

Science fiction and faith: Religions and Dune

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Abstract:

Science fiction is usually not a genre associated with religious faith, as its origins have more to do with a belief in science and technology. Most science fiction books do not deal with religions, as if it was a necessity from the past deemed irrelevant in the future. Nonetheless, a subgenre of science fiction – soft science fiction - provides a different take on religion, as it focuses more on humanity and less on science. Dune, by Frank Herbert, as a prime example of soft science fiction, considers religion to be of utmost importance in its universe of the future, but is also very critical of its political aspect. Through the description of the actions of the order of Bene Gesserit, Frank Herbert provides a precise analysis of the religious behavior of a cult of the future. This study was unfortunately lost in the adaptation to cinema by David Lynch, but could be rendered in a new attempt in 2020 by Denis Villeneuve. In this article, a study of how science fiction and religion can interact is provided using the example of Dune. In his work, Frank Herbert does not reject religion, quite the opposite as he intends to place it at the core of humanity. Still, he warns humanity about the risk of losing itself when worshipping higher powers with inhumane agendas.

Keywords:

Science fiction - Soft science fiction - Frank Herbert - Dune - Religion - Ideology - Propaganda - Artificial Intelligence

Introduction:

Science fiction has many definitions, such as the literature of ideas or, as SF author Norman Spinrad famously explained, “anything published as science fiction”. To try and provide a more

precise explanation of science fiction, Isaac Asimov defined the genre in 1975 as “that branch of literature which deals with the reaction of human beings to changes in science and technology”. Many writers would disagree with that vision, especially those dealing with so-called soft science fiction, a sub-genre where science is no longer central to the story. Since defining science fiction is complex considering its ever-changing nature, it might be safer and more productive to focus on its two main functions: inventing and preventing. The first aspect is well-known. From the beginning of the genre, authors like Jules Verne have been dreaming of technological progress that could lead to feats such as exploring the oceans or sending a ship to the moon. Many examples show how science fiction inspires inventions, from the internet prophesized in a short story by Mark Twain in 1898 to self-driving cars envisioned by Isaac Asimov in 1964. In short, the vast majority of 20th century inventions have first been imagined in literature, especially science fiction. This explains why invention is usually the most prominent aspect when it comes to defining science fiction, although the preventing dimension is just as important – if not more. Indeed, science fiction helps mankind understand the consequences of their actions by pushing imagination to its utmost limits and providing future scenarios that are (often?) labeled apocalyptic, dystopic, or just undesirable. Science fiction invents and prevents, and is as much a way to understand the present as it is a roadmap to prepare for the future.

Likewise, religion is a complex topic to define, especially since each cult claims to be the true one as opposed to the others. There is no universal definition of religion, authors from the likes of Cicero or Emile Durkheim disagreeing on the notion, as this concept is closely related to one’s cultural background. For this study, we will consider religions as an organized system of beliefs aiming at providing universal explanations, accepted behaviors, and everyday practices for its followers. Religions may or may not center around deities, but focus on beliefs to replace missing information. As such, they can be considered as ideologies, and coexist or replace political beliefs. Most religious individuals follow closely or loosely one religion, but it seems also possible to follow several, or blend them into a personal set of beliefs. Although the vast majority of people in 2019 are monotheists, with more than 4 billion for Christianity and Islam, there are other ways to practice religions in the world. Science fiction includes this diversity of worship in its attempts to invent and prevent the future.

Science fiction and religion seem to have a conflicting common history. But where religion deals with past and present, science fiction is clearly concerned with the future. To what extent is science fiction incorporating religion in its stories about the future? To partly answer this question, this article will focus on *Dune*, the number one best-seller in science fiction, and its 1984 adaptation into a movie by David Lynch. *Dune* cannot represent the whole genre of science fiction, just like any book cannot represent the whole of literature. It still contains indication as to

how religion can be perceived in what is considered a masterpiece in science fiction, and a possible way to interpret the complex relationship between science fiction and religion.

Science fiction and the role of religion

Initially, the idea that science and technology can save humanity is central to science fiction. No longer are religions and philosophies the only salvation paths for mankind, which doesn't keep early science fiction writers from combining faith in science with some religious beliefs. "Founding fathers" such as Jules Verne truly believe in the power of technological progress and its capacity to transform mankind for the best; but Verne, raised a catholic and a student at catholic school École Saint-Stanislas, also becomes a deist later in life, believing that the God of monotheisms created the universe but doesn't interact with its creation anymore.

