aelf in general and how they function as motivators for human improvement: to keep the aelf from going astray and losing themselves (as Uri and Baki have through their worship of Setr, which transformed them into Khimairae) humans must pay attention to the aelf and understand and accept their role as their lords and judges. At this point, Able does not fully understand the implications of what he has done or of the idea of their being his slaves, but ultimately, what Able develops and the series presents is a proper understanding of the overlapping worlds, of worship, and of humanity’s place in each. The central import of Able’s understanding of the worlds in the series is what it implies about the place of humans. We are, simply, gods—at least the gods of those beings living in the level below us, the aelf of Aelfrice. In just the same way, the denizens of each world are the gods of those below them. Each world is also the model for the world below and, in a sense, more real than its imitation. In one sequence, this becomes particularly vivid to Able. Speaking with Uri, he observes the Tower of Glas, a structure which begins in Aelfrice but, at its peak, is in Mythgarthr:

Far off I beheld the Tower of Glas, and its top (which had been lost in cloud when I had seen it in Garsecg’s company) was just visible where it rose into Mythgarthr. At the sight I understood as never before that the land we walk on there, and the sea we sail on there, are in sober fact the heaven of Aelfrice. (*Wizard* 316)

As the series progresses, Able and other characters, especially his protégé Toug, grapple with and come to accept their role as gods of the Aelf, a role which Able realizes necessitates the same kind of grand scale moral improvement the threat of the inhumani force in *Short Sun*. In one scene, Toug, like Able earlier, reacts with surprise and discomfort when Baki treats him as her lord:

[...] For a moment, Toug was sick with fear. “I’m going to kill him, and since I am the man I am, I’ll have to do it in a fair fight.” The words came of their own volition, and the pitiful thing in him that cringed and wept was locked away.

“That means a fight after he has recovered, a fight in which he has a chance to defend himself. I’m not looking forward to it.”

“Lord Toug,” Baki said, and knelt at his feet.

“Don’t do that,” Toug told her. “What if someone should see us?”

“I see you.” Mani yawned. “I’m wondering whether you see yourself.”

(*Wizard* 196)

If Able somewhat unknowingly satisfies his role as a god in the transformation scene with Uri and Baki, Toug faces a similar test in a scene in which Baki’s back is broken and he must use his godly powers to heal her.

“Run your fingers over her. Gently! Very gently.”

“I can’t do this.”

“Yes, you can. That’s the point. You’re a god to her. Not to me and not to Mani. But to her you’re a god. This world of Mythgarthr is a higher world than hers.”

Toug tried, and nothing happened.

“Think her whole. Healed. Imagine her healthy and well. Jumping, dancing, turning cartwheels. She did all that before this happened. Think about how she used to be.”

Toug tried, eyes tightly shut and lips drawn to a thin line. “Is anything happening?”

“No. It won’t happen gradually. When it happens, it’ll be over before it starts, and you’ll know. You’ll feel the rush of power that did it.”

“L-Lord,” Baki gasped.

“I can’t help you,” I told her, “but Toug can and will. Have you got faith in Toug? You’ve got to, or die.”

“You...drank my blood, Lord.”

“I remember, and I’d repay you if I could. I can’t help you now. Toug has to do it.”

“Please, Toug! I—worship you. They will kill me for it, but I will worship you. I will sacrifice, burn food on your alter. Animals, fish, bread.” Baki gasped. Her upper half writhed. “Every day. A fresh sacrifice every day.”
(*Wizard* 42-44)

In an echo of the earlier scene in which Able freed Baki and Uri from Setr, he again asks Baki to renounce Setr and worship a human:

“Who do you swear by?” I made it as urgent as I could.

“By him! By great Toug!”

“Not Setr?”

“I renounce him.” Baki’s voice had [*sic*] to a whisper. I renounce him again. Oh, try, Toug! I’ll build you a chapel. I’ll do anything!”

“I am trying,” Toug said, and shut his eyes again.

I bent over Baki. “Renounce him by both names, now and forever. Believe me, he can’t make you well.”

“I renounce Setr called Garsecg! I renounce Garsecg called Setr. Always, always, forever!”

“Your mother is...?”

“Kulili!”

I laid my hand on Toug’s shoulder. “She’s a thing in your mind, and you can trust me on this. She’s a thought, a dream. Have you got a knife?”

He shook his head. “Only my sword.”

“I do.” I took out the little knife that had carved my bow, and handed it to him with the cup. “Cut your arm, long but not deep. I’ll hold the lamp so you can see what you’re doing. Your blood will run down to your fingers. Catch it in this. When it’s full, hold it so Baki can drink it.”

Shutting his eyes, Toug pushed up his sleeve and made a four-finger cut.

“Hold it for her. Say Baki, take this cup.” I steered it to her lips, and she drained it.

Toug’s eyes opened. “I did it! I did it! Sit up, Baki.”

Trembling, she did. Her coppery skin was no longer like polished metal, and there was a new humanity in her smile. “Thank you. Oh, thank you! She made obeisance until Toug touched her shoulder and told her to stand up.

(*Wizard* 44)

In this moment, Toug, urged by Able, accepts his role (humanity’s role) as a god of Aelfrice and heals Baki in a ceremony which we might observe has parallels to Catholic mass, in which the priest recounts Christ transforming wine into his blood and using the words “take this cup and drink in memory of me.” This scene and portions of it discussed in an earlier section position humans as gods and judges of the beings of the level beneath them and suggest that the error and chaos that mar Aelfrice are the result of humans failing in their position. As aspiring humans often do, the aelf here function by emphasizing the status and responsibility of humans in order to provide a motivation for human moral, spiritual improvement. As transcendent outsiders act as gods or parents and put us in the position of subjects or children, aspiring humans position us as parents or gods—Wolfe is simply more direct about it in *The Wizard Knight* than most, explicitly asserting that humans are the gods of a set of aspiring humans. This arrangement is what, in the world of *The Wizard Knight*, is proper, as Baki explains when, in another scene of renunciation of false worship and swearing of loyalty to proper gods, she, Toug, and Ulfa swear oaths to help each other achieve their goals: “I do. Each of us will swear by those over us whose claim to our allegiance is sanctioned by the Highest God. Hold up your hand, Toug” (*Wizard* 109). Baki forces Toug and Ulfa to call her their “worshipper” and swears by them and by Sir Able as “sublime spirits of Mythgarthr” and once again renounces Setr forever (*Wizard* 110-111).

Unlike the inhum, however, who indirectly provide an incentive for humans to change but do not actually wish for it to happen, the aelf provide an actual call for human moral, spiritual, and philosophical improvement by choosing Able to deliver a message to Arnthor, Mythgarthr’s king. Interestingly, the message, unlike the “Message” from alien transcendent outsiders in Sagan’s *Contact*, is not from above, from the Valfather or Most High God, but from the aelf, who in this case know more “true” theology than humans do and want us to be better examples. While the inhum also reveal and reflect our inhumanity, they don’t actually want us to change, for their existence as what they are is dependent on us remaining as we are—the secret tells what we could do to become better and change them, but they do not want Horn/Silk to have or spread it. The aelf want us to be better and voluntarily give Able a message to deliver about how we can change to be their proper gods. Near the end of the series, Able discloses his true “message” for the first time. Importantly, his message is from the aelf, who are more affected than anyone by our failings, since we are their gods. In a sense, this is similar to the role the aspiring human inhum play in *Short Sun*—mirroring, and thus revealing, human failings and improper worship. In *Short Sun*, if humans were to treat each other well and worship “properly” (that is, worship the Outsider rather than the false gods of the whorl), the inhum would be unable to attack us; they would be reduced to mindless animals. In *The Wizard Knight*, if humans were to worship properly and set a better example for the worlds below, the aelf would worship and follow us, and there would be order. Speaking to King Arnthor, Able suddenly finds himself able to deliver a message whose contents have been unknown to him until this moment:

“You see, I bear tidings from Queen Disiri of the Moss Aelf, King Ycer of the Ice Aelf, and King Brunman of the Bodachan. So it was that the Bodachan gave me a companion to help me in my errand.”

