

Religion and Science Fiction (RL378-01)

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Fall 2016
Office hours T 2:30-3:30, W 1-2

This Course is a Game

What do I mean when I say that “this course is a game” (and that it will include games within the game)? The entire course is “gamified” – in other words, it takes a point-earning approach to assignments and grades, rather than the traditional percentile one. Below you will learn about the ways to earn point and how the points earned will translate into your final grade of the semester.

Up to the first 100 points you earn will represent your percentile grade in the class. But there is no need to stop there. A prize will be awarded to the student who has the most points by *the last day of class*.

You may submit up to one assignment per week, with the exception of blog posts, which can be done at most once per day. All point-earning activities must be done by the last day of class, with the exception of an essay, which can be submitted up until the scheduled exam date for the class. Some of the point-earning activities and other things that we will be doing in class will also have game-like characteristics – especially role-playing.

Ways to earn points:

Write an essay – every student must do at least one of these to complete the course, but you are welcome to do more than one. Each page of essay writing can earn up to 5 points, and so a typical 8-page essay can earn up to 40 points. The length of any essay you submit is up to you.

Write a short story: compose a piece of fiction in the science fiction genre that explores religious themes. every student must do at least one of these to complete the course. Each page can earn up to 5 points, and so a five-page story could earn up to 30 points.

Turn your short story into a movie: any student who doesn't merely write a story, but makes it into a video, can earn an additional 10 points. Actors from the class can likewise earn participation points for being part of the project.

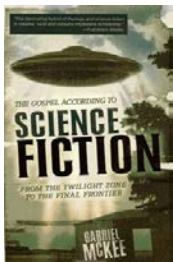
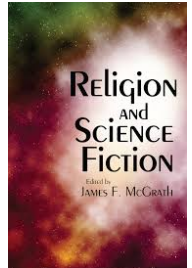
Win a debate: Short science fiction stories are used often by philosophers to explore challenging moral issues. As a member of the United Nations Ethics Committee, it will be your role to recommend policies in relation to future possibilities. Up to 3 students per session can be on each of two teams. Those not on the teams will decide the winner. See below for topics and dates. Up to 10 points per debate.

Lose a debate well: A good debate has two sides. The points of both sides depend on each other. Make the best case you can, and you'll earn half as many points as the winning team. Make a poor case, and it will make the other team's case less strong than it would have if it prevailed despite insightful objections, and so everyone will earn fewer points as a result.

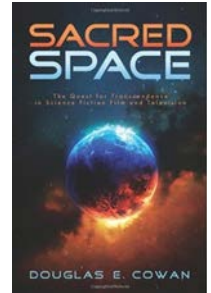
Adjudicate a debate: Jury duty gets compensation. So will you, in the form of half as many points as the losing team gets. And so by asking provocative questions of both sides and forcing them to perform well, you increase not only their points, but your own.

Blog review of a TV series or book. Up to 5 points per substantive post on religious themes.

Recommended novels include:



- Mary Doria Russell, *The Sparrow* and *Children of God*
- Dan Simmons, *Hyperion* and sequels
- Margaret Atwood, *Oryx & Crake* and sequels
- Frank Herbert, *Dune* and sequels
- Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, *Parable of the Talents*.
- Robert J. Sawyer, *Calculating God*



Blog about the assigned reading. Up to 2 points for clear summary *and* reflection.

Infographic about religious themes in one or more pieces of science fiction. Up to 10 points each.

Introduce a class discussion: On a day when no debate is scheduled, sign up to summarize some additional reading (and perhaps also viewing) that you have done. Maximum 5 points. Cannot be done more than twice.

Ask a question/offer an answer: General class participation can earn you additional points. Other point-earning activities can be proposed but require approval in advance from the professor.

Dates and topics for debates:

9/12: Should religious freedom extend beyond Earth? Do religions have the right to proselytize through interstellar transmissions or missionary journeys?

9/19: Should time travel be prohibited even if it turns out to be possible?

9/26: Can an artificial intelligence be considered a member/adherent of a religion?

9/28: Can the three laws of robotics protect humanity from machines?

OR: Can/should artificial intelligences be used to come up with arguments for the existence of God/the truthfulness of specific religions' claims?

10/3: Can a machine deserve "human" rights?

10/5: Should the running of our world be handed over to an artificial intelligence, programmed to act in humanity's best interest?

10/10: Mutants with superior intellectual, athletic, and other abilities are emerging as a result of evolution. Should special laws be enforced upon them, to protect humanity's traditional form? Should they be rounded up and either eliminated, or studied so that we can unlock the secret behind their special abilities and share it with everyone?

OR: If non-human species are determined to have religious convictions/practices, are these protected by a society's laws about religion?

10/17: Might humanity's gods be aliens? If this turned out to be true, what might the implications be?

10/19: If we discover evidence of intelligent alien life, should it be covered up to avoid traumatizing humanity?

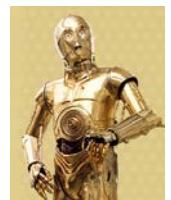
10/24: Should limits be placed on the rights of human beings to alter themselves through genetic manipulation and cyborg enhancements?

10/26: If pharmaceutical companies develop a drug or other treatment that can prolong human life indefinitely, should its sale and use be outlawed?