H.G. Wells, another major influence of science fiction in the beginning of the 20th Century, is considered an atheist, but writes in the preface of his book *The Invisible King* (1907):

This book sets out as forcibly and exactly as possible the religious belief of the writer. That belief is not orthodox Christianity; it is not, indeed, Christianity at all; its core nevertheless is a profound belief in a personal and intimate God. There is nothing in its statements that need shock or offend anyone who is prepared for the expression of a faith different from and perhaps in several particulars opposed to his own. The writer will be found to be sympathetic with all sincere religious feeling.

For Wells, religion is not to be discarded from science fiction, as it is an essential human element and can work together with technology.

Mary Shelley, the third major figure of the Trinity of science fiction, is also considered irreligious, although the theme of her most famous novel, *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (1818), could be linked to a Christian perception of science, and a warning against the effects of technology on nature.

Based on the examples above, it would be wrong to assume that faith, religions, or spirituality in general are usually discarded in a type of literature where reason is supposed to prevail. On the other hand, most religions condemn science fiction. In addition, the strong presence of aliens – who rarely share Earthlings' beliefs in a Supreme Being or a pantheon – in science fiction stories tends to render obsolete most of Earth's religions, implying that humans are not at the center of

the universe anymore. In the beginning of science fiction as a genre, reason is supposed to lead humanity to its future, not mythology. But, parallel to the genre's development, general faith in technology curbs, and eventually, science even becomes suspicious. It could be difficult to pinpoint when exactly mankind starts to distrust science. World War II, with the scientific destruction of human beings in extermination camps like Auschwitz, or the nuclear bombing of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, could be the turning points. Either way, science fiction reflects this evolution and the spirit of its times, and the second half of the 20th century sees the emergence of soft science fiction, a sub-genre where technology is either absent or irrelevant to the plot.

More and more, science fiction is facing an existential issue, its own name not describing properly what the genre is about anymore. Science is no longer at the core of the stories, except for some work of so-called hard science fiction like the books of Greg Egan or Kim Stanley Robinson. Culture is by essence changing, and it is always a complicated task in History to identify the tipping point for drastic changes. When it comes to science fiction, its focus on society can be traced back to the 1960s, with the experimental work of Philip K. Dick, but also and more precisely to 1965, with the release of *Dune* by Frank Herbert. Though the publishing of *Dune* is not per se a revolution, its impact on science fiction, and the perception of the public of the genre, will radically be changed.

The origins of *Dune* (1965)

Dune is widely considered the archetypal soft science fiction book. It is still the most sold science fiction book in the world, with more than 20 million copies since its release in 1965. *Dune* received the Nebula award in 1966 and tied the same year with Roger Zelazny for the first ever Hugo award. *Locus: The Magazine of The Science Fiction & Fantasy Field*, an American magazine published monthly in Oakland, California, and one of the most respected publications in the field of literature of imagination, voted *Dune* the all-time best science fiction novel based on a poll of readers on April 15, 1975. *Dune* is a classic and a reference, as well as an impressive work of fiction that can appeal to those that usually frown upon the notion of science fiction.

Frank Herbert wrote many other novels and short stories, but none was as successful as what is considered his masterpiece. For *Dune*, the coast of Oregon inspired him to write about a desert planet. The story was first published in nine parts appearing in *Analog magazine* between 1963 and 1965. It was later published as a full novel by publishing house Chilton Publishing, mostly known for its trade magazines and automotive manuals. Inspired by the Middle East as well as the counter culture of the 1960s, *Dune* presents a rich universe, dealing with complex themes such as

ecology, women empowerment, addiction, the quest for power and religions. It is worth mentioning that for such a landmark work of soft science fiction, there is no mention of staples of the genre such as aliens (humanity colonized the known universe) or time travel (even if, in a way, some characters of the book can be considered masters of time itself). The story could be summarized as such:

In a far future, many millenniums from our time, the known universe is ruled by the Padishah Emperor Shaddam IV. The use of Spice Melange, a drug that allows special navigators from the Spacing Guild to “fold” space, allowed humanity to travel faster than light and conquer planets across the universe. However, Melange can only be harvested on Arrakis, a desert planet also called Dune by its original inhabitants, the Fremen. When the story starts, Shaddam IV grants control of Arrakis to House Atreides, ruled by Duke Leto, who the Emperor fears is becoming a potential challenger for his throne. A poisoned gift, planet Arrakis was previously ruled by House Harkonnen, the archrival of House Atreides. When Duke Leto arrives on his new territory, he discovers how Melange is mined by workers constantly threatened to be crushed by the protectors of Spice, giant sandworms that can be several hundreds of meters long. When the Harkonnens attack the Atreides to regain control of Arrakis, Duke Leto is killed. His concubine Jessica, a member of the powerful all-female order Bene Gesserit, and their son Paul escape and find shelter with the Fremen in the deep desert. Soon, the Fremen recognize Paul as their Madhi, the legendary guide that will lead them to freedom and conquer the universe by Jihad. With the help of legions of Fremen and several giant sandworms, Paul vanquishes the Harkonnens and imposes his rule onto Shaddam IV, forced to accept the young Duke as legitimate heir by the Spacing guild who wants to remain supplied in Melange.

Dune was followed by many sequels, first written by Frank Herbert himself and, after his death, by his son Brian who carried on the work and cosmogony of his father. Thousands of pages make the universe of *Dune*, set before and after the initial episode of 1965. For many years, the book has been generating a cult among fans, with the reputation of being impossible to adapt in film, considering the complexity of its plot. But the huge success of *Dune* attracted the attention of several filmmakers, even before *Star Wars* (George Lucas, US, 1977) brought back science fiction as a profitable genre in Hollywood.

***Dune* as a movie (1984)**

Alejandro Jodorowsky was the first known filmmaker that wanted to adapt *Dune* for cinema in 1974. Jodorowsky's *Dune* (Frank Pavich, US/FR, 2013) explains how *DUNE* by the Chilean filmmaker and artist became "the best science fiction movie never made". Enlisting the most

talented artists of the time, such as Pink Floyd, Magma, Salvador Dali, Orson Welles, Moebius or Giger, Jodorowsky confessed he never read the book although pre-production of the adaptation was already in place. Unfortunately, despite being backed by French producer Michel Seydoux, Jodorowsky was never able to secure the funding in Hollywood for a project that seemed too risky at a time of crisis for the American film industry. It is not surprising that Jodorowsky was interested in *Dune*, considering his obsession for spirituality in his films, but also his collaborations on graphic novels with artists like Moebius, a French artist comfortable with all universes, especially science fiction. The failure of Jodorowsky's *DUNE* would lead to the success of other landmarks of science fiction films, such as *Alien* (USA, 1979) or *Blade Runner* (USA, 1982) in 1982, both directed by Ridley Scott who passed on directing *Dune*.

In 1976, the rights to *Dune* were purchased by Italian producer Dino de Laurentiis who then approached David Lynch to direct an adaptation. Lynch agreed, but was also contractually obliged to produce two other works for the company. Lynch wrote a script based on the original novel, first with Chris de Vore and Eric Bergren and then all by himself when the producer disapproved of their ideas. Though, initially, the project was a producer's movie, Lynch took such an interest in *Dune* that he helped build some of the sets for the movie. On December 14, 1984, David Lynch released its *Dune*. Universal, the studio that distributed the film, so feared audiences would not understand this complex universe that they decided to hand a glossary of terms in front of theaters. A simple sheet of paper printed both sides, this glossary included definitions such as:

Arrakeen: the Capitol of the planet Arrakis, known as Dune.

Arrakis: the desert planet known as Dune.

Atreides: ruling House of the planet Caladan. The Atreides family comprises of Duke Leto, his formal concubine the Lady Jessica, and their son Paul.

All the way to:

Voice: a technique originated by the Bene Gesserit which permits an adept to control others merely by selected tone shadings of the Voice.

Water of Life: the liquid exhalation of a sandwort produced at the moment of its death from drowning, which is changed by a Fremen Reverend Mother to become the narcotic which increases awareness. Since it is, before changing, a poison, only those worthy of becoming Reverend Mothers among the Fremen can survive it.