[...]

“Still I have one [a message], Your Majesty. One that has occupied me most of my life, though it has been not so many years in Mythgarthr. I was to reach you, and not that alone, but to come as one to whom you would give ear.”
(*Wizard* 396-397)

Able’s message begins as a lesson in the worlds and their relation, something like the theological sermon Horn/Silk delivers at the end of *Short Sun*, which sets up his more specific points about the failures of Arnthor and his rule:

“Seven worlds there are, Your Majesty, and so arranged that the highest, where the Most High God reigns and where no impure thing is, is larger than all the rest together. The world beneath that—”

[...]

“Is less, yet greater than the sum of those remaining. The winged beings there are not perfect in purity, but so near it they are permitted to serve the Most High God as the nobles of your realm serve you.”

“Better, I hope.”

“Below is the one we name Skai. We of Mythgarthr, who think this realm spacious, think it unutterably vast, for its extent is greater than that of the four below it laid side by side. It contains many things and many peoples, but its lawful possessors are the Overcyns—the Valfather and his queen, their sons and their daughters, and their families. To them our hearts are given. It is them we reverence when we reverence rightly.”

[...]

“Beneath them is our human realm. We are its legitimate inhabitants. Beneath us is the lesser realm of Aelfrice, smaller than our own yet beautiful. There dwell Queen Disiri and the kings whom I named, the monarchs whose messenger I am. In their realm the Most High God placed a numerous folk called Kulili. As we reverence the Overcyns, so Kulili was to reverence us, and did, and was revered by the dragons of Muspel. Kulili sought nearer subjects, and patterned them after us, the objects of her reverence, that she might be loved by the image she loved. She made them, and asked their gratitude. They refused it, and drove her into the sea.”

By this time the whole royal hall had fallen silent to listen. Only Arnthor seemed of a mind to interrupt.

“In this way they became the folk of Aelfrice, holding it by right of conquest. The wisest among them revere us, knowing it to be the wish of Him Who Made Seven Worlds, the Most High God. The foolish, seeing our vanity, our avarice, and our cruelty, have turned from us to reverence dragons, by which much harm has come, for even the best of them are insatiable of power.”

“You bear a dragon upon your shield,” Arnthor remarked. “Have you forgotten that my genealogy bears another?” (*Wizard* 396-397)

In response, Able transitions from the aelf’s message to his own application of it:

“No, Your Majesty. Neither have I forgotten that your boyhood was spent among Sea Aelf, nor that you took the Nykt to honor them. Nor have the kings and queen I mentioned forgotten these things, which embolden them to speak to you as they do, imploring you to reshape our people. Kulili formed them, Your Majesty. They know that you might reform us, making us strong but merciful, and though merciful, just. May I speak for myself, Your Majesty?”

He nodded. “After what has preceded it, I welcome it.”

“I lived in the northern forests, Your Majesty, not far from Irringsmouth. It is a city of ruins.”

He nodded again.

“Outlaws calling themselves Free Companies rove those forests. They are as cruel and rapacious as the dragons; yet many cheer them because they rob your tax gatherers and try at times to protect the people from the Angrborn. Let those people have companies that are truly free, Your Majesty, and not outlaws. Teach them to arm themselves and choose knights from their number. Your tax gatherers come seldom; but when they come, they take all, for your people there are poor and few. Let them pay a fixed tribute instead, one not ruinous. Help and protect them, and you will find them richer and more numerous each year, and strong friends to your throne. Queen Disiri, and the kinds who send me—”

“Have no claim upon your allegiance,” Arnthor said. “I do. Are betrayal and sedition the reforms you would have me encourage?”

“No, never.” His eyes told me I had failed, but I made a last effort. “The King of Skai rules as a father, Your Majesty, and because he does we name him the Valfather and count it honor to serve him even when defeat is sure. The Aelf ask that of you.” (*Wizard* 397-398)

Later, when Arnthor visits Able in prison, Able makes his moral condemnation of Arnthor’s rule more explicit and pointed:

“[...] Your Majesty, I ask no leave to speak freely. Those who ask leave of you do it out of fear of your displeasure or worse. Your displeasure means nothing to me, and any torture you might inflict would be a relief. I speak for Aelfrice and myself. You are a tyrant.”

“I love her,” Arnthor repeated. “I love Celidon more.”

“You treat them the same. You abandoned Aelfrice and taught your folk to. No doubt Queen Gaynor wishes you had abandoned her as well, and Celidon is blessed every moment you neglect her. You’re of royal birth. Queen Gaynor is of noble birth, and your knights boast this gentle birth. I’m a plain American, and I’ll say this if I die. Your villages are ravaged by outlaws, by Angrborn, and by Osterlings, because they’ve been abandoned too. The Most High God set men here as models for Aelfrice. We teach it violence, treachery, and little else; and you have been our leader.” (*Wizard* 417)

As in *Short Sun*, the point is that humanity’s dangers and threats and devastation are the result of its own moral failings—especially the failures of its leaders. Speaking on the same topic shortly after, Able says, “It would be better for Celidon [...] if it [Celidon] were left to the trees” (*Wizard* 418).

Able’s speech is interesting in many ways. One element to note is that Able speaks primarily for two groups—for the aelf and for the people of the northern forests he mentioned.

What unites the two is that they are each, in different ways, victims of human failures under Arnthor's rule. The aelf are victims in that they are not provided with proper gods, proper models to emulate, which in Wolfe is how morality is transmitted: by connection to and adherence to proper models, to those "above" one. This is how growth and morality play out among the human figures in the novels (passing from Silk to Horn, from Ravd to Able, from Able to Toug to Svon and Uns, etc). Denying someone a proper model, a proper source of worship or emulation, is, in Wolfe's view, a deep failure or betrayal. But interestingly, the figures that can articulate this failure are necessarily those below. Or, perhaps, figures from above can judge and criticize, but figures from below are also essential in revealing the byproducts or consequences of the failures of those above. In much the same way, if with slight differences, that the inhum, as aspiring humans who emulated us (if in a more direct, scientific way than the aelf do), demonstrated or embodied our failings—and would have been better (or, as Horn/Silk discovers, would be merely harmless animals) if we were better, the aelf would be better if we were better. And so they, the victims, those who see us as models, or who should find us as this, are the ones who can articulate the message of our failure.

