Faith, Fallout, and the Future: Post-Apocalyptic Science Fiction in the Early Postwar Era

Michael Scheibach

Abstract: In the early postwar era, from 1945 to 1960, Americans confronted a dilemma that had never been faced before. In the new atomic age, which opened with the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, in August 1945, they now had to grapple with maintaining their faith in a peaceful and prosperous future while also controlling their fear of an apocalyptic future resulting from an atomic war. Americans’ subsequent search for reassurance translated into a dramatic increase in church membership and the rise of the evangelical movement. Yet, their fear of an atomic war with the Soviet Union and possible nuclear apocalypse did not abate. This article discusses how six post-apocalyptic science fiction novels dealt with this dilemma and presented their visions of the future; more important, it argues that these novels not only reflect the views of many Americans in the early Cold War era, but also provide relevant insights into the role of religion during these complex and controversial years to reframe the belief that an apocalypse was inevitable.

Keywords: atomic age; atomic bomb; atomic war; apocalypse; evangelism; faith; faith in the future; postwar; cold war; social science fiction; Fahrenheit 451; nineteen eighty-four; the shrinking man; shadow on the hearth; on the beach; a canticle for Leibowitz

1. Introduction

Martha Bartter, author of The Way to Ground Zero: The Atomic Bomb in American Science Fiction, argues that many Americans expressed guilt and anxiety after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, even though the bombings undoubtedly helped to end World War II. Americans also exhibited increasing concerns about a future atomic war; communist influence and possible infiltration in the government, education, and other areas; and the expansion of governmental power. Yet, despite these general concerns, which permeated society, writers of fiction in the early postwar era, 1945–1960, often encountered criticism, and even banning, for dealing with these issues. Writers of science fiction, however, had a better opportunity to comment on sensitive and controversial political and social issues by incorporating them into their post-apocalyptic storylines. “The fantastic elements of the stories were a cover, or a frame, for discussion of many real issues which were hardly open to serious consideration in any other popular medium” writes Tom Shippey in his book, Hard Reading: Learning from Science Fiction (Shippey 2016, p. 227).

Bartter goes on to suggest that science fiction became more rather than less pessimistic as the postwar progressed, in many ways reflecting what historian Paul Boyer calls a vision of “bleakness and despair” (Bartter 1988, p. 2; Boyer 1985, pp. 264–65). This paper discusses six science fiction novels that fall within this vision. George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four, Judith Merril’s Shadow on the Hearth, Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451, Richard Matheson’s The Shrinking Man, Neville Shute’s On the Beach, and Walter Miller, Jr.’s A Canticle for Leibowitz all provide a better understanding of Americans’ concerns and fears at the opening of the atomic age.

Daniel Wojcik, in his book, The End of the World As We Know It: Faith, Fatalism and Apocalypse in America, argues that the proliferation of nuclear weapons has resulted in “widespread fatalism about the future of humanity.” He writes, “The dropping of atomic
bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 initiated an era of nuclear apocalypticism that has flourished in American religious and secular cultures” (Wojcik 1999, p. 1). The novels cited here, by mirroring the widespread fears about an unavoidable apocalypse, provide another perspective on the postwar religious flourish to reassure Americans that their lives had meaning and that their faith—or “atomic faith,” a term often used during these years—in an uncharted future would be rewarded (see Figure 1). Addressing the significance of “atomic faith,” newspaper columnist H. I. Phillips wrote that scientists might control the power of the atom, but their achievements did not compare to the “fusion of the gospels and the Psalms.” Rather than fear the deadly effects of radioactive poisoning, Phillips urged people to place their faith in the “radioactivity” of the church. “I believe in the atomic rosary beads, the atomic prayer book and the atomic thumb-worn family Bible,” he wrote. “It is my belief that it is not through the blinding glow of hydrogen bombs that man will end his harassments and worries, but through a blinding glow of atomic faith, and through a white cloud, not of desolation and death, but of Faith, Hope and Charity” (Phillips 1954, p. 20).

Figure 1. “Atomic faith” became the theme of many religious sermons, such as these in Owensboro, Kentucky (top) and Detroit, Michigan.

Many Americans, worried about the threat of the “blinding glow” of an atomic bomb, turned to religion as the best means of revitalizing their faith in the future. The view that the atomic bomb had sealed the fate of humankind with an impending and unavoidable apocalypse, in fact, served to spark a resurgence in the postwar religious movement. Robert Ellwood, author of The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace, points out that church membership
grew from 57 percent of the population in 1950 to 63.3 percent by 1960. This boom in religion, Ellwood argues, can be attributed largely to three major elements: the dramatic increase in population during the decade, the expansion of suburbia and the middle class, and the proliferation of churches to attend. He emphasizes, however, that even with this religious renaissance, fundamental differences remained between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews; among the various Protestant denominations; traditional religious faiths and evangelicals; and liberal thinkers and fundamentalists (Ellwood 1997). Yet, in terms of their approach to the threat of atomic warfare, the various religious faiths shared the same general vision of a biblical apocalypse that offered a continuation of civilization. “By asserting that history and worldly renewal are predetermined,” writes Wojcik, “religious apocalyptic belief systems affirm that the cosmos is ordered, . . . and that a millennial realm of peace and justice ultimately will be created” (Wojcik 1999, p. 4).

