

## FINDING FAITH BETWEEN THE SCIENCES: THE CASES OF ‘THE OUTER WORLDS’ AND ‘MASS EFFECT: ANDROMEDA’

---

FRANK G. BOSMAN

---

### ABSTRACT

Science fiction, as a genre, has always been a place for religion, either as an inspirational source or as a part of the fictional universe. Religious themes in science fiction narratives, however, also invoke the question of the relationship, or the absence thereof, between religion and science. When the themes of religion and science are addressed in contemporary science fiction, they are regularly set in opposition, functioning in a larger discussion on the (in)comparability of religion and science in science fiction novels, games, and films. In the games *The Outer Worlds* and *Mass Effect Andromeda*, this discussion is raised positively. Involving terminology and notions related to deism, pantheism, and esoterism, both games claim that science and religion *can* co-exist with one another. Since digital games imbue the intra-textual readers (gamer) to take on the role as one of the characters of the game they are reading (avatar), the discussion shifts from a descriptive discourse to a normative one in which the player cannot but contribute to.

### Keywords:

Religion; Science; Religion science debate; *The Outer Worlds*; *Mass Effect Andromeda*; Deism; Esoterism

DOI: 10.14712/23363398.2021.8

Science fiction, as a genre, has always been a place for religion, either as an inspirational source or as a part of the fictional universe.<sup>1</sup> Religious themes in science fiction narratives, however,

---

<sup>1</sup> Mike Alsford, *What if? Religious Themes in Science Fiction* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000); Juli Gittinger, *Personhood in Science Fiction. Religious and Philosophical Considerations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Steven Hrotic, *Religion in Science Fiction. The Evolution of an Idea and the Extinction of a Genre*

also invoke the question on the relationship, or the absence thereof, between religion and science. Some suggest that the genre sometimes functions as a ‘bridge’ between religion and science, while others insist that in science fiction, the theological standard is ‘totally atheistic’.<sup>2</sup> The reality is more complicated: the blatant atheistic animated sitcom *Rick & Morty* exists besides *Dr. Who*’s discussions on (fictional) religions on other planets.<sup>3</sup>

When the themes of religion and science are addressed in contemporary science fiction, they are not necessarily played off against each other. Nevertheless, they regularly are set in opposition, like in *Rick and Morty*, *The Outer Worlds* or *Andromeda*. This discussion of the (in) comparability of religion and science in science fiction novels, games, and films is, however, only part of a much larger (and longer) intellectual debate.<sup>4</sup>

In this article, I will present and discuss two cases of digital games within the genre of science fiction, in which the relationship between religion and science is explicitly addressed: *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, and *The Outer Worlds*. However, because of the video game medium’s unique properties, its necessary interactive nature, these games go beyond traditional media discussing and/or addressing the religion-science debate: *Andromeda* and *Outer Worlds* encourage, the second more than the first, the player to position him- or herself within this intellectual debate.

The question I want to answer in this article is two-folded: How do these two games sketch the relationship between religion and science

---

(London: Bloomsbury, 2014); Farah Mendlesohn, ‘Religion and Science Fiction’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, eds. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 264–275; Paul Nahin, *Holy Sci-Fi! Where Science Fiction and Religion Intersect* (New York: Springer, 2014); James McGrath, *Theology and Science Fiction* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Freeman Dyson, ‘The two windows,’ in *How Large is God? Voices of Scientists and Theologians*, ed. John Templeton (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 1997), 47–68; James Ballard, ‘Fictions of every kind,’ *JGBallard.ca*, accessed 23 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3xpho5k>.

<sup>3</sup> Courtney Beresheim, ‘The fallacy of the many heads,’ in *Rick and Morty and Philosophy. In the Beginning was the Squinch*, eds. Lester Abesamis and Wayne Yuen (Chicago: Open Court Books, 2019); Andrew Crome and James McGrath, eds., *Religion and Doctor Who. Time and Relative Dimensions in Faith* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> John Haight, *Science and Religion. From Conflict to Conversation* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1995); Ian Barbour, *Religion and Science: The Gifford Lectures. 1989–1991*, Volume 1 (San Francisco: Harper, 1990); Ted Peters, ed., *Science and Theology. The New Consonance* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997).

in their narratives, and how do they position the player within that discussion? To answer these questions, I will use Barbour's typology of possible relationships between religion and science, as well as a game-immanent approach to the study of digital games, treating the latter – principally – as interactive texts that – as such – can be analysed using rhetorical, literary, and communication methodologies. After a brief introduction on these methodological preliminaries, I will present both games in-depth, concentrating on those scenes discussing the relationship between religion and science and focussing on the interactive-narratives elements in these scenes. After systematising my findings from both case studies, I will draw my conclusions.