What we witness in Wolfe, most prominently with the inhum and the aelf, is the way that aspiring human figures can function; and we see that while this category may overlap with others at times, particularly that of the monster, it is own specific strategy. With transcendent outsiders, it is one of the ways that science fiction/fantasy and mythology/theology contextualize human life. We are accustomed to thinking about voices from above, but what Wolfe shows is that voices from below are also effective. In Wolfe, they are particularly useful and essential because of his model for morality based on emulation of those above. But the two are connected, as we see in Able's speech. Essentially, when he sees that his appeals from the aelf fail, he switches gears and mentions the Valfather, suggesting that Arnthor should aspire to be the same kind of model that the former is for humans of Mythgarth.

Wolfe asserts a particular theological vision of the proper roles and duties of a God to its subjects and vice versa, one based on "proper" worship, imitation, service, and loyalty. It is also, of course, one which ultimately affirms hierarchies: the problems in his worlds spring from a muddled or lost sense of the proper hierarchy and humanity's place; the solution is a restoration of the proper hierarchy. In this sense, Wolfe's aim is almost the exact opposite of those of the more progressive writers explored in the *Science Fiction Studies* issue focused on animals mentioned earlier, who argue, in general, that unquestioned hierarchies are the problem and their deconstruction the solution³⁷. Yet despite the hierarchical Christian focus, Wolfe leaves room for a great deal of complexity and uncertainty/ambiguity. While he asserts a clear hierarchy in which aspiring humans are below us (and the understanding of and restoration of that in worlds and for protagonists who have forgotten is his core focus), both of these "lower" groups instruct/lecture humans as transcendent outsiders do: Krait and Jahlee lecture Horn about human morality/superiority, prompting him to question both himself; the aelf demand better role models and judgment from humans—Uri and Baki with Able and Toug, the Bodachan through Able's message to Arnthor, which they have orchestrated every step of the way, ultimately making Able's life arc theirs for their sake. Wolfe's aspiring human figures even sometimes provide moral examples for humans. Horn/Silk's greatest sacrifice, the example of the kind of new morality he brings to replace the predatory behavior that dominates Blue, is in imitation of chem Olivine's sacrifice for her chem mother. Baki at one point tells Toug he can use her as a model as he is supposed to be for her. Wolfe's characters have complex relationships with aspiring human figures, loving them and taking them in as family, using them as servants or weapons.

Since Able has once drunk Baki's blood to heal himself, he notes that "when I drank Baki's blood it healed me a lot in just a day or so, and in certain ways I was more like one of the Aelf. I guess I still am" (*Knight* 123). Able misses the Garsecg aelf part of evil dragon Setr that was his friend. He bows to aelf Disiri, whom he loves more than anyone else, is knighted by her, and ultimately refuses to go with the Valfather back to Skai unless he can take her. When the Valfather asks him to make a choice, Able chooses to cut his arm so that Disiri can drink his blood to become more real. Perhaps because Aelfrice is the home of Disiri and it is where he spent time as a boy, Able loves this lower world more than any other and lives there at the series' end. In his speech near the end of *Short Sun*, Horn/Silk explains that other lesser gods are still to be respected, if not worshipped. And in *The Wizard Knight*, the Valfather is to be worshipped as above us, even if he is not the highest possible goal, since there are levels above him and he is merely a shadow of the Most High God. Wolfe's characters come to define themselves and/or understand human identity in contrast to/against these aspiring human figures (and in *The Wizard Knight*, the cast of monstrous creatures that also play important roles), but the similarities prompt deep, still uncertain considerations of what it means to be human, where we fit, and how we understand ourselves despite the salvation of human communities Wolfe depicts through spiritual/theological, moral, and philosophical transformation. Perhaps more than other writers that make use of transcendent outsiders and aspiring humans, in *The Wizard Knight*, Wolfe positions them both in a hierarchy that functions together: we can be, as creatures of each level can be, both gods (to those below us) and subjects (of those above us), both ones who must emulate and aspire and who must provide models for the aspiration of others.

Using and Valuing Our Spiritual/Theological Playgrounds: A Brief Conclusion

I began with the popular question of whether we need more theology or less—the return to God and faith often promoted by the traditionally religious or the escape from irrationality espoused by some atheist writers. Since we can probably agree that neither side is likely to achieve a total victory in the near future (and is even a fantasy of such uniformity actually desirable?), it is convenient that neither more nor less theology is actually what we need. What matters most, as I argued in the introduction, is not belief or disbelief, since there is evidence abound even in the mere present that either can lead to the deepest compassion or the harshest cruelty, but the nature of belief and the moral reaction to disbelief—in other words, what we understand the transcendent to be and how we envision human moral evolution.

In the introduction, I outlined some of the problems that hold back mainstream discussion of theology, spirituality, and religion and suggested we need to pay more attention to arenas which allow for deeper, more open-minded discussions of ideas about theology/transcendence and moral evolution—questions I suggested we can and must explore even without agreement on the issue of whether we are uncovering spiritual reality or actively creating an imagined model to guide human development. While those discussions and their participants are often left out of mainstream debate, they are thriving in other forums which allow for open-minded explorations and assessments of our ideas about transcendence, theology, and moral evolution. I pointed out many of the more interesting voices in that conversation and argued that evidence from several directions suggests such diverse, progressive approaches to spirituality free of literalism, exclusivism, and narrow theological visions are finding increasing success.

But often, discussion can only go so far, and there is obviously a role for artistic realms, especially narrative, to play in shifting the direction of our theological/spiritual discourse to deeper and more productive terrain, specifically in providing spaces in which ideas about theology, spirituality, and moral evolution can actually be played out or tested instead of only discussed. Science fiction has, in recent centuries, been the place in which *scientific* ideas can be tested out in a fictional context, a function which is at least one of the motives for its initial existence. And fantasy, which Ursula K. Le Guin has observed is “the oldest kind of fiction, and the most universal,” perhaps “because we need to think about what is not in order to know what is,” has perhaps always been the primary way humans used narrative to play out ideas and possibilities of all kinds (“Introduction”). What I have tried to illustrate in the previous chapters is that together, science fiction and fantasy are now perhaps the best literary arenas in which ideas about theology, spirituality, and moral evolution can be explored because instead of merely discussing or implying such ideas, both genres can actually depict them directly. For this reason, literary science fiction and fantasy are in some ways *the* narrative spaces we now use to imagine contexts to define/redefine our world and human lives.

It is clear not simply that we should have and encourage more respect for the best works of science fiction and fantasy for their literary merits, though we should (in part, as I have argued, by reevaluating the dated, but still prominent, concept many critics have of genre), but that, in valuing both genres, we should stress what I have argued throughout—that one of their most useful functions is to provide testing grounds for theological/spiritual/moral ideas and

possibilities in ways that realistic narratives typically cannot and our mainstream discourse often does not. What could (or should) such a recognition change about how we speak about or teach either genre or literature in general? What effects could or should accepting science fiction and fantasy as spiritual/theological playgrounds have on how we think of religion and theology, spirituality and transcendence? These are questions for us to consider.

¹ These opposite readings of the present perhaps have more to do with perception and politics than with any reality about the world. People on both sides long to have their own perspectives validated by others and are naturally threatened by those who hold opposite positions. As a result, each side sees the other as a more powerful, dominating force than it actually is. Such a view is also politically convenient: inflating the size of the threat obviously helps in recruiting and motivating one's own side. Of course, none of this is to say that there are not differences in the type or amount of power religious or secular forces might hold.