2. Discussion

The probability that the next war would be an atomic war, and that there would not be any guarantee of survival, represented one of the most critical issues in the early postwar era. Paul Boyer, in his seminal work, By the Bomb's Early Light, contends that by 1950, the United States had become engulfed by fear of another, more horrific, atomic war with the Soviet Union. Americans, according to Boyer, had “a dull sense of grim inevitability as humankind stumbled toward the nothingness that almost surely lay somewhere down the road—no one knew how far” (Boyer 1985, p. 350). Shippey agrees, writing that after 1945, “society as a whole was adjusting gingerly to the possibility of nuclear extinction” (Shippey 2016, p. 211). Surveys in the late 1940s reinforced these conclusions by finding 64 percent of respondents believing atomic bombs would be used against the United States in the near future (Boyer 1985, p. 23).

The nation’s use of the atomic bomb raised an outburst of opposition within the religious community. A week following the end of the war, thirty-four clergymen sent a letter to President Harry S. Truman condemning the use of the atomic bomb and appealing to the president to stop its production. The letter read, in part, “We may have to reap not only the whirlwind of revenge and retaliation at so colossal a crime as we have committed against other human beings by its indiscriminate use. This very missile may be the instrument of our own destruction as a nation” (Clergymen Condemn Atomic Bomb 1945, p. 3). The following month, Father James Gillis, editor of Catholic World, in an article titled “Nothing but Nihilism,” called the atomic bombings “the most powerful blow ever delivered against Christian civilization and the moral law” (Alstin 2015). Herbert Benton of the Christian Leader echoed this view, writing in the 15 September 1945 issue that despite hopes for peaceful applications of the atom, “at the moment we can visualize only the unutterably shattering effect upon civilization and the wholesale destruction of millions of human beings” (Boyer 1985, pp. 13–14).

The secular press expressed the same opinions. On 14 August, V-J Day celebrating victory over Japan, newspaper columnist Lowell Mellett warned that people had to choose between one of two paths to the future. They could take the way of peace, which required international cooperation, or they could take the way of war, “to which science will be prepared in due time to contribute weapons more hellish even than the new atomic bomb” (Mellett 1945, p. 4). Many Americans had difficulty reconciling this dichotomy between life or death, peace or apocalypse. Time magazine, for example, reported in its December 1945 issue that recent polls had found “awe, fear, cynicism, confusion, hope—but mostly confused fear and hopeful confusion” among people surveyed (Boyer 1985, p. 24). Science fiction author Theodore Sturgeon also addressed the new atomic bomb in a letter to the editor published the same month in Astounding magazine. “[Man] learned on 6 August 1945,” Sturgeon wrote, “that he alone is big enough to kill himself, or to live forever” (Brians 1984, p. 253).

Writing in One World or None, a compilation of articles addressing the new atomic age published in 1946, Philip Morrison, a physics professor at Cornell University, expanded on
the views of Mellett, Sturgeon, and many others concerning the next war—an atomic war that might result in the end of civilization:

The bombs will never again, as in Japan, come in ones or twos. They will come in hundreds, even in thousands. Even if, by means as yet unknown, we are able to stop as many as 90 per cent [sic] of these missiles, their number will still be large. If the bomb gets out of hand, if we do not learn to live together so that science will be our help and not our hurt, there is only one sure future. The cities of men on earth will perish. (Morrison 1946, p. 22)

Even President Truman weighed in on this daunting issue. Addressing the Conference of the Federal Council of Churches in 1946, he told the gathering, “We have just come through a decade in which forces of evil in various parts of the world have been lined up in a bitter fight to banish from the face of the earth both of these ideals—religion and democracy.” He emphasized that humankind now stood either “in the doorway to destruction” or “upon the threshold of the greatest age in history.” He then called upon Protestants, Catholics, and Jews to unite in order “to accomplish this moral and spiritual awakening.” If they failed in this effort, said Truman, “we are headed for the disaster we would deserve” (Truman 1946). Truman’s warning was taken quite seriously by religious leaders, who worked diligently throughout the early postwar years to counter the belief that civilization faced either a future of totalitarianism or an inevitable apocalypse: the end of the world.

One of the grimmest of science fiction novels in the postwar era, one that foresees the continuation of a repressive, totalitarian world, is George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four, published in 1949. In his review of Nineteen Eighty-Four, August Derleth called the book “compelling” but also “profoundly alarming” because of its similarities to the real world, such as the beginning of the Red Scare and introduction of loyalty oaths. “The most disturbing aspect of Nineteen Eighty-Four,” Derleth wrote, “is manifestly that the beginnings of most of the governmental gambits of 35 years hence are plainly visible all around us today” (Derleth 1949, p. 3). Gerald Roscoe, in a review published in The Boston Globe, agreed with Derleth, writing that the novel gave “a picture of the world of the future, a world of insane totalitarianism” (Roscoe 1949, p. 109); and Dick Magat, another reviewer in 1949, wrote that the book was “a grim nightmare of the hell we can expect if we fail to win [peace and plenty]” (Magat 1949, p. 31).

