

The Apollo 8 Genesis Reading and Religion in the Space Age

KENDRICK OLIVER

University of Southampton, Southampton, United Kingdom

Between January 1969 and the summer of 1975, NASA received over eight million letters and petition signatures supporting the right of American astronauts to free religious expression in space. Prompted by Madalyn Murray O’Hair’s complaints about the reading of Genesis during the flight of Apollo 8, the petition campaign points to the complex ambivalent relationship between religious Americans and their nation’s space program. The Genesis reading had provided reassurance that the program, with its secular motivations, its instrumental culture, and its designs upon God’s very heavens, was not hostile to faith. But what if NASA now yielded to O’Hair? The petitions flowed in the eschatological anxiety that the sacred space of the skies might be cleared of Christian speech.

“We are now approaching lunar sunrise and, for all the people back on Earth, the crew of Apollo 8 has a message that we would like to send to you.” And with that introduction from mission commander Frank Borman, the three Apollo 8 astronauts began to read the first 10 verses of Genesis, the biblical account of God’s creation of the cosmos.¹ The reading, broadcast live on Christmas Eve 1968 to an international audience of unprecedented size, was received for the most part with hosannas of public praise. There was only one notable dissent, from Madalyn Murray O’Hair, an atheist who had been one of the successful plaintiffs in the 1963 Supreme Court case that had resulted in a ban on organized prayer and Bible reading in American public schools.

As Apollo 8 made its return to the vicinity of Earth, O’Hair told a Houston radio station that its astronauts, in reading from the Bible, had been “slandering other religions, slandering those persons who do not accept

Address correspondence to Kendrick Oliver, Faculty of Humanities, University of Southampton, Southampton, SO17 1BF, UK. E-mail: K.Oliver@soton.ac.uk

religion.” She announced an intention to start a mail campaign in protest against the reading of prayers and scriptures from space.² In August 1969, after the flight of Apollo 11 and Buzz Aldrin’s celebration of communion on the Moon, O’Hair filed a civil lawsuit against NASA complaining that the actions of the Apollo 8 and 11 astronauts amounted to an establishment of religion. She sought a court order enjoining the agency from either directing or permitting further religious activities in space.³

Reports of O’Hair’s intention to campaign against the Apollo 8 Genesis reading provoked a massive and sustained counter-mobilization, which received additional impetus with her filing of the lawsuit in August, and which also endured well past the dismissal of the case in December 1969 and the final exhaustion of appellate options in March 1971. Between January 1969 and the summer of 1975, NASA received over eight million letters and petition signatures supporting the right of U.S. astronauts to free religious expression during their missions in space.⁴

This cascade of correspondence appears genuinely to have been a grass-roots phenomenon. There was no single figure who could claim overall leadership of the campaign, which also received only limited support and assistance from established national religious and non-religious organizations. Most of the petitioners seem to have begun with rather modest ambitions, working through local social and media networks in the hope of collecting a few hundred or a few thousand signatures. In a handful of cases, these ambitions quickly and radically scaled up. Loretta Lee Fry, who broadcast a daily Bible question-and-answer radio program from a station located in the window of a Christian goods store in Southgate, Michigan, amassed over half a million signatures in under two months.⁵ The fundamentalist Family Radio network, with stations in California and New Jersey, began its “Project Astronaut” campaign in February 1969 with the goal of collecting 100,000 letters, and ended it by presenting two and half million signatures to NASA in September.⁶

The story of the Apollo 8 Genesis reading and the correspondence campaigns in support of it, which followed O’Hair’s complaints, might reasonably be interpreted as evidence that the cultural politics of the national space program and the religious preferences of most Americans were sympathetically aligned. Indeed, as Carol Mersch has recently chronicled herein in this special issue and elsewhere, program personnel participated directly in some of the petition activities: they were keen to mark American space-flight as a Christian enterprise, also working, for example, to place a Bible on the Moon.⁷ A number of other commentators have noted the presence of committed Christians throughout the ranks of NASA employees. In the view of historian David F. Noble, their transcendent concerns pervaded the space program “at every level,” and constituted “a major motivation behind extraterrestrial travel and exploration.”⁸

This is an argument, however, that can be pushed too far. Insofar as it is possible to discern the religious convictions of the early leaders of the space

program, it appears that only a few considered their work in this field to be a commission from God and a fulfilment of his providential purpose. From time to time, Wernher von Braun folded space exploration into a millennial theme, but there is little evidence that strong religious convictions directed the efforts of James Webb, Thomas Paine, or Robert Gilruth to land a human on the Moon. In Huntsville, Alabama, in the heart of the Bible Belt, the NASA Marshall Space Flight Center and area churches may have abided in a seamless community of faith, but the situation was very different in the space boom settlements around Cape Canaveral. As one local pastor recalled: “We were enmeshed in a culture that gave little strength to the values we espouse. Our community was known throughout the fifty states as a ‘fast’ place.”⁹

