

SCENARIO BACKGROUNDS

I refer to the twelve scenarios collectively as “The Extraterrestrial Sermons.” All are set in Houston in the year 2050 and forecast how Muslim, Christian and Hindu clergy might react to the reception of various extraterrestrial transmissions, given various social conditions the world may face in 2050.

The twelve scenarios are divided into four sets of three scenarios each. Within any given set of scenarios, three different extraterrestrial messages are considered:

1. A simple existential message where all we learn is that a probe created by extraterrestrials has intercepted an Earth transmission sent in the year 2001. The probe sends a very simple reply message, revealing nothing about its creators or their religious views.
2. A message where we learn the extraterrestrial race that created the probe believes in God.
3. A message where we learn the extraterrestrial race that created the probe does not believe in God.

For any given scenario set, three trends chosen from separate Social, Technological, Economic, Environmental and Political categories act as the change-drivers for the societal background of the set’s three scenarios.

FIRST SCENARIO SET

Scenarios 1 – 3 (pp. 4 – 17)

“Muslim Scenarios”

The trends for this set are:

1. Aging World Population

2. Growing use of genetically modified crops
3. End of oil reserves in sight

SECOND SCENARIO SET

Scenarios 4 – 6 (pp. 18 – 35)

“Pentecostalist/Fundamentalist Scenarios”

The trends for this set are:

1. Continuing ethnic challenges to international security: Ethnic groups within nation states demand self-rule/autonomy/secession.
2. Miniaturization of technology (e.g., microelectromechanical systems [MEMS], nanotechnology)
3. Have/Have Not gap widens (both [a] between developed and developing countries; and [b] within countries)

THIRD SCENARIO SET

Scenarios 7 – 9 (pp. 36 – 53)

“Ecofeminist Mainline Church Scenarios”

The trends for this set are:

1. Deforestation continues
2. Urbanization increases, especially in developing countries
3. China emerges as a superpower

FOURTH SCENARIO SET

Scenarios 10 – 12 (pp. 54 – 74)

“Hindu Scenarios”

The trends for this set are:

1. Small arms spreading
2. Fall of aquifers (especially in China, India, Pakistan, western United States, North Africa, the Middle East & the Arabian Peninsula).
3. World population reaches 10 billion by 2050, majority in non-western world.

SCENARIO 1

It was another hot and humid day in Houston. It was noon, Friday: time for the weekly congregation at the Westside Islamic Center. The men and women entered the mosque by separate doors and took their places, the men seated on the beautiful carpets on the floor, the women seated in the balcony in the rear. After the call to prayer, the Center's Imam, Abdul Karim, rose to deliver the *khutbah* before the packed mosque.

“In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

“Today I will talk about the signal and what it means for us as Muslims.

“Ever since last month, when the SETI observatory in Australia detected the extraterrestrial signal, there has been much discussion about the signal's significance for humanity. Many have speculated that the probe that sent the signal was built by an extraterrestrial race far across the galaxy. Others think that race could live on one of the planets NASA has discovered orbiting nearby stars. If this is true, the scientists say, then we might expect to someday begin a dialogue with that civilization.

“Imagine what wonders we might learn from such an interstellar discussion. Our cosmic neighbors might tell us how to solve the energy crisis: They might provide us with a safe alternative to the hydrogen technology we are trying to use today. Far too many people have been killed when their hydrogen-fueled automobiles have blown up. Just last week a hydrogen-powered Metro bus exploded downtown, near the Houston city hall. As you might expect in light of Houston's aging population, most of the passengers on board were senior citizens. Our ten-year experiment with liquid hydrogen is simply proving to be too dangerous. As our planet runs out of oil it is tempting to begin tapping the vast coal reserves as a substitute. But as Muslims we cannot accept this alternative.

We cannot make the same mistakes our grandparents and great-grandparents did. We cannot go back to pouring massive amounts of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. This is 2050, not 1950: We know much more about the fragile nature of Earth's environment. As the Qur'an tells us in Surah 6:165, 'It is He who has made you custodians, inheritors of the Earth.'

“In addition to all the thought about the technical information the extraterrestrials might provide us, many in the religious community have recently begun to address the spiritual implications of this discovery. Most Christian leaders, and most leaders of other faiths, see no threat to their faiths. In fact, both Mormons and the Seventh Day Adventists have long believed in the existence of extraterrestrials, as have followers of Jainism. However, many of the Christian fundamentalists think the Australian discovery is a hoax, perpetrated, they claim, by a satanic new world order that is out to undermine their faith. They see the existence of extraterrestrials as a threat to their view that humans have a unique position in the cosmos. They speculate about the spiritual nature of extraterrestrials. 'Have the extraterrestrials,' they ask, 'fallen from grace, like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden? Did God send Jesus to the extraterrestrials' planet to atone for their sin? Or did Jesus' suffering on the cross simultaneously save the souls of all extraterrestrials throughout the universe?'

“As Muslims we do not speculate about such matters. I will return to this in just a moment.”

Abdul sat down to take the customary short break taken by all Imams midway through the *khutbah*. Then he rose again and continued.

“Again, we Muslims do not engage in such theological speculation. We have no need to. God knows these things. The Qur’an tells us in Surah 57:1-5:

Everything in the universe glorifies God, for God is almighty, all wise. God’s is the dominion of the heavens and the earth: God gives life, and God kills; and God has power over all things. God is the first and the last, the manifest and the hidden: and God has full knowledge of all things. God it is who created the heavens and the earth in six days, then sat firm upon the Throne. God knows what goes into the earth, and what comes out of it; what descends from the sky, and what ascends to it.

“We Muslims have nothing to fear. God will take care of us, just as he has always done. After all, why is it that, amid all the suffering and death that has resulted from the genetically engineered crops, Muslims have fared so well? Of course, it is the Muslim notion of *halal* and *haram*, of food that is allowed and that is forbidden. We Muslims long ago decided that the genetically engineered foods of this technical civilization should be considered *haram*. No Muslim may eat foods that are *haram*. No such food is available in the *halal* shops. As we read in the Qur’an, Surah 2:172, ‘O believers! Eat of the good things that God has provided for you, and be grateful to God if it is Him you worship.’ God did not provide us with genetically modified food: Man did.

“We should praise God for His wisdom and his bounty, and be thankful for his protection. We welcome a future dialogue with another civilization of God’s creation.

“Go in peace.”

SCENARIO 2

It was another hot and humid day in Houston. It was noon, Friday: time for the weekly congregation at the Westside Islamic Center. The men and women entered the mosque by separate doors and took their places, the men seated on the beautiful carpets on the floor, the women seated in the balcony in the rear. After the call to prayer, the Center's Imam, Abdul Karim, rose to deliver the *khutbah* before the packed mosque.

“In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

“Today I will talk about the signal's message and what it means for us as Muslims.

“Truly the probe's reply to an Earth message sent many decades ago is one of the momentous occasions in history. Imagine what wonders we might learn from a dialogue with such an artificial intelligence. Through their probe's memory banks, our cosmic neighbors might tell us how to solve the energy crisis: They might provide us with a safe alternative to the hydrogen technology we are trying to use today. Far too many people have been killed when their hydrogen-fueled automobiles have blown up. Just last week a hydrogen-powered Metro bus exploded downtown, near the Houston city hall. As you might expect in light of Houston's aging population, most of the passengers on board were senior citizens. Our ten-year experiment with liquid hydrogen is simply proving to be too dangerous. As our planet runs out of oil it is tempting to begin tapping the vast coal reserves as a substitute. But as Muslims we cannot accept this alternative. We cannot make the same mistakes our grandparents and great-grandparents did. We cannot go back to pouring massive amounts of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. This is 2050, not 1950: We know much more about the fragile nature of Earth's environment.

As the Qur'an tells us in Surah 6:165, 'It is He who has made you custodians, inheritors of the Earth.'

“Religious leaders around our planet have praised the extraterrestrial message of belief in God. While some atheists have questioned the interpretation of the symbols used by the probe that sent the signal, most scientists agree that the probe's message clearly indicates that its creators believed in God. After all, the probe used the same mathematical alphabet that a private company used in its interstellar transmission almost half a century ago. The only difference was that the probe used some of the symbols of that 2001 transmission to define a new symbol representing something that is omnipotent, omnipresent and eternal: What else could that be than God? Besides, there is little disagreement about the other parts of the probe's message. No one questions what the probe's message has to say about its creator's population demographics, music, and impressive science, for example.

“A religious revival is occurring all over the world as a direct result of the probe's religious message. Attendance at religious services is up. More people are carpooling to church, synagogue and mosque. Of course, even with carpooling many people still can't afford to purchase the gasoline for trips to services. So mass transit systems, like Houston's Metropolitan Transit Authority, are changing their schedules to accommodate the new demand. Our mosque's social services coordinator, Abdur-Rahman, has coordinated the expansion of our carpool program for Friday congregation, and we are grateful to him. Some of our members have even volunteered the use of their homes to form neighborhood mosques so that they and their Muslim neighbors who have recently

renewed their faith don't have to travel here every Friday. I know of two such neighborhood mosques in Sugarland, and one just inside Beltway 8.

“The sick and the elderly of the world have renewed hope for an afterlife, and for God's intervention in this life. This new hope is improving their overall well being. The medical community has known for years that spiritual people tend to be healthier than those who do not profess a faith. The growing number of people who suffer from cancers caused by the genetically engineered foods will find some solace in this new revelation. Let us pray to God that this is so.

“There will certainly be some economic benefits associated with the increased level of health in society. I am sure that medical insurance costs will decline, or at least not rise as much as they have. It's difficult to think of prices going down in our economy these days, what with the ever-increasing price of oil! And we should also expect that Medicare and Medicaid costs will not rise as fast as they have in the past. That will certainly be good news for our young people, whose heavy tax burden seems to increase almost every year.

“There seems to be a new sense of morality in the world today. Many of our elderly members have told me that young people are showing them much more respect than they used to. Remember, the Qur'an admonishes us in Surah 17:23-24:

Your Lord has enjoined you to worship none but Him, and to show kindness to your parents. If either or both of them attain old age in your dwelling, show them no sign of impatience, nor rebuke them; but speak to them kind words. Treat them with humility and tenderness and say: “Lord, be merciful to them. They nursed me when I was an infant.”

Furthermore, I read on the *Houston Chronicle's* website yesterday that the divorce rate in Harris County is falling significantly. A Rice University sociologist was quoted in the article as saying he is dumbfounded by this trend. He said that this trend seems to be occurring on at least a national basis. None of the generally accepted sociology models explains this sudden decrease in the divorce rate. Surely God should be praised!

“The probe’s message also seems to be having some positive political repercussions for the faithful. Our friends at the Religious Coalition are optimistic about this year’s congressional elections. I participated in the Coalition’s virtual conference last weekend. Paul Reed, the executive director of the Coalition, told us that the conservative Christian, Jewish and Muslim members of the Coalition should expect to see more of their candidates elected in the 2050 races. The Coalition is also looking forward to the 2052 presidential election. Mr. Reed announced at the conference that he is considering running: He never would have considered running before.

