

Bless Thou Astronauts: A Short History of Faith in the American Space Age 1957–1971

By Grace Jones

Abstract

The space race to the moon brought science and religion to the heart of the Soviet–American Cold War (1945–1991). Many historians have examined the unique cultural and social impact of America’s space program, but few have explored the unique role of faith in the space age. This short history explores the unique relationship between science and evangelical history specifically focusing on the religious embrace of space technology and the battle to preserve faith in the divine against the threat of communism and atheism. The history of space technology and religion carry a lasting presence well into our modern age and continue to usher in a spiritual or transcendent experience through the power of spaceflight.

Keywords: Space, religion, technology, faith, spaceflight, history, science, communism.

Introduction

How did the Space Age affect America’s belief in the divine? Would humankind’s ascent to the stars strengthen or weaken faith? Or was it possible to unify science and religion in the American space program? Many would be shocked to know the unique role of faith in the US space race to the moon. The apostles of the Apollo program envisioned a world in which science and religion could work together. This article explores the overall impact of human space exploration and the Protestant Christian (evangelical) church exploring the following themes. First, this section explores the implications of human space exploration on the evangelical church in the Cold War. How did space exploration impact faith, and would it displace it? This second section observes the collaborative relationship between science and religion looking at the incredible lives of two theologians: Rev. Carl McIntire and Rev. John Stout, who sought to persuade NASA to utilize faith during manned human spaceflight missions specifically in the Apollo Program. The third and final section looks ahead to the future of spaceflight in our modern technological era and its interactions with religion and spirituality.

Paradise Lost and Found

The race to the moon had more religious nuances than we might realize. Many would be surprised to learn that the earlier days of American manned spaceflight was largely dominated and supported by Christian Protestantism.¹ For centuries, the relationship between science and religion has often been thought of as historically incompatible.

¹ Kendrick Oliver, *To Touch the Face of God* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

However, the impact of human space exploration proves that this is *not* the case. With the launch of the Soviet satellite, Sputnik 1 (1957), some evangelical pastors proclaimed, “Don’t be surprised if He (Jesus) comes today,” viewing the eerie silver object as a prophetic sign of the coming apocalypse.² Every pulpit remarked on the complexities of Sputnik; they questioned whether it was it dangerous—even blasphemous to God. For some believers, the satellite challenged divinity. Some evangelicals commented that Sputnik was a “frightening toy in the hands of childlike men” who were without religion and morals.³

And here we have our Sputnik
No secret: the newborn planet
Is modest about its size
But this symbol of intellect and light
Is made by us, and not by the God
Of the Old Testament.⁴

But Sputnik was only the beginning. The Space Age forever challenged the traditional views of heaven with the launch of cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin on Vostok 1 (1961). Historian Kendrick Oliver suggested that many Christians thought the Russians desecralized the heavens due to their “lack of belief” in the divine in his book *To Touch the Face of God*.⁵ Some theologians noted that humankind was as close to God as it had ever been, but such a divine experience would go unrecognized by the Soviet nation. Sacred space had been invaded by the USSR and held captive by Gagarin. While many felt that the USSR had invaded sacred space, others embraced the idea of space travel because it “proved the existence of the divine.”⁶ Despite some growing fears of a world that would forget heaven, many saw the space race as an opportunity to reclaim God as the divine Creator.⁷ Charles Halff’s famous book *The Bible and Space Travel* encouraged Americans of faith to welcome a divinely inspired era of human spaceflight. Fighting against the communists meant embracing a “techno-religion” of sorts.⁸ Maintaining religious devotion, in this era, also meant keeping faith in science and technology. Historian David Noble writes in his book *The Religion of Technology* that the production of new technologies and scientific pursuits expressed the redemption of humanity from the fall of mankind as described in

² George W. Cornell, “Satellites Stir Debate of Science vs. Religion” *Washington Post and Times Herald*, February 4, 1958.

