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## The tension between science and religion in Carl Sagan's contact

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**Abstract**---This paper tackles Carl Sagan's 1985's science fiction novel Contact which examines the connection and the relation between religious faith and science, focusing on technology and its significance in human existence. Contact's most lasting impression on readers is its enthralling representation of the unending conflict between science and faith. At numerous points in the novel, the reader is given the impression that religion and science might have a good relationship. The two are usually considered structurally related and, in some circumstances, even dependent on one another. This paper is to discover the tension between the science and faith the author Carl Sagan presents in his Contact with relating to the postmodern theory in literary criticism.

**Keywords**---Carl Sagan, Contact, Science Fiction, Postmodernism, Novel, Religion.

**Introduction**

The term "postmodern" is a momentous term that refers to the period that presumably follows modernity. The Postmodern Condition (1979) by Jean-François Lyotard heralded a new era in cultural history known as "Post-Modernism." Postmodernism is sceptical of reason, sees technology as a tool of destruction as much as development, and opposes the assumptions of industrial

society. Postmodernism, according to Lyotard, is characterized by scepticism toward "metanarratives." He means narratives about the world that attempt to summarize everything in a single survey. Such definitive stories are unsuitable to the world of the Postmodern temperament. Instead, Post-Modernism advocates viewing the world in further rhetorical terms as a field of competing for smaller narratives in which individuals try to make their viewpoint and interests predominant by making their narratives more compelling, according to Lyotard. Postmodernism has been criticized for failing to take a position on important topics. All values are debatable, and the argument, according to Lyotard, should go on indefinitely. The only blunder is shutting off discourse. Its critics argue that values must be determined.

Moreover, while all of society's concerns or problems might be argued indefinitely, judgments must be taken at some time about which ideals will prevail (Rivkin and Ryan 355). It implies that writers, authors, and critics have the freedom to express themselves and their viewpoints, but only in a persuasive manner. In his 1997's book *Singularities: Extremes of Theory in the Twentieth Century*, Thomas Pepper says that: "a time of massive cynicism and universal lying, in which all qualities have been devalued, or rather suspended in a wave of reactive consumer populism that seems both inescapable and never-ending . . . This is an age in which one must be classifiable so that everything one says can be dismissed as a mere point of view" (Pepper XII).

## **Method**

Postmodern arguments have occupied the cultural and intellectual landscape in various sectors worldwide for the past two decades. Polemics erupted in aesthetic and cultural theory over whether modernism in the arts was dead or alive and what kind of postmodern art would replace it. Many began praising a new postmodern philosophy connected with Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, Rorty, Lyotard, and others, and arguments arose in philosophy about whether or not the tradition of modern philosophy had come to an end. The postmodern onslaught eventually spawned new social and political ideas and attempts to describe the various features of the postmodern phenomena itself. Supporters of the modern tradition either ignored the new challenger, attacked it in return, or attempted to cop with and adopt the new discourses and stances. At the same time, proponents of the postmodern shift fiercely assailed old culture, philosophy, and politics (Best and Kellner 1-2).

On the other hand, postmodern theorists argue that emergent processes of change and transformation bring out a new postmodern society in today's high-tech media society. The period of postmodernity is an innovative phase of history and socio-cultural formation that necessitates new ideas and theories. According to postmodernity theorists (Baudrillard, Lyotard, Harvey, and others), technology, new forms of knowledge, and changes in the socio-economic system are generating a postmodern social formation. Neo-Marxist theorists such as Jameson and Harvey perceive the postmodern as the advancement of an elevated level of capitalism labelled by a greater degree of capital penetration and homogenization worldwide. In contrast, Baudrillard and Lyotard interpret these developments in novel kinds of information knowledge and technologies. These

processes result in growing cultural fragmentation, alterations in the perception of space and time, and new forms of experience, subjectivity, and culture. Such circumstances offer the socio-economic foundation for the postmodern theory and its study, giving the viewpoints from which postmodern theory may claim to be at the forefront of current events (Ibid 3).

## **Discussion**

### **Religion and Science**

Evolution, with its most apparent clash with scientific authority, has been one of the most prominent venues of renewed conservative Christian political involvement. Religion and science have a complex connection. It has compounded that religion and science have evolved, and neither can be claimed to be a single, consistent entity. While the lines between science and non-science are blurry, it can be hard to determine what must and must not be considered scientific. Religion is a broad phrase that encompasses a wide range of organizations. Furthermore, people may engage in science and religion in various methods. While the lines between science and non-science are blurry, it can be hard to determine what must and must not be considered scientific. Religion is a broad phrase that encompasses a wide range of organizations. Furthermore, people may engage in science and religion in various methods. Although religions have oppressed scientific inquiry and scientists at times, it is not correct to say that science and religion have always been at odds. A similar relationship exists now. Some faiths, particularly fundamentalist religions, reject science because it contradicts their theological beliefs. On the other hand, numerous other faiths have embraced contemporary science, altering or abandoning aspects of their faith that contradict scientific discoveries. Individuals may be more or less open to science than the religion's teaching within any faith. Science has also started to look at religion with uncompromising eyes, demonstrating that trust in the supernatural being most probably, a natural occurrence (Cragun 172, 175)

