

Science Fiction For Preachers

An Examination of Popular Culture

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Science-fiction and fantasy have become two of the most well-known genres of popular culture in our time. Today the most frequently attended movies are science fiction or fantasy movies. The *Star Wars* saga, *E.T.*, and the *Superman* movies are but a few. In addition to the movies the paperback galleries in the bookstores are drawing record numbers of sales to their science fiction and fantasy sections. Indeed, the books made from successful science fiction movies and TV series (*Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, for example) are often paperback bestsellers. From these books readers seem to be drawn to other books with similar plots and themes, thus causing many science fiction novels to become best sellers: Isaac Asimov's *Foundation's Edge*, *The Robots of Dawn*, *Robots & Empire*, Arthur C. Clark's *2010*, Frank Herbert's *Dune* series and others.

What is happening to the population, especially the younger population, to cause them to imbibe from this particular well of popular culture? Perhaps the question should be turned around and asked, what are these forms of popular culture saying that draws so many people, especially young people, to see these movies and read these books? Should the preacher pay attention to this phenomenon?

The purpose of this article is to attempt an answer to this question. The answer has a direct bearing on the proclamation of the gospel for our times, for in discovering an answer to the popularity of science fiction and fantasy we discover some basic beliefs and values American Christians share with the American culture at large. Discovering these beliefs and values and coming to grips with them can, I firmly believe, strengthen our proclamation of the gospel.

In examining the reasons why science fiction and fantasy have become so popular we discover that this genre, more than any other at this particular period in our history, has tapped into our cultural myths as Americans. In fact, such a tapping into our myths has not been done since the classic western movies of the forties and fifties. The word myth though, may need a bit of explanation in this context. Myth for so many people, especially those affiliated with the thought of Rudolph Bultmann, means something illusory and false. This concept comes from a superficial way of looking at myths as ancient people's childish way of explaining natural phenomena which they did not understand because science had not yet developed. For primitive people though, mythology was sacred. That is, mythology contained their very soul as a people. The death of the mythology of a people signals the destruction of the lives and especially the spirit of that people, as we have seen in the American Indian

tribes. Fortunately, now many anthropologists and psychologists (especially those with an affinity for Carl Jung) are helping us to see that mythology reflects underlying psychological and spiritual processes taking place within the human psyche. Science fiction and fantasy as we see it today, and especially in the movies, touches, reflects upon, and most importantly, reinforces our myths as Americans in a fashion never before seen.

Since this essay is concerned with the question of the wide-spread popularity of science fiction and fantasy, the myths I will discuss are those that have been presented in recent movies and TV shows. Until the past several years science fiction has generally been a genre of popular culture chiefly found in books and magazines. However, due to the tremendous power of mass communication found in television and on the screen, science fiction has now become a combination of movie, TV, books, and magazines. The visual media feeds upon the print media for ideas and forms; the visual media attracts viewers who are in turn redirected back to the print media for further excursions into the realms of science fiction and fantasy.

The following list of cultural myths into which science fiction has tapped is not presumed to be complete; perhaps there are other ways of formulating the myths. To my mind, though, the following four myths, however titled or labeled, are basic to understanding what is going on in the population at large where science fiction and fantasy are concerned. Needless to say, our congregations are participating in these myths just as much as anybody else, mainly because as Americans we all share the same cultural environment.

I. The Cowboy(s) On A Journey

For Americans this is the all-time classic myth and is rooted deep in our collective psyche. In its simplest terms the myth is the story of an honest, morally upright, rugged individualist who journeys through life encountering those who are weaker and need his help. Usually the weaker is a community of some sort. In the western movies this collection of weaker individuals was the town. Something had happened to break the continuity and bonding of the community. Something evil had somehow, somehow crept into the idealic community, an evil which needed to be eradicated. Usually this eradication necessitated some violent action on the part of the cowboy. In the classic western this was the final shoot-out between the good cowboy and the evil gunslingers, bounty hunters, outlaws, or power-and-land-hungry cattle baron. Good won; evil was defeated; the community was restored. The cowboy, after righting the wrong, continued on his journey, riding off into the sunset, to use the cliché.