“Even the cyberart world seems to be producing more morally uplifting productions these days. Maybe we will finally return to the wholesome days of the 2030’s when the Religious Coalition was in its heyday. Let’s hope so.

“I will return to this subject in just a moment.”

Abdul sat down to take the customary short break taken by all Imams midway through the *khutbah*. Then he rose again and continued.

“Despite this rosy outlook, some fault lines have appeared in the Religious Coalition as a result of the probe’s message. While Mr. Reed is trying to preserve the unity of the Coalition, many of the delegates to the conference showed more than the usual subtle signs of religious bigotry. This dismayed me: I thought the Coalition had

helped us move away from this sort of thing long ago. In fact, at one point during the conference I was deeply hurt on a personal level by a blatantly overt act of intolerance. I ran into an old friend of mine who leads a Pentecostal congregation in California. Of course, we have never physically met: I mean, who can afford to travel any more?! But we always make a point of getting together at the Coalition's virtual conference every year. We met each other and shook hands. I could tell he had been drinking: the simulation facility I used has the latest in olfactory simulation software. Unfortunately, we got into a terrible argument about which god extraterrestrials follow. My friend told me that clearly the probe's message spoke of Jesus Christ. 'The time has come,' he said, 'for you Muslims to accept Jesus as your savior.' This led to an unfortunate altercation between my friend and an Imam from Canada who was accompanying me. Fortunately, the simulation facility my friend uses in Canada has a maximum impact safety feature that softened the blow to his nose. I don't know if my California friend and I will ever talk again.

"We must remember our Muslim tradition of religious toleration. If you should find yourself in a similar confrontation with someone of another faith, remember Surah 2:62, 'Believers, Jews, Christians, and Sabaeans – whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does what is right – shall be rewarded by their Lord; they have nothing to fear or to regret.'

"Go in peace."

SCENARIO 3

It was another hot and humid day in Houston. It was noon, Friday: time for the weekly congregation at the Westside Islamic Center. The men and women entered the mosque by separate doors and took their places, the men seated on the beautiful carpets on the floor, the women seated in the balcony in the rear. After the call to prayer, the Center's Imam, Abdul Karim, rose to deliver the *khutbah* before the packed mosque.

“In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

“Today I will talk about the signal's message and what it means for us as Muslims.

“Some religious leaders around our planet have questioned the extraterrestrial atheistic message. These leaders cannot accept that such a highly technologically advanced civilization does not believe in God. They have questioned the interpretation of the symbols used by the probe that sent the signal. However, most scientists agree that the probe's message clearly indicates that its creators did not believe in God. After all, the probe used the same mathematical alphabet that a private company used in its interstellar transmission almost half a century ago. The only difference was that the probe used some of the symbols of that 2001 transmission to define a new symbol representing something that is omnipotent, omnipresent and eternal: What else could that be than God? Besides, there is little disagreement about the other parts of the probe's message. No one questions what the probe's message has to say about its creator's population demographics, music, and impressive science, for example.

“But let's talk more about the religious message and how it appears to relate to other components of the probe's transmission. We have all read of the timeline in the

message, where the probe demonstrates the evolution of the concept of God in the extraterrestrials' history. Initially the extraterrestrials believed in multiple gods, then came to believe in the existence of only one god, and finally concluded that there is no god. Many atheists have pointed to the impressive level of scientific and technical achievement that is demonstrated in the probe's message and, indeed, in the probe's very existence! These Earthly nonbelievers argue that an extraterrestrial civilization that has accomplished so much, and that has existed for literally millions of years longer than humanity has, is a civilization that is much more sophisticated than ours. Such a technical civilization must be highly literate and learned. The faculty of reason in such a society must be developed to a level that would boggle our minds. With such high levels of technology the extraterrestrial population must have a great deal of leisure time for philosophical pursuits. Such a civilization would tend to value reason over emotion, logic over faith, science over religion.

“Yet should the religious community be intimidated by the atheism of our cosmic neighbors? Should we abandon the mosques, the synagogues, the churches and the temples? Is there no longer hope for an afterlife and the grace of God? Should we forgo the Hadith, the Torah, the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule?

“I will return to this subject in just a moment.”

Abdul sat down to take the customary short break taken by all Imams midway through the *khutbah*. Then he rose again and continued.

“The nonbelievers are wrong. Their arguments do not stand the test of history. We should not let the atheists of this world – or of any other world – shake our faith in God.

“The notion that the extraterrestrials’ advanced technology has provided them an abundance of leisure time to think about philosophy, religion, the arts, and so forth should not impress us. After all, have not the scientists and industrialists of history made similar arguments before? Just look at *our* technologically advanced society – ‘advanced’ at least as compared to our own history. Our young people are working longer and harder than previous generations of youth. They have large tax burdens as a result of the increased demands our elderly have placed on social insurance programs. The young find it increasingly difficult to find work as they have to compete with older workers who have years of valuable experience. Nevertheless, the elderly cannot enjoy their retirement years. Many have diseases that have developed after a lifetime of eating the genetically altered foods grown by the large, international agricultural companies. The spouses of those who are afflicted often have to delay their retirement, or come out of retirement, to earn the money needed to provide their loved ones with proper medical care. We have more technology, yes, but *less* leisure time than ever before.

“And even if we did have more leisure time, would the fact that we have advanced technology mean that we would become wiser? After all, it was advanced technological civilizations from Europe that brutally killed and dislocated the native Americans centuries ago. It was advanced technological civilizations that suppressed our Muslim brothers in the Middle East and in the developing world during the last part of the twentieth century. And it was our own advanced technological society – the United States – that launched a genetic attack on the food supply of the Cuban people in the mid 2020’s. Advanced technology does not translate into advanced morality.

“Many people today see extraterrestrials as the new gods. The followers of the new ET cults display, yes, *faith* in the whole concept of technology. Yet our technology has done harm not only to ourselves, but also to our environment. Our economy is still dependent on the use of oil. Our chronic energy crisis has forced us to try to find quick solutions, such as hydrogen technology. Yet, far too many people have been killed when their hydrogen-fueled automobiles have blown up. Just last week a hydrogen-powered Metro bus exploded downtown, near the Houston city hall. As you might expect in light of Houston’s aging population, most of the passengers on board were senior citizens. Our ten-year experiment with liquid hydrogen is simply proving to be too dangerous. As our planet runs out of oil it is tempting to begin tapping the vast coal reserves as a substitute. But as Muslims we cannot accept this alternative. We cannot make the same mistakes our grandparents and great-grandparents did. We cannot go back to pouring massive amounts of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. This is 2050, not 1950: We know much more about the fragile nature of Earth’s environment. We have learned that industrialization does not necessarily lead to a more just society. The extraterrestrials, if they are supernatural beings, may very well be *jinn*, the tools of Satan.

“Of course, we should not condemn all technology. Islam has historically proven to be an ally of science and technology. It was Islam, after all, which transmitted the science and philosophy of the ancients to medieval Europe. Indeed, much of the Arab world has benefited from the petrochemical period of human history. But as Muslims, we must indeed remember God’s injunction to be stewards of this planet. As the Qur’an tells us in Surah 6:165, ‘It is He who has made you custodians, inheritors of the Earth.’

We can and should adopt a more mature attitude toward technology, and certainly not engage in the blasphemous practice of worshipping it.

“The extraterrestrials may have advanced technology, but the people of Earth have advanced wisdom. We Muslims know this to be true. We know that God takes care of those who are faithful to him. After all, why is it that, amid all the suffering and death that has resulted from the genetically engineered crops, Muslims have fared so well? Of course, it is the Muslim notion of *halal* and *haram*, of food that is allowed and that is forbidden. We Muslims long ago decided that the genetically engineered foods of this technical civilization should be considered *haram*. No Muslim may eat foods that are *haram*. No such food is available in the *halal* shops. As we read in the Qur’an, Surah 2:172, ‘O believers! Eat of the good things that God has provided for you, and be grateful to God if it is Him you worship.’ God did not provide us with genetically modified food: Man did.

“Look at the Muslim elderly. See how our Muslim youth respect and admire them, compared to the relationships between the young and old in our secular culture. As Muslims we take to heart the wisdom of the Qur’an in Surah 17:23-24:

Your Lord has enjoined you to worship none but Him, and to show kindness to your parents. If either or both of them attain old age in your dwelling, show them no sign of impatience, nor rebuke them; but speak to them kind words. Treat them with humility and tenderness and say: “Lord, be merciful to them. They nursed me when I was an infant.”

“We should praise God for His wisdom and his bounty, and be thankful for his protection.

“Today I am joining other Muslims in the call for a mid twenty-first century *jihad*: A *jihad* for religion and morality. We will join hands with our Christian, Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist brethren in an ecumenical ‘crusade.’ We will remind the people of the world that ET does not have a monopoly on wisdom: that the people of Earth also possess much wisdom, both from experience and from the sacred scriptures of the world’s religions.

“Go in peace.”

SCENARIO 4

“Hal-le-lu-jah ... Hal-le-lu-jah ... Hal-le-lu-jah ... Hal-le-lu-jah”

The Smalleydome at Rice University reverberated with the voices of 80,000 Pentecostal Christians slowly singing, *“Hal-le-lu-jah ... Hal-le-lu-jah ... Hal-le-lu-jah ... Hal-le-lu-jah”*. Swaying from side to side with the music, with their arms raised above their heads, palms spread open, the multi-ethnic crowd looked like they were performing a slow motion wave at a Rice football game. Most were dressed in their Sunday best, the women in dresses, and the men in suits and ties. Almost everyone had their eyes closed with their faces turned upwards. All were either crying or smiling – or both.

The worshippers of the Greater Houston Assembly of God were poor but proud. Proud of their church and their leader, the Rev. George Wu. Founded in 2015 by the Rev. Nancy Wu, the Greater Houston Assembly of God had grown in thirty-five years to a membership that almost filled the Smalleydome. The Rev. Wu became the church’s leader in 2048 after his wife had been killed in a nanoaccident while on a trip to St. Louis.

Slowly the music faded away. The Rev. Wu waited a few moments, allowing time for everyone to take their seats and wipe away the tears. Then he rose to address the congregation.

“Praise Jesus!” the Rev. Wu exclaimed.

The crowd roared with approval. Many rose to their feet.

“Praise Jesus!” he repeated.

Again the crowd roared. More rose to their feet.

“Praise Jesus!” he repeated.

Again, the crowd roared. Now almost everyone was standing again.

“Amen! Amen, and Amen,” said the Rev. Wu. Everyone took their seats.

“It’s great to be with you today in this breathtaking facility. It’s a beautiful stadium. With its wonderful architecture that seems to defy the laws of gravity, it is indeed a fitting place for the people of God to gather in the Spirit. Praise the Lord!”

The crowd roared with approval.

“Yes, named after one of the scientists who pioneered the development of nanotechnology, this stadium is a modern marvel.”

Many in the crowd grumbled.

“Now, brothers and sisters, listen to me. Listen to me. I know your pain. I know what you’re feeling. But hear me out.

“Turn in your Bibles to Matthew 21:12-13 and read with me.”