It is never a good sign when a studio believes a movie needs some additional explanation, and one cannot help but be reminded of the voice-over explaining *Blade Runner* in its first release. Even with the help of the glossary, the movie was a failure. David Lynch did not agree with the

final cut of his film, imposed by the production, and even tried to take his name out of the credits. Audiences did not support the movie either: according to Box Office Mojo, the total profit for *Dune* in domestic theatres (USA and Canada) was \$30,925,690 - a disappointment considering the movie cost ten million dollars more.

At the time, film critic Pauline Kael did not approve of the movie, though she claimed to be a fan of David Lynch. She had notoriously disliked *Star Wars* and about *Dune*, she wrote in *The New Yorker* :

The movie is heavy on exposition, and the story isn't dramatized - it's merely acted out (and hurried through), in a series of scenes that are like illustrations. And, despite the care that has gone into the sets and costumes and the staging, the editing rhythms are limp and choppy.

In the *Washington Post*, Paul Attanasio wrote in a December 14, 1984 piece called "'Dune': Lost in The Dust":

How maddening "Dune" is! As you would expect from visionary director David Lynch, it is a movie of often staggering visual power, the most ambitious science fiction film since "2001"; it's also stupefyingly dull and disorderly. "Dune" doesn't get going till fully two hours have elapsed, so only the most patient will wait for the images to build to their crescendo. Lax in its storytelling, "Dune" gives us sublimity unmoored.

The *Hollywood Reporter* tried to find qualities in *Dune* by writing on December 14, 1984:

Dune is not the masterpiece its adherents have hoped for — but neither is it the disaster its detractors have claimed.

But Rita Kempley in the *Washington Post* on December 14, 1984 concluded:

David Lynch's disastrous film adaptation of Frank Herbert's science-fiction classic turns epic to myopic.

Influential film critic Roger Ebert was even less convinced when he wrote about *Dune* on January 1, 1984:

This movie is a real mess, an incomprehensible, ugly, unstructured, pointless excursion into the murkier realms of one of the most confusing screenplays of all time. Even the color is no good; everything is seen through a sort of dusty yellow filter, as if the film was left out in the sun too long. Yes, you might say, but the action is, after all, on a desert planet where there isn't a drop of water, and there's sand everywhere. David Lean solved that problem in "Lawrence of Arabia," where he made the desert look beautiful and mysterious, not shabby and drab.

The movie's plot will no doubt mean more to people who've read Herbert than to those who are walking in cold.

And Ebert concluded:

Nobody looks very happy in this movie. Actors stand around in ridiculous costumes, mouthing dialogue that has little or no context. They're not even given scenes that work on a self-contained basis; portentous (sic) lines of pop profundity are allowed to hang in the air unanswered, while additional characters arrive or leave on unexplained errands. "Dune" looks like a project that was seriously out of control from the start. Sets were constructed, actors were hired; no usable screenplay was ever written; everybody faked it as long as they could. Some shabby special effects were thrown into the pot, and the producers crossed their fingers and hoped that everybody who has read the books will want to see the movie. Not if the word gets out, they won't.

Though Europe and Japan appreciated the movie more than the American market, *Dune* was a commercial failure, even more than *Blade Runner* released two years before. What could the reasons why *Dune* seems to be impossible to adapt onto the big screen be? With 412 pages in its original edition, it is not a particularly big book, and falls within the average length of science fiction where readers enjoy epic sagas. do you have an answer to this question? And is it really a relevant question within the context of your article?

In 2000, Frank Herbert's *Dune* was a three-part television miniseries shown on the Sci-Fi Channel (today SyFy). It received two Primetime Emmy Awards in 2001, Outstanding Cinematography for a Miniseries or Movie and Outstanding Special Visual Effects for a Miniseries, Movie or a Special.

It seems *Dune* can be better served as a miniseries, or even as a theater play considering the importance it gives to psychology, that could be expressed through asides on a stage. In addition, *Dune*'s major themes are not visual and cannot easily be expressed in film. Each House

has a complex agenda that is carefully explained in the book, but would be considered annoying by movie audiences. In addition, the importance of mental abilities and spirituality appeals to the imagination of the reader, but would be complex to render in a film, even using sophisticated CGI. *Dune*, the book, is sometimes complex to read, and requires patience and also apprenticeship in understanding the complex universe designed by Frank Herbert. Among other major themes, faith is central to the work of Frank Herbert, to the point he added an Appendix in his novel: Religions of *Dune*. This appendix is precious to understand *Dune*, the book, and it was obviously impossible to add it to the 1984 film version, even on a simple sheet with the glossary. *Dune* worked well for those who read the book and were already aware of the different Houses of *Dune*, and the central importance of faith and religion. For Frank Herbert, if he was to place humanity at the center of his universe, religion should be an essential part of the plot.

