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Religious Faith and Science in Contact

Abstract

The popular film, *Contact*, explores head-on the relationship between religious faith and science, especially with regard to technology and its role in human life. At a number of points in the film, the audience is sent the message that a positive relationship is possible between faith and science. Indeed, the two are often treated as similar to one another in basic structure and, perhaps, even in need of one another. Implicitly, however, at the level of standard filmic conventions, *Contact* offers no clear and compelling vision of religious faith and ultimately the relationship between faith and science breaks down as the former is reduced to a caricature.

Religion and religious faith have not traditionally been a preoccupation of contemporary film, though they are becoming increasingly prominent these days. Directed by Robert Zemeckis (of *Forrest Gump* fame), *Contact* ranked eleventh in top grossing films in 1997, securing for itself a respectable position in contemporary American culture so far as popular film goes. *Contact* is based on the late Carl Sagan's novel by the same name that imagines the personal, religious, and political impact of an extraterrestrial encounter - a question that is certainly worth entertaining, especially with regard to its theological implications. Anyone who has paid attention to the work of Carl Sagan will recognize his perennial interests throughout the film. Sagan, who wrote more than two dozen books, hundreds of articles, and hosted the 1980 PBS series, *COSMOS*, was enormously successful in his lifetime at popularizing science and giving the search for extraterrestrial intelligence a measure of scientific respectability. Though Sagan had no place in his worldview for traditional religion and popular notions of God, he had a deep appreciation for the unresolvable mysteries of the universe. Sagan was actively involved in the transition of *Contact* from book to screenplay until his death at age 62 in December, 1996. Toward the beginning of the film, the central character of *Contact*, Eleanor "Ellie" Arroway, asks her dad whether he thinks there are people on other planets. In a line that is something of a Sagan mantra, her father replies, "I don't know. . . but I guess I'd say if it is just us. . . seems like an awful waste of space."

It is difficult to watch the film without being impressed by its special effects, especially the very beginning of the film where we are graphically transported backwards away from the planet earth for an incredible ride through the universe. However, *Contact* is much more subtle and intelligent on the "alien" side of things than other recent films and it does have a way of drawing the viewer in where the dimension of science is concerned. Roger Ebert refers to *Contact* as "the smartest and most absorbing story about extraterrestrial intelligence since *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*." [*Chicago Sun Times*, 11 July 1997.] Of course, that may not be saying much since few science fiction films over the last two decades have taken it upon themselves to rise above the standard plot that include lots of people getting slimed by aliens and cosmic cowboys chasing interplanetary bad guys throughout the galaxy.

Still, as a uniquely modern genre, science fiction - whether in literature, film, or television - is uniquely suited for dealing with questions of faith. At first glance, we might take science fiction to be a distraction - a flight of fancy and escape from the real world. When science fiction first began to appear almost a hundred years ago it was considered little more than the product of end-of-the-century anxiety. Since that time, however, it has served as an important avenue for dealing with heavy questions such as the shape of ultimate reality, the meaning of life, and the place of human beings in the cosmos. *Contact* boldly places such

questions at its front and center even though this can sometimes causes the film to become preachy, often straining under the weight of its own sense of self-importance. In brief, the film is about Ellie Arroway (Jodie Foster), a zealous radio astronomer who discovers a pulsing signal originating from the star system Vega, some twenty-six light years away (later in the film we see an Elvis look-alike holding up a sign that says "Viva Las Vega"). The signal contains instructions for building a star-transport and most of the film traces the political, scientific, and religious complications that develop in response to the alien signal and Ellie's strong desire to be the one to go on the transport. Introduced into the story to provide roadblocks for Ellie are cardboard characters such as a glory-hogging science advisor to the president (Tom Skerritt) and a paranoid national security advisor (James Woods). Ellie is an atheist because she doesn't find any empirical evidence for the existence of God, but because the film develops her character so well, even the most devout theists will find themselves liking her and taking her side. Ellie finally gets to take the transport and after traveling through galactic wormholes at cosmic speeds she encounters an alien who, strangely enough, appears in the form of her father (I can just see Freud with a broad smile across his face). The alien has few answers for Ellie's questions and can only give her hints of the evolutionary process that has for millions of years brought them to this point. The alien doesn't even know how the transport system got there in the first place. Nonetheless, he comforts Ellie with the following words of wisdom:

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. See, in all our searching, the only thing we've found that makes the emptiness bearable....is each other.

