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Intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic: Science, Religion, and The War of the Worlds - Part II

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Intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic: Science, Religion, and The War of the Worlds - Part II

Abstract

This article is continued from Volume 11, Issue 1.

The War of the Worlds, which was scripted by Barré Lyndon and directed by Byron Haskin, reflects the Christian religiosity with which many of these films were charged—the overt references to a second Ark as humankind struggles to escape Earth in *When Worlds Collide* or the oft-repeated interpretation of Klaatu as a Christ-figure in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. The significant question in this essay, though, is: In terms of its presentation of religion, why does the first cinematic version of *The War of the Worlds*, one of the seminal science fiction novels of the twentieth-century, differ so dramatically from Wells' original vision?

The Death of Pastor Collins

When the pastor questions the colonel's need to fire on the Martians, the marine looks at the minister as though he's lost his mind. However implicit it may have been, there is no further blessing of the military option from this point on. Pastor Collins backs away from the marine commander and turns his back on him. He no longer wants any part of the operation, and any religious sanction the military option had turns and leaves with him. As it did when he entered the tent, the camera follows him as he walks through the crowd of soldiers and out of the command post. He is, once again, the focus for the audience. Sylvia follows him and finds him standing alone, staring out at the machine. She grasps his arm—not only is he her uncle, but she is symbolically holding on to the hope represented by the church, by faith in God in times of trouble. Significantly, she is not at Forrester's side. Despite her Masters degree, her thesis on "modern scientists," and her job teaching "Library Science" at USC—the commentators on the 2005 Collector's Edition DVD get this point wrong, incorrectly remarking that she is a "librarian"—she has left both science and the military option in the tent. This could not be more different than the way in which Wells presented his vision of religion in the novel.

Though, as I have noted, many commentators on the film have roundly dismissed the presence of the pastor, or commented lightly on the futility of his act, as he prepares to meet the Martian ships he strikes a very Gandhian pose—likely

something else that would have resonated with audiences in 1953, since Gandhi died only a few year before (1948) and was one of the most recognizable faces in the world at the time of his assassination.

COLLINS

I think we should try to make them understand that we mean them no harm. They are living creatures out there...

SYLVIA

They're not human. Dr. Forrester said they're from some kind of advanced civilization.

COLLINS

If they're more advanced than us, then they should be nearer the Creator for that reason. No real attempt has been made to communicate with them, you know.

SYLVIA

Let's go back inside, Uncle Matthew.

Sylvia is frightened, and wants to return to the dubious if conservative security of the military option. Facing the machines alone, protected only by one's faith is too much for her. Not for Matthew, though. "I've done all that I can in there. You go back," he tells his niece, though as she turns to leave, he says, "Sylvia! I like that Dr. Forrester. He's a good man." Though he cannot sanction the military option, he

recognizes—and indicates to the audience through his approval of Forrester—that science is not to be abandoned nor is it antagonistic to religious faith. This approval of one domain for the other will be mirrored later in the film as Sylvia and Forrester take refuge in the abandoned house.

When Pastor Collins walks out to meet the machines, we see him first in full headshot. This is quickly replaced with a point of view shot from within the command bunker, looking out through the observation slit as though we were one of the soldiers. As the audience, we are no longer out in the valley with the man of faith, but are back with the military option. We watch as Collins, now very small on the screen—as though his faith is puny compared to the implacable might of the Martian war machines—goes to meet the advancing aliens. He removes his hat as the machine hovers above and in front of him and we see him only from the back—we know he will not survive this scene.

As Sylvia screams for him to come back, the shot quickly shifts to slightly overhead and in front of Collins—a Martian's-eye view, perhaps? He is still walking, now with a small Bible in his hand, and he begins to repeat well-known parts of Psalm 23. He seems clearly aware that these may be his last moments on earth, but is willing nonetheless to meet the Martians with satyagraha ("truth-force") rather than military force:

COLLINS

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil...

The shot tightens as Collins holds up his Bible, a cross embossed in gold on its cover.

COLLINS

Thou anointest my head with oil. My cup runneth over...

The shot tightens further, to head-and-shoulders, almost full front. Collins holds the Bible higher—the cross, quite ornate, is now fully visible, leading him, protecting him. How many missionaries throughout the history of the Christian church walked similarly into unknown territory?