Notable in this myth is the fact that evil is something on the outside. It has crept almost unnoticed into the community, causing rot and decay from within. This decay has grown to such an extent that only some powerful force from the outside can arrest the progression. Please note: the evil is not indigenous to the community. It is an alien entity or force that has crept into or seduced the community. To eradicate the evil it is only necessary to struggle and cast it out. Such a simplistic attitude to evil has great difficulty grasping the notion of sin as indigenous to fallen humanity. Thus the notion of moral

perfectionism (not sanctification; perfectionism), pure individuals from whom the alien evil has been cast out by the blood of Christ, found ready soil in much of American popular thought.

The western is always set on the frontier. It has long been noted that the frontier has exercised an incalculable influence on our consciousness as Americans. Something deep within us responds to the cowboy myth no matter how this myth is portrayed. It should come as no surprise then that there was such a tremendous response to the television show which began with a visual of outer space flashed on the TV screen and a voice saying, "Space. The Final Frontier. These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise. . . ."

Star Trek is THE example of the cowboy myth for our time. When Gene Roddenbury first conceived this series he presented it to potential television producers as a "Wagon Train" to the stars, thus basing the show consciously on a TV version of the western myth. The TV western as seen in the fifties and early sixties was the heir to the movie westerns cranked out by the studios in almost countless number. *Wagon Train* along with *Gunsmoke*, *Bonanza*, *The Rifleman*, *Have Gun-Will Travel*, and others, formed the altar of worship on which Americans prostrated themselves in terms of having their beliefs and values reinforced. By watching the TV westerns, certain beliefs concerning morality, evil, and community were reinforced week after week.

Roddenbury's *Star Trek* consciously emulated this mythical archetype. But this time, rather than focusing on the past and using the settings and architecture of the past to promote a myth that was believed true in the present, *Star Trek* presented the cowboy myth in future terms. The focus was on what will happen tomorrow and how the archetypical hero-community (the wagon train or the Star Ship's officers) handles future demands and pressures and intrusions of evil. The answer was quite plain and simple: as the cowboys did in the past, so we will do in the future. The typical *Star Trek* plot went like this: the ship encountered some weaker community (alien or human) wherein some evil, or potential evil, threatened this community; the ship's officers then proceeded to eradicate the evil, leading to a final denouncement after which the ship left orbit to proceed to another weaker community.

Star Trek was taken off the air in 1969, but then began an incredible phenomenon in its syndication. The series in its syndication became even more popular than it was as a current series. I believe that a generation of young people, battered by swift societal changes, by incredible intrusions of evil such as the late-sixties assassinations, the escalation of the war in Vietnam, the Watergate revelations, found a surcease and comfort in the simplicity of *Star Trek*, a simplicity that used the high technology of science fiction combined with the simplicity of the cowboy myth. This reassurance was not so much conscious as it was an unconscious response on the part of young people to their deepest instincts as Americans, an appeal that crossed economic, racial, and religious boundaries.

The taking of the hostages in Iran which opened the eighties, the continuing problems in the Middle East, and all the economic and sociological forces which gave rise to the upsurge in the right-wing shift in American politics, contributed to the continuing popularity of *Star Trek* on into this decade, a

popularity that shows little sign of abating. In fact, with the growth of conservatism and the "classic" American virtues of freedom, individualism, combating the evil outside the community (communism from Russia), *Star Trek* will continue, if not grow, in popularity. The fourth *Star Trek* movie, *Star Trek IV*, recently released, testifies to this.

II. The Elected One

As with the cowboy myth, the myth of the Elected One (or perhaps group) is rooted deep in the American psyche. This myth comes out of our Calvinist heritage, especially in the way the Calvinistic Puritans expounded the doctrine of election. To Calvin election was always an appointment to the service of God. His interpretation of the providence of God centered on the notion that whatever happened to people, even natural or man-made disasters, always had some divine purpose. Human beings may not be able to adequately discern that purpose, but the purpose is nonetheless there in the mind of God; otherwise the event or natural happening would not have occurred.