The stadium’s giant television monitors displayed the verses, along with a close-up of the reverend, who read:

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a den of robbers.”

The Rev. Wu continued, “Brothers and sisters, this stadium is a monument to nano. We know that. Its builders are proud of their achievement, just as the rich scientists, business people and engineers are proud of the many other technical wonders of nano.

“But we are turning this monument to Satan into a house of worship! We’re telling the devil to *get* out of town! We’re throwing the money changers out of this temple! We’re filling this house with the spirit of Jesus!”

The crowd rose to its feet and roared with approval. The television monitors showed the Rev. Wu’s emotional face, close up, with sweat and tears beginning to appear on his face.

“Yes, Satan is using nano in his plots to oppress God’s people. We all know that. We see Satan at work every day in the news and in our society. The proliferation of arms, the bloodshed in the streets, the ethnic wars of ‘liberation’ around the world. Some of these revolutionaries are using nanobugs. Our military budget is soaring in an attempt to stay ahead of the nanoterrorists who have tried to use nanobugs to kill our citizens. We’ve been lucky so far in the development of nanocountermeasures – nanovaccines, if you will – that always seem to just barely anticipate the new strains of nanobugs.

“But others in foreign lands aren’t so lucky. While most of the revolutionaries have relied on the ready supply of small arms, some have actually acquired some of the old nanobugs that were such a threat to the United States ten years ago. Somehow the Nanotechnology Nonproliferation Treaty hasn’t prevented the spread of nanobugs to the developing world. Already thousands have died from nanobug attacks in the ethnic wars of ‘liberation’ in parts of Africa – and Europe.

“But we don’t need to be attacked by nanobugs to suffer from nanotechnology.”

The crowd applauded, with many shouting, “Amen” or “That’s right.”

“Nanotechnology is helping and hurting. It helps build magnificent structures like this stadium with strong yet extremely lightweight materials. It helps us recycle the trash

in our landfills. It's cleaning up the atmosphere by removing all those excess greenhouse gases.

“But it destroys jobs, and it destroys hope. I know your pain. I know your suffering. So does Jesus. He knows what you're going through. He knows your tribulations. He knows how the nanotechnology has destroyed your livelihood.

“The moneychangers of today make billions off nanotechnology. The nanotechnicians make good livings: After all, they are the only ones licensed to use this dangerous technology. But even they cannot prevent the unforeseen nano mutations. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Nanotechnology has documented numerous cases where nano mutation outbreaks have killed livestock and people. Let us not forget that Boy Scout troop that was decimated last year in Nevada.

“While technology can help us, far too many people have fallen in to worshipping technology. They see technology as a god. They have faith that technology will solve all their problems. But they shall reap what they shall sow!”

The crowd applauded.

“We see a manifestation of this technofaith in the recent discovery of the extraterrestrial probe. All the probe did was retransmit a message that had been sent from Earth in 2001. That's it. Yet already people are saying the Earth will be saved by the technology the probe can give us. Can you believe that?! They're looking to technology to solve the problems created by technology!

“Well I'm here tonight to tell them that the only savior from the sins of this world is Jesus Christ!”

The crowd rose to its feet and applauded, with many “amen’s” and “that’s right’s” shouted by the faithful.

“The liberal ‘Christians’, the Muslims, the Buddhists and the Hindus may not say it, but I will: This so-called extraterrestrial probe is an agent of Satan! Read with me in your Bibles Second Thessalonians 2:9-10.”

Again, the television monitors displayed the verses along with a close-up of Rev. Wu, whose face was now completely covered in sweat:

The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders, and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.

“This probe among the stars,” Rev. Wu continued, “is a wicked deception for the lost souls of this world who worship upon the false altar of technology. This probe is Satan’s way of distracting the unsaved from God’s holy truth. It is all part of Satan’s plan. Like he did in the garden of Eden, Satan tempted us with the lovely fruits of nano. ‘Eat from the fruit of the technological tree’, he said, ‘and you shall be free.’

“Yet we experienced a second fall – this time from an imperfect world to a world of chronic unemployment, terrorism, and despair. And now Satan comes along and tempts us again, this time with a subtle promise of saving-technology-to-come from the stars.

“Well, we’re not going to bite that apple!”

The crowd rose to its feet again, shouting and clapping.

“We’re not going to be led astray!” said the Rev. Wu.

“Amen” and “You said it!” shouted many in the stands.

“We are going to march on like good Christian soldiers and win over the lost souls of the false technoreligion. Because we know who the true savior is, the everlasting, ever loving, ever caring holy Son of God!”

With that, the 1,000-member choir began to sing as Rev. Wu took his seat.

SCENARIO 5

“Hal-le-lu-jah ... Hal-le-lu-jah ... Hal-le-lu-jah ... Hal-le-lu-jah”

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The worshippers of the Greater Houston Assembly of God were poor but proud. Proud of their church and their leader, the Rev. George Wu. Founded in 2015 by the Rev. Nancy Wu, the Greater Houston Assembly of God had grown in thirty-five years to a membership that almost filled the Smalleydome, named after one of the pioneers of nanotechnology. The Rev. Wu became the church’s leader in 2048 after his wife had been killed in a nanoaccident while on a trip to St. Louis.

Slowly the music faded away. The Rev. Wu, dressed in his trademark white suit, waited a few moments, allowing time for everyone to take their seats and wipe away the tears. Then he rose to address the congregation.

“Praise Jesus!” the Rev. Wu exclaimed.

The crowd roared with approval. Many rose to their feet.

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“Praise Jesus!” he repeated.

Again, the crowd roared. Now almost everyone was standing again.

“Amen! Amen, and Amen,” said the Rev. Wu. Everyone took their seats.

“What a wonderful time to be a Christian!” the Rev. Wu began. “The sign from heaven offers more proof that God loves us! Can you believe it?!”

“Yes,” the crowd responded.

“I said, can you believe it?!” the Rev. Wu exclaimed.

“Yes,” the crowd roared back, rising to their feet.

“Shout it and let the whole world know. I said, can you *be-lieve* it?!” the Rev. Wu asked one last time, his face grimacing with enthusiasm.

“Yes!” the crowd exclaimed, and then took their seats.

“Ever since the probe’s message was deciphered last month religious leaders around the world have praised its pro-God statement. Hindus, Jews, Muslims – all have joined with Christians in our enthusiasm for this message from heaven. God does indeed move in mysterious ways: Who would have thought that the messages sent from Earth in the first few years of this century would be used by God to give us comfort in these times of toil and tribulation?

“And I need not remind you that we do live in rough times. We see Satan at work everyday in the news and in our society. The proliferation of arms, the bloodshed in the streets, the ethnic wars of ‘liberation’ around the world. Satan is using nano in his plots to oppress God’s people. We all know that. Some of these revolutionaries are using nanobugs. Our military budget is soaring in an attempt to stay ahead of the nanoterrorists who have tried to use nanobugs to kill our citizens. We’ve been lucky so far in the

development of nanocountermeasures – nanovaccines, if you will – that always seem to just barely anticipate the new strains of nanobugs.

“But others in foreign lands aren’t so lucky. While most of the revolutionaries have relied on the ready supply of small arms, some have actually acquired some of the old nanobugs that were such a threat to the United States ten years ago. Somehow the Nanotechnology Nonproliferation Treaty hasn’t prevented the spread of nanobugs to the developing world. Already thousands have died from nanobug attacks in the ethnic wars of ‘liberation’ in parts of Africa – and Europe.

“But we don’t need to be attacked by nanobugs to suffer from nanotechnology.”

The crowd applauded, with many shouting, “Amen” or “That’s right.”

“Nanotechnology is helping and hurting. It helps build magnificent structures like this stadium with strong, yet extremely lightweight materials. It helps us recycle the trash in our landfills. It’s cleaning up the atmosphere by removing all those excess greenhouse gases.

“But it destroys jobs, and it destroys hope. I know your pain. I know your suffering. So does Jesus. He knows what you’re going through. He knows your tribulations. He knows how the nanotechnology has destroyed your livelihood.

“The moneychangers of today make billions off nanotechnology. The nanotechnicians make good livings: After all, they are the only ones licensed to use this dangerous technology. But even they cannot prevent the unforeseen nano mutations. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Nanotechnology has documented numerous cases where nano mutation outbreaks have killed livestock and people. Let us not forget that Boy Scout troop that was decimated last year in Nevada.

“But in these turbulent times God has indeed sent us a message from heaven, from a race of extraterrestrials. In fact, the Bible tells us that extraterrestrials exist.

“Turn in your Bibles to the book of John 14:2 and read with me.”

The stadium’s giant television monitors displayed the verse, along with a close-up of the reverend.

The Rev. Wu said, “Jesus said, ‘In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?’ God’s house is in the starry vaults of heaven, and we all know that there are countless stars and planets in the universe. Clearly Jesus was telling us not only of our heavenly destination, but also of the existence of places where extraterrestrials live.

“The Bible tells us not only that extraterrestrials exist, but also that humanity is destined to rule over them. Turn in your Bibles to Psalm 8:3-6 and read with me.”

Again, the television monitors displayed the verses along with a close-up of Rev. Wu.

The Rev. Wu read:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet

“So God has given us dominion over not only the Earth, but also the stars!

“Astronomers tell us that the extraterrestrial creators of the probe may be only one of millions of extraterrestrial species living on planets throughout our galaxy. Many of

us in the Christian community have been skeptical of these sorts of suggestions in the past. But God has shown us that extraterrestrials exist!

“But this lends further evidence for God’s special love for us. Just stop and think. Of all the extraterrestrial civilizations on all the planets orbiting all the stars in the universe, God chose *Earth* as the one and only planet to rule over all the rest of his creation. Furthermore, he sacrificed his only son so that the leaders of the universe – you and me – might be redeemed from sin and be worthy witnesses to the extraterrestrials!

“As Christians we are called upon by God to be witnesses to our fellow human beings of God’s eternal truth and love. We cannot stop with the lost souls of Earth. We don’t know if the extraterrestrials still exist. But if they do they certainly need to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ! I’m going to call on my fellow Pentecostal ministers to join with us in spreading our electronic ministry to the stars. We’re going to spread the good news of Jesus Christ to *all* of God’s creation!”

With that, the crowd again rose to its feet and cheered until the 1,000-member choir began to sing the closing hymn, “Angels We Have Heard On High.”

SCENARIO 6

“Hal-le-lu-jah ... Hal-le-lu-jah ... Hal-le-lu-jah ... Hal-le-lu-jah”

The Smalleydome at Rice University reverberated with the voices of 80,000 Pentecostal Christians slowly singing, *“Hal-le-lu-jah ... Hal-le-lu-jah ... Hal-le-lu-jah ... Hal-le-lu-jah”*. Swaying from side to side with the music, with their arms raised above their heads, palms spread open, the multi-ethnic crowd looked like they were performing a slow motion wave at a Rice football game. Most were dressed in their Sunday best, the women in dresses, and the men in suits and ties. Almost everyone had their eyes closed with their faces turned upwards. All were either crying or smiling – or both.