For some Americans of faith, the space age also precipitated a discomfiting encounter with modern religious thought. There were few theologians who still declared the spatial reality of heaven, but the concept had retained its meaning for many ordinary parishioners. When Soviet scientists and cosmonauts announced that their spacecraft had encountered neither God himself or any of his angels, these parishioners discovered, with some perplexity, that the point had already been conceded in their own seminaries and rectories. “We must be factual and historical in our proclamation of the events in which God was savingly revealed to men,” noted one evangelical minister, “but avoid suggesting that the divine world can itself be located in space and time The angelic worlds from which the Annunciation broke upon our Earth must not be confused with some portion of discoverable space.”¹⁰ Theologians themselves equivocated between a celebration of space exploration as a fulfilment of the creative gifts that God had bestowed on humankind and an apprehension that—as mankind moved out into space far enough to contain the whole Earth in his vision—he might forget the extent to which he owed his success to the sanction of the divine. In their reflections, they often invoked the Tower of Babel and the fate of Nebuchadnezzar.¹¹ Pope Paul VI applauded the first Moon landing, but cautioned that man was in danger of idolatrizing his own instruments, “perhaps to the point of madness.”¹² The travails of Apollo 13, and the prayerful public vigil that attended its long, twilight journey back to Earth, were thus widely interpreted as a salutary lesson. “God has heard us,” wrote 290 citizens of Grafton, North Dakota, in a telegram to the president. “The events of these last few days have again taught us what wonderful abilities God has bestowed upon man and it has also taught us we are ever continually dependent upon him.”¹³

During the 1960s, personal spiritual experience, rather than adherence to a particular denominational or faith tradition, became the dominant source of validation for religious conviction. By 1979, more than a third of American adults polled were attesting to a “life-changing religious experience.”¹⁴ This was another context in which spaceflight became religiously important: not

only did it conjure with the traditional Christian symbolism of proximity to the divine, it also opened up—at least to the astronauts—a progressive series of almost entirely original perspectives, including distant views of the whole Earth, vistas that declared the infinite depths of the universe, and panoramas of the haunting landscape of the Moon. Americans therefore anticipated that their astronauts might return from their adventures in space with a new intelligence of the sacred. “I was wondering,” said one U.S. Senator to John Glenn following his flight on Friendship 7, “whether you felt that God was up there as well as down here, and that in Him you lived and moved and had your being.”¹⁵ “You get the feeling,” asserted a news correspondent just before the crew of Apollo 11 left for the Moon, “that people think of these men as not just superior men, but different creatures. They are like people who have gone into the other world and have returned, and you sense they bear secrets that we will never entirely know, that they will never entirely be able to explain.”¹⁶

Glenn, however, refused to claim that his experience on Friendship 7 had afforded him any special insight into the nature of God. If God had been with him in orbit, it was not because Glenn had journeyed any closer to his kingdom, but simply because God was present “wherever we go.”¹⁷ He continued to hold to the mainline Presbyterian faith in which he had been raised. A ticket into orbit, or onward to the Moon, was not enough to ensure that its bearer would come back a different man. NASA, after all, favored stability in its astronauts. For obvious operational reasons, it preferred their personalities to be well-armored against spontaneous transformations. Accordingly, a number of Apollo astronauts reported that in matters of mind and spirit they had not been changed by their missions. Only two—Apollo 14’s Edgar Mitchell and Apollo 15’s James Irwin—experienced epiphanies significant enough to change the trajectories of their careers. Irwin, who sensed God helping him on the Moon, began an evangelical ministry.¹⁸ Mitchell, in contrast, had intuited the underlying connectedness of everything in the universe—not just matter, but consciousness too—and so established an institute to explore the physical basis for that unity, aiming to bridge the divide between religion and science.¹⁹ Mitchell’s theories involved a concept of divinity, but it was too implicit in the substance of nature to do the work of saving souls. Irwin and Mitchell were friends, but they were trying to touch the face of very different gods.

CONCLUSION

Any account of the relation between religion and the U.S. space program in the Mercury-Apollo era, then, must register the increasing pluralism of the American religious marketplace as the space age wore on. Models of the sacred varied markedly across that marketplace; so too, correspondingly,

did the religious meanings of spaceflight. Moreover, the efforts to sacramentalize the nation's enterprise in the starry skies spoke of anxiousness, as much as assurance, concerning its ultimate purposes and effects. The space age had already witnessed theologians announcing the death of God and the state banishing prayer and Bible reading from the public schools. Who now could be trusted to make a defence of faith? Not necessarily NASA, with its default instrumentalism in pursuit of its lunar goals.