## 1. Methodological Preliminaries

The subject of religion and digital games is a relatively new one amongst the various academic disciplines but has brought fundamental insights into the fields of religion studies, digital game studies, and theology.<sup>5</sup> The actor-centred approaches focus on the experiences of other players, that is, not on those of the researcher him- or herself. The game-immanent approaches concentrate on the playing of the game itself by the researcher/scholar. These two approaches roughly coincide with the concepts of the text-immanent reader versus the reader in communication analysis.<sup>6</sup> The uniqueness of the digital game medium is the possibility, if not necessity, of the convergence of the player both as the text-immanent reader of *and* as a character within the story (through the player's in-game representation and actor, the avatar).

This also sheds some important light on the reason why I have chosen digital games as case studies. As opposed to analogue narrative

<sup>5</sup> Craig Detweiler, eds., *Halos and Avatars. Playing Video Games with God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010); Rachel Wagner, *Godwired. Religion, Ritual, and Virtual Reality* (New York: Abingdon, 2012); William Bainbridge, *eGod. Faith versus Fantasy in Computer Gaming* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Kevin Schut, *Of Games and God. A Christian Exploration of Video Games* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015); Heidi Campbell and Gregory Grieve, eds., *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2014); Vit Sisler, Kerstin Radde-Antweiler and Xenia Zeiler, eds., *Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Frank Bosman, *Gaming and the Divine. A New Systematic Theology of Video Games* (London: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Archibald van Wieringen, 'Methodological Developments in Biblical Exegesis: Author – Text – Reader,' in *Analecta of the UCU*, Series: Theology 7 (2020), 27–46.

devices (books, movies, etc.), digital games force the player, both as the text-immanent reader *and* the game's protagonist, to take part in the discussion on religion and science. Because of the (immanent) player's control over certain aspects of the game's narrative and its unfolding (limited by the text-immanent author, of course), the question about the relationship of science and religion is not only witnessed by the (immanent) player as something that is 'happening' outside of his control but is something the player has to take part in in order to make the game's story progress.

As stated earlier, when discussing the relationship between religion and science, one cannot pass over Ian Barbour and his typology of that relationship.<sup>7</sup> His typology is (still) highly influential within the debate (take, for example, his influence on Macmillan's *Encyclopaedia of Science and Religion*, in which his name appears 90 times). Let me give some more insight into this typology.

The first relation is that of conflict, in which Barbour contrasts scientific materialism with biblical literalism. Both are criticised for not respecting the boundaries of science proper: the first one reduces all knowledge and truth to empirical instances while the second one tries to defend faith and revelation (the Bible) against empirical assaults by excommunicating all knowledge that does not properly fit into a fundamentalist Biblical frame.

The second relation is that of mutual independence and autonomy, each within its own domain and with its own characteristic methods that can be justified by their own terms (cf. Gould's idea of the non-overlapping *magisteria*).<sup>8</sup> The third relation is that of dialogue, in which both scientists and believers try to find some common ground, for example, the assertion that both originated from a Judeo-Christian tradition and history.

The fourth relation is that of integration, for which Barbour states three possibilities. (I) Natural theology: the belief in the existence of God is based entirely on human reason alone, rather than on (Biblical) revelation or (spiritual or religious) experience. (II) Theology of nature: religious understandings and convictions are influenced by the collective of human scientific discoveries. (III) Systematic synthesis:

---

<sup>7</sup> Barbour, *Religion and Science*.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Gould, *Rock of Ages. Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999).

‘both science and religion contribute to a coherent world view elaborated in a comprehensive metaphysics’.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Case I: Religion and Science in Mass Effect: Andromeda

After the much-acclaimed original *Mass Effect* trilogy, including its treatment of ethics and religion, the latest instalment of the series, *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, suffered from an avalanche of bad reviews, both by critics and consumers.<sup>10</sup> *Andromeda* begins in 2185, when the collective government of the Milky Way sends a couple of massive colonisation ships to Andromeda to find a new and peaceful life. When Andromeda is not prepared to be colonised without a fight, the player is given control over one of two scouts – called ‘Pathfinders’ – Scott or Sara Ryder to protect the Milky Way Initiative. The player, as Ryder, takes command of the starship *Tempest* and will interact with several team and crewmates, among whom Suvi Anwar is an important one.<sup>11</sup> Anwar is an astrophysicist, molecular biologist, and the *Tempest*’s resident science officer.