² In his infamous appearance on CNN's *Crossfire* and in *America: The Book*, Jon Stewart has argued that political news and debate are often presented merely as political theater, and that, more generally, the media sees itself primarily as a form of entertainment. George Saunders uses two eloquent analogies to make similar points in an essay titled "The Braindead Megaphone." The first presents the mainstream media as a "braindead megaphone" who intrudes on a party and whose simplistic and mindless but (thanks to the megaphones) loud utterances keep partygoers from talking about the deeper issues they might really want to discuss. Saunders appears to draw this idea from his own allegorical fable *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil*, in which he presents the media as "well-groomed squat little men with detachable megaphones growing out of their clavicles" whose only mode of speech is shouting brief, often self-involved, news headlines such as "MAJOR MEDIA FIGURE COMPLIMENTED BY SECOND MAJOR MEDIA FIGURE" and "IS THE MEDIA TOO FOCUSED ON THE MEDIA?" (90, 92). Saunders' second analogy compares the media to a neighbor shouting through the window about goings on next door. Saunders argues the best case scenario would be one in which the "Informant" uses clear language, has no agenda, and has plenty of time in which to construct and communicate his narrative with as much nuance and complexity as may be necessary, while the worst case scenario is essentially that which we face with our mainstream media:

Information arrives in the form of prose written by a person with little or no firsthand experience in the subject area, who hasn't had much time to revise what he's written, working within narrow time constraints, in the service of agenda that may be subtly or overtly distorting his ability to tell the truth. ("Braindead Megaphone" 5)

Making matters worse, Saunders argues, is the entertainment motive Stewart often criticizes: "Let it be understood that the Informant's main job is to entertain and that, if he fails in this, he's gone. Also, the man being informed? Make him too busy, ill-prepared, and distracted to properly assess what the Informant's shouting at him" (5). It is this need for news and media coverage to be entertaining that results in turning discussion topics into theatrical debates between polarized opposites out to "win." Along similar lines, in a lecture excerpted on *YouTube*, linguist Noam Chomsky argues persuasively that the need for mainstream media discussions to be brief ("concision") actually has an ideological impact on discussions, making it easier to regurgitate conventional wisdom and practically impossible to express or support unorthodox ideas, which obviously take more time to explain and defend ("Noam Chomsky on

Concision”). Blogger/journalist Julian Sanchez argues along the same lines, observing in a passage quoted on Andrew Sullivan’s *Daily Dish* that bad arguments “survive” because, while providing enough of an appearance of complexity to appease the listener, they are easier to explain than their rebuttals. Sanchez concludes, “So the setup is ‘snappy, intuitively appealing argument without obvious problems’ vs. ‘rebuttal I probably don’t have time to read, let alone analyze closely’” (qtd. in Sullivan). This dynamic enables slick, “reasonable-sounding” arguments to win out over positions supported by more credible evidence.

³ Even a relatively brief perusal of mainstream television/video and print debates reveals obviously limiting patterns, one of which, in recent years, is the ubiquity of *God is Not Great* author Christopher Hitchens as the representative for the “atheist side.” In 2007 alone, he debated Christian Al Sharpton on *Hardball* (and then again at a New York Public Library event), Bill Donohue of the Catholic League (again on *Hardball*) on the topic of Mother Teresa, and Christian Jon Meacham on Tim Russert’s CNBC show (“Christopher Hitchens & Al Sharpton on *Hardball*,” “Christopher Hitchens vs. Al Sharpton,” “Christopher Hitchens on Mother Teresa,” “CNBC- Christopher Hitchens”). In 2010, Hitchens appeared on CNN to debate his brother Peter (a Christian) on the topic of whether or not “civilization can survive without God” and debated former British Prime Minister (and current Catholic) Tony Blair in Toronto (Marrapodi, Noronha). Respect for Hitchens as a journalist and critic cannot obscure the fairly obvious observation that a debate featuring a “believer” (who, at least in each of these examples, is a traditional Christian) and the famously irascible atheist author of a book titled *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* on the topic of our chances of “surviv[ing] without God,” while sure to entertain, will almost certainly not be capable of moving past a limited, and not especially helpful, array of questions concerning religion, theology, and spirituality. Along similar lines, in 2007 *Newsweek*’s Jon Meacham moderated a debate between Christian pastor and *The Purpose Driven Life* author Rick Warren and Sam Harris titled “Religion: Is God Real?,” which concludes with Warren stating,

When I look at history, I would disagree with Sam: Christianity has done far more good than bad. Altruism comes out of knowing there is more than this life, that there is a sovereign God, that I am not God. We’re both betting. He’s betting his life that he’s right. I’m betting my life that Jesus was not a liar. When we die, if he’s right, I’ve lost nothing. If I’m right, he’s lost everything. I’m not willing to make that gamble. (Meacham)

Also in 2007, *Beliefnet* hosted a much longer “blogalogue” debate between Harris and Catholic Andrew Sullivan; the lengthy exchange is more discussion than debate and certainly has value, but it still features only an atheist and a member of a traditional organized religion (and only Christianity) and comes presented under the title, “Is Religion ‘Built on Lies’?”

⁴ There is an entire body of journalistic writing exposing and critiquing the folly and sometimes cowardice of the media’s “balance” obsession, its incompatibility with accuracy and its tendency to elevate speakers without credibility and positions without real support, especially, in recent years, on the issues of torture and gay rights. Perhaps the most concise statement of the problem comes in an *NPR* report by Brooke Gladstone:

We all know true objectivity is a myth. We use unconscious biases to filter billions of bits of sensory information every day, just to function. Reporters sorting through mountains of data must do the same thing. So is this impartiality

obsession just about appearance? And do we need to keep up that appearance to retain the trust of the news consumers?

The price of maintaining that appearance can be high. It can lead news outlets to refraining from calling a lie, a lie. It can lead them to give equal time to very unequal positions, distorting the truth in the process.

As [Jon] Stewart's partner in crime, Stephen Colbert, famously observed at the White House Correspondents dinner some years back, sometimes *reality* has a bias.

To give just a few examples of similar arguments: in a blog post, Atlantic writer Garret Epps observed that "One of the basic functions of journalism is to say: This is true, and that is false [...] In today's political environment, when so many simple facts are disputed, journalists can feel abashed about stating plainly what is true [...] instead they cover themselves by writing, 'according to most scientists, the sun rises in the east, although critics say....'" (qtd. in Pollock). Salon writer Glen Greenwald explores this problem perhaps more frequently than any other writer, in one post observing of a column, "Here we find two of the most common pundit afflictions: (1) a compulsion to assert equivalencies when they don't exist, and (2) a willingness to spout anything without doing the slightest work to find out if it's true." In an article from June 2010, Jason Linkins discusses a Harvard Kennedy School of Government study which finds that (in Linkins' words) "around 2004, major newspapers just stopped referring to waterboarding as torture, after decades of properly categorizing it as such." In his Martin Luther King Day piece, media critic Eric Deggans discusses a GLAAD petition "demanding CNN stop giving airtime during stories on gay issues to experts whose only qualification is that they are opposed to homosexuality" and observes, "CNN doesn't bring on a member of the Ku Klux Klan for expert commentary when talking about the status of Black people in America." While Deggans notes that newspapers eventually apologized decades later for how long it took them, in covering civil rights the media "eventually concluded that such views were prejudiced and stopped presenting them as equal arguments—reasoning that treating racists like equal participants in such debates only granted them a power they should not have." For an example of a far better paradigm, one in which fairness is prized (voices are allowed to articulate their arguments), but instead of artificially creating balance and equalizing unequal speakers and arguments, accuracy and credibility are weighed, and weak arguments and unqualified speakers are cast aside, we might look to a text on the same issue—U.S. District Chief Judge Vaughn R. Walker's proposition 8 decision. The decision text features exactly the kinds of voices who might be asked to appear on a CNN discussion of gay rights issues like those Deggans discusses, but with a difference—their credibility as experts and the support for their positions is rigorously questioned, and instead of leaving the discussion after five minutes with a "We're gonna have to leave it there," in a "Credibility Determinations" section, Walker assesses the credibility of witnesses for both sides and, while finding the plaintiff's witnesses credible, over the span of approximately fifteen pages explains exactly why the arguments of think tank founder David Blankenhorn and Professor Kenneth P. Miller, the primary defense witnesses, should be given, respectively, no weight and little weight.