The worshippers of the Greater Houston Assembly of God were poor but proud. Proud of their church and their leader, the Rev. George Wu. Founded in 2015 by the Rev. Nancy Wu, the Greater Houston Assembly of God had grown in thirty-five years to a membership that almost filled the Smalleydome. The Rev. Wu became the church’s leader in 2048 after his wife had been killed in a nanoaccident while on a trip to St. Louis.

The music slowly faded away. The Rev. Wu, dressed in his trademark white suit, waited a few moments, allowing time for everyone to take their seats and wipe away the tears. Then he rose to address the congregation.

“Praise Jesus!” the Rev. Wu exclaimed.

The crowd roared with approval. Many rose to their feet.

“Praise Jesus!” he repeated.

Again the crowd roared. More rose to their feet.

“Praise Jesus!” he repeated.

Again, the crowd roared. Now almost everyone was standing again.

“Amen! Amen, and Amen,” said the Rev. Wu. Everyone took their seats.

“It’s great to be with you today in this breathtaking facility. It’s a beautiful stadium. With its wonderful architecture that seems to defy the laws of gravity it is indeed a fitting place for the people of God to gather in the Spirit. Praise the Lord!”

The crowd roared with approval.

“Yes, named after one of the scientists who pioneered the development of nanotechnology, this stadium is a modern marvel.”

Many in the crowd grumbled.

“Now, brothers and sisters, listen to me. Listen to me. I know your pain. I know what you’re feeling. But hear me out.

“Turn in your Bibles to Matthew 21:12-13 and read with me.”

The stadium’s giant television monitors displayed the verses, along with a close-up of the reverend.

The Rev. Wu read:

Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you are making it a den of robbers.”

The Rev. Wu continued, “Brothers and sisters, this stadium is a monument to nano. We know that. Its builders are proud of their achievement, just as the rich scientists, business people and engineers are proud of the many other technical wonders of nano.

“But we are turning this monument to Satan into a house of worship! We’re telling the devil to *get out* of town! We’re throwing the money changers *out of this temple*! We’re filling this house with the spirit of Jesus!”

The crowd rose to its feet and roared with approval. The television monitors showed the Rev. Wu’s emotional face, close up, with sweat and tears beginning to appear on his face.

“Yes, Satan is using nano in his plots to oppress God’s people. We all know that. We see Satan at work everyday in the news and in our society. The proliferation of arms, the bloodshed in the streets, the ethnic wars of ‘liberation’ around the world. Some of these revolutionaries are using nanobugs. Our military budget is soaring in an attempt to stay ahead of the nanoterrorists who have tried to use nanobugs to kill our citizens. We’ve been lucky so far in the development of nanocountermeasures – nanovaccines, if you will – that always seem to just barely anticipate the new strains of nanobugs.

“But others in foreign lands aren’t so lucky. While most of the revolutionaries have relied on the ready supply of small arms, some have actually acquired some of the old nanobugs that were such a threat to the United States ten years ago. Somehow the Nanotechnology Nonproliferation Treaty hasn’t prevented the spread of nanobugs to the developing world. Already thousands have died from nanobug attacks in the ethnic wars of ‘liberation’ in parts of Africa – and Europe.

“But we don’t need to be attacked by nanobugs to suffer from nanotechnology.”

The crowd applauded, with many shouting, “Amen” or “That’s right.”

“Nanotechnology is helping and hurting. It helps build magnificent structures like this stadium with strong, yet extremely lightweight materials. It helps us recycle the trash

in our landfills. It's cleaning up the atmosphere by removing all those excess greenhouse gases.

“But it destroys jobs, and it destroys hope. I know your pain. I know your suffering. So does Jesus. He knows what you're going through. He knows your tribulations. He knows how the nanotechnology has destroyed your livelihood.

“The moneychangers of today make billions off nanotechnology. The nanotechnicians make good livings: After all, they are the only ones licensed to use this dangerous technology. But even they cannot prevent the unforeseen nano mutations. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Nanotechnology has documented numerous cases where nano mutation outbreaks have killed livestock and people. Let us not forget that Boy Scout troop that was decimated last year in Nevada.

“While technology can help us, far too many people have fallen in to worshipping technology. They see technology as a god. They have faith that technology will solve all their problems. But they shall reap what they shall sow!”

The crowd applauded.

“We see a manifestation of this technofaith in the recent discovery of the extraterrestrial probe. The probe responded to a message sent from Earth almost half a century ago. People are saying the Earth will be saved by the technology the probe has given us. Can you believe that?! They're looking to technology to solve the problems created by technology!

“Well I'm here tonight to tell them that the only savior from the sins of this world – or of any other – is Jesus Christ!”

The crowd rose to its feet and applauded, with many “amen’s” and “that’s right’s” shouted by the faithful.

“But more than that – *much* more than that – is the probe’s atheistic message”, the Rev. Wu continued as the crowd took their seats. “This extraterrestrial probe is an agent of Satan! The holy word of God warned us against this sort of extraterrestrial visitor, and to be prepared to resist. Read with me in your Bibles Ephesians 6:11-12.”

Again, the television monitors displayed the verses along with a close-up of Rev. Wu, whose face was now completely covered in sweat.

The Rev. Wu read:

Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

“We must shield ourselves from the atheism of this extraterrestrial race. We must resist the arguments of the intellectuals and other elites who pooh-pooh us for our faith in God. Remember, these are the same intellectuals who cooked up the nanotechnology brew. They are the authorities, the technological rulers who have caused so much misery for God’s children in the present darkness.

“Don’t be surprised to hear the intellectuals say, ‘See. The extraterrestrials are a very advanced technological race and have existed for many millions of years more than we have. The fact that they do not believe in God should tell you something.’

“When they tell you that, you tell them this: ‘Since when does having advanced technology make anyone spiritually advanced? How do you explain the morality of the

use of nanobugs by the rich nano nations on the Pentecostal revolutionaries in Latin America? Just because the extraterrestrials have better mousetraps doesn't mean that God won't punish them for their decision to stop believing in God. For all we know, God may already have destroyed them. After all, all we have encountered is a probe that was constructed by the extraterrestrials over a million years ago. The probe doesn't know what has happened to its creators.'

"Read with me in your Bibles Second Thessalonians 2:9-10."

Again, the television monitors displayed the verses along with a close-up of Rev. Wu.

The Rev. Wu read:

The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders, and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.

"This probe among the stars," Rev. Wu continued, "is a wicked deception for the lost souls of this world who worship upon the false altar of technology. This probe is Satan's way of distracting the unsaved from God's holy truth. It is all part of Satan's plan. Like he did in the garden of Eden, Satan tempted us with the lovely fruits of nano. 'Eat from the fruit of the technological tree', he said, 'and you shall be free.'

"Yet we experienced a second fall – this time from an imperfect world to a world of chronic unemployment, terrorism, and despair. And now Satan comes along and tempts us again, this time with a subtle promise of a saving technology from the heavenly places.

"Well, we're not going to bite that apple!"

The crowd rose to its feet again, shouting and clapping.

“We’re not going to be led astray!” said the Rev. Wu.

“Amen” and “You said it!” shouted many in the stands.

“We are going to march on like good Christian soldiers and win over the lost souls of the false technoreligion. Because we know who the true savior is, the everlasting, ever loving, ever caring holy Son of God!

“And we’re not going to stop with the lost souls of Earth. We don’t know if the extraterrestrials still exist. But if they do they certainly need to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ! I’m going to call on my fellow Pentecostal ministers to join with us in spreading our electronic ministry to the stars. We’re going to beat Satan at his own game. If the devil can use space to spread his false promises, we can certainly use space to share the Holy Spirit with the all the beings of our galaxy! We’re going to transmit to the stars!”

With that, the crowd again rose to its feet and cheered until the 1,000-member choir began to sing the closing hymn, “Onward Christian Soldiers.”

SCENARIO 7

It was the 11.00 AM Sunday service at Houston's First Methodist Church. Christmas was just around the corner. A large, beautifully decorated, artificial Christmas tree graced the church's altar area. The pews were filled with the mostly white congregation dressed in their Sunday best.

The Rev. Mary Smithson had just finished leading her congregation in the hymn "Oh Come All Ye Faithful." She turned off her electronic hymnal, stepped up to the microphone, raised her hands and said, "Please be seated."

After a brief pause to allow everyone to sit down the Rev. Smithson began, "The topic of my sermon today is 'A Christmas gift from heaven.'

"Everyone's talking about the probe. Just a few weeks ago Chinese scientists using China's *Dai Yee* or 'Big Ear' radio astronomy dish on the far side of the Moon discovered the probe's transmission. Western scientists at the SETI Institute's radio astronomy facility in Australia independently discovered the transmission several days later.

"The probe did not provide any information about its creators. We don't know the location of its creators' planet or star. We don't know anything about its creators' physical appearance, art or religion. We don't even know the exact position of the probe. The only thing we do know is that the probe cannot be more than twenty-five light years from Earth. The scientists explained this by pointing to the content of the probe's message. Its message is simply the rebroadcast of a transmission sent from Earth half a century ago, in the year 2000. Because radio waves travel at the speed of light, the

maximum round trip distance of that message must be twenty-five light years, half of fifty.

“Last Monday evening I watched a live roundtable discussion on my personal entertainment system where several theologians discussed the religious implications of this discovery. Some of the theologians said that the fact that extraterrestrials exist poses grave consequences for Earth’s religions, especially for monotheistic religions like Christianity. They wonder, for example, about the spiritual nature of the extraterrestrials. Are the extraterrestrials like us? By that the theologians did not mean to ask if the extraterrestrials look like us, or if they have the same senses as we do such as feeling, smelling and so on. Scientists tell us that in all likelihood the extraterrestrials don’t look like us or have the same senses as we do because they probably evolved in an environment totally different from our own. Rather, the theologians wonder if the extraterrestrials fell from grace like we did in the Garden of Eden. If so, how are their sins redeemed? In other words, how can their souls be saved? Did Jesus’ incarnation on Earth and his subsequent death and resurrection atone only for our sins, or for the sins of all God’s sentient creation? If Christ’s act of atonement here on Earth affects only us, does that mean that Christ has also lived and died and been resurrected on other planets?

“Not all theologians are worried about the probe’s impact on religion. I sent a copy of the video in a v-mail message to some fellow ministers I meet with each year at the North American Ecumenical Conference. The next day two friends of mine replied with some very interesting v-mail. One is a Mormon and the other is a Seventh Day Adventist. We first met at the 2046 conference in Ottawa. Both of my friends told me

that it just so happens that some of the founders of these two churches believed in what was then called ‘the plurality of worlds’ — what we call the existence of extraterrestrials!

“That piqued my curiosity. So I got on the Theonet and found some interesting articles about what the early leaders of our own denomination thought about the possible existence of extraterrestrials. While John Wesley doubted the existence of extraterrestrial life, Adam Clarke, a leading Methodist theologian of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, supported the idea of the plurality of worlds. In fact, Clarke believed that all the planets in our solar system, including Earth’s moon, were inhabited by extraterrestrials!”

The congregation gently laughed.