Suvi is more than willing to venture into her passion for science *and* her religious beliefs.<sup>12</sup> When Ryder and Suvi are confronted with a dark energy cloud called ‘The Scourge’, she contemplates the nature of the universe itself: ‘Scans of the Scourge. All that dark energy, twisting

<sup>9</sup> Barbour, *Religion and Science*, 28.

<sup>10</sup> Heather Wald, ‘Games That Defined the Decade: Mass Effect 2 Had Strength in Storytelling by Not Being Afraid to Kill off Its Heroes,’ *Games Radar*, accessed 23 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3cQsM2x>; GamesRadar\_US, ‘The Top 7 Best New Franchises of this Generation,’ *Games Radar*, accessed 23 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3gLpxu6>; Christ Melissinos and Patrick O’Rourke, *The Art of Video Games from Pac-Man to Mass Effect* (New York: Welcome Books, 2012); Joshua Irizarry and Ita Irizarry, ‘The Lord is my Shepard. Confronting Religion in the Mass Effect Trilogy,’ in *Online 5* (2015); Bosman, *Gaming and the Divine*, 84–87; Tobias Knoll, ‘Instant Karma. Moral Decision Making Systems in Digital Games,’ in *The Sacred & the Digital. Critical Depictions of Religions in Video Games*, ed. Frank Bosman (Basel: MDPI 2018); Matt Gerardi, ‘What Makes Mass Effect: Andromeda Such a Disappointment?’, *AV club*, accessed 23 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3iWfhCh>. Justin Mahboubian–Jones, ‘Mass Effect: Andromeda Review. BioWare Shoots for the Stars but Finds itself Circling the moon,’ *Digital Spy*, accessed 23 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3gLrVky>; Joe Juba, ‘Mass Effect: Andromeda. Adapting to Harsh Frontiers,’ *Game Infomer*, accessed 23 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3vDGwUP>.

<sup>11</sup> I will refer to Ryder as ‘she’ and ‘her’, due to the fact that on my first playthrough of the game, I chose to select the female character.

<sup>12</sup> Tamoor Hussain, ‘How Mass Effect: Andromeda’s Characters Deal With Science, God (and Why That’s So Exciting),’ *Game Spot*, accessed 23 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3vBsXFL>.

and turning on itself. It is splendid. (...) Heleus is incredible, isn't it? (...) Just all of it. So alien. A constant reminder of the divine intelligence behind all creation.' When Ryder enquires about Suvi's faith ('You mean... a god?'), she continues: 'Yes, I believe in a higher power. I know it's a little odd. But I am a scientist because science brings me closer to something greater than myself.' If Ryder expresses that she has the same feelings, Suvi opens up even more: 'It's wonderful to meet someone who understands. I've had to justify myself so often. As if having faith in the divine invalidated my work as a scientist. As if the sacred could be diminished by the search for truths.' Asked about the origins of her faith, Suvi replies to Ryder:

My parents were both scientists. My home was ruled by rationality. So when I became a teenager... Let's just say that while the other kids found batarian [alien race] music, I found God. [My work as a scientist] convinced me even more. Especially when I got into molecular biology, physics... The patterns I kept seeing, over and over again: they were like an artist's watermarks. God, to me, is an artist. An inventor. Not someone checking to see if I brushed my teeth.

Now it is time for some preliminary observations. Suvi Anwar's position fits, quite nicely, into Barbour's fourth model, that of the integration of science and religion. Even when unidentified 'others' think differently, and to whom Suvi has to justify her integration of the two constitutive parts of her life, for the Tempest's science officer, there is no principle discrepancy between science and religion in the first place. Suvi even argues that being a scientist brings her closer to the divine, to 'something greater than myself', a position that brings her into the realm of natural theology, that is – in this case, the theological idea that the 'demonstration or affirmation of the existence of God [can be done] on the basis of the regularity and complexity of the natural world'.<sup>15</sup>

Suvi identifies this divine entity successively as 'an artist', leaving his 'watermarks' all over the universe, and as 'an inventor'. The first image – God as an artist – is firmly rooted in Biblical and Christian thought.<sup>14</sup> The second one, God as an inventor, has a slightly different

---

<sup>15</sup> Alister McGrath, *Re-Imagining Nature. The Promise of a Christian Natural Theology* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 19.