COLLINS

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The shot cuts to a point of view looking over Matthew's shoulder, up at the alien war machine with its menacing "cobra head." It fires and destroys him. As soon as he is killed—martyred—the military bombards the ships, though to no more effect than the pastor's simple greeting.

In what is perhaps the most revealing bit of commentary offered by Joe Dante, Bill Warren, and Bob Burns on the 2005 Collector's Edition DVD, Dante points out that "it's very polite of the Martians to let him finish the prayer" when Pastor Collins walks out to the Martian war machine "thinking he can create interplanetary understanding by holding up a Bible."¹ This is exactly the kind of dismissal of religion that is common in interpretation of science fiction films, a dismissal that so often refuses to take the presence of religion onscreen seriously—either as a function of the narrative itself or as a reflection of the society that produced the film. Once again, though, they have completely missed the significance of the shift from Wells' novel to Barré Lyndon's screenplay. Rather than a relic charged with the futility of a faith humankind should long ago have left behind—a reading that is at least implied by Dante's comment—the pastor is a sacrificial figure, a martyr in the Gandhian tradition, though this aspect of the narrative is never explored. In this, he is completely different from the insane curate with whom Wells' protagonist hides in the abandoned house. He doesn't go out to meet the Martians "thinking he can create interplanetary understanding by holding up a Bible," he offers himself up as a vehicle of that understanding—much like the first three victims of the "heat ray" who approached the ship confident that "everyone knows what a white flag means."

The Abandoned House: A Reinscription of Normality

Following the destruction of the military at the initial landing site, Forrester and Sylvia escape in his plane, which then crashes near an abandoned farmhouse. Unlike both the Wells novel and Steven Spielberg's 2005 remake of the film, both of which portray the time in the house as a period of unrelenting terror, in Pal's film it is also a significant respite for the two main characters, a brief period of normality in the midst of chaos. Safe for the moment, Forrester and Sylvia share a breakfast of coffee and eggs, forming for the moment a quasi-family and reinscribing the family values that characterized the American dream in the early 1950s. There may be war with the Russians coming, but the family gathered around the kitchen table remains the heart of the American way. Though he clearly has no idea how, in the face of the Martian threat Forrester tries to comfort Sylvia.

FORRESTER

They'll be stopped... somehow.

SYLVIA

I feel like I did one time when I was small. Awful scared and lonesome. I'd wandered off—I've forgotten why—but the family and whole crowds of neighbors were looking for me. They found me in a church. I was afraid to go in anyplace else. I stayed right by that door, praying for the one who loved me best to come and find me. [She suddenly realizes that] It was Uncle Matthew who found me!

FORRESTER

I liked him.

While Forrester's comment mirrors Collins' before he walked out to meet his death—just as religion acknowledged the value of science, science now recognizes the value of religious faith. Besides the overt reference to the church as her only place of sanctuary, in a relatively complex interplay of biblical allusions Sylvia is also presented as the lost sheep in the gospels, the one among ninety-nine for whom the shepherd searches; the gospel in which the parable first appears is Matthew (18:11-14); and Uncle Matthew was her shepherd who found her, the shepherd who just a few scenes before sacrificed his life for those he regarded as his sheep.

"The beginning of the rout of civilization, the massacre of humanity"

Despite Sylvia's reminiscences about seeking sanctuary in a church, when Pastor Collins dies, the explicitly religious component of the film is subsumed for a brief period. It is as though God has abandoned the people of Earth. Instead, the military, the scientists, and presumably everyone else put their trust—their faith—in an atomic bomb "ten times bigger than anything that's ever been dropped." As a "couple of million people" are waiting for the bomb to drop in the "shelter of the San Gabriel hills"—hills named for the mightiest archangel of God—a radio announcer intones:

ANNOUNCER

The whole world is waiting, for this will decide the fate of civilization and all humanity. Whether we live or die may depend on what happens here.

If the bomb fails, however, one of Forrester's colleagues has calculated that "the Martians can conquer the Earth in six days." Not insignificantly, in her role as chorus once again, Sylvia points out that this is "the same number of days it took to create it." Religion may be subsumed, but it has not disappeared entirely.