Our Puritan forefathers and mothers combined the Calvinist notion of the election and providence of God into the idea that America was elected by God for a purpose. Those people who emigrated from England to the "New World" were used by God to found a country which would promote a true religion purified of dross. The new government was to be morally upright and founded on the tenets of religion as interpreted by the Puritan town council. To the Puritans their community was conceived as a city set on a hill, designed to be seen by all the other nations of the world as a shining example of God in human affairs and government. Their mission was an errand of light into the dark wilderness of corrupt, absolute government, and warped, "popish" religion.

Although this myth of a "God-elected" community has had rough going throughout our history it has, nonetheless, maintained a strong hold on our collective psyche. Most Americans believe that their country does indeed have some responsibility to the other nations of the world and this responsibility entails coming to the aid of other countries when they are in trouble, be it from hunger, poverty or tyranny. America first began to flex its international muscles under Theodore Roosevelt, and with the possible exception of the twenties, has never ceased since.

Americans still see themselves more or less as endowed through God or fate with the responsibility of at least "saving" others physically (through sharing of resources) and, at most, showing others the right and true way to live and how to behave towards each other. (Witness the Peace Corps, Vista, etc.) With this in mind we can see how the idea of Superman begins to make a lot of sense. *Superman* is the collective embodiment of how the vast majority of Americans see themselves, or rather their country. The popular notion is: "Our country is bigger than any other, save Russia; it is stronger; it is more powerful; it stands for truth and justice." If you think about it, *Superman* could have emerged; as we know him, only from America.

As Clark Kent, Superman is self-effacing, unprepossessing and mild-mannered. This is his day-to-day way of functioning. But when needed, the superpowers emerge and are utilized to whatever extent needed. Villains, natural disasters—all are taken on and defeated. As with the cowboy myth evil is generally “out there,” not within. *Superman* is the prime example of the one who, in a natural disaster (his home planet exploded, his parents killed) was “elected” by fate or God, through this natural disaster, to come to a weaker community that desperately needed him. Seeing the world’s need of him, Kal-El (his Kryptonian name) accepted his responsibility, his election unto service. He took up the burden of his “super-career,” first in Smallville (which served as a training ground) then in the great Metropolis. It is noteworthy that Superman is honest, morally upright, and seeks to promote justice. The old fifties TV show included the phrase “promote the American way,” ostensibly to fight and eradicate the outside evil of communism in those McCarthy days.

Superman the Movie premiered the summer of 1979, the time when President Carter labeled our country in a crisis of confidence. Upon hearing this from its chief leader, the public, as usual, turned to its sanctuaries of worship, that is, the movies and paperback galleries, to find some sort of reaffirmation of themselves and their country. These altars of worship gave them exactly what they wanted: reassurance that America really was okay, that contrary to the statement from the President, the evil was not within, but out there; that we as Americans were elected by God (or fate or some “higher” power) to be great and great we would be! People knew what they wanted to hear, especially from their leaders. It should come as no surprise to discover that Ronald Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter in an incredible landslide. Reagan presents an image of optimism, belief in the inherent goodness of the community to which he belongs—America—and that if we all pull together, we can fight off our troubles which are not from within us, but something we’ve let into our midst. I also find it fascinating to note that Reagan’s consciously promoted image is that of the cowboy!

III. The Maturation of The Hero

This is a primal myth which transcends cultural-national boundaries, but which in the U.S. has received an “americanized” treatment. According to Jungian scholar Robert Johnson, this primal myth finds its truest form in the story of Parsifal and the Holy Grail through the version which emerged in the eleventh century by Chrétien de Troyes. In simplest terms, this myth deals with a boy growing up. Early on he sees what his destiny is, or what his fulfillment of potential will be through viewing the grail. But he does not yet have the maturity to understand it. Accordingly, he goes rather ignorantly out into the world, jousting with the Red Knight, fighting many enemies, until finally in maturity the grail is reached (grail meaning maturity and wisdom).