Religions of *Dune*

Frank Herbert himself was initiated to Zen, an evolution of Buddhism. He often highlighted the importance of his faith in interviews, to further address the crucial impact spirituality has on the universe he created with *Dune*. Herbert imagined how human faith can evolve over several millenniums. For Herbert, religions do not die with the conquest of the universe by mankind, they merely transform, and sometimes merge. For instance, the Orange Catholic Bible (OCB) is, according to Appendix II: The Religion of *Dune* page 339:

the "Accumulated Book," the religious text produced by the Commission of Ecumenical Translators. It contains elements of most ancient religions, including the Maometh Saari, Mahayana Christianity, Zensunni Catholicism and Buddislamic traditions. Its supreme commandment is considered to be: "Thou shall not disfigure the soul."

One of the characters, Dr Yueh gives, a copy of the Orange Catholic Bible to Paul Atreides in page 26:

"It's a very old Orange Catholic Bible made for space travelers. Not a filmbook, but actually printed on filament paper. It has its own magnifier and electrostatic charge system." He picked it up, demonstrated. "The book is held closed by the charge, which forces against spring-locked covers. You press the edge -- thus, and the pages you've selected repel each other and the book opens."

"It's so small."

"But it has eighteen hundred pages. You press the edge -- thus, and so . . . and the charge moves ahead one page at a time as you read. Never touch the actual pages with your fingers. The filament tissue is too delicate." He closed the book, handed it to Paul. "Try it."

The OCB restores the faith in humanity, and explains the rejection of advanced technology such as robots and artificial intelligence:

Thou shalt not make a machine in the likeness of a man's mind.

As explained before, *Dune* does not envision a future where humanity is using or even coexisting with Artificial Intelligence (AI). AI is a sin, and constant references to the Butlerian Jihad are made in *Dune* to explain why mentats (specially trained humans) are being used instead of computers. The prequels and sequels to *Dune* further explain why the Butlerian Jihad is a tipping point in the reconquest of humanity against robots and thinking machines, but *Dune* is set many millennia after the Butlerian Jihad. What the OCB provides is actually more a reason to believe in humans than God, although a divinity is mentioned early in *Dune*, page 46:

O, Man! Here is a lovely portion of God's Creation; then stand before it and learn to love the perfection of Thy Supreme Friend.

Later on, other divinities are mentioned such as on page 77, when Gurney Halleck sings:

*Wild beasts of the desert do hunt there,
Waiting for the innocents to pass.
Oh-h-h, tempt not the gods of the desert*

The OCB is an essential book in the universe of *Dune*, although it is never clear to what extent the temporal power works together with the spiritual power. The Emperor Padishah does not seem to be endorsed by a religious order, as it seems the OCB is literally a universal reference and therefore no one needs to protect its teaching against unbelievers. Religion and politics seem, in *Dune*, to be dissociated. One order though is obviously using religion to gain power, the Bene Gesserit.

Religion and power: The Bene Gesserit

Appendix II: The Religion of Dune, page 324:

The Bene Gesserit, who privately denied they were a religious order, but who operated behind an almost impenetrable screen of ritual mysticism, and whose training, whose symbolism, organization, and internal teaching methods were almost wholly religious;

An order exclusively composed of women, the Bene Gesserit (BG) is one of the main Houses of the universe of *Dune*. As a universal organization, its mission is to control the genetic alliances between the Noble Houses. The goal of the BG is to produce the ultimate human, the Kwisatz Haderach, which in Chakobsa (a language spoken by the sisters that form the order), means Shortening of the Way. Only Him, as a male overman, can access a place that the sisters cannot reach, a terrifying place for the entire order. No one seems to know what will happen once the Kwisatz Haderach emerges, but the sisters of Bene Gesserit work all over the universe to prepare its coming.

