

REFLECTIONS

Robert Silverberg

DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF ELECTRIC POPES?

A long time ago I wrote a story called “Good News from the Vatican,” telling of the election of the first robot pope. My friend Terry Carr was starting to assemble material for a new anthology called *Universe*, and he asked me to do a piece for him. I very quickly obliged with a lighthearted little item that fit neatly into Terry’s first issue. “This is the morning everyone has waited for,” the story begins, “when at last the robot cardinal is to be elected pope. There can no longer be any doubt of the outcome. The conclave has been deadlocked for many days between the obstinate advocates of Cardinal Acciuga of Milan and Cardinal Carciofo of Genoa, and word has gone out that a compromise is in the making. All factions now are agreed on the selection of the robot.”

Someone who speaks Italian might have been able to tell, simply from that first paragraph, that I was not being entirely serious. “Acciuga” is Italian for “anchovy.” “Carciofo” is Italian for “artichoke.” These are, let us say, not exactly common surnames in Italy.

But I continued in the same deadpan tone:

“Every era gets the pope it deserves,” Bishop FitzPatrick observed somewhat gloomily at breakfast. “The proper pope for our times is a robot, certainly. At some future date it may be desirable for the pope to be a whale, an automobile, a cat, a mountain.”

I don’t actually believe this to be true. Although I’m not a Roman Catholic myself, I think that in the immediate future and for as long as there is likely to be a Roman Catholic Church, the head of the church is going to be an ordained priest who is a flesh-and-blood human being. We may have a female pope some day (there is a legend that there was one in the Middle Ages, the apocryphal Pope Joan), but a cat, a mountain, a robot—no. All I was doing, though, was telling a science fiction story. I have written a great many stories about things that I believe to be not only highly unlikely but flat-out impossible—time machines, faster-than-light starships, immortality. While I’m writing something, I am willing to suspend my own disbelief for the sake of the story, and readers generally have been willing to go along with me.

And so the story unfolds, told through the eyes of a group of tourists visiting Rome at the time of the papal election. The robot candidate, one of them tells the others, is “a shiny metal box with wheels below and eyes on top”—not even humanoid in form. A rabbi in the group corrects him: not wheels, but treads, “like a tractor has. But I don’t think that treads are spiritually inferior to feet, or, for that matter, to wheels. If I were a Catholic I’d be proud to have a man like that as my pope.”

“Not a man,” Miss Harshaw puts in. “A robot.”

A robot, yes, and we are told that a delegation of 250 Catholic robots from Iowa is about to leave for Rome to hail the new pontiff. “There can be no doubt,” Bishop FitzPatrick says, “that his election will bring a great many people of synthetic origin into the fold of the Church.”

Within the Vatican, the voting proceeds; white smoke arises from the chimney of the Sistine Chapel, a sign that a decision has been reached; and then the new pope appears on the balcony of St. Peter’s, with the sunlight glinting on a forehead with the brightness of polished steel, and he pronounces his benediction, announces that he will take the name of Sixtus the Seventh (a small inside joke of my own, too complicated to explain here) and activates his levitator jets and rises above the crowded

piazza to salute the assembled faithful. I was, of course, just having a bit of fun. Terry Carr, in his introduction to the story, said that "'Good News from the Vatican' is indeed a silly story, but silliness has a legitimate function in art, and it's also a clever story. . . . I think this is my own favorite story in this book." Somewhat to my surprise, my amiable little spoof went on to win a Nebula in 1972, was a nominee for the Hugo, and has turned up in any number of anthologies over the years. Evidently it was rather more than the fluffy item I wrote in a day and a half in the winter of 1971.