This myth is THE myth of the male according to Dr. Jung and other scholars. This is what every man goes through growing up, from jousting with the Red Knight known as the bully to the Red Knight of the college professor or first boss. The Parsifal myth has several modern counterparts, but the su-

preme example in science fiction is the *Star Wars* saga. George Lukas admits that his saga is loosely based on a Japanese film, but the finished product is distinctly of the Parsifal myth, and in content distinctly American. *Star Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and *Return of the Jedi* are all dealing with primarily one thing: the maturation of Luke Skywalker; everything else is secondary. The developing romance between Hans Solo and Princess Leia, the conflict between the evil empire and the Rebels, the relationship between Hans Solo, Chewbacca, Luke and Lando Calrissian, are all secondary to Luke's maturation into his fulfillment, a Jedi Knight. The concept and term knight are not incidental; they are part of the roots of the myth and it is to George Lukas' credit and genius that he kept these concepts in, adding the science fiction adaptation of the sword into the light sabre.

Lukas' version of the myth begins with Luke, as did Parsifal, seeing the grail in its fullness before he could adequately understand it. Luke's vision is old Obi Wan Kenobi, the Jedi Knight par excellence, who ultimately sacrifices himself for his companions. After this sacrifice, which is the ultimate vision of the grail for Luke, he decides to go into training with the greatest Jedi master of all, Yoda. *The Empire Strikes Back* portrays Luke's training to become a knight. The training includes learning to deal with the dark side of one's own personality, or as Yoda says, the dark side of the Force. The Force is a stroke of genius on Lukas' part. It stretches beyond technology (which lifted these three films to a state-of-the-art model for high-tech films and special effects) to embrace awe and mystery, even mysticism. These emotions are the root emotions for religious experiences and it did not take long for many fundamentalists to try to portray the Force as the God revealed in scripture. Perhaps they had fun with such proposals, but the Force in the *Star Wars* saga is not and was never intended to be the God revealed in the Judeo-Christian scriptures. Rather the Force is a natural phenomenon arising from all that exists; it is in everything and causes everything to be; it is the harmony of the cosmos. In fact, Lukas, whether knowingly or not, has reached back into the history of philosophy and pulled out the Greek notion of the Logos. According to the Greeks, the Logos is in everything and causes everything to exist and above all gives reason to man, through which man can participate in the Logos. For Lukas, as for the ancient Greeks, to tap into the Logos or Force, is to tap into the basic power of the universe.

For Luke Skywalker the greatest example of the dark side of the Force is his own father, Darth Vader, in whom, to his dismay, Luke sees much of himself. The father figure who succumbed to using the Force for selfish ends (that is, tapping into the dark or selfish side of the Force) is the part of Luke which he must constantly battle and ultimately be victorious over if he is to mature as a Jedi Knight.

The Return of the Jedi reveals this ultimate conflict for Luke in the turning point of the movie and, in fact, the entire saga. Luke is victorious at the second confrontation with his father when he refuses to tap into the dark side of the Force. However, by refusing to battle his father, Luke apparently condemns himself to a horrible death at the hands of the evil emperor. Luke now finds himself in exactly the same position as did his mentor Obi Wan Kenobi;

in refusing to fight back and in submitting to being overpowered by evil, Luke is sacrificing himself for his friends. However, Darth Vader cannot bear to see his own flesh and blood killed, and sacrifices himself to save Luke, thus redeeming himself too. The emperor, pure evil, is destroyed; the evil which invaded and corrupted the community (the known space and planets of the saga) is eradicated; Luke has achieved the grail, becoming a full-fledged Jedi Knight.