Nineteen Eighty-Four takes place in the post-apocalyptic nation of Oceania, where Winston Smith, the protagonist, works in the Ministry of Truth. His job, however, is not preserving historical documents; it is rewriting history to ensure nothing threatens Big Brother and the Party that controls society. The reader learns quickly, though, that Winston is tired of his job and becoming more opposed to Big Brother’s all-powerful hold on society. “[Winston] was alone. The past was dead, the future unimaginable,” writes Orwell (Orwell 1949, p. 27).

The novel follows the progression of Winston’s opposition, along with his romantic interest, Julia, as they move cautiously toward the Brotherhood, the rebel group dedicated to bringing down Big Brother and the Party. Winston and Julia’s efforts are soon thwarted by O’Brien, an entrenched member of the Party, who eventually subjects Winston to torture over several months until he finally succumbs. The book ends with Winston sitting alone in the Chestnut Tree Café drinking gin. As the telescreen announces Oceania’s victory over its archenemy Eurasia and projects the face of Big Brother, Winston tries to convince himself that everything is all right, even as he quietly cries:

He gazed up at the enormous face. Forty years it had taken him to learn what kind of smile was hidden beneath the dark mustache. O cruel, needless misunderstanding! O stubborn, self-willed exile from the loving breast! Two gin-scented tears trickled down the sides of his nose. But it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother. (Orwell 1949, p. 300)
Winston’s victory, as the reader knows, is actually his defeat in terms of maintaining his personal freedom. Although Oceania has apparently won another war, Winston has given up. He has lost all faith in the future—his personal future.

Orwell’s dystopia novel, which lacks any religious concepts related to the renewal of civilization, offers little hope going forward, which is in stark contrast to Ray Bradbury’s 1953 science fiction novel, *Fahrenheit 451*. Montag, the protagonist, is someone who does not want to believe the world is coming to an end. A fugitive “fireman” who finally rebelled against burning books rather than extinguishing fires, Montag escapes from the city and joins the Book People, a group of intellectual dissidents living on the outskirts of society. The Book People are dedicated to preserving the written word by memorizing entire books, with the hope of one day seeing their words once again in print. Shortly after Montag and the Book People meet, another war erupts and Montag witnesses the destruction of the city he just fled. The atomic bombs dropped on the city, and many others unleashed across the novel’s post-apocalyptic nation, reinforced the fact that humankind is seemingly compelled to use scientific discoveries for mass destruction. “As quick as the whisper of a scythe,” Bradbury writes, “the war was finished. Once the bomb release was yanked, it was over” (*Bradbury* 1953, p. 183). Montag, however, believes he and the Book People have an opportunity to rebuild civilization, reflecting the biblical view of an apocalypse as an opportunity for a new beginning.

Rodney Smolla, writing for the *Michigan Law Review*, described *Fahrenheit 451*, which appeared eight years after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, in August 1945 and four years after the Soviet Union successfully tested its own atomic bomb, as a “cultural time marker, helping us to locate the past, evaluate the present, and imagine the future” (Smolla 2009, p. 895). Although atomic energy could be applied in a positive way, Smolla writes, the novel implies that it is more likely that atomic energy will be “impressed into the service of weapons of mass destruction, unleashing Armageddon” (Smolla 2009, p. 911).

Montag realizes his past life has been obliterated. After recovering with the others from the destructive winds and radiating dust, he must accept a new, more personal, challenge: how to maintain his faith in the future. Although Bradbury’s protagonist does not openly express any religious beliefs, he does find inspiration in a copy of The Bible, which he saved from the library of an old woman, who commits suicide by lighting herself on fire. Not only does he read The Bible, including sharing it with his friend, Faber, Montag decides to memorize the book of Ecclesiastes and the book of Revelations in the hopes of having The Bible reprinted one day in a new, free society. As Peter Sisario points out, Bradbury views the nature of life as being cyclical; and that even though it may reach a low point, people “must have faith and blindly hope for an upward swing of the cycle” (*Sisario* 1970, p. 202). This is evident with the comment made by Granger, a member of the Book People, about the Phoenix. As he cooks his meal on a fire, he tells Montag and the others about “this damn bird called a Phoenix.” Every time the bird burns up, Granger says, it springs from the ashes and is born again (*Bradbury* 1953, p. 188). Then, at the novel’s conclusion, as the Book People begin a morning walk, Montag contemplates what he will say when the conversation comes to him. Finally, after thinking it through, he grasps onto a saying from the Book of Revelation: “And on either side of the river was there a tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month; And the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations” (*Bradbury* 1953, p. 190). These lines, argues Sisario, “give us a key to Bradbury’s hope that ‘the healing of nations’ can best come about through a rebirth of man’s intellect” (*Sisario* 1970, p. 205).