Of course, the bomb—the most powerful weapon humankind can deploy—is useless against the alien machines, and the destruction of Los Angeles begins. In the panic of people trying to flee the city as the Martians approach, one man tries to buy his way onto a truck, but is thrown off and told "you're money's no good, mac"—when he falls, his valise breaks open and spills wads of cash and jewelry out onto the street. As he tries in vain to gather it up, the crowd passes him by. A more biblically literate generation might see this as a clear allusion to Mark 8:36: "For what shall it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"

As Forrester and his colleagues leave Pacific Tech loaded with equipment they hope will help them defeat the Martians, the same mob drags Forrester from the truck and throws out all of the scientific instruments that could yet save them. In this case, the crowd has become like the insane curate in Wells' novel. In the face of such unrelenting terror, the military option has failed and science is abandoned.

Alone now, battered by the loss of his companions and the tools of his profession, Forrester wanders the skyscraper canyons of the nearly deserted city looking for Sylvia. Realizing that she is "kind of lost," he begins to look for her in churches. "I think I know where she'll be," he tells a military policeman who urges him to seek safety.

The Triumph of Religion Over Science

As the Martians raze the city, Forrester spots the spire and bell tower of a church, and runs toward it. The shot shifts to an almost gargoyle-view, and we hear the sound of singing from inside the sanctuary. As he opens the heavy wooden doors to the cathedral-style church, the concluding "Amen" resounds from within. Given the denominational particularity of the final sequences, this is likely a large, urban Episcopal church. It is not the white, clapboard, country-style community church that Matthew Collins pastored, but rather the architectural symbol of the power and place of the church in modern society. Forrester enters as the "Amen" fades away and the doors close behind him. At this moment, we have an inkling that things will work out in our favor. As he searches frantically for Sylvia, the voice-over intones a prayer:

PRIEST (V-O)

We humbly beseech Thy divine guidance, O Lord, deliver us from the fear that has come upon us...

The shot shifts to look at the congregation from the pulpit, over the left shoulder of the priest, as though from above the altar itself, where the cross would hang or stand.

From the evil that grows ever nearer...

The camera swings around to take in the congregation,

From the terror that soon will knock upon the very door of this, thy house...

The camera swings around further and tightens on the head and shoulders of the priest, who joins his hands in supplication. In clerical blacks and roman collar, he seems for a moment like a younger version of Matthew Collins. In the story arc of Pal's film, the military option has failed utterly, the mob has turned in panic from the promise of science, and the remnant faithful have sought refuge once again in their religious faith. One can only imagine how many similar prayers were offered during the Nazi advance through Europe...

O Lord, we pray Thee, grant us the miracle of Thy divine intervention.

The shot pauses, the priest in profile (screen right) with the stained glass windows (another iconic representation of the Christian faith) in the background. As the

organ begins to play, Forrester turns to leave, but an elderly man beseeches him, "Don't go, son. Stay with us." "No," he replies, "I'm looking for someone. She'll be in a church, near the door." Throughout the film, the characters of Dr. Forrester and Pastor Collins have represented the parity of science and religion to the 1950s audience. Now, science moves explicitly in the direction of faith, the antithesis of Wells' novel and a movement that is reinforced throughout the rest of the film.

As Forrester continues his search, special effects of the Martians attacking the city lap dissolve to a Roman Catholic statue of St. Joseph holding a bunch of lilies and the Christ Child—who holds a globe of the Earth in one hand, the other raised in benediction. The feeling that salvation is at hand grows stronger. The shot pans down to a woman and a man lighting votive candles—for the dead, the dying, the death of the human race? The man crosses himself and turns away as the camera pans across the sanctuary, finding Forrester as he looks for Sylvia. He steps out of the shot as the camera lingers on a priest in surplice and stole, as though vested for mass, teaching a group of children the rosary—an item and an act which is, for many Roman Catholics, the controlling symbol and ritual of the mystery of faith.

Out once again in the ongoing attack, Forrester finds himself at a third church, another massive sandstone metropolitan sanctuary. Inside, the camera focuses on a man who looks eerily like Billy Graham—which is probably no accident, since the Los Angeles crusade that catapulted Graham to international

prominence was in 1949, only four years before the film was released. By 1953, Graham was already one of the most recognizable religious figures in the country. The evangelist also prays, though this is a qualitatively different prayer than either of his two co-religionists.

EVANGELIST

In our peril we plead, succor and comfort us in this hour. Please, God.