Alongside this main, mythic story-line revolves the fortunes of the secondary characters mentioned above. What happens to them forms the adventurous parts of the movies. There are many Americanized trappings added to the basic myth, most notably, Hans Solo. As the name suggests, he is the rugged individualist, the cowboy on a journey. He is somewhat less than honest, yet possesses a heart of gold, and gets involved with Luke in using his talents to save the community (the band of rebels) from the corrupting evil of the empire. Lukas thus ties in the archetypal western myth with the archetypal male myth for a movie series that has an extremely powerful appeal especially to boys but actually to anybody who has grown up in America.

For Americans living after World War II, especially those boys and girls reared on comic books portraying “good” U.S. army units battling “evil” nazis, the archetypal embodiment of evil is Germany, not Russia or any other country. Lukas labels the emperor’s soldiers storm troopers, and the uniforms of the officers bear marked resemblance to Wehrmacht uniforms. These are examples of this “evil” German notion so many boys grew up with which Lukas ties into. For the myth to be successfully portrayed on screen the characters must delineate “pure” types on the whole. Good is purely good, and evil purely evil. However, Lukas goes deeper than this in dealing with Luke, for Luke must constantly struggle with his own temptation to use the Force for selfish ends and to acquire power. In fact, it is precisely this desire for power that Luke must forego if he is to achieve victory.

Theologically the notion of foregoing power and submitting oneself to evil powers and their seeming victory has resonances with Christ’s submitting himself to the evil of the cross. Such submission is very difficult for most of us; like Hans Solo and the early Luke, we want to fight and use violence to rip out the evil, thus using evil means for a good end. But as Luke, and we, eventually perceive, to use evil even for a good end means becoming corrupt; tragically corrupt, yet nevertheless corrupt. This myth has much to say to us when we link it to the cross. However, the preacher must be very careful for the myth deals with pure characters and ideal notions of good and evil. For Luke to forego touching the dark side of the Force is one thing; for us to live in this world is another. Living in this fallen world means making decisions and oft-times tragic choices, as Reinhold Niebuhr tried to show us. The profundity of the gospel is that even as we believe ourselves forced by circumstances to make tough decisions and tragic choices, and even use evil for good ends with all the corruption such decisions bring, God can still forgive and even grant us the Holy Spirit to work upon ourselves and our society so that eventually some good can emerge out of our tragic choices and circumstances.

IV. Salvation Occurs In An Encounter With That From "Out There"

The most prevalent example of the popular version of this myth is the recent mania for flying saucers and other UFOs. C.G. Jung has given an extremely penetrating analysis of this myth in his work *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Sky* (1958). According to Jung, the natural inclination of people is to seek wholeness and fulfillment, especially during times of stress (such as the cold war). This natural inclination finds its object of desire in some sort of symbol which represents wholeness. For Jung a typical symbol of this inclination to achieve wholeness is the mandala or magic circle. This magic circle symbolizes psychic fulfillment or achieving psychological wholeness. This is an ancient symbol which crosses cultural lines. According to Jung, the national mania for flying saucers was indicative of the desire for fulfillment and even peace in the sense of a cessation of tension during an acute time of cold-war anxiety.

Although few science fiction books are expressly concerned with flying saucers, Steven Spielberg taps into the mythic phenomena with the science fiction movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Spielberg's genius at movie making is nowhere better expressed than in this movie which portrays the familiar science fiction theme of first contact with aliens. Unlike other science fiction movies (for example, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*) the humans in *Close Encounters* welcome rather than attack the aliens. In fact, they have prepared for meeting them by building a "space port" where the alien ships can land, and have even gone so far as to arrange for a cultural exchange by sending some humans with the aliens. However, the focus on the movie is not on those who are preparing to welcome the aliens, but on two particular people who have "encountered" the aliens and because of this encounter, now feel compelled to journey from their homes to an unknown destiny where perhaps they will come face to face with what it was that first called them. Journeying to meet the aliens becomes an obsession, a desperate need to find fulfillment. For actor Richard Dreyfuss, portraying the central character thus summoned, being allowed to go with the aliens into their ship, and off with them into outer space becomes his ultimate fulfillment or destiny in life. He has experienced salvation defined in the broadest sense of the concept: wholeness, purpose in life, completeness psychologically, integration of personality, etc., etc.