### **Science and Religion in Carl Sagan's Contact**

The novel's central dialectic is the conflict between science and religion, reason and faith; it is set up early and perpetuated continuously by the narrative and extensive discussion between Ellie and other religious figures. The twenty-four chapters of *Contact* all start with a religious epigraph or two, referencing, for example, William James on God and universal laws, the Dead Sea Scrolls, St. Augustine on demons, Euripides on the presence of the gods, and the Bible, to name a few. Sagan presents religion as a communal phenomenon disturbed by the receiving of the message, not merely an element of Ellie's awareness. According to *Contact*, evidence of intelligent alien life could elicit various imaginative answers. Some religious sects think the message came from God, whereas others think it came from the Devil. It has a "steadying impact" on Cold War geopolitics even before it is decoded. Nuclear peace between the US and the USSR is in its initial phases, and cautious global optimism has emerged. This optimism and a familiar feeling of cohesion and purpose are not universally welcomed (Douglas 187). Millennialist groups anticipating apocalyptic end-times—Sagan refers to them as "chiliasts," from the ancient Greek word

"thousand," meaning people who believe Christ will return to govern for millennia before the final judgment— are unable to discern if the message symbolizes or postpones the end. Sagan says:

Some chiliasts held that the imminent arrival of the Third Millennium would be accompanied by the return of Jesus or Buddha or Krishna or The Prophet, who would establish a benevolent theocracy on Earth, severe in its judgment of mort. Perhaps this would presage the mass celestial Ascent of the Elect (Sagan 151)

Contact progresses the religious themes in the narrative via two Christian "fundamentalist" figures. Like Kingsolver, to be fair in her assessment of rising conservative Christianity, Sagan portrays a sympathetic, rational Christian and a more narrow-minded, slightly dishonest Christian ideologue to the audience. Via their images, this idea becomes evident. Sagan is not only talking about an overall, dehistoricized Christianity as he progresses the religious themes in his novel. However, instead, the conservative Christian resurgence because it already affected politics, science, and society throughout the 1980s as he did write it, as the above quotation on millenarianism implies.

According to the novel's climax, Palmer Joss is a compassionate Christian who befriends Ellie and may become her romantic interest. Palmer, who had the Earth tattooed on his body and a knack for reciting Ovid, was struck by lightning someday and had a near-death encounter in which he saw a "Godlike" person at the end of a tunnel (133). "He had been true, and reborn" (134). Palmer apprenticed to Billy Jo Rankin Sr., the fundamentalist preacher who occurred to be there when Palmer awoke from the lightning hit, and Sagan writes about Palmer's experience (possibly without a precise grasp of what "literally" implies). ("Am I gonna live or die?" Palmer whispers to Rankin Sr. as he wakes; Rankin responds, "My boy, you are gonna do both" [133].) therefore, Sagan depicts Palmer as a middle-way rational fundamentalist:

"he would explain baptism and the afterlife, the connection of Christian Revelation with the myths of classical Greece and Rome, the idea of God's plan for the world, and the conformity of science and religion when both were adequately understood". (Sagan 134)

In opposition to Palmer, the novel presents Billy Jo Rankin Jr as a theologically rigid fundamentalist who is a bit of a charlatan. Rankin Jr. argues that "the actual amniotic fluid that surrounded and protected our Lord" (135), a saintly artefact allegedly belonging to a late-twentieth-century Protestant fundamentalist. Accordingly, Palmer is "appalled", "not so much that Rankin would attempt so transparent a scam but that any of the parishioners were so credulous as to accept it" (135). Palmer's rationality is demonstrated by his strong criticism of his mentor's son, i.e. "he railed against other deviant forms of Christian fundamentalism". It includes the snake-handling Pentecostal cults that are still functioning today (135): "Joss argued that in every religion there was a doctrinal line beyond which it insulted the intelligence of its practitioners" (135). Ellie ultimately joins up with Palmer and Rankin for an informal conversation about science and religion. Ellie and Rankin are the main characters, with Palmer acting as a listener and moderator.

The theological argument between religion and science occupies the entire sixteen-page chapter. The readers see Sagan's desire for a synthesis between the two magisterial, both of them are "bound up," as Ellie puts it, with "a thirst for wonder." According to Palmer's conclusion, "Perhaps we are all wayfarers on the road to truth" (173). Thirty years later, in the period of the belligerent "New Atheists," such reconciliation may be more difficult to envision than it was when Sagan penned his novel. Ellie's usage of the word "faith" to allude to her personal views regarding natural scientific principles and fundamentalist Christians' convictions about God's existence and proactive involvement in the world suggests that equivalence may be the form of that reconciliation.

### **Conclusion**

Contact, a book by Carl Sagan published in 1985, achieves this reconciliation by drawing exact parallels between religious beliefs and scientific endeavours, as shown in Arroway's voyage and testimony. Through Christian characters, Contact advances the story's religious themes. The relationship between religion and science is complicated. It has been made worse because religion and science have changed over time, and neither can be considered a single, continuous entity. Nevertheless, Contact fails to provide a clear and compelling image of religious faith at the level of standard narrative conventions. The link between religion and science finally breaks down as the latter is degraded to a caricature.

Everyone would go to church anyhow if they were in Contact. People want solutions to their world-related questions and know that their world has spread beyond the planet. They require new answers to their new concerns. As a result, many turn to religion and churches. The pious, on the other hand, have difficulty offering solutions. The message might be from God, official evidence of existence; the message might be from Satan, aiming to deceive humankind; the message might bring doomsday and salvation in the apocalyptic tradition; the message may result in doomsday and salvation in the apocalyptic tradition. Rev. Rankin, however, insists that religious organizations be in charge of gathering and interpreting the message. This element of the novel's ongoing conflict between the religious and the scientific.

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### **Declaration of Interest**

According to the researchers, there is no need to report any conflicts of interest since there are none.

### Data availability statement

It is possible to receive the dataset that was used in this study from the individual who functioned as the corresponding author if a legitimate request is made to do so.

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