³ Paul Dickson, *Sputnik: The Shock of the Century* (London: Walker, 2001), 114–15.

⁴ “Religion: Not by God,” *Time Magazine* 87, no. 14, 1975.

⁵ Oliver, *To Touch the Face of God*, 10.

⁶ Martin Heineken, *God in the Space Age* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston, 1959).

⁷ Jonathan Herzog, *The Spiritual–Industrial Complex* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁸ David Noble, *The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997).

the Book of Genesis.⁹ Kendrick Oliver suggests that despite some initial resistance toward space age technologies, the prospect of spaceflight brought about a transformative era of divinity and redemption. Spaceflight symbolized an ascending motion toward heaven. Both Noble and Oliver stated that spaceflight (at least in the United States) “owed much to religious archetypes and sensibilities.”¹⁰ Increasingly, science and technology remained indebted to religion as faith seemed to be a primary tool in technological innovation. Many working in the Apollo program found no conflict between faith and science. The prospect of a moon landing strengthened faith as technological growth persisted. Explorations of God’s celestial creation did not challenge divine supremacy.

Apollo’s Apostles

As NASA worked tirelessly to launch American astronaut Alan Shepard into space, two theologians, Rev. Carl McIntire and Rev. John Stout, worked alongside them. McIntire believed that technology was crucial to the survival of faith and sought to form a space-based religious campaign to encourage believers in Christ not to dwell on old science vs. technology debates, but instead to embrace a future dominated by space travel. He often discussed how technology could bring about a Christ-centered America and how NASA’s missions (against the Communist nations) would solidify belief in creationism.¹¹ In the mid-1960s, McIntire opened a large hotel on Cape Canaveral called “Gateway to the Stars” to invite enthusiastic Christians to explore the word of God through his yearly Bible conference and to witness the “spectacular accomplishments in spaceflight: factories, labs, communities, experiments of every conceivable kind ... as [humanity] prepared to live permanently in the sky.”¹² He compared the flaming rockets and sputtering chariots of spacemen to biblical prophecy and often encouraged astronauts to incorporate religious ritual into their missions. The Apollo 8 (1968) reading of Genesis thrilled McIntire and his many supporters; this event only strengthened his mission to use NASA’s resources for the glory of God—despite pushback from some American activists including Madalyn Murray O’Hair.¹³ The reciting of the biblical creation story was broadcast to televisions in nearly every home in America and around the world. McIntire believed that the “moon would never be the same,” and the Genesis story would forever ring in the ears of all those who witnessed the incredible journey of the Apollo 8 astronauts. He strongly believed that those who came to Cape Canaveral could walk in the presence of the Lord as astronauts ascended into heavens.

⁹ Noble, *The Religion of Technology*.

¹⁰ Oliver, *To Touch the Face of God*, 9.

¹¹ Carl McIntire, “Creation and Revelation Command Cape Canaveral,” *Christian Beacon*, October 24, 1974, 1.

¹² Carl McIntire, “Gateway to the Stars: Pamphlet for Cape Canaveral Bible Conference,” n.d.

¹³ Madalyn Murray O’Hair supported atheism and the separation of church and state. After the Apollo 8 Genesis reading, O’Hair filed a lawsuit against NASA; however, the case was rejected due to a lack of jurisdiction—yet the challenge impacted the way NASA handled future interactions with religion.

As McIntire worked to bring his loyal followers to Cape Canaveral, another clergyman and scholar was working to bring the Word of God to heaven itself. Many are unfamiliar with the incredible history of NASA's chaplain to the astronauts, Rev. John Stout. In the midst of the space race, the young scientist from Texas accepted his role at NASA under one condition: that he could use his theological degree to motivate the astronauts who trained daily for manned lunar missions spiritually. Stout was well known for his scientific expertise as an engineer, but in the tragedy of Apollo 1 he would become something far greater. After the death of his dear friend Astronaut Edward White, Stout sought to honor his memory and legacy by organizing the Apollo Prayer League in 1967—a group dedicated to praying for the safety of the astronauts and all manned-spacecraft missions.¹⁴ Stout's versatility in science and faith and his admiration for White's belief that "space travel brought humanity closer to God" inspired him to bring the Bible to the lunar surface.¹⁵ In 1971, utilizing microfilm technology the Lunar Bible landed successfully on the moon during the Apollo 14 mission.

