Afterword

Science Fiction, Historical Fiction and Religion Fiction?

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That Implicit Religion should look at Science Fiction, was (as mentioned before) a suggestion made during the course of one of the half-yearly meetings of the Trustees of CSIRCS (the Centre for the Study of Implicit Religion and Contemporary Spirituality). To be more precise, the idea came from the anthropologist, Tim Jenkins (whose Implicit Religion post, in the Faculty of Divinity at Cambridge, was endowed by CSIRCS). Indeed, because no opportunity to follow it up appeared immediately, he subsequently repeated the suggestion. How the rather obvious conjunction of that idea, with the proceedings of the Religion and Science Fiction Group at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, came about, now seems unclear. It may have been the brainchild of Kimberley Rae Connor, the co-editor of this Special Issue, who had already contributed an article to Implicit Religion (“The Fifth Corner”: Hip Hop’s New Geometry of Adolescent Religiosity, 9(1): 7–28, 2006)—with whom, it might be added, it has indeed been a pleasure to cooperate, during the fairly lengthy period of this Issue’s gestation.

Holding to the view that “people are mostly right in what they affirm (and wrong in what they deny),” and that a new idea should be cosseted as a rara avis, had this Editor been more familiar with Science Fiction perhaps the link with the AAR Group would have been made more quickly. Now, however, he is as glad to have become a little better educated, as he was grateful to be thus prompted. Science Fiction, as this collection of essays keeps pointing out, shares with religion(s) the capacity to present both alternative views of this world, and views of alternative worlds.

Three thoughts come to mind, however. For, while worldviews, whether ontological or ethical (empirical or utopian, pragmatic or fantastic) are undoubtedly elements of explicit religions (in the forms of worship and eschatology, intercessory or contemplative prayer and teleology or apocalypse), and are undoubtedly important factors in human life, science fiction in itself is (inevitably) a closer parallel to theology and philosophy (in their various forms) than to the broader gamut covered by “religion.”
concerns of science fiction may be “intensive,” but how “extensive” are their “effects”?

A second thought is no doubt the question of someone who really learned to read, at the rather late age of seven, with a large, children’s history book, and has remained historically minded, ever since.

Thinking of Science Fiction’s historical context, then, it is not surprising to see the parallel with the widespread development and influence of science and (even more) of technology, in the twentieth century. However, each had already been developing both fast and influentially, in the same “western world,” for the previous two, four, or even six centuries. Might the seemingly late development of SF, therefore, be a sign of their lack of impact upon the imaginations of the literati of those times? Might the slightly “outsider” status of H.G. Wells (sometimes cited as SF’s founder or forerunner) be a pointer in the same direction?

Historically speaking, again, might Science Fiction be seen as the successor to the fictional Utopianism apparent in More’s Utopia and Hobbes’s “social contract,” each of them reflecting the new geography rather than science of their time?

Likewise historically, might Science Fiction be seen as filling the gap left by Christian theology, at least in the homelands of SF, when anthropocentric and vaguely teleologised “social Darwinism” replaced its vivid apocalyptic and clearer eschatology, at least among the literati? (The lived utopianism of monasticism, Pilgrim Settlers, hippy communes, and love-marriages, has continued unabated.) This recent lacuna of Christian imagination may be reflected more widely, outside the world of SF, in the brusque (because so “obvious”) and contemptuous (because so pre-scientific) dismissal, in opinion poll after opinion poll, by intellectuals and would-be intellectuals, of any notion of personality within divinity, and the apparent resurrection therefore of mechanical gods, as the extreme of what can be envisaged?

The third thought can be seen as centred less on the “fiction” versus the “facts” aspect, and more on the “science.”

It has been noted how popular “historical fiction” has recently become. Presumably it fills out the dry bones of genealogy, just as the enactment of a battle brings a tourist spot to spectacular life. For some time now, however, it seems we have had the growth of another new literary genre: religion fiction.

The three best-known authors are probably J.K. Rowling, Dan Brown, and Richard Dawkins. Part at least of their appeal must be (as with H.G.
Wells and science fiction, a century ago) the ease with which projections can be made upon screens that are (increasingly becoming) blank. When intended neither as children’s entertainment, nor as mystery thriller, but as fervent gospel, such instances cry out for consideration as Implicit Religion.

The Emperor himself might not welcome what many whisper, but it is hard to believe that no one has yet published such an essay; perhaps some student is even now working on it? Perhaps for inclusion in another Special Issue on Religious Fiction.