Spielburg continued his exploration of this myth with the even more popular movie, *E.T.* This movie has some additional mythic elements which make it even more appealing. Some evangelicals have noted at great lengths the similarities between Jesus Christ and E.T.: they both come from "out there"; both are misunderstood; both return to "out there"; both are appreciated greatly by children; both are compassionate beyond normal; both possess incredible healing powers. When Jesus leaves his disciples he tells them, "I will be with you always." When E.T. leaves Elliott (the ten-year old hero of the movie) he tells him, "I'll be right here," pointing to Elliott's mind and heart.

As with *Close Encounters*, once the characters have come into contact with that from "out there" their lives are changed, usually for the better in the sense of each person becoming more integrated and fulfilled. *E.T.* reveals that love and compassion can overcome the worst of situations, even death itself.

Indeed, *E.T.* is in many respects, the Christian gospel in science-fictional form. For Americans so familiar with the story of Jesus and what he did, here was a creature cuter than Jesus and yet perhaps as profound. He was wise, yet simple; powerful, yet benign. He was extremely compassionate, loving and patient. In addition, he was vulnerable and needed help. In spite of the "evil" waged against him, E.T. triumphed, even over death! This was exactly what Americans believed on the whole about Jesus and what he stood for. Millions of Americans flocked to this movie and unconsciously had their deepest beliefs and values affirmed in watching the story of E.T. unfold. No wonder so many people said they felt "so good" when they walked out of this movie.

However, before the preacher climbs into the pulpit and begins a sermon on apologetics starting with "Americans, I see that you are a religious people, flocking to see E.T.," it is worth remembering that in *E.T.* there is no cross. E.T. dies, but this is an accidental death, not an intentional death. In the movie there is no notion whatsoever of the redemptive nature of suffering as perceived in Jesus' words, "Take up your cross daily and follow me." Preachers can employ *Close Encounters* and *E.T.* to pose the problem of salvation and how this is sought in our culture. Yet they should never forget that in the final analysis *Close Encounters* and *E.T.* offer "easy religion" and fulfillment (salvation) without much pain at all. How wonderful if it were only true!

Conclusion

The reason behind this brief analysis of the central myths of American culture is the author's belief that science fiction and fantasy have tapped into these myths in a profound way. Popular culture has always, to some extent, touched the myths which unite a people together into a common culture. In the sense of reinforcing already accepted values, popular culture can be considered means of worship. To a certain degree, all worship is a reinforcement of values and beliefs already affirmed by the group doing the worshipping. For example, we say as Christians that we should be forgiving and loving. So, in a worship service this affirmed value of loving and forgiving is reinforced through hymns on forgiveness; the worship leader chooses responsive psalms on forgiveness; the sermon text delineates forgiveness and the sermon expounds this; the anthems, both children and adult, have some text with forgiveness as the theme. Notice: the value of forgiveness is unconsciously affirmed even before worship begins; what the worship actually does is to bring this value into the open, examine it, and through such examination, deepen it in the consciousness of the participant.

I have tried to show in the four myths presented here some of the most prevalent values and beliefs we have currently as Americans and as human beings, whether we want to admit these values/beliefs or not. Movies and books dealing with these myths in one form or another, either reinforcing them or perhaps challenging them, reveal that these myths are basic to us and form much of the lens through which we perceive the world around us. We in the church, especially preachers whose primary function is to communicate the gospel for our time and culture, would ignore these myths at our peril. The

myths in this essay are not exhaustive, nor are they complete. But they do reveal some of the archetypical beliefs and values we have, particularly as Americans. They form some of the background information for the questions preachers ought to ask before ascending into the pulpit: What is the nature of the community in which my congregation believes? Where do they believe evil comes from? Is it outside us trying to get in, or within us seeping out? What is true maturity? What sort of quest are we on simply by being alive? Where are we headed? What is salvation? These and other such questions, informed by both the Gospel and the myths of contemporary society, can help focus our preaching and strengthen our work as pastors.