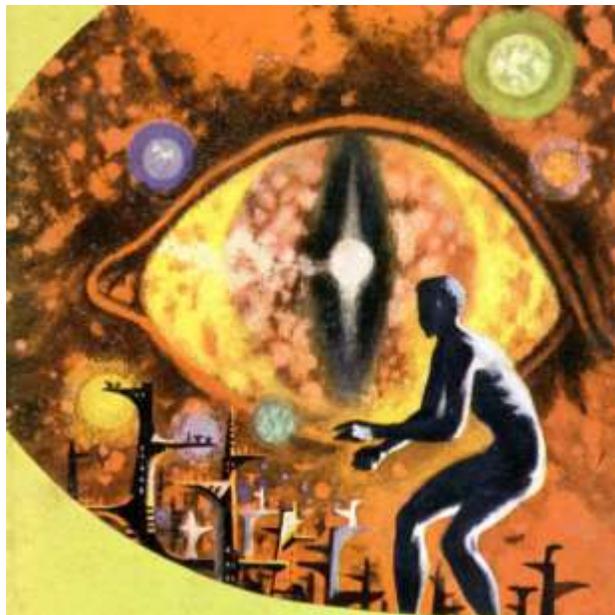


Religion, Sci-Fi and the Age of Disposable Human Bodies

Ronald Brown
May 27, 2019

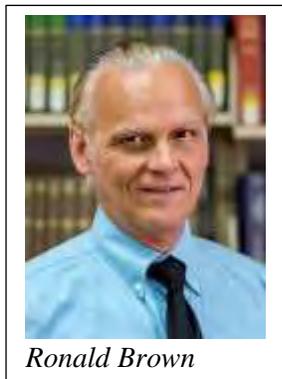


As I stood by one of the burning gats on the bank of the sacred Ganges River, I couldn't help but contemplate the Hindu approach to death.

Christians, Jews, and Muslims view the death of the body as the end of our earthly existence. The individual then goes on to either heaven or hell if he or she is religious, or we simply cease to exist if we do not subscribe to one or the other of the major world religions. For Hindus, on the other hand, one body is disposed of and the person takes on another to continue his or her spiritual voyage.

As I watched one worn-out garment after another being consumed by flames, I couldn't help but think of challenges disposable human bodies will pose for Christians in the future.

Unfortunately, the only serious discussion I found of this topic was not by religious thinkers but rather in serious Sci-Fi literature such as Arthur C. Clarke's 1953 novel, *Childhood's End*. Transcendent evolution is also a theme in "2001: A Space Odyssey," a film co-written by Clarke and director Stanley Kubrick. I contend religious leaders must begin to confront this urgent question.



Ronald Brown

The time has come for humans to ponder their post-body existence and the freedom this will result in.

For too long religions have not only venerated the human body but idolized it. At the dawn of the 21st century, humans are slowly ending their millennia-long romance with physical bodies and are surging into the brave new bodiless world. The profound influence material bodies have exerted on human religions is coming to an end. Before the age of embodied humans is relegated to the trashcan of human history, I chronicle in this article the impact of material bodies on religions.

The body in world religions

Judaism, Christianity and Islam place great emphasis on the human body.

According to Genesis 2:7, "Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life: and the man became a living being." What God breathed into Adam (derived from the Hebrew word for the soil of the ground) is not elaborated, but theologians came to call it the soul. The Koran states that Allah created Adam from "sounding clay, from mud molded into shape." Thus began the intimate link between the human body and the soul that has dominated Judaism, Christianity and Islam until today.

Jews have elaborate rituals and laws regulating the body, ranging from kosher foods, beards, hair, cleanliness, and days of rest. Christians emphasize the importance of the physical incarnation, scourging, crucifixion, resurrection, and bodily ascension as central to God's plan for salvation. Mary was pronounced a biological virgin, even after giving birth to Jesus, and later a doctrine was elaborated that she was assumed bodily to heaven (The Assumption). Baptism, the eating of Jesus' body and drinking of his blood, became the central rituals; the veneration of relics further emphasized the importance of the human body in Christianity. Islam retained many of the Jewish body regulations, such as circumcision, food regulations (*halal*), beards for men, and veils for women. There is also the removing of shoes and washing before prayers, and fasting and then feasting during Ramadan.

The Hindu Rigveda argues that all material creation hatched from a primal egg that floated in primordial waters. This explains the Hindu belief that all living things, from a lofty Brahman to a lowly microbe, are equally sacred. The Hindu dietary regulations, ritual washings, the famous mass bathing in the Ganges, the burning of bodies after death, are all body-centered. The most distinguishing aspect of Hinduism is the elaborate caste system that separates humans based on birth, and maintains this separation through rigorous rules of food, physical contact, housing, marriage, and even the fear of a lower caste person's

shadow falling on a someone of a higher caste. In spite of the centrality of the body to Hindus, the ultimate goal remains the shedding of the body.

Buddhism, of all the major world religions, considers the body among the many obstacles to be overcome on the individual's path to enlightenment. Once enlightenment is achieved then both the human body and individual consciousness are unceremoniously discarded, except for those few saintly *bodhisattvas* who freely chose to retain their human bodies in order to help others on their paths to liberation.

Sci-Fi and the liberated human

Millions of years of human evolution have so bound the individual with his or her material body that we have difficulty conceiving of human life without our sack of water and protein. Only Science Fiction literature has ruthlessly taken the mind into realms where no one has gone before -- the realm of bodiless humans.