The shot cuts to a stained glass of St. Peter, holding the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven, backlit by the flashes of the Martian attack on the city. An oblique reference, perhaps, to something like Augustine's City of God, which contrasted the city of God with the city of Rome as the latter was being sacked by the Goths in 410? The stained glass window goes dark. A series of quick cuts follow. A Norman Rockwell-style shot of a young American couple sitting in a pew, singing a hymn with their two children, brings together all that is threatened by the invasion: the Church, the last sanctuary of a frightened humanity, and the family, the bedrock social unit of post-war America. The message is clear: life as we know it is threatened. Cut to an elderly couple reading the Bible as the attack worsens. Cut to Forrester and Sylvia as they find each other in the midst of the sanctuary, just as the attack reaches its height and the stained glass window is blown in. The church begins to collapse around them.

As Forrester and Sylvia hold each other and prepare for what must surely be the end, something happens to the Martian ships. They begin to lose power, destabilize, and crash. As the first ship crashes, though those inside the church are not aware of it yet, the shot cuts to Forrester and Sylvia, and a voiceover of the evangelist praying (though, interestingly, you can only barely hear it on the soundtrack, and have to rely on the subtitles to understand what he's saying):

EVANGELIST

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from Thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against Thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done. And we have done those things which we ought not to have done.

The denominational particularity here is suddenly quite stark, reflective, perhaps, of the clear denominational divisions that remained in the immediate post-war period. This is a prayer of repentance, very like one Billy Graham would have used at a crusade, and quite unlike the prayers offered by the other clergy. The Episcopal priest asks simply for the "miracle of divine intervention" and, in what looks like humanity's last hour, the Roman Catholic priest insists on catechizing, on teaching children the Rosary. Simple supplication and a retreat to ritualism are trumped in this part of the story arc by the prayer of repentance, which in the evangelical Protestant schema exemplified by Graham is the first step toward the reception of

God's mercy. As the evangelist finishes his prayer and the people trickle out into the street, the Martian dies.

After he checks the Martian and confirms that it is dead, Forrester says, simply, "We were all praying for a miracle." He looks up as church bells across the city begin to peal. The camera pulls back to a three-shot: Sylvia, the evangelist (who would, presumably, have been in the same denominational camp as her Uncle Matthew), and Forrester—the same juxtaposition as when Forrester and Pastor Collins first met at the initial landing site. Science and religion are once again side-by-side, brought together by Sylvia: she introduced Forrester to her Uncle Matthew, he found her in the evangelist's church. All three look skyward as the church bells ring, and the narrator reads from the closing of Wells' novel.

NARRATOR

The Martians had no resistance to the bacteria in our atmosphere, to which we have long since become immune. Once they had breathed our air, germs which no longer affect us began to kill them. The end came swiftly. All over the world, their machines began to stop and fall. After all that men could do had failed, the Martians were destroyed and humanity was saved by the littlest things, which God, in His wisdom, had put upon this Earth.

The closing shots cut to the crowd in the San Gabriel mountains singing, "...in this world and the next. Amen," the same hymn that was being sung in the first church Forrester entered during his search for Sylvia. As the "Amen" swells, this time, however, rather than the door closing on humanity, the last shot shows the sun

rising over Los Angeles, guarded once again by the imposing edifice of the cathedral church at screen left. The hymn the people are singing is Martin Rinkart's "Now Thank We All Our God," written in approximately 1636. Because it finishes after the second verse, and does not proceed into the more creedally specific third verse, it can be seen as a more religiously generic hymn of thanks. Given sufficient time, science may be able to explain exactly how the germs worked on the Martians, but the closing sequence of the film leaves the audience in no doubt as to who put them on the planet in the first place.