⁵ Interestingly, when atheists, agnostics, and those who are simply not conventionally religious enter into the argument only to argue against theology or specific theological approaches, they unintentionally cede all of the theological ground, implying that there are only two choices: either no theology at all or whatever unsophisticated or improbable theology their opponent puts

forward. The implication is that the theology of those they oppose is the only theology, the idea of God/gods and the spiritual framework they present the only ones (both of which actually make their opponents seem more authoritative than they actually are). While they might dismiss theology in general, in such debates, it would be helpful if atheists and agnostics sometimes engaged proponents of conventional theology on their own grounds—not merely by critiquing their theology as representative of all spiritual possibilities (which just validates the prominence, even dominance, of their theology in the first place), but also by making an additional move and saying something like, “Your idea of God sounds more like an angry king, a petty, jealous person, or an abusive parent. If there is a transcendent being, I think it’d be better than the most enlightened person or the best parent, not worse. It seems more likely a transcendent being would...”. We see a hint of this approach in *Religulous*, when the actor playing Jesus at The Holy Land Experience tells Maher that God is a jealous God, and Maher responds, “Jealousy—that’s a pretty petty human emotion. I know *people* who’ve gotten over jealousy.”

⁶ In *A History of God* and *A Short History of Myth*, prominent religious historian Karen Armstrong repeatedly emphasizes the alleviation of despair and the fostering of compassion as core purposes of religion and myth—and of “mythos” generally as a form of thinking separate from the rational “logos” which has come to supplant it in the modern world. Armstrong observes that throughout history, myths and theological conceptions have typically endured when they succeed at these tasks and often (but not always) failed when they do not motivate compassionate behavior or provide comfort from despair. Following Armstrong, then, we might use the alleviation of despair and the fostering of compassion as criteria by which to judge the success or value of different beliefs, especially different theological concepts.

⁷ The abuse of the “God wants it” rationale is perfectly satirized by George Saunders in his piece “My Amendment,” in which the ironic persona he creates frequently asks, “Is this what God had in mind?” and scenes in the Ridley Scott film *Kingdom of Heaven*, in which Christian knights shout “God wills it!” to support their own bloodlust for war with Muslims.

⁸ Along similar lines: “If you were to destroy the belief in immortality in mankind, not only love but every living force on which the continuation of all life in the world depended, would dry up at once” (71).

⁹ Goldberg doesn’t directly refer to Jon Stewart’s/Stephen Colbert’s “Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear” in his article, but the timing (his piece follows the event by less than a month), the conceptual similarities, and his prominent use of variations of the word “sane” suggest the essay is partly an attempt to apply the rally’s approach to the media’s polarization of the political divide to its very similar handling of the religious/spiritual one. Given that in both cases, extremely loud voices with black and white views are emphasized, to the neglect of perhaps a majority of calmer, less extreme people with more complex, less partisan views, Goldberg is wise in suggesting that a similar solution (drawing awareness to the difference between the media’s heated and simplistic presentation of the debate and the more varied beliefs and mature attitudes of much of the actual population) might help here.

¹⁰ In *The Essential How to Know God*, Chopra presents seven aspects of God he argues spring from different “God response[s]” and which he translates into seven “level[s]” (17, 25). While he emphasizes that he is “not arranging these from bad to good,” he does say that “the seventh stage [“a level of unbounded unity”] is the goal, the one where pure being allows us to revel in the infinite creation of God” (29, 27).

¹¹ In *Life After Death: The Burden of Proof*, for example, he notes that “Earthly images carry us into the afterlife (we see what our culture has conditioned us to see), but then the soul makes creative leaps that open new worlds” and “If different cultures see different things after death, we must face the possibility that we create our own afterlife. Perhaps the vivid images that appear to dying people are projections, the soul’s way of helping us to adjust to leaving behind the five senses” (17, 42).

¹² In a section of *American Veda* titled “The Vedization of America,” Philip Goldberg suggests that “[t]he way Americans understand and practice religion has become decidedly Vedantic” (20). Pointing to research conducted in recent decades, Golberg suggests significant changes in categories including “Spiritual independence,” “Tolerance,” “Nonliteralism,” and “A different kind of God”:

One Gallup survey asked, “Do you think of spirituality more in a personal and individual sense or more in terms of organized religion and church doctrine?” Almost three quarters opted for “personal and individual” [...] Exclusivism is in decline; pluralism is in the ascendancy. A 2008 Pew Research Center survey found that 70 percent of Americans agreed that “many religions can lead to eternal life.” (Fifty-seven percent of Evangelical Christians also agreed.) [...] [Princeton sociologist Robert] says that the number of people who believe the Bible is the literal word of God has “dropped remarkably since the 1960s.” [...] Over 90 percent of Americans check “yes” when asked if they believe in God. But increasingly they see God as an abstract, nonpersonal force or intelligence, as opposed to an anthropomorphic deity. In the 2001 Beliefnet survey cited above, 84 percent saw God as “everywhere and in everything” as opposed to “someone somewhere.” (*American Veda* 21-22)

Of the SBNR category, he writes,

These trend lines coincide with the appearance of a new religious category: “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR). Robert C. Fuller, a religious studies scholar and author of a book on SBNRs, describes them this way: “Forsaking formal religious organizations, these people have instead embraced an individualized spirituality that includes picking and choosing from a wide range of alternative religious philosophies. They typically view spirituality as a journey intimately linked with the pursuit of personal growth or development.” In other words, they are spiritual pragmatists looking for usable wisdom wherever they can find it. Called by some the fastest growing segment of the religious spectrum, SBNRs make up 16 to 39 percent of the population. That a distinction has emerged between religion and spirituality is in itself a major change, and the fact that I don’t need to explain the difference is further proof. (Goldberg, *Veda* 22)

Also prominent is what is called “the New Spirituality”:

What [Wade Clark] Roof calls “the New Spirituality” is marked by questing and driven by autonomy and direct experience of the sacred. One-third of boomers, he reports, agree that people have God within them, and almost half regard “all religions as equally true and good.” He cites the rise of panentheism [...], which he defines in Vedantic language: “The self is the indwelling of God. The world is the abode of God. All is one, and one is all.[...]” [...] Ideas like those, says Roof in a subsequent work, “are now rather widely diffused in American culture as a

whole—including within the churches, synagogues and temples. (Goldberg, *Veda* 23)