<sup>14</sup> Clifton Edwards, *Creation's Beauty as Revelation. Towards a Creational Theology of Natural Beauty* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 100–102.

ring to it. Its proper context is that of the idea of God as a divine artisan, craftsman, or – famously – watchmaker.<sup>15</sup> Where the concept of God as an artist, however, stresses the personal involvement of the maker with his creation, the other concept suggests far more distance between the maker and the object made.<sup>16</sup>

The ‘patterns’ Suvi keeps seeing in the scientific work she does, associate, especially in the context of the rest of the conversation, with the idea of ‘intelligent design’, the ‘designer’ of which could or could not be identified as the God of the Christian tradition.<sup>17</sup> Suvi’s version seems to be more of an agnostic type, merely stating the existence of a *prima causa* instead of proposing who or what the cause precisely is. Suvi dismisses the idea of a personal God, or at least the notion of God as an all-seeing and monitoring judge: ‘Not someone checking to see if I brushed my teeth.’

For her, the Grand Designer of the universe is an elusive force, an inspiration to venture deeper into its intricacies, an invitation to never stop wondering about the inner workings of the cosmos, but not a person with whom one can have, or want to have, a relationship.

### 3. Case II: Scientism and Philosophism in *The Outer Worlds*

The second case is taken from the much-praised game *The Outer Worlds*.<sup>18</sup> The game features an alternative future in 2355 that diverged from our timeline, and the theme of anti-capitalism is flagrantly present throughout the game’s narrative.<sup>19</sup> The colonists are all in the

<sup>15</sup> Howard van Till, ‘Clockwork Universe,’ in *Encyclopedia of Science and Religion*, ed. Wentzel Vrede van Huyssteen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 145; Alister McGrath, *Dawkins’ God. From the Selfish Gene to The God Delusion* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 98–107.

<sup>16</sup> McGrath, *Re-Imagining Nature*, 272–275.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Paxton, *Media Perspectives on Intelligent Design and Evolution* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2013), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Landon Wright, ‘The Outer Worlds Is a Spiritual Successor to Fallout: New Vegas, Says Obsidian,’ *GamingBolt*, accessed 23 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3hiiZ6t>; Eric Sousa, ‘Outer Worlds. The Spiritual Successor to Classic Fallout Games,’ *The Torch*, accessed 23 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/35WL8uR>; Adi Robertson, ‘The Outer Worlds Is a Cruel Twist on Role-Playing Games’ Lone Hero Stories,’ *The Verge*, accessed 23 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3q9NqA6>.

<sup>19</sup> Jacob Corbin, ‘The Outer Worlds Is a Vicious Parody of Capitalism, with a Very Accurate Twist,’ *Polygon*, accessed 22 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3qipJWp>; Julie Muncy, ‘The Outer Worlds. An Anticapitalist Game That’s Too Much Work,’ *Wired*, accessed 23 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3q4qWAt>; Brittny Miller, ‘How the Outer Worlds Functions as a Critique of Capitalism,’ *CBR*, accessed 23 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3cQN0Je>.



employment of the corporations, which, in a strikingly Marxist fashion, suppress the working class by harsh labour conditions and enough bureaucracy to extinguish any attempt to unite or revolt. The player finds himself in the role of ‘The Stranger’, a speechless avatar, revived from cryostasis on board of a lost colony-ship Hope. The player now has to find the ingredients to safely revive all other colonists on board, while attempting to finally break the spell of the corporations over the colonies.

### **3.1 Scientism: Maximillian DeSoto and the Order of Scientific Inquiry**

The Stranger can find and recruit several crew or party members to follow the player around the world and assist him in battles, conversations, hacking, and the likes. One of them is Maximillian ‘Max’ DeSoto, the Vicar of Edgewater, residing in the church building of the Order of Scientific Inquiry (OSI). As a representative of the official, corporations-sanctioned official religion, the vicar sprinkles his speech with pseudo-mystical, but capitalism-supporting aphorisms like: ‘They who are not satisfied with their work, are satisfied with nothing’ or ‘Work fortifies the spirit, true exhaustion awaits idle hands’. Eventually, Max will ask the player to retrieve a mysterious journal by an author named M. Bakonu. The OSI has dubbed the book ‘heretical’ and forbids its possession or studying. After an adventure with a hermit and a drug-induced meditation session, it is up to the player to decide the ultimate fate of Max: ending up as a cheerful adventurer, a disillusioned spiritual counsellor, or the Presiding Bishop of the OSI.

Now, the Order of Scientific Inquiry is of the greatest interest. Since only two vocal adherents of the OSI can be found throughout the course of the game, one of them, a certain Constable Reyes, having little philosophical inclination, it is Vicar Max who is the primary source for its beliefs. The OSI, or ‘Scientism’, as Max explains, revolves around the theological idea of ‘The Plan’, also called ‘The Universal Equation’: ‘The OSI teaches that the Grand Architect set a perfect system in motion at the beginning of time. Contentment is found by accepting one’s role in that Grand Plan.’