“He even estimated the number of extraterrestrial civilizations in existence as of 1819. Citing Genesis, Clarke argued that it takes God only seven days to create any given solar system. Since many biblical scholars of Clarke’s day believed the Earth was created in 4,004 BCE, Clarke calculated that God had had time to create at least 303,575 solar systems since he created our neck of the cosmic woods!”

The congregation laughed again.

“There are indeed many weighty theological issues that surround the discovery of the probe. I am sure these issues will be discussed in seminaries for years to come. We may never know the answers to these questions until and unless the probe or its creators contact us again.

“But the discovery of the probe is really something of a gift to us at this beautiful time of the year — and at this dangerous time in the history of the world. The state of humanity and of our planet is in peril. Humanity has returned to a cold war between two

superpowers. Our rainforests have been decimated. This has resulted in the extinction of many species, the pollution of streams and rivers, and radical changes in weather patterns around the globe.

“More and more of us are living in megacities. Houston’s population, for example, has doubled since the turn of the century. The growth of megacities is particularly evident in developing countries. People in these countries are losing touch with their native customs, history, and cultures. As the cities grow, crime rates and pollution increase as well.

“The escalating arms race is forcing us, as Americans, to spend more money on defense, and therefore less money on the environment. Similarly, the Chinese, in their effort to remain competitive with us, have resorted to burning more and more of their vast reserves of coal. Both countries are engaging in an extraordinarily expensive superpower space race. The Chinese are focusing on the Moon, while we prepare to go to Mars.

“The Pope recently spoke out about the world situation. The Pope emphasized that we can’t continue like this as a species, or as a planet. We’ll either kill each other with bombs, or we will kill each other with pollutants. As Her Holiness put it, ‘This is not what God intended us to do as stewards of Earth.’

“The probe’s existence should remind us that we are travelling on a spaceship called Earth. The extraterrestrials who created their probe must share something in common with us: A desire to learn, to grow, to expand their horizons and thus to live in peace with their cosmic neighbors. Cannot we, as a species, learn from their example?

“Amen.

“For those of you meeting in small groups during the week, this week’s suggested discussion topic is ‘Does God care for extraterrestrials?’”

SCENARIO 8

It was the 11.00 AM Sunday service at Houston's First Methodist Church. Christmas was just around the corner. A large, beautifully decorated artificial Christmas tree graced the church's altar area. The pews were filled with the mostly white congregation dressed in their Sunday best.

The Rev. Mary Smithson had just finished leading her congregation in the hymn "Oh Come All Ye Faithful." She turned off her electronic hymnal, stepped up to the microphone, raised her hands and said, "Please be seated."

After a brief pause to allow everyone to sit down the Rev. Smithson began, "The topic of my sermon today is 'A Christmas gift from heaven'.

"Everyone's talking about the probe. Just a few weeks ago Chinese scientists using China's *Dai Yee* or 'Big Ear' radio astronomy dish on the far side of the Moon discovered the probe's transmission. Western scientists at the SETI Institute's radio astronomy facility in Australia independently discovered the transmission several days later.

"The probe has provided us with a number of gifts at this time of the year. The probe has certainly provided us with a wealth of information about the extraterrestrials' science and technology. This knowledge, combined with the other gifts the extraterrestrials have provided us in their message, may help humanity solve many of our manmade problems.

"In a sense, the extraterrestrials have also given us God. While some atheists have questioned the interpretation of the symbols used by the probe that sent the signal, most scientists agree that the probe's message clearly indicates that its creators believed

in God. After all, the probe used the same mathematical alphabet that a private company used in its interstellar transmission almost half a century ago. The only difference was that the probe used some of the symbols of that 2001 transmission to define a new symbol representing something that is omnipotent, omnipresent and eternal. The symbol, thus, represents God. Besides, there is little disagreement about the other parts of the probe's message.

“Last Monday evening I watched a live roundtable discussion on my personal entertainment system where several theologians discussed the religious implications of the God symbol. Some of the theologians said that the symbol raises many questions. They wonder, for example, about the spiritual nature of the extraterrestrials. Did the extraterrestrials fall from grace as we did in the Garden of Eden? If so, how are their sins redeemed? In other words, how can their souls be saved? Did Jesus' incarnation on Earth and his subsequent death and resurrection atone only for our sins, or for the sins of all God's sentient creation? If Christ's act of atonement here on Earth affects only us, does that mean that Christ has also lived and died and been resurrected on other planets?

“Some theologians are ecstatic about the God symbol. I sent a copy of the video in a v-mail message to some fellow ministers I meet with each year at the North American Ecumenical Conference. The next day two friends of mine replied with some very interesting v-mail. One is a Mormon and the other is a Seventh Day Adventist. We first met at the 2046 conference in Ottawa. Both of my friends told me that it just so happens that some of the founders of these two churches believed in what was then called ‘the plurality of worlds’ — what we call the existence of extraterrestrials!

“That piqued my curiosity. So I got on the Theonet and found some interesting articles about what the early leaders of our own denomination thought about the possible existence of extraterrestrials. While John Wesley doubted the existence of extraterrestrial life, Adam Clarke, a leading Methodist theologian of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, supported the idea of the plurality of worlds. In fact, Clarke believed that all the planets in our solar system, including Earth’s moon, were inhabited by extraterrestrials!”

The congregation laughed.

“He even estimated the number of extraterrestrial civilizations in existence as of 1819. Citing Genesis, Clarke argued that it takes God only seven days to create any given solar system. Since many biblical scholars of Clarke’s day believed the Earth was created in 4,004 BCE, Clarke calculated that God had had time to create at least 303,575 solar systems since he created our neck of the cosmic woods!”

The congregation laughed again.

“In addition to these weighty theological issues, I am curious as to how extraterrestrials view their God. Do they see God as male or female? Do extraterrestrials have a concept for male and female? Do they see God as a personal God that they can relate to directly? Or do they think of God in deistic terms? That is, do they think God created the Universe, got things going, and just left it alone to run its course?

“I am sure these sorts of issues will be discussed in seminaries for years to come. We may never know the answers to these questions until and unless the probe or its creators contact us again.

“The extraterrestrials have also given us the gift of peace. But we will have to work to make this gift a reality. We have a lot of work to do. The state of humanity and of our planet is in peril. Humanity has returned to a cold war between two superpowers. Our rainforests have been decimated. This has resulted in the extinction of many species, the pollution of streams and rivers, and radical changes in weather patterns around the globe.

“More and more of us are living in megacities. Houston’s population, for example, has doubled since the turn of the century. The growth of megacities is particularly evident in developing countries. People in these countries are losing touch with their native customs, history, and cultures. As the cities grow, crime rates and pollution increase as well.

“The escalating arms race is forcing us, as Americans, to spend more money on defense, and therefore less money on the environment. Similarly, the Chinese, in their effort to remain competitive with us, have resorted to burning more and more of their vast reserves of coal. Both countries are engaging in an extraordinarily expensive superpower space race. The Chinese are focusing on the Moon, while we prepare to go to Mars.

“The Pope recently spoke out about the world situation. The Pope emphasized that we can’t continue like this as a species, or as a planet. We’ll either kill each other with bombs, or we will kill each other with pollutants. As Her Holiness put it, ‘This is not what God intended us to do as stewards of Earth.’

“The probe’s existence should remind us that we are travelling on a spaceship called Earth. The extraterrestrials who created their probe must share something in

common with us: A desire to learn, to grow, to expand their horizons and thus to live in peace with their cosmic neighbors. Cannot we, as a species, learn from their example?

“My Buddhist Zen master told me the other day that Buddhists, especially Tibetan Buddhists, have always believed in the existence of extraterrestrials. Buddhists see the universe as an interconnected whole. Similarly, we should view Earth and all of its species and nations as part of this interconnected existence. This is the great lesson of peace provided by the probe. Let us pray that the probe’s appearance will cause all humanity, both East and West, to join together as brothers and sisters.

“The extraterrestrials have given us three gifts in one: the gift of science, the gift of God, and the gift of peace. It is up to all of us to decide whether or not to accept these gifts.

“Amen.

“Before the ushers step forward to take the offering, I have a few announcements to make.

“For those of you meeting in small groups during the week, this week’s suggested discussion topic is ‘How will the probe’s message impact your view of God?’

“There will be a Rainforest Action Group meeting Tuesday evening, 7:00 PM in room 214 of the church office building. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss how First Methodist will participate in the International Arbor Day drive in February. If you can’t be there, please try to join us virtually.

“Finally, don’t forget about the Christmas Eve service next week at 11:00 PM.”

SCENARIO 9

It was the 11.00 AM Sunday service at Houston's First Methodist Church. Christmas was just around the corner. A large, beautifully decorated artificial Christmas tree graced the church's altar area. The pews were filled with the mostly white congregation dressed in their Sunday best.

The Rev. Mary Smithson had just finished leading her congregation in the hymn "Oh Come All Ye Faithful." She turned off her electronic hymnal, stepped up to the microphone, raised her hands and said, "Please be seated."

After a brief pause to allow everyone to sit down the Rev. Smithson began, "The topic of my sermon today is 'What to make of the probe'.

"Just a few weeks ago Chinese scientists using China's *Dai Yee* or 'Big Ear' radio astronomy dish on the far side of the Moon discovered the probe's transmission. Western scientists at the SETI Institute's radio astronomy facility in Australia independently discovered the transmission several days later.

"Everyone's talking about the probe. The President addressed the nation shortly after the discovery to express her reactions to this historic discovery. I am sure that thousands of ministers around the world are discussing this subject in their sermons this morning. The Theonet is flooded with video-mail messages about the probe.

"In fact, some fellow ministers I meet with each year at the North American Ecumenical Conference have sent me some very interesting v-mail about this topic. Two of my colleagues sent some fascinating v-mail's to me. One colleague is a Mormon and the other is a Seventh Day Adventist. We first met at the 2046 conference in Ottawa. Both of my colleagues told me that it just so happens that some of the founders of these

two churches believed in what was then called ‘the plurality of worlds’ — what we call the existence of extraterrestrials!

“That piqued my curiosity. So I got on the Theonet and found some interesting articles about what the early leaders of our own denomination thought about the possible existence of extraterrestrials. While John Wesley doubted the existence of extraterrestrial life, Adam Clarke, a leading Methodist theologian of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, supported the idea of the plurality of worlds. In fact, Clarke believed that all the planets in our solar system, including Earth’s moon, were inhabited by extraterrestrials!”

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“He even estimated the number of extraterrestrial civilizations in existence as of 1819. Citing Genesis, Clarke argued that it takes God only seven days to create any given solar system. Since many biblical scholars of Clarke’s day believed the Earth was created in 4,004 BCE, Clarke calculated that God had had time to create at least 303,575 solar systems since he created our neck of the cosmic woods!”

The congregation laughed again.