10/31: Should science fiction fans have their beliefs, pilgrimages, and right to wear costumes protected in the same way that (other) religions do?

11/2: A powerful otherworldly intelligence has contacted the UN and demanded our worship. Should we comply?

11/28: We have made contact with aliens who have nothing corresponding to human religious beliefs and practices. Should we cover this up?



11/30: Should humanity pursue transferring our consciousnesses into machines as a way of ensuring our long-term survival?

12/5: Should terraforming of other worlds be allowed?

Provisional reading and topic schedule

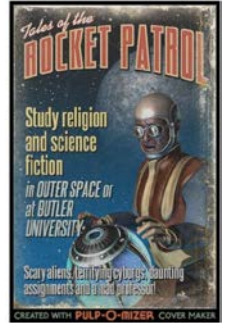


There will generally be at least one short story and/or at least one academic article to be read in connection with a given topic. PLEASE NOTE that the readings listed below are to be read PRIOR TO the date specified. Movies and television shows are listed in brackets where these are particularly relevant to a topic.

- W 8/24 Introduction: Defining Religion and Science Fiction - What is science fiction? What is religion? Why study them together? Where do we start?
- M 8/29: Cowan, "Religion in Science Fiction Film and Television" [TOPIC: Stories and Canons]
- W 8/31: Clarke, "The Nine Billion Names Of God"; "The Star"
- W 9/7: Sanders, "The Word to Space"; Murphy, "Jesus and Life on Mars" [TOPIC: First Contact]
- M 9/12: Bradbury, "The Fire Balloons"; Robert J. Sawyer, "Come All Ye Faithful"; Harrison, "The Streets of Ashkelon"; Meynell, "Christ in the Universe"
- W 9/14: Garry Kilworth, "Let's Go To Golgotha" [TOPIC: Time Travel; Dr. Who]
- M 9/19: Michael Moorcock, "Behold the Man"
- W 9/21: Technology training by Information Commons: videos and blogging
- M 9/26: Robert Silverberg, "Good News from The Vatican"; McDevitt, "Gus" [TOPIC: Artificial Intelligence; [ST:TNG "The Measure of a Man"](#); A.I.; Bicentennial Man; I, Robot]
- W 9/28: Asimov, "Reason"; Morrow, "Building God with the Wrong Blocks"
- M 10/3: Chapter 2 from *Terminator and Philosophy*; Arp, "If Droids Could Think."
- W 10/5: Poul Anderson, "Goat Song"; John Brunner, "Judas"
- M 10/10: Silverberg, "The Pope of the Chimps" [TOPIC: Mythologizing Evolution; X-Men, Superheroes]
- W 10/12: Erich von Daniken, *Chariots of the Gods* chapter 4 [Stargate, Ancient Aliens]
- M 10/17: Clarke, "[Guardian Angel](#)"; Poul Anderson, "Kyrie"
- W 10/19: Philip K. Dick, "Rautavaara's Case"; James Patrick Kelly, "St. Theresa of the Aliens"
- M 10/24: Vandana Singh, "Delhi"; John Brunner, "The Vitauls" [TOPICS: Hinduism; Cloning and Genetic Engineering: Blade Runner; Gattaca; The 6th Day; The Island]
- W 10/26: Orson Scott Card, "Mortal Gods"; [TOPICS: Mortality and Mormon science fiction; Battlestar Galactica; Ender's Game; cryogenics, life extension]
- M 10/31: *Star Trek and Sacred Ground* chapters 11 and 13; TOPIC: Trekkies and Jedi as religious identities; Scientology [COSTUMES WELCOME]
- W 11/2: *Star Trek and Sacred Ground* chapters 3-4; Aaron Smuts, "The Little People" [TOPIC: What is a "god"? Q & Adonais in Star Trek; Contact, etc.]
- M 11/7: Zelazny, "A Rose for Ecclesiastes"; Miller, "A Canticle for Leibowitz" [TOPIC: Post-Apocalyptic]
- W 11/9: Philip Jose Farmer, "Prometheus"; Payes, "In His Own Image" [TOPIC: Universalism and truth; Enemy Mine]
- M 11/14: Robinson, "The Far East Of Star Wars" [TOPICS: From Eywa to the Force: Pantheism and Gaia, Taoism and Zoroastrianism; Avatar; Lost; Star Wars].



- W 11/16: William Tenn, “On Venus Have We Got A Rabbi”; Phyllis Gotlieb, “Tauf Aleph” [TOPICS: Judaism; Superman]
- M 11/28: C. S. Lewis, “Forms of Things Unknown”; Boucher, “The Quest for St. Aquin”; Andrews, “Epiphany” [TOPIC: Christianity]
- W 11/30: David Brin, “Reality Check”; [Bostrom article](#); Excerpts from *The Matrix and Philosophy* [TOPIC: Virtual reality; The Matrix, Total Recall, Vanilla Sky, Star Trek: Generations]
- M 12/5: Asimov, “The Last Question”; Kurzweil and Moravec selections; [TOPIC: Terraforming; Singularity]
- W 12/7: LAST DAY OF CLASS. Farah Mendlesohn, “Religion and science fiction.”



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