This ‘Grand Architect’, responsible for the creation and initial start of ‘The Plan’, is not – as was the case with Suvi’s ‘artist’ from *Andromeda* – a personal God, but a formless concept. Max:



You don't talk to the Grand Architect. Once the universe was set in motion, it stepped back. It has no concern for us. (...) Is the Grand Architect a consciousness? A natural force? Did it create the Equation on purpose? The answers to these questions don't really matter. The Equation, The Plan, is all that matters. Contentment is found by accepting one's role in The Plan.

Scientism is not only the name of the in-game religion but also of a philosophical concept, in which the traditional epistemological boundaries of the natural sciences are expanded into the realm of metaphysics and moral normativity.<sup>20</sup> In an interview, game director Leonard Boyarsky told the journalist about the team's fascination with 'Laplace's Demon' and how it influenced the OSI's teachings.<sup>21</sup>

The demon is named after the French scholar Pierre-Simon de Laplace (1749-1827), who published, in 1814, his thoughts on the causal and deterministic nature of the universe.<sup>22</sup> A 'demon', or perfect intellect, would be able to determine all causes and effects in the past, present, and future if given knowledge of all forces in motion and all positions of all items in the universe. Even though the concept met with quite some criticism over the course of the 20th century, Max's explanation of the Universal Equation sounds almost like it:<sup>23</sup>

We will eventually decode The Plan and all its intricacies. Once we are able to deduce the properties of every particle in the universe and its trajectory, we will know everything. The future, the past, each person's place within The Plan, all will be laid out before us, removing struggle and bringing peace. No one will ever need question their path again. Some even believe this ultimate knowledge will unlock mankind's true potential, and we will all become akin to Grand Architect ourselves, after a fashion.

This kind of metaphysics leads to a determinist view on human freedom, although, according to Max, the system does indeed leave room

<sup>20</sup> Robinson, 'The Outer Worlds'; Mikael Stenmark, 'Scientism,' in *Encyclopedia of Science and Religion*, ed. J. Wentzel Vrede van Huyssteen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 785–785.

<sup>21</sup> Justin Massongill, 'How Obsidian Brought Its New Sci-Fi Rpg the Outer Worlds to Life,' *Playstation*, accessed 23 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/5gHpdg1>.

<sup>22</sup> Friedel Weinert, *The Demons of Science. What They Can and Cannot Tell Us about Our World* (New York: Springer, 2016), 65–116.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Green, *The Thwarting of Laplace's Demon. Arguments against the Mechanistic World-View* (London: St. Martin's Press, 1995).

for some flexibility even if, later on, that is corrected by the system, and then often in a very hand-handed manner. Max:

The Plan is not one rigid path, there are a variety of multitudes contained within it. Our paths have variance, but we'll end up adhering to it whether we like it or not. Some choices make the path smoother, some rougher. You can even go outside the lines, but the further outside you go... It's like an unbreakable elastic band – it will only stretch so far before it snaps back. The further it is stretched, the more violent the eventual correction.

During the game, it becomes clear that the OSI and its Scientism is the exclusive corporate-approved religion in the colony: it strengthens the social status quo in which all – workers and managers, poor and rich – have their own, unchanging place in a greater Plan. Resistance against one's place – the labourers' struggle for better working conditions, higher wages, and a more egalitarian attitude towards social migration – is futile, pointless, and even heretical. Scientism, in the context of *The Outer Worlds*, equals capitalism in its worst form.

### 3.2 Philosophism: Graham Bryant and the Iconoclasts

In this context, the heretical nature of the journal that Max so passionately sought after also becomes clearer. Max identifies the 'journal' as having been written by an 'M. Bakonu, one of the founders of the Philosophist school of thought'. While game director Boyarsky identified Theosophism as the inspiration for Philosophism, he remains silent on the inspiration for Bakonu. Game journalist Daniele D'Orefice, however, claims it to be the Russian anarchist and revolutionary Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876).<sup>24</sup> He was fiercely anti-capitalist, a strong critic of Marxism, which he thought had an inherent tendency to produce dictatorship, and was an even stronger opposer of religion, considered by him as being sustained by indoctrination and conformism.<sup>25</sup>

It is obvious that the OSI wanted to prevent the writings of such an anarchist and socialist thinker from falling into the hands of otherwise obedient and submissive labourers. Interestingly enough, in *The*

---

<sup>24</sup> Daniele D'Orefice, 'The Outer Worlds. Le Migliori missioni del gioco Obsidian,' *Every-eye*, accessed 23 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3zAZfDC>.