“Some religious leaders have questioned the extraterrestrial atheistic message. These leaders cannot accept that such a highly advanced civilization does not believe in God. They have questioned the interpretation of the symbols used by the probe that sent the signal. However, most scientists agree that the probe’s message clearly indicates that its creators did not believe in God. After all, the probe used the same mathematical alphabet that a private company used in its interstellar transmission almost half a century ago. The only difference was that the probe used some of the symbols of that 2001

transmission to define a new symbol representing something that is omnipotent, omnipresent and eternal: What else could that be than God? Besides, there is little disagreement about the other parts of the probe's message. No one questions what the probe's message has to say about its creator's population demographics, music, and impressive science, for example.

“But let's talk more about the religious message and how it appears to relate to other components of the probe's transmission. We have all read of the timeline in the message, where the probe demonstrates the evolution of the concept of God in the extraterrestrials' history. Initially the extraterrestrials believed in multiple Gods, then came to believe in the existence of only one God, and finally concluded that there is no God. Many atheists have pointed to the impressive level of scientific and technical achievement that is demonstrated in the probe's message and, indeed, in the probe's very existence! These atheists argue that an extraterrestrial civilization that has accomplished so much, and that has existed for literally millions of years longer than humanity has, is a civilization that is much more sophisticated than ours. Such a technical civilization must be highly literate and learned. The faculty of reason in such a society must be developed to a level that would boggle our minds. With such high levels of technology the extraterrestrial population must have a great deal of leisure time for philosophical pursuits. Such a civilization, the atheists maintain, would tend to value reason over emotion, logic over faith, science over religion.

“What a sick society! Even if we accept the premise that higher levels of technology translate into more leisure time – which our own history demonstrates is false – would we really want to live in such an alien civilization? If we think about it, though,

in many ways we have lived in such an alien society – indeed, in an *alienating* society – for far too long. And as we have come to understand, our past conception of God helped to foster this alienation, and therefore has led to many of the problems we face today.

“For thousands of years the Christian vocabulary excluded half the population. God was depicted in religious art as a bearded man who was omnipotent. ‘He’ looked *over us*. But ‘He’ was a jealous god, one who did not hesitate to *destroy* entire cities, such as Sodom and Gomorrah. Indeed, ‘He’ even *destroyed* the Earth in a great flood.

“The God of our parents and ancestors gave ‘man’ *dominion over* the world. The book of Genesis tells us that God made woman as man’s *assistant*. And, according to Genesis, we should blame all our woes on Eve: After all, it was she, not the virtuous Adam, who first ate of the ‘Tree of Knowledge’.

“Until the women’s spiritual movement blossomed in the 2030’s, church liturgies and rituals did not reflect the feminine perspective. We continued to use male-oriented language that subtly reinforced such male virtues as competition and dominance – over both women and nature. ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’, we sang. God is ‘Our Father, who art in Heaven’, we prayed. Our government placed chaplains in military units so soldiers, practicing the manly art of war, could *destroy* our enemies: Enemies who were enemies often because they had natural resources, like oil, that we wanted to *control*, to *dominate*.

“Fortunately we have seen the error of our ways. We have incorporated gender-inclusive language into our liturgies. We no longer say that ‘God created man in his own image.’ Rather, we believe that, ‘The creator nurtures all people in her own image.’ We no longer use dualistic imagery to describe our relationship to God, to nature and to each other. Nature is not some ‘other’ to be tamed. It is instead the greater whole in which we

coexist. We teach that a man should not view a woman as an ‘other’ to be objectified and dominated. Instead, we teach that the sexes should be equal and respectful of each other. God, we have come to believe, is panentheistic: She is not only above all (as in the old view of God) watching ‘over’ us from heaven, but also *in* all. That is, as in much Eastern religious thought, we find that God is part of the interconnected whole of existence. She is what links you and me and the plants and birds and stars and planets and everything else in the universe together.”

A baby in one of the middle pews on the right-hand side of the church started crying.

“Female imagery plays other new roles in religion today”, the Reverend Smithson continued. “We have created rituals that reflect important events in women’s lives such as childbirth, menopause, even menstruation. The majority of ministers and rabbis today are women. Even the current cold war with China has helped us change our perspective by making us all better aware of Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, with their female goddess traditions.

“Yet despite the fact that we are moving in a more positive, more inclusive direction, we bear a heavy social and environmental burden from the sexist theological lexicon of the millennia. Indeed, as a result of our historic attempts to dominate nature and each other, the state of humanity and of our planet is in peril. Humanity has returned to a cold war between two superpowers. Our rainforests have been decimated. This has resulted in the extinction of many species, the pollution of streams and rivers, and radical changes in weather patterns around the globe.”

The baby continued to cry. Many in the pews started frowning. Several church members sitting in the front pews turned around occasionally to determine who the guilty parents were.

“More and more of us are living in megacities. Houston’s population, for example, has doubled since the turn of the century. The growth of megacities is particularly evident in developing countries. People in these countries are losing touch with their native customs, history and cultures. As the cities grow, crime rates and pollution increase as well.

“The escalating arms race is forcing us, as Americans, to spend more money on defense, and therefore less money on the environment. Similarly, the Chinese, in their effort to remain competitive with us, have resorted to burning more and more of their vast reserves of coal. Both countries are engaging in an extraordinarily expensive superpower space race. The Chinese are focusing on the Moon, while we prepare to go to Mars.”

The crying baby really started to bawl. Raising her eyebrows in a way that everybody understood the Rev. Smithson looked directly at the young couple who was trying to calm their baby. The couple got the point and started to take their child to the soundproof room in the rear of the church.

“Yes, we can literally hear the Earth *crying out!*” the reverend remarked.

The congregation broke out in laughter.

“The Pope recently spoke out about the world situation,” the reverend continued. “The Pope emphasized that we can’t continue like this as a species, or as a planet. We’ll either kill each other with bombs, or we will kill each other with pollutants. As Her Holiness put it, ‘This is not what God intended us to do as stewards of Earth.’”

“Now we are faced with a message from an extraterrestrial civilization. This civilization has existed for many millions of years, much longer than Homo sapiens has been around. It is a civilization that presents us with wonders of science and technology – and with a message that says ‘God does not exist.’

“I am skeptical of the message. No, unlike my conservative brethren of the ‘Old Time Religion’ churches, I don’t doubt the translation of the God symbol. Rather, I am skeptical of what the extraterrestrials did not include in their message. I would like to know what sort of social problems ET has. How do the extraterrestrials treat the weakest members of their society? Does this extraterrestrial civilization engage in warfare? What is the status of ET’s planetary environment? And how did the extraterrestrials view the God that they later came to reject? (I betcha’ their God was a guy!)”

The congregation laughed.

“No, the fact that ET has advanced science and technology – advanced ways of dominating nature and, possibly, each other – does not impress me. A world of pure reason, unguided by a sense of spirituality, of caring, or of nurture is exactly the direction in which we have collectively decided not to continue.

“Amen.

“Before the ushers step forward to take the offering, I have a few announcements to make.

“For those of you meeting in small groups during the week, this week’s suggested discussion topic is ‘How will the probe’s message impact your view of God?’

“There will be a Rainforest Action Group meeting Tuesday evening, 7:00 PM in room 214 of the church office building. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss how

First Methodist will participate in the International Arbor Day drive in February. If you can't be there, please try to join us virtually.

“Finally, don't forget about the Christmas Eve service next week at 11:00 PM.”

SCENARIO 10

The Sage Road Hindu Community Center's auditorium was packed. Thousands of Hindu men and women had come from throughout the Houston area to hear a visiting guru, Prabha Bhardwaj Patil, discuss the discovery of the probe's message.

"It is good to be in Houston again," the white-robed guru began. "Your climate reminds me so much of Calcutta!"

The audience laughed.

"Ever since the SETI observatory in Australia detected the extraterrestrial signal last month, there has been much discussion about the significance of the signal for humanity. Many people around the world have speculated that the probe that sent the signal was built by an extraterrestrial race far across the galaxy. Others think that race could live on one of the planets NASA has discovered orbiting nearby stars. If this is true, the scientists say, then we might expect to someday begin a dialogue with that civilization. There is much scientific and technological information we could learn from such a dialogue.

"The probe did not provide any information about its creators. We don't know the location of its creators' planet or star. We don't know anything about its creators' physical appearance, art or religion. We don't even know the exact position of the probe. The only thing we do know is that the probe cannot be more than twenty-five light years from Earth. The scientists explained this by pointing to the content of the probe's message. Its message is simply the rebroadcast of a transmission sent from Earth half a century ago, in the year 2000. Because radio waves travel at the speed of light, the

maximum round trip distance of that message must be twenty-five light years, half of fifty.

“In addition to all the thought about the technical information the extraterrestrials might provide us, many in the religious community have recently begun to address the spiritual implications of this discovery. Many of the Christian fundamentalists think the Australian discovery is a hoax, perpetrated, they claim, by a satanic new world order that is out to undermine their faith. They see the existence of extraterrestrials as a threat to their view that humans have a unique position in the cosmos. They speculate about the spiritual nature of extraterrestrials. ‘Have the extraterrestrials,’ they ask, ‘fallen from grace, like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden? Did God send Jesus to the extraterrestrials’ planet to atone for their sin? Or did Jesus’ suffering on the cross simultaneously save the souls of all extraterrestrials throughout the universe?’ However, most Christian leaders, and most leaders of other faiths, see no threat to their religions. In fact, both Mormons and the Seventh Day Adventists have long believed in the existence of extraterrestrials, as have followers of Jainism. How should we, as Hindus, view this discovery of the message from space?

“Of course, as Hindus we know that Hinduism is a religion that encompasses a wide variety of beliefs.”

The audience laughed at the guru’s statement of what is so obvious to Hindus.

“Even Christianity, with its many sects and denominations, is not nearly as varied as Hinduism. It is said that there are over three hundred and thirty million gods and goddesses in Hinduism. On the other hand, many Hindus do not believe in the existence of a divine being.

“With this qualification in mind, I think I can make some general statements about the probe’s implications for most Hindus. Of course, traditional Hindu cosmology has long entailed the existence of extraterrestrials – both physical and spiritual. That is, according to our traditional cosmology there are not only physical places in the universe – planets – where other intelligent species live, but also spiritual realms where the departed souls of our dead go temporarily until they are reincarnated in their next lives.

“Some Hindus see the probe as a sign inspired by Vishnu, the Hindu god who preserves the universe. Vishnu, these Hindus believe, wants to reassure us during these times of want and violence. We all know the hardship that has befallen India. The declining water supplies in western India have caused a mass migration of Indians into the eastern part of the country. Food is costlier. With our rising population, many more Indians are dying from starvation and thirst. Young people are using the abundant supply of guns to compete for the scarce supply of food and water. Violence on the streets is an everyday occurrence. The police are overwhelmed. Respect for the law has deteriorated to the point where India is in a virtual state of anarchy.

“Our neighbors in Pakistan and China are also suffering from the decline of their water supplies. ‘Why’, many Indians ask, ‘did we fight a nuclear war with Pakistan in 2027 over the Kashmir and Punjab regions – areas that have become dry wastelands?’

“As Americans, you can relate to the sorts of problems we are having. Your western and plains states have become a dust bowl. As in India, the decline of your aquifers has crippled your grain production. The higher costs of food have resulted in higher overall prices in your economy, and in the economies of the rest of the developed world.