The War of the Worlds: Godly America vs. Godless Communism

H. G. Wells wrote *The War of the Worlds* in a time of considerable conflict between religion and science. On the one hand, the teachings of John Nelson Darby, the fiery English Puritan preacher who is credited by many with originating the Christian fundamentalist concept of dispensationalism—the belief that God has divided history into a number of consecutive ages or "dispensations," the last of which will mark the final battle between good and evil—were prominent both in England and in the emerging fundamentalist movement in North America. On the other hand, an optimism about the scientific worldview, characterized both by the achievements of men like Darwin and Lamarck, but also the technological innovations that were taking place more and more rapidly, cast a decidedly dim view on religious faith. Indeed, in the conclusion to his famous Gifford Lectures at

the University of Edinburgh in 1902, William James felt compelled to write that "there is a notion in the air about us that religion is probably only an anachronism, a case of 'survival,' an atavistic relapse into a mode of thought which humanity in its more enlightened examples has outgrown."²

The situation was very different in the immediate post-war period when George Pal produced *The War of the Worlds*. As other commentators have pointed out, there are numerous social strains and perceived crises to which this film was a response, and with which it resonated so strongly in the audiences who lined up around the block to see it. In the early 1950s, Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Committee on Un-American Affairs was at the height of their anti-communist activities. Americans were primed and ready for the imminent Red invasion, an invasion that came in Pal's film from the red planet. UFO stories were prominent in the news at the time, ever since the widely reported 1947 sighting of UFOs in the Cascade Mountains by private pilot Kenneth Arnold (24 June), and the alleged crash of an alien spacecraft on a ranch near Roswell, New Mexico, a little more than two weeks later (8 July). There was an unmitigated trust in both science and the military option, exemplified most completely in the atomic bomb. On the other hand, though, this was also a period of significant church expansion, and to be a good American meant that one was also a good (Protestant) Christian. Looking

beyond the movie screen, we see this clearly in some of the other news and entertainment material to which audiences of the time would have been exposed.

Collier's, for example, was one of the most important mass circulation weeklies in the first half of the twentieth century and the major competitor to the *Saturday Evening Post* for most of that time. Most issues featured cover art that extolled in one way or another the family and the community as the core of American life, and, by implication, a reflection of the American dream. Collier's ran a feature story on *The War of the Worlds* at the time of its release, though the cover art and headlines from other issues during the period reveal quite a bit about what was on people's minds. Consider these brief examples.

"Will Russia Rule the Air?" asked the 25 January 1947 cover headline, while the 28 February 1948 issue advertised an article entitled, "How to Beat the Communists." In the new year's day 1949 edition, on the other hand, *Collier's* offered readers the "Life of Christ: A Painting in Full Color." Two cover headlines for the 27 October 1951 issue read: "Russia's Defeat and Occupation: 192-1960" and "Preview of the War We Do Not Want." The cover art for this issue depicted an American military policeman standing in front of a map of Europe, on which two U.N. flag pins mark all of eastern Europe and the western Soviet Union as "Occupied." He is carrying an M1 Garand rifle with a fixed bayonet—the quintessential image of the American foot soldier during World War Two—and has

a "pineapple" hand grenade clipped to his breast pocket. Across the front of his white helmet are both the U.S. and U.N. flags, with the words "Occupation Forces" emblazoned between them. Just a few months earlier (2 June 1951), *Collier's* cover article advertised "A Reporter in Search of God: What Soldiers Believe." The 23 February 1952 issue featured a large church on its cover, a structure that looks like a cross between a metropolitan cathedral and a country chapel. Cars and horse-drawn sleighs are pulling up as the congregation arrives for Sunday worship. The feature article that week was "The Favorite Bible Passages of 25 Famous Americans," while a sidebar beside the *Collier's* logo at the top of cover reads, "They're Sticking Stalin With a Pitchfork." Finally, the 14 April 1954 issue, the cover sidebar advertizes an article on "The 10 Favorite Protestant Hymns." And right below it? "Do the Soviet People Expect to Go to War?"

By ignoring the social context in which the film was produced, and failing to note the vast difference between the film and Wells' novel, commentators have long dismissed the profoundly religious elements in George Pal's *The War of the Worlds*. A closer reading reveals that it is significantly more than just a science fiction metaphor for a Soviet invasion. In it, he and screenwriter Barré Lyndon completely reversed the understanding of religion in Wells' novel, and used it instead to reinforce the intimate connection that existed in post-World War Two America between a strong faith and a determined resistance to communist

aggression. Rather than an experience that left audiences wondering if the attack would come that evening, Americans could leave the theatre secure in the knowledge that the manifest destiny of humanity was secure.

¹ Joe Dante. "Commentary" on *The War of the Worlds*, dir. Byron Haskin, prod. George Pal (1953). Collector's Edition DVD. (Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2005).

² William James. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. (1902; rep. New York: The Modern Library, 1999), 534.