<sup>25</sup> Paul McLaughlin, *Mikhail Bakunin. The Philosophical Basis of His Theory of Anarchism* (New York: Algora Publishers, 2002).

*Outer Worlds*, there is a group of people that follows the way of Bakonu (Bakunin). A group of the self-proclaimed ‘Iconoclasts’ and ‘Philosophists’ fiercely opposed the greedy ways of the corporations running the colony. Their inspirational leader, Graham Bryant, explains:

The Eternal is in us all! The OSI would have you believe that your place in society – indeed, in the universe! – is pre-ordained. A man who works in the mines of Hephaestus, coating his lungs in mercury dust; naught but a few bits a night – this fate is set in stone? When he dies young, coughing up black blood – his part in the Grand Plan? No, I say! Greatness is in everyone, not just those so fortunate as to have been born into prosperity! (...) The Iconoclasts are free folk. We live under our rules, motivated by our own beliefs, all petals on the same flower of enlightenment. Meanwhile, the Board strangles the will of its workers. It is the penultimate exercise of a poisoned society, where people are enslaved by a corporate ladder. We seek to replace their way of life with ours. Philosophism is key to unlocking their shackles.

When the player meets Graham for the first time, and if the player has chosen Max as one of two party members to come with him, the two scholars are very keen to embark on a theological-philosophical discussion on the nature of the universe. Graham starts with saying:

Were there a truth to the Grand Plan in the first place, I – and Bakonu – might agree. But what we see as divine purpose is just one facet of the universe figuring itself out. To quote: ‘As a child looking at the leg of an elephant, unable to view it whole, we mistake the tiny scope of our understanding as the unfathomably large purpose of the universe.’

Graham disqualifies the OSI’s concept of ‘the Grand Plan’ using a kind of intertextual reference to John Hick’s use of the Indian parable of the elephant and the blind man.<sup>26</sup> Hick, the father of religious pluralism, uses this parable to illustrate that no creature, even not an idealised one like Lapidé’s demon, can have full knowledge of the universe. Graham seems to use parallel ideas to argue that all creatures are part of the ‘consciousness of the cosmos’. Graham again:

<sup>26</sup> John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions. The Rainbow of Faiths* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 49.

Ah... the Eternal. We are all part of the consciousness of the cosmos. Each of us plays a tiny role in the universe's continual journey towards understanding itself. You and I... and the rapt, and the mantisworms [two violent alien animal species, fgb]... divinity is in us all, and the Eternal is that divinity.

The idea of the existence of cosmic consciousness, of which all living things are part, trying to understand itself, is a pantheistic topos found in a variety of hermetic-esoteric circles and other holistic circles, like that of David Bohm's holomovement.<sup>27</sup> The idea of pantheism does not necessarily exclude the idea of a personal God, but it usually does since the total sum of existence is equated with the divine itself.<sup>28</sup> This is one of the few points where Scientism and Philosophism touch: they both reject the idea of a personal God. Answering The Stranger's question as to whether Graham believes in a creator, he replies:

Not in the sense of a single entity, fashioning the universe as a whittler fashions a flute. The universe comes into being over time. Organically. Naturally, and without purpose. In that sense, I suppose, you could say that, in the interest of finding its purpose, the universe itself created all living things.

The major difference between the OSI's teachings and those of Bakonu and Graham seems to be their respective visions on the unfolding of the universe. While Philosophism teaches the spontaneous, chaotic, anarchist unfolding of *itself*, Max defends the idea that this unfolding is strictly deterministic, dictated *to* the universe along the lines of an unknown plan by an unseen architect. The chaotic ontology of Philosophism inspires the Iconoclasts – the name of which implies rebellion against the creation of images of the divine – to rebel against, not only the deterministic interpretation of the universe by the OSI, but also against the OSI approved social and political status quo that is

---

<sup>27</sup> Shivana Pateras, *Divine Love. Awakening Unity Consciousness* (s.l.: Balbao press, 2019); David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (London: Routledge, 1980); Renée Weber, 'Reflections on David Bohm's Holomovement. A Physicist's Model of Cosmos and Consciousness,' in *Metaphors or Consciousness*, ed. Ronald Valle and Rolf von Eckartsberg (New York: Plenum Press, 1989), 124–125.

<sup>28</sup> Nancy Frankenberry, 'Pantheism,' in *Encyclopaedia of Science and Religion*, ed. J. Wentzel Vrede van Huyssteen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 645–646.

detrimental to the happiness and damaging to the development of the common worker.<sup>29</sup>

#### 4. Finding Religion between the Science. A Comparison

From this presentation of the two case studies, I can synthesise some important features of both narratives concerning religion and science.