Judith Merril’s *Shadow on the Hearth*, called by one reviewer “an odd post-apocalyptic novel because it is so domestic,” focuses on the impact of an atomic attack on the Mitchells, a suburban family living near New York City (*Nicoll* 2021). The husband, Jon, works in the city but fortunately has a meeting on its outskirts and thus survives the blast, although this is not known by his wife, Gladys. Gladys and her two daughters, Barbie and Ginny, must deal at home with the aftermath of the blast, including radiation poisoning.
as well as an assortment of neighbors and strangers in their home. Although Gladys’ family and the families in her suburban neighborhood survive the worst of the attack, the radio announces that the country has suffered severe damage as a result of atomic bombs destroying numerous cities. After dealing with myriad concerns about the health of her daughters and the safe return of her husband, Gladys finally hears on the radio that the war has ended in victory.

*Shadow on the Hearth*, published in 1950, received mixed reviews at the time. Charles Poole of *The New York Times* wrote that the novel’s emphasis on the domestic woes of the Mitchell family made it difficult to imagine an actual war was transpiring. “Nevertheless,” Poole wrote, “*Shadow on the Hearth* is generally entertaining reading, even if, understandably enough, not always for the reasons intended by the author” (Poole 1950, p. 29). Anna King, reviewing the book for the King Features Syndicate, found the book to be much more relevant to the nation’s situation, however. “This title is most appropriate, more so than the author ever dreamed when she was writing the book,” King wrote. “There is a shadow over practically every hearth in this country at the present time, the shadow of fear of the unknown, a feeling in inadequacy in the face of mysteries too deep for the average mind to fathom” (King 1950, p. 30). More recently, Lisa Yaszek, in her book, *Galactic Suburbia: Recovering Women’s Science Fiction*, argues that the goal of Merril’s novel was to alert readers to the horrific effects of nuclear war, as well as “to investigate what models of social order are most likely to address women’s concerns about the nuclear war” (Yaszek 2008, p. 132). Although the novel lacks any religious references, it most definitely sees life after the apocalypse. As the novel nears its conclusion, Gladys opens the door only to have a neighbor carry a man into the house. The doctor, who happens to be checking on Barbie upstairs, examines the man and declares that he is wounded but should fully recover. Merril, in stark contrast to Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, provides a positive conclusion. Gladys’ faith that her husband would make it home and they would have a future proved to be right. As the novel ends, Gladys turns to the doctor and says, quite assuredly, “It’s Jon, you know. He’s come home” (Merril 1950, p. 276).

Having a future is also central to Richard Matheson’s 1956 science fiction novel, *The Shrinking Man*, which balances the search for spirituality and place in society with the dangers of the atomic bomb—in this instance, radiation poisoning. Scott Carey, the protagonist, is exposed to a radiation cloud while enjoying an outing on his boat. Due to an earlier exposure to insecticides, which results in a rare reaction to the radiation, Scott begins to shrink. The science fiction novel does not revolve around an atomic war or apocalypse; rather, it focuses on man’s place in the world. Some critics have seen this as a story about the demise of masculinity during the 1950s. Cyndy Hendershot, for instance, has written, “If the 1950s American man is supposed to epitomize human civilization in order to set a good example in Cold War society, Scott’s character reveals the stresses involved in embodying masculine identity” (Hendershot 1966, p. 328). Matheson’s story, however, is arguably more about the threats to humankind in a world that has unleashed the dangers of the atom. As Scott continues shrinking to no bigger than a spider, which he must fight for survival, Matheson says of Scott:

> He still lived, but was his living considered, or only an instinctive survival? Yes, he still struggled for food and water, but wasn’t that inevitable if he chose to go on living? What he wanted to know was this: Was he a separate, meaningful person; was he an individual? Did he matter? Was it enough just to survive? (Matheson 1956, p. 47)

These questions were the same ones asked by many Americans during the postwar era—and the motivation to find religious inspiration and faith in the future, as does Scott. Although he had always thought life would end when he no longer existed, he has a spiritual epiphany that gives him renewed hope. “To a man,” he thinks to himself, “zero inches mean nothing. Zero meant nothing. But to nature there was no zero. Existence went on in endless cycles” (Matheson 1956, p. 182). He finds a new faith in the future—a future where there is “no point of non-existence” and where there also might be intelligence.
In the end, Scott runs toward the light, his new world. Writes Barry Keith Grant in his review, “This ending was strikingly unusual, not only for its lack of conventional narrative closure but also because it evokes the Transcendental philosophy of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman . . . in its astonishing openness toward nature and the natural world, in stark contrast to the paranoia characteristic of the genre at the time” (Grant 2019). Maria Manuel Lisboa, in her book, The End of the World: Apocalypse and Its Aftermath in Western Culture, calls The Shrinking Man “a metaphor for human disappearance by reason of science gone wrong” (Lisboa 2011, p. 50).