And now we learn, once again, that life will imitate art, if only one waits long enough. Not long ago Gabriele Trovato, a roboticist and associate professor at Waseda University in Japan, announced that he has developed a robot he calls SanTO, which stands for Sanctified Theomorphic Operator, which is capable of speaking with humans in need of religious counseling and offering them appropriate spiritual advice. Professor Trovato presented SanTO at an international conference on human-robot interaction in 2018 during a discussion of whether robots can perform religious tasks and perhaps—a really startling concept—even become divine in their own right. "What if robots could do more than just assist someone in performing a religious task and actually become sacred objects themselves?" he asked, a notion that I find personally hard to grasp and that I think the Church would immediately find blasphemous. But not so: a group of scholars from Pontificia Universidad Catolica del Peru showed up at the conference, not to burn Trovato at the stake (as would surely have happened five hundred years earlier) but to help him explore the theological consequences of introducing robots into the procedures of the Church. That such a concept could be taken seriously by any Catholic scholastics, even for a moment, is a sign that we are indeed living in the twenty-first century, which I have suspected for some time now.

Of course, the Church is taking a cautious approach to the coming of what can properly be called a *deus ex machina*. The Church is always cautious: that is how it has survived for more than twenty centuries. Trovato says he has discussed his robot with several Vatican officials. They find the idea of a Catholic robot quite interesting but express uneasiness about allowing a robot endowed with artificial intelligence to give advice to parishioners or offer interpretations of Scripture, because those are functions that belong exclusively to the Church, and no one, Trovato included, is talking about ordaining SanTO as a priest . . . at least, not yet.

Nor should we imagine anything that looks like R2-D2 or C-3PO sitting in the confessional booth. Trovato's robot, he says, will have "the appearance and identity of a familiar religious entity or icon. The sacred appearance can be seen as a mask—which covers the robotic component—for a device that will perform some service that can range from keeping [worshippers] company during prayer to even performing catechesis, teaching positive values of a certain religion."

I'm not sure what he means by this, except that when in operation SanTO won't in fact look like something from a pulp-magazine cover, but also will not be disguised as a human priest. What he intends to do, he declares, is to create "a new object that retains some design features inherent to another already existing object (for example, making a book-reading app interface look like a wooden bookshelf). In our case, it translates to hiding the robotic component." I suppose we'll have to wait until the Vatican gives SanTO its blessing to find out what Trovato has in mind—surely not a talking crucifix, or an interactive reliquary, or some other such object based on a familiar type of sacred artifact. He specifies that the "theomorphic" robot must be something that believers "can feel at ease with, and even hold in high regard." My guess is that SanTO will be a hard sell in small parish churches in Sicily or Quebec, and may not even be easy to put over in Manhattan's St. Patrick's Cathedral. But we'll see.

The use of robots in religious contexts isn't something that Gabriele Trovato intends

to limit to Catholicism. He's already devised a robotic Daruma—a Japanese good-luck talisman linked to Shinto and Buddhism—and is thinking of applying his roboticist skills to Islam and Hinduism. Perhaps he'll get somewhere with Hinduism, a polytheistic religion that has readily absorbed deities of all sorts from other religions of Asia, and is quite comfortable with an elephant-headed god, one with blue skin, a monkey-god, and a goddess with many arms. In our own day India has become quite the technology-oriented nation, and it seems to me that it might not be at all difficult for Hindu theologians to add a robot to the pantheon, without even the need to disguise its mechanical nature. But Islam is a deeply conservative creed, so sternly monotheistic that it abjures holy images of any sort, and I would not expect to have robot imams turning up in the mosques very soon.

Life is full of surprises, though. The Roman Catholic Church has shown itself remarkably open to change in the past fifty years, since the startling revolution in procedures and dogmas thrust upon it by Pope John XXIII at the Second Vatican Council in 1962. And, since the current Pope Francis has recently been complaining of a developing shortage of qualified priests, we may very well find Gabriele Trovato's theomorphic robots helping out in church in various ways in the years just ahead. Life does indeed sometimes imitate art. Recall the Bishop FitzPatrick of my 1971 story saying that "at some future date it may be desirable for the pope to be a whale, an automobile, a cat, a mountain," and compare it with Gabriele Trovato's recent statement before a group of electronics engineers that "we have to investigate how humanity expresses the divine across religions. The answer is that across world religions there are divine humans, divine animals, divine objects. Therefore a theomorphic robot is a robot that takes the appearance of an existing divine entity."

There we are: the *deus ex machina*. With the coming of SanTO, the advent of Pope Sixtus the Seventh suddenly seems not all that far in the future.