It is still debated whether the Bene Gesserit is a political organization or a religious one. No mention is made of its possible belief other than its supreme mission to create the ultimate human; yet the methods used by the BG are obviously religious. First of all, if propaganda is the control of people's beliefs, the Bene Gesserit heavily uses propaganda to convert entire populations to its holy mission. For that purpose, the order has developed a special organization; Missionaria Protectiva, in charge of spreading superstitions to prepare planets to follow its orders. On Arrakis, Missionaria Protectiva used special techniques from its Panoplia Propheticus to spread self-fulfilling prophecies about the coming of the Mahdi, the guide that would liberate the Fremen. Referred to as Lisan al Gaib, the Fremen term for an off-world prophet, the guide will be the son of a Bene Gesserit according to the prophecy. Thus, when House Atreides arrives on planet Arrakis, Paul, the son of Jessica, concubine of Leto Atreides and member of the Bene Gesserit, is immediately perceived as being the One heralded by the mythology developed for centuries by Missionaria Protectiva. Jessica inquires, page 126:

Has a Manipulator of Religions been on Arrakis?

Indeed, for centuries, many manipulators of religions have been preparing Arrakis to the coming of Paul Atreides. Jessica can only wonder, as she is merely an instrument for the BG. Therefore, she does not have access to the Azhar Book, which only the high-ranked members of the Bene Gesserit use: a "bibliographic marvel that preserves the great secrets of the most ancient faiths" according to Appendix II: The Religion of Dune Different from the Orange Catholic Bible, read by the followers, the Azhar Book is a manual teaching how to use religions to control populations. As such, it works in coordination with the OCB, one answering to the other.

Religion is essential in *Dune*, and in his film, David Lynch had to choose which element to focus on, considering how the many layers of the book could not fit on a big screen. This is not the place to evaluate whether or not Lynch did a good job as he provided his vision of a book that is notoriously difficult to read and even more to adapt.

In 2020, a new movie adaptation of *Dune* will be released. This time, Canadian director Denis Villeneuve will direct another cast of stars and his version of *Dune* appears more like a blockbuster, as opposed to the strong artsy concept of David Lynch (despite the presence of major stars such as pop singer Sting). Considering Villeneuve respected the aesthetics and atmosphere of the initial *BLADE RUNNER* 1982-1992 version by Ridley Scott in the sequel he directed recently, will he follow in the footsteps of David Lynch, or impose a new reading of the masterpiece by Herbert? One can speculate that the spectacular aspects of *Dune* will be chosen over the psychological ones, and that sandworms will attract a larger audience than the many nuances of the OCB.

Is it possible to adapt *Dune* and render its complexity? In 1982, Ridley Scott chose to take certain liberties with *BLADE RUNNER*'s original story, *Do Androids dream of electric sheep*, to create a movie that is different in many ways from the book, although the message remains the same. As Frank Herbert said repeatedly, *Dune* was also designed to be a criticism of leadership, and as such, the role of messiah that Paul Atreides endorses is perceived more like a curse than a blessing. *Dune* is a lesson about power, and is often closer to mythology than science fiction. A more faithful adaptation of the book should definitely focus on the importance of spirituality, which remains complex to show in audiovisual format despite the amazing progress of CGI in more than 30 years. Science fiction and religion can co-exist, and Frank Herbert demonstrated they must, as French author Rabelais said: "Science sans conscience n'est que ruine de l'âme" (Science without conscience is but the ruin of the soul). But can religion inspire in a movie? Jediism became an official religion after the success of *Star Wars*. It is doubtful that David Lynch's *Dune* inspired women to start a Bene Gesserit order in our modern world.

What Frank Herbert expressed clearly in *Dune* is a warning for humanity to be careful of absolute power. Mankind should think for itself, and not blindly follow religious and/or political organizations with hidden agenda that would ultimately destroy humanity by transforming it irreversibly. Herbert does not condemn religions, he considers in his work that spirituality is an essential part of humanity. Furthermore, by banning artificial intelligence and thinking machines from the future, Herbert also answers one key question in science fiction, and philosophy in general: what makes us human? Spirituality is his answer, the ability to question our own

existence. Herbert tries to prevent humanity from destroying itself, and invents an impressive universe to illustrate its fears of the future. As such, Dune remains one of the masterpieces of science fiction, and a major story for humanity to guide itself into the future.