Science going wrong formed the theme of President Truman’s last State of the Union address, given two weeks before Dwight Eisenhower’s inauguration in January of 1953. Truman served to amplify the dangers ahead by warning that “the war of the future would be one in which man could extinguish millions of lives at one blow, demolish the great cities of the world, wipe out the cultural achievements of the past, and destroy the very structure of a civilization that has been slowly and painfully built up through hundreds of generations” (Truman 1953). Truman seemed to pull science fiction’s post-apocalyptic scenarios into a very real scenario. Two years earlier, the Rev. Rudolph Ressmeyer, pastor of Baltimore’s Emmanuel Lutheran Church, told attendees at the National Conference of Religious Leaders that pastors should be prepared to “help people die” (Spiritual Aid Plan Offered in Raid Event 1951, p. 3). The year following Truman’s warning an editorial in The Salt Lake City Tribune titled “Can We Avoid a Suicidal Atomic War?” declared, “We may well have to depend on man’s fear of evil rather than on his love of good to save him from a Frankenstein fate” (Can We Avoid a Suicidal Atomic War? 1954, p. 12).

Conservative evangelicals seized on this fear of apocalypse, as well as the fear of communism, to enhance their appeal. In fact, argues Angela Lahr in her book, Millennial Dreams and Apocalyptic Nightmares: The Cold War Origins of Political Evangelicalism (Lahr 2007), linking their religious message with their opposition to communism and promoting Christian nationalism helped evangelicals become more accepted by mainstream culture. “Conservative evangelicals employed their apocalyptic understanding of the world for political and religious ends,” Lahr writes, “becoming staunch advocates of ‘Christian America’ and opponents of ‘atheistic communism’” (Lahr 2007, p. 4). Billy Graham, for example, a leading figure in the resurgence of evangelism during these years, addressed contemporary Cold War issues while promoting Christian nationalism, encouraging people to turn to God, and offering a more positive image of apocalypse. Yet, underlying people’s motivation to add religion to their lives, and to believe in the Christian message, was the constant fear of atomic annihilation—a fear that provided the foundation for many of the era’s works of science fiction.

With politicians, religious leaders, scientists, newspaper columnists, and others describing an apocalyptic future, it is not surprising to find this same vision of the future in science fiction. Connor Pitetti, in his article titled “Uses of the End of the World: Apocalypse and Postapocalypse as Narrative Modes,” argues that “at the core of postapocalyptic narrative is the recognition that there is no entirely new world, and that history can never be transcended or escaped” (Pitetti 2017, p. 447). Neville Shute’s 1957 classic novel, On the Beach, exemplifies Pitetti’s point that one can never escape history. In Shute’s post-apocalyptic story, a massive nuclear war involving the Soviet Union, the United States, China, Israel, Egypt, and other nations results in the death of all humans and animal life in the Northern Hemisphere, leaving survivors in the Southern Hemisphere, including Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, to await their ultimate demise from the deadly radiation drifting slowly southward. The book, whose characters appear devoid of any religious beliefs, focuses on how people react when they know all of humankind will perish in six to nine months. “Shute forces us to look at the possibility and horror of nuclear war,” writes Bruce G. Smith in his review of On the Beach. “He makes the reader feel the barrenness of a post-apocalyptic Earth” (Smith 2010).

The novel focuses on U.S. Navy Commander Dwight Towers, who has docked his submarine, the USS Scorpion, in Australian waters in an effort to find an area safe for
humankind. The story presents an assortment of characters, including Moira, a woman who falls in love with Towers only to have Towers reject her advances. Although his family, which lived in Connecticut, was unquestionably killed in the war, Towers refuses to accept their deaths, blindly maintaining his faith that he will eventually reunite with them. In the end, however, no one can escape the radiation poisoning blanketing Australia. Realizing there is nothing to stop the inevitable, the Australian government even issues suicide pills to everyone to use at their individual discretion.

Towers, in a final attempt to return to his family, takes the _Scorpion_ into open waters, while Moira looks on from afar, ready to end her life. As she gazes out to sea, she sees the submarine submerge and vanish under the water. With only a painful death left for her, Moira suddenly remembers her religious lessons as a child and quietly says the Lord’s Prayer. Then, she swallows her suicide pills and, although no one will hear, says, “Dwight, if you’re on your way already, wait for me,” referring to Dwight taking his own suicide pills (Shute 1957, p. 320).

Unlike _Fahrenheit 451_ and _The Shrinking Man, On the Beach_ has no tomorrow. No one in the novel can maintain faith in the future because nations of the world chose to annihilate another and unleash radiation to all living creatures. The exception is Towers, who keeps his faith until the very end when he finally accepts that there is no future.