In the two case studies, we have been able to identify three individuals who represent, one way or the other, a convergence of the domains of religion and science: Suvi Anwar in *Andromeda* and Graham Bryant and Maximilian DeSoto in *The Outer Worlds*. But before we can decide where on Barbour's matrix they fit and what their particular traits are, we have to address their respective qualification as 'religion' and 'science'. The statement that Suvi's position in the game's narrative is located at the intersection of the religious and scientific realms is beyond the need of further argumentation, but what about Scientism/the OSI and Philosophism?

I would argue that both organisations have both religious and scientific traits, at least rhetorically, since both fictive systems make use of a combination of religious and scientific vocabulary. Words and phrases like 'metaphysics', 'contemplation', 'heretical texts', the terms 'bishop' and 'vicar' used by the OSI, and the 'eternal' of the Iconoclasts, all evoke a distinct religious context, just like 'Grand Architect', 'decoding the Grand Plan', 'study', the name of the Iconoclast movement, and 'the key' to unlock 'the mathematically perfect Universal Equation' do for the scientific context. Other notions like 'truth seeking' and 'enlightenment', used by both Scientists and Philosophists, belong to both contexts – science and religion – if not with different meanings.

For Suvi Anwar, the interrelationship between religion and science has a strong individual dimension. For her, and her alone, the belief in a divine artist and the hunger for scientific knowledge are mutually beneficial. Her enthusiasm is individual, particular, almost of an aesthetic kind. For Max and even more for Graham, their theo-philosophical systems are very much concerned with the wider world. Both

<sup>29</sup> Willemien Otten, 'The Tension between Word and Image in Christianity,' in *Iconoclasm and Iconoclash. Struggle for Religious Identity*, eds. Willem van Asset, Paul van Geest, Daniele Müller, and Theo Salemink (Leiden: Brill, 2007) 33–48.

Scientism and Philosophism are linked in *The Outer Worlds* with the socio-economic status quo or with the struggle against it.

The OSI and its determinist belief in ‘The Plan’, in which all humans have their unchanging and logical place, is linked to the establishment, the corporations, the rich and powerful who benefit from the status quo, while the anarchist Philosophists with their belief in an organically developing, ever-changing universe, strive for the betterment of the working class, the possibility of social migration, and the dignity of all people. In this context, is it interesting to note that Mikhail Bakunin, the hero of Philosophism, was both a stringent fighter for labourers’ rights and a firm critic of (institutionalised) religion.<sup>50</sup> Bakunin in his *God and State* states: ‘The idea of God implies the abdication of human reason and justice; it is the most decisive negation of human liberty, and necessarily ends in the enslavement of mankind, both in theory and practice.’<sup>51</sup>

Graham believes his Philosophism is, on the contrary, helping the labourers to free themselves from the corporations’ clutches, while Max argues that ‘The Plan’ is actually beneficial to all humans, including the working class, since it helps everyone to find, maintain, and appreciate their own perfect place in the larger machinery of the universe.

What does this mean for the player-character of the two games? If the player, as Ryder, chooses to interact with Suvi between missions, the dialogue on faith emerges in *Andromeda*. And only during that brief period of time is the issue raised, debated slightly, and then waved away, never again to return throughout the entire rest of the (large!) game. The player, through his in-game representation Ryder, is only listening to Suvi’s extrapolations on her views on the relationship between science and religion. The player’s influence on this debate is restricted to some short dialogue options – either affirming Suvi’s vision or challenging it. Neither for Ryder nor for the player, does the question play any significant role in the unfolding of the rest of the game and the game’s narrative specifically.

In *The Outer Worlds*, this is different. In this game, the struggle between the OSI and the Iconoclasts is a big part of the game’s narrative,

---

<sup>50</sup> Mark Leier, *Bakunin. The Creative Passion. A Biography* (New York: Seven stories press, 2006), 191.

<sup>51</sup> Mikhail Bakunin, ‘From God and State,’ in *The Communist Manifesto and Other Revolutionary Writings. Marx, Marat, Paine, Mao. Gandhi, and Others*, ed. Bob Blaisdell (New York: Dover Publications. 2005), 189.

and the related struggle between classes even bigger: it belongs to the core of the story. Even more, the player is charged with choosing his or her own path through the game. The game usually allows the player to solve any given problem in at least two different ways. Shooting through hordes of enemies is always an option, but also is sneaking in through a backdoor. The player can persuade people to cooperate, but lying and threatening are also possibilities.