Sci-Fi has not only explored this possible future non-corporal existence but even celebrated it. Hollywood is literally light years ahead of theologians, scientists and governments in exploring the fascinating implications of disposable human bodies.

The first work that opened my eyes to the possibility of human liberation from our material bodies was Clarke's *Childhood's End* (made into a 2015 SyFy Channel mini-series). In the novel, aliens arrive on Earth and announce the time has come for humans to move to their next stage of evolution. Under their guidance, children begin to exhibit clairvoyant, telekinetic, and other mental powers. They soon begin to transcend their burden of material bodies and gradually merge with a vast cosmic intelligence that is the amalgamation of many ancient civilizations. At the end, the last human, Rodricks, watches as the last children leave their bodies and eventually all matter dissipates in a blinding flash of light.

Rodricks experiences a profound sense of fulfillment, akin to seeing a child graduate from college, get married or achieve success. Adulthood inevitably follows childhood. The earthly material existence of humans is but a preparation for a glorious future.

In the 2014 film "Transcendence," Dr. Will Caster (played by Johnny Depp) contracts a fatal disease and his wife uploads his consciousness to a computer. Eventually, Dr. Caster adapts to his non-body existence, but love for his wife forces him to create a new physical body. Unfortunately, 350,000 years of attachment to a human body were not easy for Will's earthly wife to overcome. However, implied in the film is the possibility of constructing and inhabiting a material body, any kind of body, at will. Dr. Caster himself is proud of his mastery of "body-building." In the future he could easily send his consciousness to another planet or galaxy and construct a body that could survive in an atmosphere where human bodies could not.



A film still from 2009's "Avatar" (courtesy Twentieth Century Fox/Walt Disney Studios)

In the 1992 movie "Lawnmower Man," Jobe Smith is subjected to an experimental intelligence expanding program that turns a mildly retarded yard boy into a genius. He soon finds that his physical body can no longer contain his increasing intelligence and powers. He insists he has reached the final stage of human evolution -- liberation from the limitations of a human body, which he describes as a "husk" -- and is

becoming pure energy. He uploads his consciousness into a VSI computer mainframe and from there is able to access all the electronic systems of the world.

However, like the traditional mad scientist genre, Jobe sets out to punish all those who treated him poorly when he was of limited intelligence. Dr. Angelo, Jobe's former colleague, sets out to stop Jobe's evolution and remotely infects the VSI computer. Angelo then joins him in virtual reality and tries to reason with Jobe, but Jobe overpowers and kills him. In a final effort to stop Jobe, other scientists plant bombs in the computer center to "kill" him.

Jobe employs religious terminology to describe his quest. He states that when he has spread to the complete planetary computer network, he will be "born." At the end of the film, as the computer center goes up in flames, Jobe manages to escape through a maintenance line and he announces his "birth" by the simultaneous ringing of every telephone on the planet. Implied is the idea that his real birth, his baptism, into a complete person happened only after he was freed from his physical husk.

The 2009 blockbuster film, "Avatar," features a future world where advances in human technology enable the transfer of a human's intelligence into biological bodies at remote locations. The name of the film is derived from the Hindu belief that gods have the ability to take on flesh form at will. In the film, a group of aggressive capitalistic businessmen from Earth are out to destroy the people and environment of a distant planet named Pandora to mine a rare mineral called unobtainium.

Unlike the individualistic Earthlings, Pandora's living creatures have evolved a vast neural network that is vastly superior and more powerful than the individualistic Earthlings and is centered on a giant tree called "The Tree of Souls." One of the Earthmen, Jake, recognizes the superiority of this collective and sides with it to resist the Earthlings. Jake, a vastly superior human, is able to access the collective and achieves both a human existence and an avatar existence. In the end, the humans are defeated and, except for Jake and a select few others, are expelled back to Earth. Jake permanently merges with the collective existence of the planet of Pandora.

Conclusion

The future holds a plethora of challenges and promises. In the human journey to places where "no man has gone before," we will abandon not only our mortal bodies but our home planet and galaxy as well. "Once upon a time, humans inhabited physical bodies and lived on a small planet called Earth" will be the opening lines of novels, bedtime stories, and history books.

As I watched the porters hurrying down to the burning gats in Varanasi to dispose of still another discarded bag of water and protein, I realized the Hindu attitude toward the human body was far more advanced than that of any other religion. The ultimate goal was liberation from our sacks of water and protein.

Central to most of the above and many other works of Sci-Fi is the premise that humans will one day become gods. The powers that humans have long attributed to gods will be assumed by humans. Lacking bodies, humans will be in control of creation. Freed from material existence and biological sex, humans will freely create new beings. Freed from death, we will become immortal; as we join the universal consciousness, we will become immortal. Unlimited access to all other minds and artificial intelligence will render humans all-knowing. Conquering distance, gravity and disease will grant humans omnipotence.

Dr. Ronald J. Brown is a professor of history, political science and ethnic studies at Touro College, and teaches courses in world religions at Unification Theological Seminary. A docent at the New York Historical Society with degrees from Harvard Divinity School, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and the University of Geneva, he is author of A Religious History of Flushing, Queens; Into the Soul of African-American Harlem; and How New York Became the Empire City.

Graphic at top: *A detail of Richard M. Powers' cover illustration from the first edition (1953) of Arthur C. Clarke's Childhood's End for Ballantine Books.*