“Indeed, it is reassuring to think the extraterrestrial probe is a sign inspired by Vishnu. If nothing else, thinking about our Hindu religion reminds us in these times of shortage and violence that things will eventually get better. For as Hindus we know that the universe ultimately comes full circle. We know that good times are followed by bad times, which are then followed by good times – in an infinite cycle. It is in these bad times that we must redouble our efforts to practice good karma. In fact, we can see the current period of deprivation as the result of the bad behavior of humanity’s past. Our historical overemphasis on consumption, our lack of effective family planning, our failure to curtail the growth of the small arms industry – all of these past bad behaviors made for a bad social karma that has resulted in today’s problems of water shortages, overpopulation and violence in our streets. We must counteract the prevailing violence in society with a return to the Hindu concept of *ahimsa*, the absolute reverence for life.

“But setting aside the problems we face today – with the faith that things will, after all, improve – we can view the extraterrestrial probe in a different Hindu light. In fact, in many respects, the awe that the probe’s discovery has generated among the world population reminds us of why we are Hindus. Let us review the central core of our religion.

“We believe that there are four general categories of wants. Most people, especially in the western world, follow the first two categories of wants – what we call the ‘Path of Desire.’ First, people seek pleasure. They want fine foods and drink, pleasant vacations, sex, laughter and entertainment. But these things ultimately prove trivial. Those who seek mere pleasure eventually find that the gratification of the senses is illusory and spiritually empty. Second, people seek the related goal of worldly success

as measured by wealth, fame and power. People strive to make money, to ‘get ahead’, to gain notoriety, to win the respect of their peers. We Hindus do not disparage these goals. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with any of these sorts of objectives. We must feed and clothe ourselves, and fulfill our needs for love and affection. For many people these goals are sufficient for their happiness in this life. But eventually, either in our current life with our existing bodies or in some future life with another body, many of us come to see worldly success as illusory as the desire for pleasure. We come to realize how ephemeral worldly success really is.

“And so we enter the ‘Path of Renunciation’. We have ‘been there’ and ‘done that’: We have succeeded in the Path of Desire, but have found that path wanting. We strive to transcend our ego-centered nature with a new category of wants. We strive, now, to fulfill a sense of duty to society. We work to improve the well-being of our neighbors, our fellow citizens and our world. We enter the political arena, we donate our time and money to worthy causes, we lend a helping hand. Yet even this sense of duty leaves us wanting for something more. Ultimately, we seek the fourth category of wants – what we Hindus call *moksha*, the desire for liberation from the human condition of ignorance, unhappiness and death. In other words, we seek ultimate knowledge, bliss and eternal life. *Moksha*, we believe, can be found deep inside each of us, in our *atman*, or soul.

“The extraterrestrial probe serves to remind us of this ultimate desire. For the probe teaches us that there are other sentient beings out there. These sentient beings are clever enough to create a probe that is capable of interstellar flight. And because interstellar flight is so time-consuming, we know that the probe must have been built long

ago. By now, the extraterrestrial civilization that built the probe must be much more advanced than humanity in science and technology. The extraterrestrial civilization's advanced knowledge, thus, reminds us of our own limited condition. The discovery of the probe prompts each of us – Hindu and non-Hindu alike – to consider how trivial our desires for pleasure, success and even duty really are. In short, this machine created in the depths of infinite space reminds us of what we *really* want: unlimited knowledge, existence and bliss.”

SCENARIO 11

The Sage Road Hindu Community Center's auditorium was packed. Thousands had come from throughout the Houston area to hear a visiting guru, Prabha Bhardwaj Patil, discuss the religious implications of the probe's message.

"It is good to be in Houston again," the white-robed guru began. "Your climate reminds me so much of Calcutta!"

The audience laughed.

"Ever since the SETI observatory in Australia detected the extraterrestrial signal last month there has been much discussion about the significance of the signal for humanity. While the scientists have not yet completely translated the message, they have released their partial translation to the public. The scientific and technological information in the message is astonishing scientists and engineers. The information in the message will keep the scientific and technological community busy for years to come as scientists translate the more difficult scientific portions of the message. Our science and technology may be on the verge of being advanced thousands, or even millions of years.

"Religious leaders around our planet have praised the extraterrestrial message of belief in God. While some atheists have questioned the interpretation of the symbols used by the probe that sent the signal, most scientists agree that the probe's message clearly indicates that its creators believed in God. After all, the probe used the same mathematical alphabet that a private company used in its interstellar transmission almost half a century ago. The only difference was that the probe used some of the symbols of that 2001 transmission to define a new symbol representing something that is omnipotent,

omnipresent and eternal: What else could that be than God? Besides, there is little disagreement about the other parts of the probe's message. No one questions what the probe's message has to say about its creator's population demographics and music, for example.

“Unfortunately, many religious leaders have taken a rather parochial attitude toward the god symbol in the probe's message: The ugly head of religious bigotry seems to be re-emerging. Many Christian fundamentalists see the god symbol as a sign from heaven 'proving' that the end times are near, as foretold in the Christian Bible. This 'verification of the Holy Bible', they maintain, conclusively shows that Christianity is the only 'true' religion. Some fundamentalist Islamic sects have made similar arguments as well, claiming that the probe was sent by the angel Gabriel as a sign from Allah. How should we, as Hindus, view this discovery of the message from space?

“To be sure, Hinduism is not free from religious bigotry. Many Hindu nationalists see the probe's religious message as a sign from Vishnu, the Hindu god who preserves the universe. Vishnu, these Hindus believe, wants to reassure us during these times of want and violence. We all know the hardship that has befallen India. The declining water supplies in western India have caused a mass migration of Indians into the eastern part of the country. Food is costlier. With our rising population, many more Indians are dying from starvation and thirst. Young people are using the abundant supply of guns to compete for the scarce supply of food and water. Violence on the streets is an everyday occurrence. The police are overwhelmed. Respect for the law has deteriorated to the point where India is in a virtual state of anarchy.

“Our neighbors in Pakistan and China are also suffering from the decline of their water supplies. ‘Why’, many Indians ask, ‘did we fight a nuclear war with Pakistan in 2027 over the Kashmir and Punjab regions – areas that have become dry wastelands?’

“As Americans, you can relate to the sorts of problems we are having. Your western and plains states have become a dust bowl. As in India, the decline of your aquifers has crippled your grain production. The higher costs of food have resulted in higher overall prices in your economy, and in the economies of the rest of the developed world.

“In some ways, it *is* reassuring to think the extraterrestrial probe is a sign inspired by Vishnu. If nothing else, thinking about our Hindu religion reminds us in these times of shortage and violence that things will eventually get better. For as Hindus we believe that the universe ultimately comes full circle. We believe that good times are followed by bad times, which are then followed by good times – in an infinite cycle. It is in these bad times that we must redouble our efforts to practice good karma. In fact, we can see the current period of deprivation as the result of the bad behavior of humanity’s past. Our historical overemphasis on consumption, our lack of effective family planning, our failure to curtail the growth of the small arms industry – all of these past bad behaviors made for a bad social karma that has resulted in today’s problems of water shortages, overpopulation and violence in our streets. We must counteract the prevailing violence in society with a return to the Hindu concept of *ahimsa*, the absolute reverence for life.

“But let us set aside a strict Hindu interpretation of the probe’s message. While bearing in mind the dangers of religious bigotry, we Hindus can offer the world a more

pluralistic way of viewing the extraterrestrial probe's religious message. Of course, as Hindus we know that Hinduism is a religion that encompasses a wide variety of beliefs."

The audience laughed at the guru's statement of what is so obvious to Hindus.

"Even Christianity, with its many sects and denominations, is not nearly as varied as Hinduism. It is said that there are over three hundred and thirty million gods and goddesses in Hinduism – or none at all!"

The audience laughed again.

"Most Hindus worship their own *ishta*, or representation of God," the guru continued. "Many of those who live in the Indian countryside worship their village god or goddess. Most Hindus worship one of the major gods in the Hindu pantheon, such as Vishnu or Shiva. On the other hand, our samkhya Hindu brothers and sisters don't accept the existence of a divine being.

"Indeed, we Hindus believe that there are many paths to God. Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam – all these religions lead to the same ultimate reality. Hindus believe that no one religion has a monopoly on religious truth.

"So when we consider the religious message of the probe, let us not conceive of it in purely Hindu terms. Let us set an example for all the peoples of the Earth regardless of their particular religion. Let us view the god symbol for what it is: an abstract, imperfect representation of ultimate reality. Indeed, many of the world's religions view God in this light. In both Judaism and Islam it is forbidden to make images of God. Even in Christianity, where images of God abound in western culture, God is viewed as a being that transcends human comprehension. We Hindus also realize the limitations of

our many concepts of God. Indeed, the Lord Vishnu, in his incarnation as the Lord Krishna, said to his friend Arjuna in Chapter eleven, verse 5 of the *Bhagavad Gita*:

*'Behold My forms, son of Prthā,
By hundreds and by thousands,
Of various sorts, marvelous,
Of various colors and shapes.'*

In verses 15 to 16, Arjuna says to Krishna:

*'I see the gods in Thy body, O God,
All of them, and the hosts of various kinds of beings too,
Lord Brahmā sitting on the lotus-seat,
And the seers all, and the divine serpents.*

*'With many arms, bellies, mouths, and eyes,
I see Thee, infinite in form on all sides;
No end nor middle nor yet beginning of Thee
Do I see, O All-God, All-formed!'*

“In fact, in many respects, the awe that the probe’s discovery has generated among the world population reminds us of why we are Hindus. Let us review the central core of our religion.

“We believe that there are four general categories of wants. Most people, especially in the western world, follow the first two categories of wants – what we call the ‘Path of Desire.’ First, people seek pleasure. They want fine foods and drink, pleasant vacations, sex, laughter and entertainment. But these things ultimately prove

trivial. Those who seek mere pleasure eventually find that the gratification of the senses is illusory and spiritually empty. Second, people seek the related goal of worldly success as measured by wealth, fame and power. People strive to make money, to ‘get ahead’, to gain notoriety, to win the respect of their peers. We Hindus do not disparage these goals. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with any of these sorts of objectives. We must feed and clothe ourselves, and fulfill our needs for love and affection. For many people these goals are sufficient for their happiness in this life. But eventually, either in our current life with our existing bodies or in some future life with another body, many of us come to see worldly success as illusory as the desire for pleasure. We come to realize how ephemeral worldly success really is.

“And so we enter the ‘Path of Renunciation’. We have ‘been there’ and ‘done that’: We have succeeded in the Path of Desire, but have found that path wanting. We strive to transcend our ego-centered nature with a new category of wants. We strive, now, to fulfill a sense of duty to society. We work to improve the well being of our neighbors, our fellow citizens and our world. We enter the political arena, we donate our time and money to worthy causes, we lend a helping hand. Yet even this sense of duty leaves us wanting for something more. Ultimately, we seek the fourth category of wants – what we Hindus call *moksha*, the desire for liberation from the human condition of ignorance, unhappiness and death. In other words, we seek ultimate knowledge, bliss and eternal life. *Moksha*, we believe, can be found deep inside each of us, in our *atman*, or soul.