From this new perspective, believing that there is only one true faith can seem limiting, even ignorant:

In a 1994 essay Ken Woodward, then Newsweek's religion editor, said that America is engaged in a "reconfiguring of the sacred" with a pluralism that "makes any one spiritual path seem inherently parochial." We are now much further along that path. Data on the generations after the baby boomers indicate that they are even more spiritually exploratory, more likely to fall in the SBNR category, and more curious about religions other than their own. The drift toward personalized, experiential spirituality and freely chosen affiliations—a decidedly Vedantic route—shows no sign of stopping. (Goldberg, *Veda* 24)

¹³ Armstrong is here making a sweeping judgment according to a standard she herself elsewhere problematizes. In an era of science and realism in which mythos is derided and only logos valued, even to the extent that religion must attempt to present itself as logos (a point she often makes), *of course* there will be no "major writers" who deal with supernatural topics since any writer who attempts to deal with mythos in such a period will naturally be dismissed as a "minor writer" and his or her works as genre works (in this case, "genre" in the pejorative sense sometimes used to dismiss fiction and film genres including science fiction and fantasy, not the neutral, and far more useful, descriptive usage of the term). In a much more astute analysis of science fiction and fantasy in the same review I quoted earlier, Margaret Atwood notes the breadth of the genre, which contains both deep literary exploration and somewhat silly, shallow escapism:

In brilliant hands, however, the form can be brilliant, as witness the virtuoso use of sci-trash material in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, or Russell Hoban's linguistically inventive *Riddley Walker*, or Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* and *The Martian Chronicles*. (Jorge Luis Borges was a fan of this last book, which is no surprise.) Sci-fi is sometimes just an excuse for dressed-up swashbuckling and kinky sex, but it can also provide a kit for examining the paradoxes and torments of what was once fondly referred to as the human condition: What is our true nature, where did we come from, where are we going, what are we doing to ourselves, of what extremes might we capable? Within the frequently messy sandbox of sci-fi fantasy, some of the most accomplished and suggestive intellectual play of the last century has taken place.

Of course we might say even Atwood's analysis here does not go far enough—viewed more accurately, isn't every genre, not only those dismissed as "genre fiction," really a "messy sandbox" containing deep examinations of the "human condition" and "trash"/"excuse[s] for [...] sex"? The difference might simply be that, with genres more readily accepted as literary, the two poles on the continuum have been disguised as separate genres (and thus the embarrassing parts hidden) whereas, with science fiction, the sillier or more overtly escapist works actually take center stage, and the literary works tend to be obscured or to attempt to present themselves as "not actually science fiction" to achieve recognition. An acceptance of the folly of making qualitative assessments by genre (rather than individual work) and of the idea that literariness need not be seen as wiping away genre aspects would help here.

¹⁴ Interestingly, Woody Allen's 2005 drama *Match Point* uses its plot to make the exact opposite point—that things happen by chance alone, or, as protagonist/narrator Chris puts it in the film's opening moments,

The man who said "I'd rather be lucky than good" saw deeply into life. People are afraid to face how great a part of life is dependent on luck. It's scary to think so much is out of one's control. There are moments in a match when the ball hits the top of the net, and for a split second, it can either go forward or fall back. With a little luck, it goes forward, and you win. Or maybe it doesn't, and you lose.

In Allen's film, as well, there are two possible perspectives—a faithful view that sees purpose and signs and views life as happy and the protagonist's (and seemingly Allen's own) nihilistic perspective that sees only randomness and chance and, for that reason, finds life tragic. In Allen's film, the plot proves the latter correct; while Chris admits that "It would be fitting if I were apprehended... and punished [for murdering his pregnant lover and her neighbor]. At least there would be some small sign of justice - some small measure of hope for the possibility of meaning," that "measure of hope" never comes. There is no justice (Chris is saved from being caught by luck), but neither can he enjoy his escape, as the final shot reveals him to be disconnected from the happy family celebrating the birth of his new child. This is the tragedy of a world without purpose or meaning, Allen's screenplay argues.

¹⁵ While this could be the result of an ideological agenda, it is of course also possible that, as big budget blockbusters, such films simply take the least controversial position possible: in this case that God exists as a mysterious protector and our task is to hope and believe—a stance which will perhaps offend the fewest potential viewers. Of course, that also means few will be challenged.

¹⁶ As Ramses eventually admits in Cecille B. DeMille's 1956 version of *The Ten Commandments*, "His god is God." Since Wolfe's themes and narrative arcs echo the Old and New Testament and the narratives of Moses and Jesus, the comparison should not surprise.

¹⁷ Ursula K. Le Guin, for example, has taken on what she calls "genrification", writing,

Here then in the curricular flask we have the distillate, the Great Tradition, the pure quintessence; and over there somewhere in a lot of little bottles and old Mason jars is all the other stuff, including all genre fiction.

[...]

I first thought about this issue of genrification not as a woman writer but as a writer of science fiction, fantasy, children's books, and young adult books—four fictionalized modes categorized by both publishers and academics as genres, and thereby, by the simple designation, excluded from serious criticism and consideration as literature.

(Yes, there are exceptions; there are always exceptions: there are battered husbands; there is Jane Austen; there is *Alice in Wonderland*; a critic here and there includes Tolkien among the "major writers." I am happy to discuss exceptions as long as they are not being dragged in as red herrings to lead us away from the fact that, as 95% of battered spouses are women, 95% of canonical authors are white men writing realism for adults.)

[...]

If the mainstream definably exists, then I think it is itself a genre; one among many ways of writing fiction—one of the many modes I myself work in.

What's important to me is not setting up these polarities and rivalries, but getting free of them. [...]

Categorization and the ranking of classes in a hierarchy is a useful and necessary intellectual activity, in its place. Misused, it serves not understanding, but authority. [...] I want to say that I think the teaching of literature in universities perpetuates a false ranking, a pernicious hierarchy of values.

[...]

[...] It seems to me that s.f. studies have not been integrated into literature any more than woman's studies have, or black studies; they all remain exceptions, marginalized, gentrified [...].

[...]

As I understand it, the s.f. teacher and critic has two general options or directions. One is to accept and foster s.f. as a genre—to teach separate courses in s.f. and defend its unique virtues. To do so is to admit the dominance of the exclusionary canon, either as an aesthetic fact or as force majeure. The other option is to refuse to gentrify, and to try to spike the canon. [...]

[...] I hope there will be many more such crossovers. I hope they will take place out of, as well as into, s.f. studies—comparisons, studies of influence, demystifications of genre, and some useful definitions. [...] I hope that obstinate genre-busting and large-scale, radical questioning will begin to have a good effect, not perhaps on minds that closed down years ago, but on the younger minds, among whom, after all, lurk the future chairpersons and members of Curriculum Committees, as well as the editors, publishers, librarians, critics, readers, and writers of books. (Leguin, "Spike" 17-21)

George R.R. Martin and Gene Wolfe have both pointed out the tendency of writers and critics to attempt to remove literary works from the genre by saying they are "not really science fiction"; Martin:

But I do think fantasy and science fiction are a legitimate part of literature. I think I speak for virtually all fantasy and science-fiction writers that it's a constant annoyance for anyone who works in these fields, that whenever a great piece of work is produced, you get reviewers saying, "Oh, this isn't science fiction, it's too good." Most recently, that's happened with Cormac McCarthy and *The Road*. Which is definitely a science fiction book, and yet it's winning all these prizes and people are saying, "No, no, it's science fiction." Well, it's literature and it's science fiction. It's a breath mint *and* a candy mint. (Martin par. 9)

Wolfe on the same point:

But although mainstream *literature* has been open, mainstream criticism has been implacably closed. I am not just talking about academic criticism, though I very definitely include academic criticism. The technique is simple: when some big name—John Barth, say—writes speculative fiction, the critics pretend it is not speculative fiction. When someone who is not a big name writes speculative fiction, they pretend the book—I say "book," Heaven help a short story—does not exist.

