By: George L. Murphy

In some ways I would have been better equipped for ministry if I had spent more time in high school studying Latin and less time reading science fiction. But in other ways I wouldn't be. Science fiction provides useful and interesting ways to deal with a number of religious questions and issues at the science-theology interface.

Back in the 1950s science fiction had the reputation of appealing only to teenaged boys and other immature types and was generally considered worthless as literature. Much of it is pretty forgettable, but "Sturgeon's rule" (which I cite in bowdlerized form) keeps things in perspective. When a critic asked science fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon why 90 percent of science fiction was garbage, he replied, "90 percent of everything is garbage." But the good material (and even some of the bad) can raise questions and ideas that other genres cannot easily provide.

This is not because science fiction always does a good job with science itself. Sometimes I wonder if science consultants for *Star Trek* and other productions are ever consulted about the supposed science on the programs. But attempts by knowledgeable writers to be accurate can result in what C. S. Lewis (himself a writer of science fiction) called "engineer's fiction." A writer should try to keep plot devices that are absurd by present-day scientific standards to a minimum. Lewis said somewhere in commenting on Arthurian romances that in such literature one magician is better than two.

Recent Examples
A lot of people today are familiar with science fiction through *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, and other films and television programs. It is hard to get participants in a high school or adult Sunday class to do "assigned reading," but they often will go to see a film that is currently in theaters or rent a movie or television episode that can be a topic for discussion in a future class. Of course, the leader of the class needs to see the film or program ahead of time and think about how to approach it.

The 1997 film *Contact* stars Jodie Foster as a radio astronomer who is devoted to the search for messages from extraterrestrials and receives one. The resulting drama raises important questions about humanity's place in the universe and the nature of belief. Religion is not presented in a very positive way, and one might be tempted to blame Carl Sagan, on whose novel *Contact* (Simon & Schuster, 1985) the movie is based, but I think that he did a better job with that than the film did. In any case, this

doesn't detract from the movie's interest and may even be helpful in provoking discussion.

The *Matrix* trilogy is a more recent example. Religious symbolism is obvious in a film with heroes named Neo and Trinity! They are among the last free people fighting the machines, which have imprisoned most humans and subjected them to an illusory virtual reality while using the energy their bodies generate. On one level this could be criticized as a kind of cyber-gnosticism, but we could ask if advertising and political propaganda don't try to inflict just such illusions on us. Viewing the first film of the series, *The Matrix*, would be sufficient for discussion.

Star Wars should not be neglected. Episode III (the sixth to be seen) is scheduled for release May 19. Those familiar with the series know that Anakin Skywalker will turn to "the dark side of the Force" and become Darth Vader. That should provide opportunity for moral and theological reflection. Ever since the first *Star Wars* film (Episode IV) came out in 1977 there has been interest in "The Force," a concept nebulous enough that people with different religious views have claimed it. When Luke turned off his computer and let himself be guided by The Force in his attack on the Death Star, some people were upset at what they saw as an endorsement of mysticism over science, but maybe there are some limits to science-based technology.

More Discussion Starters
The various *Star Trek* television series and films did not deal much with traditional human religions, largely because of series creator Gene Roddenberry's dislike of religion. Still, a number of episodes could be excellent discussion starters. In "Darmok," from the fifth year of *Star Trek: Next Generation*, the crew of the Enterprise encounters a species whose language is a highly metaphorical one based on stories. It could be a way to get at some issues of biblical literalism and truth. (In my opinion *Next Generation* is the best of the *Star Trek* series.)

Certain older films are valuable. *Forbidden Planet* from 1956 does not have an explicitly religious theme, but its threat of "monsters from the Id" actually raises the question of how we can talk sensibly about original righteousness and original sin in an evolutionary context.

Science fiction can also be a helpful resource for preaching. One possibility is to be on the lookout for popular films or television programs that might provide good illustrations for a sermon. Of course you will need to know your congregation and have some idea whether or not they will know what you are referring to. More general science fiction ideas could be used without mention of a specific story. The concept of time travel (which real physicists have thought about) could bring to life the theological concept of prolepsis, "the invasion of the present by the power of what is yet to come" (Ted Peters, *GOD — The World's Future*, 2d ed. [Fortress, 2000], 320–21).

There is also a more ambitious approach. Story sermons have been popular in recent years, and you might try developing science fiction story sermons for appropriate texts. For example, you could tell a story about the inventor of a computer inserting him/herself into one of the computer's programs to convey the idea of the Word becoming flesh in John 1:1–14. It would be hard to make this completely accurate theologically, but you are presenting an analogy, not exegeting the Definition of Chalcedon.

(Some people may have the idea that developing a story sermon is easier than writing a traditional kerygmatic or didactic one. They will probably be disabused of that notion once they try it themselves!)

New to Sci-Fi?
In order to use any of these ideas — and especially the development of story sermons — effectively, you'll want to have some familiarity with science fiction novels and short stories as well as films and television. Works that make contact with religious themes will be especially helpful. I have already mentioned Sagan's *Contact*. Olaf Stapledon's *Starmaker* (Orion, 2004), C. S. Lewis's "space trilogy" (*Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*, Scribner Book Co., 2003), Walter H. Miller Jr.'s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (Bantam, 1997), James Blish's *A Case of Conscience* (Del Ray, 2000), Philip K. Dick's *The Divine Invasion* (Vintage, 1991), Robert A. Heinlein's *Job: A Comedy of Justice* (Del Ray, 1985), and Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* (Ballantine Books, 1997) and *Children of God* (Ballantine Books, 1999) would be a good start.

Useful works about science fiction are John Clute's *Science Fiction: The Illustrated Encyclopedia* (Dorling Kindersley, 1995) and Thomas M. Disch's *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World* (The Free Press, 1998).

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