Many viewers will likely be disappointed by the encounter. Twenty-six light years and all we get is a cure for interplanetary angst! And yet, perhaps an understated alien encounter is somewhat refreshing given some of the outlandish portrayals in other science fiction films. The film quickly turns to what is perhaps its most important segment - not the alien encounter, but Ellie's return to earth. To her fellow earthlings it appears that her star-transport never left - such is the nature of interstellar travel, I guess. Ellie is now left having to explain her experience not merely in the face of a lack of evidence, but in the face of controverting evidence. Ellie the atheist is reduced to the status of those poor religious folk who have no proof for their claims, but must simply live by faith and bear witness to their life-changing experiences in an unbelieving world. The other central character, Palmer Joss (played by Matthew McConaughey) shows up early in the film during Ellie's research at the Arecibo radio telescope site in Puerto Rico. McConaughey is completely unconvincing as a kind of new age ex-catholic theologian who got his Masters of Divinity, dropped out of seminary, and is now working on a book about how technology affects third-world cultures. Later in the film, we discover he has written another book entitled, *Losing Faith*, an indictment of modern culture that has lost its sense of direction and meaning despite its advances in science,

technology, and creature comforts. According to Palmer, "We shop at home, we surf the Web, at the same time we're emptier."

Palmer is supposed to represent faith in the film and Ellie, of course, represents science. Their flirtations are the flirtations between science and faith. When they hold hands or kiss, we are watching the potential union of science and faith. And in a scene that is loaded with theological potential, faith gives science his number, but science never calls! The problem, however, is that we don't get to know Palmer well enough to understand, let alone identify with, his version of faith so that throughout the movie the "faith" that collides with and sometimes colludes with science remains abstract, meaningless, and void. We do know that Palmer couldn't, as he says, "live with the whole celibacy thing." He tells Ellie, "You could call me a man of the cloth. . . without the cloth." Following the standard Hollywood convention for communicating to viewers that the two have established a close caring relationship, they fall into bed for a one-night stand never to see each other again until four years later after Ellie has tuned in to the alien signal. By this time, Palmer has become, as Larry King describes him, "author and theologian. . . spiritual counselor of sorts and a recent fixture at the White House" or, according to the New York Times, "God's diplomat."

As a film that deals with the question of the existence of God, both of its central characters, Ellie and Palmer, supply the typical arguments for their

respective positions on the topic. While their arguments are by no means profound, it is extraordinary to see a film today even allow itself to deal with such questions explicitly. Where the film gets muddled, however, is, first, in its attempt to portray authentic religious faith and, second, in its attempt to interface science with religious faith (which, of course, is a muddle that is the byproduct of the first muddle). Either the film does not really understand religious faith or, while pretending to remain neutral on the question, it so implicitly disagrees with religious faith that it finds it difficult to write well for it.

It is tempting to suggest that it is Carl Sagan's well known atheism that is the culprit here, but the truth of the matter is that authentic religious faith is notoriously difficult to depict accurately on screen. It is much easier to resort to caricature and distortion. Through the vehicle of the Palmer Joss character, *Contact* tries not to yield to the standard Hollywood convention of trivializing religion by presenting persons of faith as misinformed, confused, ineffective, fundamentalist, or fanatic. But it is not at all clear that it succeeds in doing this with Palmer. In the case of three other less prominent instances of religious figures in the film it finally does succumb to traditional Hollywood conventions altogether (and that doesn't even count the man holding the "Jesus is an alien" sign halfway during the movie!) The first figure is a priest who, in the beginning of the film, attempts to console Ellie, age 9, after her father has died. The priest tells her, "Ellie, I know it's hard to

understand this now, but we aren't always meant to know the reasons why things happen the way they do. Sometimes we just have to accept it as God's will." Ellie responds matter of factly, "I should have kept some medicine in the downstairs bathroom....then I could have gotten to it sooner" and the priest is left with a helpless, confused stare on his face. It has now gotten to the point in popular film that if you see a man with a clerical collar you can go ahead and count on his being morally reprobate, inflexibly ruthless, or, in this case, sincere but intellectually helpless.