Furthermore, many of the review media are closed to speculative fiction; The New Yorker is an example. Many of those that are not closed (please note that I am talking about reviews now, not criticism) ghettoize what they print. (Wolfe, "Right of Things" 392).

Perhaps the most sweeping criticisms of the critical tendencies to evaluate generically and to insist on a divide between high and low culture come from Lawrence Levine and Andreas Huyssen. Here is Levine:

If there is a tragedy in this development, it is not only that millions of Americans were now separated from exposure to such creators as Shakespeare, Beethoven, and Verdi, whom they had enjoyed in various formats for much of the nineteenth century, but also that the rigid cultural categories, once they were in place, made it so difficult for so long for so many to understand the value and importance of the popular art forms that were all around them. Too many of those who considered themselves educated and cultured lost for a significant period—and many still have not regained—their ability to discriminate independently, to sort things out for themselves and understand that simply because a form of expressive culture was widely accessible and highly popular it was not therefore necessarily devoid of any redeeming value or artistic merit. (232-233)

Huyssen on the same point:

The subtext for all of the essays assembled here is the conviction that the high modernist dogma has become sterile and prevents us from grasping current cultural phenomena. The boundaries between high art and mass culture have become increasingly blurred, and we should begin to see that process as one of opportunity rather than lamenting loss of quality and failure of nerve. There are many successful attempts by artists to incorporate mass cultural forms into their work, and certain segments of mass culture have increasingly adopted strategies from on high. If anything, that is the postmodern condition in literature and the arts. For quite some time, artists and writers have lived and worked after the Great Divide. It is time for critics to catch on. (Huyssen ix)

Two observations: First, we should accept that evaluating generically (and by this I mean assessing *quality* by genre, not using genre descriptively) is simply lazy and unwise. Second, the paradigm that views works as "leaving" their genres when they become literary (and thus entering the "genre" of literary fiction) is a misleading one that works primarily to discredit certain genres like science fiction and fantasy (while claiming their best works) and to "cleanse" others of "low" associations—in other words, to obscure connections between genres and works and, even more deeply, between escapist and literary reading. It would be both more honest and critically useful to admit, for example, that despite significant differences, Jane Austen's literary romance *Persuasion* and Nicholas Sparks' romance novel *Dear John* actually share significant genre conventions and escapist appeals. And perhaps noticing that both belong in a capacious and diverse genre or category of "romance novel" something akin to the "messy sandbox" Margaret Atwood used to describe science fiction would make it easier for us to accept that both Gene Wolfe's *Sun* epic and the latest *Star Wars* novelization fit into science fiction—and that such close co-existence of the literary and the escapist within genres is in fact the norm rather than a strange aberration. If we must make qualitative distinctions, we might apply what Martin says of fantasy to literature in general: works we consider literary do not exist entirely outside of

genres; they simply feature *both* genre elements *and* literary aims or traits. This is not a curiosity of fantasy and science fiction, but a feature of literature in general. If we wish to slap the pejorative “genre fiction” label on anything, it should be on works, from within any genre, that feature *only* genre or formula elements and little or nothing in addition.

¹⁸ But not the film, which, in addition to pushing the setting back from the future to 1998 (the actual year of its release), leaves out this element.

¹⁹ This is one of many ways in which a feature of science fiction and fantasy can be seen partly as an extension of a feature of fiction more generally.

²⁰ By figures ranging from spiritual writers such as Deepak Chopra, Eckhart Tolle, and Mathieu Ricard to atheist critic Sam Harris to President Obama.

²¹ In *A Short History of Myth*, Karen Armstrong discusses how the dominance of scientific thinking and logos in general caused many people to lose an understanding of the workings of myth and religions to attempt to “rationalize their mythology,” an endeavor she observes “Western Christians seized on” in the eleventh and twelfth centuries “with an enthusiasm they would never completely lose” (117). Biblical literalism can be seen as a product of this tendency; ironically, those often arguing against science are (often unknowingly) themselves desperately contorting their spiritual views to fit within the paradigm of science and the structure of logos in which only what is empirically true counts.

²² Of course, as it often is in works ranging from Thackeray’s Victorian novel *Vanity Fair* to the 1952 Hollywood classic *Singin’ in the Rain*, the metafictional discussion of and criticism of other stories is used in part to affirm the realism of this one, essentially telling us, “This isn’t like other stories; this time it’s really happening.”

²³ This is also the God most frequently criticized by atheist and agnostic thinkers including Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Richard Dawkins, who describes Yahweh of the Old Testament as an “evil monster” (Dawkins 248). (When, in Bill Maher’s *Religulous*, the “amusement park Jesus” of The Holy Land experience in Orlando tells the comic that God is a jealous God, Maher responds, “Jealousy—that’s a pretty petty human emotion. I know *people* who’ve gotten over jealousy”).

²⁴ It is necessary here to note that the two broad categories of science fiction narratives featuring alien god figures I have outlined in this and the previous chapter do not, by a stretch, represent the full multitude of roles and functions alien figures can occupy within science fiction, nor even the range of god roles aliens can play. Along the same lines, nor am I claiming that these categories cover the entire range of science fiction’s approaches to and insights on matters of religion and spirituality, which any serious reader of the genre will recognize is vast and varied. What I am arguing, however, is that these two broad categories of science fiction narratives depicting aliens as types of gods or, at the very least, spiritual/theological players, show the genre’s special ability to engage in theological speculation of exactly the kind that our discourse about spirituality, theology, and moral evolution currently requires. These groups of narratives have allowed and continue to allow us to embody and examine god-figures and spiritual/religious approaches of the kind that have dominated the past (and, as we have seen, to consider their problems and limitations) as well as the more sophisticated, open-minded, pluralistic, less literal versions of both to which, in recent decades, more and more have turned (but which, unfortunately, are often ignored in mainstream discussion).

²⁵ The Robert Zemeckis-directed film pares away a great deal of the novel’s plot, almost all of the its discussion of the impact of an alien message on the nationalism of Earth, and much of the

complexity of the alien encounter itself (as well as the novel's surprisingly explicit attempt, at the end, to answer the religious/spiritual question), but it preserves much of the comparison.

²⁶ In the novel's fairly overt allegorical schema, Ellie stands for science and Joss for open-minded progressive spirituality/religion; their coming to understand each other and their common interests obviously represents a synthesis of science and religion.

²⁷ It is noteworthy that this is virtually the same question (especially the who/what are we portion of it) the narrator of *The War of the Worlds* asks himself during his very different alien encounter. It is a question about purpose—the purpose, nature, and context (in multiple senses) of human life. These are theological or at least spiritual questions, or questions which have components of both aspects, and in these two novels they are raised not through encounters with divinity or some spiritual force but through interactions with alien beings functioning in similar roles, exemplifying how science fiction, like myth and theology, functions by contextualizing human life.