Both McIntire and Stout concluded that America's space program revitalized faith in the divine. Space travel would only strengthen faith. Citizens across the United States wrote thousands of letters to both Stout and McIntire about their efforts in securing religion and the space program. For some, the unification of science and faith at such a transcendent level renewed their faith in God—as many felt they could also experience what the astronauts spiritually encountered during spaceflight.¹⁶ The blessing of space technology forever altered how believers could experience God—whether it was on the grounds of Cape Canaveral or in the comfort of their homes. Science did not displace faith. Instead, it adopted religion and made it physically transcendent. Both McIntire and Stout believed that the American space program declared the glory of God and celebrated humanity's scientific innovation.

Sacred Space

The unique story of spaceflight and religion during the Soviet–American Cold War plays an interesting role looking ahead to the future of space travel and new posthuman capabilities.¹⁷ Now that we have briefly touched on the role of religion and science during the space race, what will space and religion look like in future missions to the moon and beyond? The new religion of space exploration points to the sublime through the powers of engineering. Kendrick Oliver recounted in *To Touch the Face of God* that many Apollo

¹⁴ Astronaut Edward White stated to Stout that he wanted to take his Bible into space as he prepared for the Apollo 1 mission.

¹⁵ Carol Mersch, *The Incredible Reverend Stout: Presidents, Astronauts, and the Woman He Loved* (Fayetteville, AK: Pen-L, 2021).

¹⁶ This is similar to the Overview Effect.

¹⁷ Posthumanism is a concept that originates in the field of futurology or philosophy that seeks to look at going beyond the present state of humanity. In other words, it looks at how humans will evolve in the future as technology continues to advance.

astronauts, despite their hostile environment, still reported feelings of divinity while walking on the lunar surface. For some, it was the familiar feeling of the Overview Effect, and for others, it was a transcendent experience with God.¹⁸ The future of human space exploration beyond the moon will include an inclusive spiritual perspective—though it may shift from a predominately Christian outlook. It is still an unavoidable fact that the nature of spaceflight induces an experience like no other.

As scientists speak of a posthuman future in which technology reshapes human life on earth, it is discernable that the future of space technology will also have a lasting impact on the human mind and belief systems. For some, space itself could represent its own religion with no influence from the divine; others may find comfort in taking their religion to outer space. Looking toward a posthuman era, the relationship between space and religion will inevitably draw from the historic past of the Apollo era as space exploration fits several characteristics of religion. It is paired with curiosity about the unknown and the desire for meaning in the universe. Humanity has always looked to the stars for spiritual meaning and guidance; it is only natural that we will continue to look for them even among the stars.

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¹⁸ The Overview Effect is a cognitive shift in awareness reported by astronauts while in spaceflight. Research has concluded that the effect is similar to a transcendent or awe-inspired state brought about by the process of viewing Earth from space, reshaping the perception of beauty or producing overwhelming emotion. This experience can be transformative and influence the belief system or religion of an individual during space travel.

of space-based education, career diversity, and interdisciplinary research in the broad fields of liberal arts.

Editors' Notes: Our retrospective continues with an article by a first-time contributor, space historian Grace Jones. Like Thangavelu, Jones addresses the role of spirituality in the space age ... particularly the role of evangelical religion in the United States during the cold war space race. From poetry about Sputnik to projections of a posthuman future, this historian gives us a lot to think about as we begin to look forward to the next ten years of space philosophy. ***Mark Wagner and Gordon Arthur.***