In *The Outer Worlds*, the OSI and the Iconoclasts are two factions holding opposite metaphysics and worldviews, from which the player has to choose, and in doing so altering the ending of the game by either siding with the corporations and confirming the OSI's determinism, or with the Iconoclasts' Philosopher-inspired liberation of the common worker. Choosing between these two social groups is also making a choice between opposite views on metaphysics, cosmology, and ethics. Even the very ending of the game is – in fact – the same kind of choice.

## Conclusion

Now, how do these two games sketch the relationship between religion and science in their narratives? As far as Barbour's matrix is concerned, all the discussed cases – Suvi Anwar, Max DeSoto and Graham Bryant – fit quite nicely into the integration model, and even more precisely, into the sub-model of natural theology in which 'it is claimed that the existence of God can be inferred from the evidences of design in nature, or which scene had made us more aware' of.<sup>32</sup> Barbour recalls the Newtonian world being deemed to be 'the perfect clock', and its designer to be 'the deistic God', both terms found – quite literally – in the two games.<sup>35</sup>

Consequently, the philosophies of Suvi, Max, and Graham produce anything but a personal God, with whom one can have an intimate relation, far removed from the God of monotheistic religions. Besides, these deistic philosophies usually fail, as Barbour argues, in convincing people to join: 'few if any persons have actually acquired their religious beliefs by such arguments'.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Barbour, *Religion and Science*, 23.

<sup>35</sup> *Idem*, 24.

<sup>34</sup> *Idem*, 26.



Deism, or Barbour's version of the concept of natural theology, seems like a perfect fit for these futuristic narratives, especially when trying to combine the realms of science and religion. This deism can have a more transcendent option, including the possibility of a transcendent reality or a more immanent one, excluding any transcendent reality whatsoever. Anwar's deism and DeSoto's Scientism are more like the first variety – including the possibility, though unlikely, of a personal deity, such as the creator or the Grand Architect – while that of Bryant is clearly of the latter sort. A universe figuring itself out excludes a transcendent realm.

Both kinds of deisms are fitting to contemporary, futuristic narratives such as *Andromeda* and *The Outer Worlds*. The reason for this suitability is that deism allows the realms of religion and science to be dealt with within one empirical paradigm, which is the dominant one, not only in the field of the empirical sciences but also in the humanities, including philosophy and theology.<sup>35</sup> This context makes deism the self-explanatory umbrella under which both religion and science can peacefully co-exist. Theologically speaking, five conclusions can be drawn:

- (1) Deism and (certain forms of) hermetic esoterism are re-appropriated by modern-day games as genuine and acceptable forms of religious belief, even though – or maybe exactly because – these kinds of theological concepts are frowned upon within institutionalised Christian dogmatics.
- (2) Science and religion – may it be in its post-institutionalised forms – are by no means intrinsically opposed to one another: in the narrative universes of both games, *Mass Effect Andromeda* and *The Outer Worlds*, efforts are made to overcome such a 'simplified' dualism, or to illustrate that both domains – religion and science – share a kind of common vocabulary, which could be interpreted as indicative of their common origin, that is, humankind trying to understand the world and itself.
- (3) Neither science nor religion are morally or practically neutral; that is, both domains have real repercussions on the everyday life of common citizens. This may be apparent in the case of religion – few

---

<sup>35</sup> John Anderson, *Studies in Empirical Philosophy* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2005); Johannes van der Ven, *God Reinvented? A Theological Search in Texts and Tables* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 19–22.

people will deny that religion produces or demands a normative interpretation of reality – but, according to especially *The Outer Worlds*, science suffers the same also does demand a normative interpretation of reality. ‘Science’ or scientists may self-identify as seeking and finding the objective truths of reality; philosophers and theologians have frequently argued against this idea of a *voraussetzungslose Wissenschaft* (‘science without a priori preferences’).

- (4) *The Outer Worlds* formulates (the possibility of) a kind of crypto-liberation theology, in which Marxist criticism and Christianity co-exist to form a permanent and fundamental dissonant voice in the (virtual) public domain. The discussion between Scientism and Philosophism shows that both religion and science have the ability to lift people up from their marginalised positions but also to keep them captive in their underprivileged circumstances.
- (5) Both games address the relationship between religion and science, including the difficulties within that relationship, and stimulate the player to contemplate (in the case of *Andromeda*) or even experiment with and/or position oneself (in the case of *The Outer Worlds*) within that relationship. The broader benefit of this treatment of the religion-science relationship, that is, *outside* the realm of digital gaming, is to be found in the stimulation of critical thinking on that relationship in the context of real life.

*Faculty of Catholic Theology, Tilburg University  
Warandelaan 2  
5037 AB Tilburg  
Netherlands  
E-mail: f.g.bosman@wt.nl*