²⁸ This is an odd choice on Proyas' part, given that the very different (and far less beneficent) alien figures in his most acclaimed film, *Dark City*, are explicitly called “the strangers” by the narrator.

²⁹ Interestingly, he says them to a character played by Jeff Bridges, who voiced Starman.

³⁰ Works like *Dawn* and Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris*, in which humans scientists puzzle over and indirectly communicate with an entire planet with little result, also imply a subtle criticism of the easy anthropomorphism of much other science fiction. The aliens in Butler's series can be seen as loving God-like figures in the manner of the alien figures in *Contact*, *Close Encounters*, and *Cocoon*, as conquering Westerners bringing civilization to the “primitives,” or, by another analogy, as a somewhat more ambiguous version of the “alien as cold scientists” model.

³¹ The scene in the Disney film adaptation in which Pinocchio's new buddy turns into a donkey, and Pinocchio himself begins his own transformation, might strike a contemporary viewer as exactly the kind of story element to inspire a child viewer's nightmares, and that despite the fact that the story holds back a bit, showing the punishment happen fully to his new friend and only begin to happen to Pinocchio.

³² Discussing a film called *The Ape Man* in her insightful *Science Fiction Studies* piece on “Simian Cinema,” Rebecca Bishop notes that the Bela Lugosi character “is confronted with the animality that lurks within human nature” and that “[t]he capacity to metamorphose in and out of animality is an enduring theme” before making a comment that could be applied to the moral dynamic in this sequence in *Pinocchio*: “The ‘subjectification’ of the ape in sf films is not about containing the animal as an object of difference per se: it is about representing animality as a condition against which the human progresses or degenerates” (241, 242, 248). In a similar sense, Pinocchio's partial transformation into a donkey represents his moral degeneration, but in Pinocchio's case, it is not merely from human to animal; it is from the simulation of a human, or an aspiring human, to an animal. He can rise from aspiring human to humanity or fall to animality, which emphasizes the degree to which aspiring human is a separate category from animal, though of course there is much they share and many cases in which the two overlap.

³³ In his article on the film, *Esquire* writer Tom Junod picks up on the Pinocchio connection: “The conceptual edge of the movie is borne almost entirely by Sam Worthington's Marcus, who, damned as a human, finds his redemption as a machine. It's a little *Pinocchio* — Marcus wants to be a real boy — and a little *RoboCop*, but it's also a little McG, striving to make the most personal impersonal movie that Hollywood will allow.”

³⁴ Analyzing the film's real focus, Greydanus argues,

But *A.I.* isn't really about machines. It's the human condition that's really at issue in this film, as in most worthwhile works of art. The quest of the mechas for their makers, David's quest to become a real boy, are symbols of our own quest: our human longing to be whole and complete, to be truly human, to know and be known by our maker and fill the God-shaped hole in our hearts.

The conclusion of that quest in the film, he suggests, is disappointment and loneliness:

This is a fairy tale struggling with the desperate horror of life in a lonely universe — of life without God, or faith, or love. It's an example of what John Paul II was talking about in his *Letter to Artists* when he wrote, "Even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul... artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption."

³⁵ Of course Wolfe also uses this scene to make a meta-fictional comment on the role of drama or art and its difference from simple lying. Horn/Silk understands that this pretend is not merely a casual lie, but meaningful drama—a meaningful ritual these figures are enacting that is, if untrue on a surface, literal level, true in a deeper, spiritual one

³⁶ Explaining to Capsicum why humans have “separated themselves” from the Outsider and what the consequences of that separation are, Horn/Silk uses the analogy of a person and his or her walking stick:

“You have a walking stick. Suppose it could walk by itself, and that it chose to walk away from you.”

[...]

“You see,” I said, “if the Outsider were to make a walking stick, it would be such a good walking stick that it could do that.” [...] “But if it chose to walk away from him, instead of coming to him when he called to it, it would no longer be a walking stick at all, only a stick that walked. And when someone tending a fire saw it go past, he would break it and toss it onto the coals.”

[...]

“It's only a walking stick when I walk with it.” She held up her own thick black stick. “That's what you mean, isn't it?”

“Exactly.” (*Whorl* 271)

³⁷ Speaking generally of the movement away from a hierarchical view of humanity's place, Sherryl Vint observes,

In the past twenty-five years there has been an explosion of interest in human/animal relations in a number of disciplines. [...] The very fact that Lissy can become pregnant with the fetus of another species dramatizes the increasing permeability of the boundary between human and animal as well as the challenge such permeability presents to social and political structures. [...] In the late twentieth century, sf enthusiastically took up the question of cyborg identity in relation to machines; now in the twenty-first, we are ready to explore sf's contributions to our kinship with animals. (177-178)

Later, she notes that “the protagonists of these novels challenge taxonomic purity and in some ways position animal-being as superior” (Vint 183). Along similar lines, Joan Gordon summarizes the changed state of the human/animal relationship:

We used to spend our energies explaining how we are different from animals, making sharp distinctions between humans and animals. Now we say that we are one species among many. Once we were a little lower than the angels, but higher on the great chain of being than other creatures; now we see ourselves, more and more, as abandoning any pretense of some place in a hierarchy. Once we were the exclusive proprietors of mind, sentience, soul; now we are not sure. Once we had free will, animals had instinct; we were autonomous, they were machines; we had language, they did not. Now we question all those assumptions, and ask ourselves why we think we are at the top of the food chain.

[...]

These days we question the human/animal divide more than ever. (189)
 Cat Yampell's characterization of the older, more hierarchical mindset we may be transcending actually sounds like a good description of Wolfe's approach:

The history of *homo sapiens* is firmly rooted in the delineation of differences, often to the complete exclusion of samenesses—woman from man, child from adult, nature from culture, and nonhuman animal from human-animal.¹ In contemporary Western culture, animals are so labeled to perpetuate anthropocentrism [...]. In *Of Grammatology* (1974), Jacques Derrida writes, "Man calls himself man only by drawing limits excluding his other... : the purity of nature, of animality, primitivism, childhood, madness, divinity" (244; emphasis in original). Entrenched in a position that maintains their subjugation and ensuing limitations, women, children, animals, and other subaltern groups are often discouraged or dismissed. In order to ensure dominion, human-animals (a category which does not necessarily include all *homo sapiens*) create and celebrate hierarchical boundaries and privilege that which separates over that which unifies. (207)

Of course, as I have said, Wolfe's focus is not exactly parallel to those of the writers these critics are discussing, since they are dealing with the relationship between humans and animal beings and Wolfe is focused on relationships between human or human-like beings alongside animals at different moral/spiritual levels. (The dog Gylf in *The Wizard Knight*, for example, is an animal, but being a member of the Valfather's pack, is actually from a higher level of the world's hierarchy than is human protagonist Able). That said, the distinctions Wolfe makes between levels (such as between the humans of Mythgarthr, who have immortal souls, and the aelf of Aelfrice, who do not) at times draw from and echo the kinds of religious/spiritual/moral distinctions once made between humans and animals and which the works analyzed by these critics typically critique. As Bishop observes, "The eighteenth-century naturalist Buffon argued that although man and ape shared similar characteristics, only man was divinely endowed with a soul and a capacity of speech" (240).

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