“We have no assurance that tomorrow is going to come to us,” said Dr. Earle B. Jewell, rector of St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1951. “Do we live today, therefore, in the sense that this day is futile? No, you and I are living this hour to the full capacity of our potential because we do have hope in the future, we do have a secret belief that tomorrow will be better” (Plea for Normal Life 1951, p. 3). The Rev. George Davis, minister of the First Christian Church in Wichita Falls, Texas, also emphasized the importance of looking forward to tomorrow. “Despite the dark and troubled times all over the world,” he was quoted as saying, “there is deep and abiding reason for faith in the future. A-bombs and H-bombs, the threat of war or even the outbreak of war cannot halt for long man’s improving future” (Pastor Has Faith in Future Despite H-Bombs or War 1954, p. 15).

Walter Miller, Jr.’s science fiction novel, _A Canticle for Leibowitz_, published in 1959, does not describe an improving future; in fact, the novel ends as the planet’s very existence is threatened by yet another nuclear war. The post-apocalyptic novel covers a span of some 1800 years, beginning with a nuclear war called the Flame Deluge taking place in the twentieth century, some 600 years before the story opens. The novel is divided into three parts, opening with “Fiat Homo,” or “Let There Be Man.” A young and somewhat naïve monk named Brother Francis Gerald uncovers a fallout shelter dating to the Flame Deluge. Inside, he discovers original documents of Edward Leibowitz, an electrical engineer who survived the war and founded a monastic order. According to the order’s teachings, God wanted to test humankind, which had become “swelled with pride” by having scientists, including Leibowitz, develop “great engines of war such as had never before upon the Earth, weapons of such might that they contained the very fires of Hell” (Miller 1959, p. 62). God believed that weapons of this magnitude would never be used, but those in power wrongfully believed the one using the weapons first would be the victor. War pursued, followed by the “Simplification,” an extended era during which technology was shunned.

The second part, “Fiat Lux”, or “Let There Be Light”, is set hundreds of years later in the thirty-second century. Finally, the world is leaving the Simplification and accepting technology as a means to a better life. As seen in other post-apocalyptic novels, the cycle of war and devastation has reemerged. Three city-states (Denver, Texarkana, and Monterey), which formed after the nation of America was destroyed, are vying for supremacy over one another and the most powerful figure, a scientist named Thon Taddeo, seeks Leibowitz’s scientific documents that he believes will give him the advantage needed to win the next war. Fortunately, the monks prevent Taddeo from taking the documents.

In the final part, “Fiat Voluntas Tua”, or “Let Thy Will Be Done”, set 600 years later, another nuclear war is on the cusp, this time threatening the very existence of the planet
itself. Now, however, space travel has become commonplace, which proves fortunate because the nuclear arsenals in use are far more powerful than those in the twentieth century. Miller’s story challenges the notion that faith can prevent humankind from destroying itself. As they anticipate yet another apocalypse, the monks, along with others chosen for the journey, board a spaceship. They hope to reach another planet, which they pray will allow the rebirth of civilization. Suddenly, the horizon erupts in red flashes, with “the visage of Lucifer” rising skyward “like some titan climbing to its feet after ages of imprisonment on Earth.” The last monk, pausing briefly before entering the spaceship, looks at the mushroom cloud “engulfing a third of the heavens,” then closes the hatch behind him (Miller 1959, p. 337).

Paul Brians, writing in *Science Fiction Studies*, argues that *A Canticle for Leibowitz* illustrates learning about the past, including the evils of nuclear destruction, does not guarantee a better future; rather, “the revival of learning may lead only to another and more apocalyptic war” (Brians 1984, p. 257). Such is the case in Miller’s novel. After many centuries of the Albertian Order of Leibowitz preserving the scientific documents describing the world before the Flame Deluge, the most significant advancement was the development of more powerful nuclear weapons—weapons capable of destroying the planet. Understanding this stark reality and having clearly lost faith in a future on Earth, the monks finally prepare to find a new world.

3. Conclusions

In 1950, at the opening of the decade, a newspaper editorial urged people to have “less concern about the atomic bomb and more concern about our atomic faith,” and to accept the “plain fact, now clearly visible, that from this point on [they] either join the Brotherhood of Man or the Society of Self-Destruction” (Just Visiting Around 1950, p. 1). Additionally, speaking on the importance of faith in countering people’s trepidations about the atomic bomb, the Rev. Alvin Rogness of Mason City, Iowa, expressed the belief that in order to have faith in the future, one needed to have assurance that God had a purpose for every life. “We may sometimes feel that the evil seems to triumph over the good,” Rogness said, “but we must have confidence that in the end right will be the victor” (Rev. Rogness Calls for Faith in the Future 1951, p. 1).