The second religious figure is the brief appearance of Richard Rank, leader of the Conservative Coalition who is thrown into the mix now and again to blabber this and that about not knowing whether the aliens have any moral values or to criticize science for "intruding into matters of faith." This, of course, is meant to be a parody of Ralph Reed and the Christian Coalition - a parody made all the more amusing by the casting of Rob Lowe (not exactly the epitome of righteousness). Finally, there is the fanatic cult member with a crucifix draped around his neck who blames science for all the world's woes and subsequently tries to nuke the entire project. But for what reason? "What we do we do for the goodness of all mankind. This won't be understood - not now - but the apocalypse to come will vindicate our faith." In other words, no answer is to be given. Instead the film merely falls back on one of the standard film conventions for portraying religious faith - a mixture of

fanaticism and irrationality. Not that some future contact with extraterrestrial intelligence wouldn't occasion some very real conflict and tension between science and religion. One need not think long about doctrines central to all religions (such as soteriology, anthropology, or eschatology -- not to mention christology, in the case of Christianity) to realize that each of them would be thrown into a tizzy with the advent of aliens. But, of course, these are not explored in the film. Rather, the focus of the faith versus science tension is an entirely anti-technology predilection.

So, then, are these the only candidates to be found for the relationship between religious faith and science: the befuddled priest, the political moralizer, the irrational fanatic, or the whatever-Palmer-Joss-is? Apparently so. *Contact* is a good example of how Hollywood creates and maintains popular attitudes toward religion and religious "faith" whether it intends to or not. What we find in the film, *Contact*, is an explicit message about science and religion that attempts a neutrality and maybe even a positive cooperation between the two. On the implicit level, however, where filmic conventions operate (See Margaret R. Miles, *Seeing and Believing*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), we find what is true of many popular films - a consensus that traditional religious faith is deeply untrustworthy and to be placed at the margins of culture if not rejected altogether.

Furthermore, because of the implicit messages the film conveys to its viewers about the nature of religious faith, it never really is able to make the jump

it wants to with regard to the relationship between that very faith and science. In the end, faith is not allowed to stand on its own two feet but is instead reduced to a caricature. As a byproduct, even the question of God's existence is throughout the film treated as if it were logically identical to the question of alien existence. As a byproduct, even the question of God's existence is throughout the film treated as if it were logically parallel to the question of alien existence. But just this confusion is what an authentically religious faith can never allow. The existence of God is not at all parallel to the question of whether there are aliens. The latter will always be an empirical question that is answerable, at least in principal, by empirical methods of discovery while the question of God's existence, as a properly metaphysical question, is in a different category altogether. It is almost as laughable as hearing once again of the Soviet cosmonaut who, having attained space orbit, proudly boasted that he saw no God. What we have here is a mixing of categories and a misunderstanding of the nature of faith.

But perhaps this film can teach us something about the uneasy relationship of faith and science in our world. As a general uneasiness about where our technocentric world is headed becomes increasingly widespread along with alteration after alteration in our understanding of the cosmos, we can expect more films to reflect our cosmic anxieties and the implications of those anxieties for religious faith. A faith that tries to achieve for its claims the certainty of science is

perhaps as doomed as a science that pretends it begins with no faith claims of its own. There is a yearning in our world today for a philosophy - nay, a spirituality - that can resolve the tensions between faith and science with integrity and practicality. If *Contact* is unsuccessful in pointing the way to such an integral spirituality, it at least has the courage to try to imagine its possibility. Whether and how we decide to rise to that challenge is up to us. In a secular and scientific world that less and less requires metaphysical stop-gaps, the challenge of people of faith is to communicate that faith as pervasive, relevant, and meaningful rather than obscure, trivial, and silly. And perhaps the one point where that task will be most difficult but most important is, as the film itself suggests, at the intersection of the human spirit and technology.