“The extraterrestrial probe serves to remind us of this ultimate desire. The advanced knowledge of the probe’s creators reminds us of our own limited condition.

The discovery of the probe prompts each of us – Hindu and non-Hindu alike – to consider how trivial our desires for pleasure, success and even duty really are. In short, this machine created in the depths of infinite space reminds us of what we *really* want: unlimited knowledge, existence and bliss.

“Let us remember our core beliefs as Hindus. Let us not fall into the trap of religious bigotry. Let us instead see this god symbol sent to us from the heavens as a means of furthering the admittedly Hindu belief in religious pluralism and the unity of humanity.”

SCENARIO 12

The Sage Road Hindu Community Center's auditorium was packed. Thousands had come from throughout the Houston area to hear a visiting guru, Prabha Bhardwaj Patil, discuss the religious implications of the probe's message.

"It is good to be in Houston again," the white-robed guru began. "Your climate reminds me so much of Calcutta!"

The audience laughed.

"Ever since the SETI observatory in Australia detected the extraterrestrial signal last month there has been much discussion about the significance of the signal for humanity. While the scientists have not yet completely translated the message, they have released their partial translation to the public. The scientific and technological information in the message is astonishing scientists and engineers. The information in the message will keep the scientific and technological community busy for years to come as scientists translate the more difficult scientific portions of the message. Our science and technology may be on the verge of being advanced thousands, or even millions of years.

"Some religious leaders around our planet have questioned the extraterrestrial atheistic message. These leaders cannot accept that such a technologically advanced civilization does not believe in God. They have questioned the interpretation of the symbols used by the probe that sent the signal. However, most scientists agree that the probe's message clearly indicates that its creators did not believe in God. After all, the probe used the same mathematical alphabet that a private company used in its interstellar transmission almost half a century ago. The only difference was that the probe used

some of the symbols of that 2001 transmission to define a new symbol representing something that is omnipotent, omnipresent and eternal: What else could that be than God? Besides, there is little disagreement about the other parts of the probe's message. No one questions what the probe's message has to say about its creator's population demographics and music, for example.

“But let's talk more about the atheistic message and how it appears to relate to other components of the probe's transmission. We have all read of the timeline in the message, where the probe demonstrates the evolution of the concept of God in the extraterrestrials' history. Initially the extraterrestrials believed in multiple gods, then came to believe in the existence of only one god, and finally concluded that there is no god. Many atheists have pointed to the impressive level of scientific and technical achievement that is demonstrated in the probe's message and, indeed, in the probe's very existence! These Earthly nonbelievers argue that an extraterrestrial civilization that has accomplished so much, and that has existed for literally millions of years longer than humanity has, is a civilization that is much more sophisticated than ours. Such a technical civilization must be highly literate and learned. The faculty of reason in such a society must be developed to a level that would boggle our minds. With such high levels of technology the extraterrestrial population must have a great deal of leisure time for philosophical pursuits. Such a civilization would tend to value reason over emotion, logic over faith, science over religion.”

The guru paused.

“The extraterrestrials sound like a bunch of Americans!”

The audience laughed.

“Let’s examine the extraterrestrial atheistic message and its common interpretation more closely,” the guru continued.

“First, there is the theological timeline. This is a very western concept. The very notion of *time* as a *line* pervades western society. The linear concept of time underlies the western idea of progress: that things improve with time, never to return to their original state. The idea of progress is intertwined with the west’s historical emphasis on technological and economic development – regardless of the consequences. To be sure, the west has gradually been changing its ways since the advent of the west’s environmental movement in the 1960s, some ninety years ago. But the people of our world are still dealing with the consequences of past reckless development.

“We all know the hardship that has befallen India. The declining water supplies in western India have caused a mass migration of Indians into the eastern part of the country. Food is costlier. With our rising population, many more Indians are dying from starvation and thirst. Young people are using the abundant supply of guns to compete for the scarce supply of food and water. Violence on the streets is an everyday occurrence. The police are overwhelmed. Respect for the law has deteriorated to the point where India is in a virtual state of anarchy.

“Our neighbors in Pakistan and China are also suffering from the decline of their water supplies. ‘Why’, many Indians ask, ‘did we fight a nuclear war with Pakistan in 2027 over the Kashmir and Punjab regions – areas that have become dry wastelands?’

“As Americans, you can relate to the sorts of problems we are having. Your western and plains states have become a dust bowl. As in India, the decline of your aquifers has crippled your grain production. The higher costs of food have resulted in

higher overall prices in your economy, and in the economies of the rest of the developed world.

“All of these problems can be traced back in part to unbridled ‘progress’, to the notion of linear time. The notion of progress has customarily involved the idea that ‘bigger is better’. Expanded economic output has also called upon humans to exploit natural resources to a greater and greater degree. This exploitation of scarce resources has fostered a competitive mindset that has often led to war. And so, humans have built much of their growing industry and agriculture on the use of scarce resources, such as water. Water aquifers have been depleted faster than they could be replenished by nature. And the growth in the arms industry has provided the young and unemployed with the means to steal the food and water they need to survive. The idea of unlimited progress has caused our world many problems.

“There do appear to be many similarities between the mindsets of the extraterrestrials and western society. Indeed, what I find most interesting about the extraterrestrial message taken as a whole is not so much what is included in the message, but what the message may be leaving out! I would like to know what is the status of ET’s planetary environment? Are their young killing each other in the streets over food? What sort of social problems does ET have? How do the extraterrestrials treat the weakest members of their society? Does this extraterrestrial civilization engage in warfare? And how did the extraterrestrials view the God that they later came to reject? In short, is this extraterrestrial message nothing more than interstellar propaganda?

“To the western mind the theological timeline makes sense. After all, it parallels the development of western religious thought, from the polytheism of the ancient Greeks,

Romans and Norsemen, to the God of Abraham, Jesus and Allah, to the agnosticism and atheism so common among the western intelligentsia. But as Hindus we do not subscribe to the linear argument. We view time in cyclic terms. Concepts that may seem intrinsically contradictory to the western mind make sense to us given our fundamental ideas about the cyclic nature of reality.

“This is certainly true with our concept of God. We see God both as many and as one. The Lord Vishnu, in his incarnation as the Lord Krishna, said to his friend Arjuna in Chapter eleven, verse 5 of the *Bhagavad Gita*:

*‘Behold My forms, son of Prthā,
By hundreds and by thousands,
Of various sorts, marvelous,
Of various colors and shapes.’*

In verses 15 to 16, Arjuna says to Krishna:

*‘I see the gods in Thy body, O God,
All of them, and the hosts of various kinds of beings too,
Lord Brahmā sitting on the lotus-seat,
And the seers all, and the divine serpents.*

*‘With many arms, bellies, mouths, and eyes,
I see Thee, infinite in form on all sides;
No end nor middle nor yet beginning of Thee
Do I see, O All-God, All-formed!’*

Indeed, we Hindus believe that there are many paths to God. Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam – all these religions lead to the same ultimate reality. Hindus believe that no one religion has a monopoly on religious truth. Most Hindus worship their own *ishta*, or representation of God. Many of those who live in the Indian countryside worship their village god or goddess. Most Hindus worship one of the major gods in the Hindu pantheon, such as Vishnu or Shiva. Indeed, it is said that there are over three hundred and thirty million gods and goddesses in Hinduism – or none at all!

“This leads us to consider the case that the extraterrestrials may be correct: that there is no ultimate reality – that there is no God. How might this affect us as Hindus? Should we come to accept this atheistic message our religion will change but not die. Many Hindus would certainly follow the Samkhya School of Hinduism, which does not accept the existence of a divine being. Others may decide to follow our theological cousins, the Jains who not only practice a non-theistic religion, but also have long believed in the existence of extraterrestrials.

“Yet while Hinduism’s theistic schools might suffer, the basic tenets of Hinduism would not change. To see this, let us review the central core of our religion.

“We believe that there are four general categories of wants. Most people, especially in the western world, follow the first two categories of wants – what we call the ‘Path of Desire.’ First, people seek pleasure. They want fine foods and drink, pleasant vacations, sex, laughter and entertainment. But these things ultimately prove trivial. Those who seek mere pleasure eventually find that the gratification of the senses is illusory and spiritually empty. Second, people seek the related goal of worldly success as measured by wealth, fame and power. People strive to make money, to ‘get ahead’, to

gain notoriety, to win the respect of their peers. We Hindus do not disparage these goals. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with any of these sorts of objectives. We must feed and clothe ourselves, and fulfill our needs for love and affection. For many people these goals are sufficient for their happiness in this life. But eventually, either in our current life with our existing bodies or in some future life with another body, many of us come to see worldly success as illusory as the desire for pleasure. We come to realize how ephemeral worldly success really is.

“And so we enter the ‘Path of Renunciation’. We have ‘been there’ and ‘done that’: We have succeeded in the Path of Desire, but have found that path wanting. We strive to transcend our ego-centered nature with a new category of wants. We strive, now, to fulfill a sense of duty to society. We work to improve the well being of our neighbors, our fellow citizens and our world. We enter the political arena, we donate our time and money to worthy causes, we lend a helping hand. Yet even this sense of duty leaves us wanting for something more. Ultimately, we seek the fourth category of wants – what we Hindus call *moksha*, the desire for liberation from the human condition of ignorance, unhappiness and death. In other words, we seek ultimate knowledge, bliss and eternal life. *Moksha*, we believe, can be found deep inside each of us, in our *atman*, or soul.

“The extraterrestrial probe serves to remind us of this ultimate desire. The advanced knowledge of the probe’s creators reminds us of our own limited condition. The discovery of the probe prompts each of us – Hindu and non-Hindu, god-fearing and atheist – to consider how trivial our desires for pleasure, success and even duty really are.

In short, this machine created in the depths of infinite space reminds us of what we *really* want: unlimited knowledge, existence and bliss.

“And so we see that even if we were to accept the atheistic message of the probe, our fundamental Hindu beliefs would not be shaken. There is nothing to fear from the extraterrestrial message, unless, of course, we fail as a world society to learn from our mistakes. That is, as the scientists translate the more advanced scientific and technological portions of the extraterrestrial transmission, we will learn of the marvels of extraterrestrial technology. We must, however, not confuse advanced technology with advanced wisdom.

“We should recall our own Hindu concept of time and the universe. For as Hindus we believe that the universe ultimately comes full circle. We believe that good times are followed by bad times, which are then followed by good times – in an infinite cycle. It is in these bad times that we must redouble our efforts to practice good karma. In fact, we can see the current period of deprivation as the result of the bad behavior of humanity’s past. Our historical overemphasis on consumption, our lack of effective family planning, our failure to curtail the growth of the small arms industry – all of these past bad behaviors made for a bad social karma that has resulted in today’s problems of water shortages, overpopulation and violence in our streets. We must counteract the prevailing violence in society with a return to the Hindu concept of *ahimsa*, the absolute reverence for life. And we must treat this new technological knowledge for the double-edged sword that it may very well prove to be.”