Unfortunately, as the 1950s progressed, many Americans began to lose this confidence. Nat Finney, of the *Minneapolis Tribune*, summed it up by writing, “The America that ultimately awaits atomic attack on its civilian vitals may well be an angry nation, frightened at its inability to adequately defend its homes, and more bitter in hatred of its enemy than ever before in its history” (Finney 1950, p. 4). A 1950 Gallup poll, for example, found that 57 percent of Americans believed an atomic war would occur within five years (Gallup 1955, p. 3). A 1956 Gallup poll reported that 63 percent of respondents believed an H-bomb would be used against the United States; and, even more alarming, only 38 percent expressed complete confidence that their family would survive (“Americans Fear H-Bomb As Lurking Doom”, Gallup 1956, p. 11). This increase in Americans fearing a nuclear war can be attributed, at least in part, to a statement in 1953 by the Federal Civil Defense Administration. The FCDA acknowledged that the Soviet Union could send 400 planes equipped with atomic bombs and cause more than 100,000 casualties with each bomb. Moreover, the Air Force admitted that only 30 percent of the enemy bombers could be stopped (Defense Agency Warns of Soviet Attack 1953, p. 26).

As this paper has argued, Americans were caught between optimism and despair about the new atomic age: wanting to see a future of promise and prosperity but constantly reminded that the future promised only an apocalypse. As Daniel Wojcik writes, “Faith and fatalism are thus interwoven into the fabric of apocalyptic thought: a profound fatalism for a world believed to be irredeemably evil is entwined with the faith for a predetermined, perfect age of harmony and human fulfillment” (Wojcik 1999, p. 4). Expanding on this, Cyndy Hendershot writes, “The atomic age held out a double-edged sword to the American public. Atomic energy was portrayed as a force which could lead postwar society to a
utopian existence, even as the atomic bomb threatened to plunge the world into a horrific” (Hendershot 1966, p. 319). This threat, viewed as very real during the early postwar era, was reinforced by the development of a hydrogen bomb, a thousand times more powerful than the atomic bomb used at Hiroshima, as well as the introduction of intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of delivering mass destruction in minutes rather than hours—two advancements that formed the thematic core in post-apocalyptic science fiction novels, and which also had an impact on America’s religious community. “As the outbreak of the Cold War intensified,” writes Angela Lahr, “the evangelical focus on the end of the world, promises of hope and signs of despair, became important to conservative Protestants who used them to cope with changes beyond their control” (Lahr 2007, p. 21).

A Gallup poll in 1959 found that more than half of Americans surveyed believed Jesus Christ would return to Earth, suggesting, according to Lahr, that “many Americans living in the nuclear age found it easy to accept evangelicalism’s eschatological explanations of world events” (Lahr 2007, p. 17). In contrast, Wojcik argues that despite the surge in church membership during the early postwar era, the acceptance of the inevitable end-of-times persisted. “Religious apocalypticism and its secular counterpart may differ in terms of underlying premises and the details of doomsday,” Wojcik writes, “but the proponents of such beliefs . . . agree that global catastrophe is imminent” (Wojcik 1999, p. 2).

Faith in a peaceful future became increasingly difficult to maintain because of the escalation in tension between the United States and the Soviet Union. As the new decade unfolded, this tension brought the two nations dangerously close to the tipping point for a nuclear war. In June 1961, the Soviet Union demanded that the United States and its allies withdraw their troops from West Berlin, an arrangement dating back to World War II. At the height of the standoff, which finally ended in November 1961, newly elected President John F. Kennedy issued yet another warning of a potential apocalypse. In words similar to those used by President Truman in 1953, Kennedy addressed the Union Nations in September, telling representatives from nations around the world, “Every inhabitant of this planet must contemplate the day when this planet may no longer be habitable . . . The weapons of war must be abolished before they abolish us” (Weart 1988, p. 215). In many respects, these words reflect the underlying message in the post-apocalyptic novels discussed here. From Montag, Winston Smith, and Scott Carey to Gladys Mitchell, Commander Dwight Towers, and the monks in the Order of Leibowitz, all of these protagonists sought a future where the weapons of war would no longer be a threat to their existence and to the existence of the planet, as well as a threat to their faith in the future.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

**References**

Alstin, Zac. 2015. Horror of Limitless Freedom: The Moral Fallout of the Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. August 5. Available online: [https://www.abc.net.au/religion/horror-of-limitless-freedom-the-moral-fallout-of-the-bombings-of/10098014](https://www.abc.net.au/religion/horror-of-limitless-freedom-the-moral-fallout-of-the-bombings-of/10098014) (accessed on 20 May 2021).

Bartter, Martha A. 1988. *The Way to Ground Zero: The Atomic Bomb in American Science Fiction.* New York: Greenwood Press.

Boyer, Paul. 1985. *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age.* New York: Pantheon Books.

Bradbury, Ray. 1953. *Fahrenheit 451.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Brians, Paul. 1984. Nuclear War in Science Fiction, 1945-59. *Science Fiction Studies* 11: 253–63.

Can We Avoid a Suicidal Atomic War? 1954, *The Salt Lake City Tribune,* April 2, p. 12.

Clergymen Condemn Atomic Bomb. 1945, *The Berkshire Evening Eagle,* August 20, p. 3.

Defense Agency Warns of Soviet Attack. 1953, *The Miami News,* February 16, p. 26.