The correspondence campaigns in support of the Apollo 8 Genesis reading expressed an apprehension that, challenged by Madalyn Murray O'Hair, NASA's heart might not be in the fight. The consequence would be eschatological in its significance: a ringing affirmation of God's creation of the cosmos suddenly inverted into a clearance of Christian speech from his very heavens. "Evil triumphs when good men do nothing," read the legend emblazoned across the petitions submitted to NASA by Loretta Lee Fry.²⁰ The president of Family Radio warned that the space program "can only be successful if it has God's approval and if it is kept in a right relationship to God."²¹

There was something about spaceflight that seemed consonant with sacred purposes; there was also something that seemed to anticipate a future, desecralized world. Traditional religious ideas about heaven, about man's dependence on God, and about his purpose in the universe were at work—and at stake. The space program was culturally significant because it involved participants and audience alike in a discourse of ultimacy that simultaneously revealed the influence of religion and raised the prospect of its negation. It was this dualism that charged American spaceflight with much of its meaning during the space age. It may even have defined the space age itself. From Sputnik until the Apollo-Soyuz mission in 1975, the last year that the petitions flowed, many religious Americans found compelling religious reasons to take an interest in the space program, which has not been true in the years since.

NOTES

1. Apollo 8 Onboard Voice Transcription, 195, NASA/Johnson Space Center History Portal, http://www.jsc.nasa.gov/history/mission_trans/apollo8.htm (accessed January 2013).

2. "Woman Attacks Space Prayer from Apollo 8," *Odessa (TX) American*, 27 December 1968, 7, <http://www.NewspaperArchive.com> (accessed January 2013).

3. O'Hair et al., "Complaint and Prayer (excuse the expression) for Injunctive Relief," 5 August 1969, "Civil 3502 (Madalyn O'Hair)," Records of U.S. Attorney, Western District of Texas, San Antonio Division.

4. Evidence of the scale of petition activity can be found in "Mail Count 1969–1973," folder: "Complaints Regarding the Reading of Selections from Genesis on Apollo 8," box 12, Apollo General History Series, Johnson Space Center History Collection, University of Houston-Clear Lake; "Worship in Space Lauded," *Houston Post*, 8 March 1969, 14; James A. Long, "Project Astronaut," 6 October 1969, Record No. 6744, NASA History Office; "Prayer in Space Backed," *New York Times*, 9 December 1969, 41; and "O'Hair Rumor Blazes," *Austin-American Statesman*, 13 July 1975, 14. For a detailed accounting, see Kendrick Oliver, *To Touch the Face of God: The Sacred, the Profane and the American Space Program, 1957–1975*, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 138.

5. "Mrs. Fry Enroute to NASA with 500,000 'Prayer' Signatures," *Detroit News*, 6 March 1969, 3D.
6. Harold Camping to Thomas Paine, 24 September 1969, folder: "Reading File: Sept 1969 [2 of 2]," box 34, Thomas O. Paine Papers, U.S. Library of Congress.
7. See C. L. Mersch, *The Apostles of Apollo: The Journey of the Bible to the Moon and the Untold Stories of America's Race into Space* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2009).
8. David F. Noble, *The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 5. See also Ryan J. McMillen, "Space Rapture: Extraterrestrial Millennialism and the Cultural Construction of Space Colonization," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2004.
9. Robert L. Lowry, "Recollections," Riverside Presbyterian Church, <http://www.riversidepres.org> (accessed January 2013).
10. David H. C. Read, "Sputnik and the Angels," *Christianity Today*, 9 December 1957, 9–11.
11. See, for example, Addison H. Leitch, "The View from the Moon," *Christianity Today*, 28 February 1969, 51.
12. "Pope Paul Hails Moon Explorers," *Bridgeport (CT) Post*, 21 July 1969, 9, <http://www.NewspaperArchive.com> (accessed January 2013).
13. Rev. R. D. Gillquist, et al., to Richard M. Nixon, 28 April 1970, folder: "[Ex] OS 3 5/1/70–6/30/70," box 7, Subject Files: Outer Space, White House Central Files, Nixon Presidential Materials, National Archives, College Park.
14. "The Christianity Today-Gallup Poll: An Overview," *Christianity Today*, 21 December 1979, 14.
15. *Orbital Flight of John H. Glenn, Jr.: Hearing Before the Senate Committee on Aeronautical and Space Sciences*, 87th U.S. Congress, 1962, 13.
16. Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), 20 July 1969. See *The Historic Conquest of the Moon as Reported to the American People by CBS News over the CBS Television Network* (New York: 1970), 13.
17. *Orbital Flight of John H. Glenn, Jr.* (note 15): 13.
18. James B. Irwin, *To Rule the Night* (Old Tappan, NJ: Spire Books, 1975).
19. Edgar Mitchell, *The Way of the Explorer: An Apollo Astronaut's Journey Through the Material and Mystical Worlds* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1996).
20. "500,000 Sign Petitions for Prayers," *Holland (MI) Evening Sentinel*, 10 March 1969, 18, <http://www.NewspaperArchive.com> (accessed January 2013).
21. Harold Camping to Thomas Paine, September 24, 1969, folder: "Reading File: September 1969 [2 of 2]," box 34, Thomas O. Paine Papers, U.S. Library of Congress.