Derleth, August. 1949. Mr. Orwell’s Prophecy ‘Nineteen Eighty-Four’ No Pretty View. *The Capital Times,* July 23, p. 3.

Ellwood, Robert. 1997. *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace: American Religion in a Decade of Conflict.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Finney, Nat. 1950. Panic, Apathy Post Civil Defense Problem. *Star Tribune,* August 21, p. 4.

Gallup, George. 1955. Few U.S. Voters Fear New War. *Arizona Daily,* January 21, p. 3.

Gallup, George. 1956. Americans Fear H-Bomb As Lurking Doom. *The Orlando Sentinel,* July 15, p. 11.
Grant, Barry Keith. 2019. The Incredible Shrinking Man. Available online: https://www.loc.gov/static/programs/national-film-preservation-board/documents/shrinking_man.pdf (accessed on 21 May 2021).

Hendershot, Cyndy. 1966. Darwin and the Atom: Evolution/Devolution Fantasies in The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms, Them! and The Incredible Shrinking Man. Science Fiction Studies 25: 319–35.

Just Visiting Around. 1950, The Hardy Herald, December 21, p. 1.

King, Anna. 1950. Shadow on the Hearth. The Morning Call, September 24, p. 30.

Lahr, Angela. 2007. Millennial Dreams and Apocalyptic Nightmares: The Cold War Origins of Political Evangelicalism. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lisboa, Maria Manual. 2011. The End of the World: Apocalypse and Its Aftermath in Western Culture. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers.

Magat, Dick. 1949. Horrible World of 1984—If Dictatorship Prevails—Painted Vividly in New Book. Dayton Daily News, July 3, p. 31.

Matheson, Richard. 1956. The Shrinking Man. Garden City: Nelson Doubleday.

Mellett, Lowell. 1945. Will Atom Bomb Prevent War Or Stimulate Another War? The Ogden Standard-Examiner, August 14, p. 4.

Merril, Judith. 1950. Shadow on the Hearth. New York: Doubleday & Company.

Miller, Walter, Jr. 1959. A Canticle for Leibowitz. New York: Bantam Books.

Morrison, Philip. 1946. If the Bomb Gets Out of Hand. In One World Or None. London: Latimer House Limited, p. 13.

Nicoll, James. 2021. Just a Little Rain. Available online: https://jamesdavisnicoll.com/review/just-a-little-rain (accessed on 20 May 2021).

Orwell, George. 1949. Nineteen Eighty-Four. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

Pastor Has Faith in Future Despite H-Bombs or War. 1954, Greeley Daily Tribune, August 9, p. 15.

Phillips, H. I. 1954. Credo for This Easter tide: Let Faith Glow, Not Bombs. Democrat and Chronicle, April 16, p. 20.

Pitetti, Connor. 2017. Uses of the End of the World: Apocalypse and Postapocalypse as Narrative Modes. Science Fiction Studies 44: 437–54. [CrossRef]

Plea for Normal Life. 1951, The Kansas City Times, January 15, p. 3.

Poole, Charles. 1950. Book of the Times. The New York Times, June 15, p. 29.

Rev. Rogness Calls for Faith in the Future. 1951, Ames Daily, February 9, p. 1.

Roscoe, Gerald D. 1949. To Madness in 35 Years. The Boston Globe, June 19, p. 109.

Shippey, Tom. 2016. The Cold War in Science Fiction, 1940–1960. In Hard Reading: Learning from Science Fiction. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, pp. 209–28.

Shute, Neville. 1957. On the Beach. New York: William Morrow and Company.

Sisario, Peter. 1970. A Study of the Allusions in Bradbury’s ‘Fahrenheit 451’. The English Journal 59: 201–5, 212. [CrossRef]

Smith, Bruce G. 2010. Book Review: On the Beach by Nevil Shute. March 20. Updated 26 April 2011. Available online: https://www.seattlepi.com/lifestyle/blogcritics/article/Book-Review-On-the-Beach-by-Nevil-Shute-894423.php (accessed on 25 May 2021).

Smolla, Rodney. 2009. The Life of the Mind and a Life of Meaning: Reflections on ‘Fahrenheit 451’. Michigan Law Review 107: 895–912. Spiritual Aid Plan Offered in Raid Event. 1951, The Baltimore Sun, June 14, p. 3.

Truman, Harry S. 1946. Address in Columbus at a Conference of the Federal Council of Churches. March 6. Available online: https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/52/address-columbus-conference-federal-council-churches (accessed on 30 May 2021).

Truman, Harry S. 1953. State of the Union Address. January 7. Available online: https://www.infoplease.com/primary-sources/government/presidential-speeches/state-union-address-harry-s-truman-january-7-1953 (accessed on 30 May 2021).

Weart, Spencer. 1988. Nuclear Fear: A History of Images. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Wojcik, Daniel. 1999. The End of the World As We Know It: Faith, Fatalism and Apocalypse in America. New York: New York University Press.

Yaszek, Lisa. 2008. Galactic Suburbia: Recovering Women’s Science Fiction. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.