God, Science, and Delusion

A chat with Arthur C. Clarke

Arthur C. Clarke is known across the world for his books, television programs, and movies. Free Inquiry *Deputy Editor Matt Cherry visited the science fiction author, who is a member of the International Academy of Humanism, in Sri Lanka, the beautiful tropical island that has been Clarke's home for nearly four decades. His house, in the capitol of Columbo, is filled with spectacular wall-sized NASA photos, reminiscent of some of the shots in his film* 2001: A Space Odyssey. *In the personal study where he was interviewed, Clarke was surrounded by books and signed photos—ranging from actress Elizabeth Taylor to astronaut Buzz Aldrin—that reflect Clarke's prominent roles in the very different worlds of science and entertainment. He talked to* Free Inquiry *about mankind, morality, and religion.*

FREE INQUIRY: This is a rare opportunity. Thanks for talking with us.

ARTHUR C. CLARKE: Rare indeed. My agent will probably shoot me for granting this interview. I turn down interviews all the time, but for FREE INQUIRY, I'm happy to make an exception.

FI: Our readers have some familiarity with your views and in particular your very strong emphasis on the use of science in understanding the natural world. But could you say something about your views on moral issues?

CLARKE: One of the great tragedies of mankind is that morality has been hijacked by religion. So now people assume that religion and morality have a necessary connection. But the basis of morality is really very simple and doesn't require religion at all. It's this: "Don't do unto anybody else what you wouldn't like to be done to you." It seems to me that that's all there is to it.

The other issue is, why can't humans live up to this principle? Why is it that people can't act as human beings should? I'm appalled by what we all see on the news every day—massacres, atrocities, injustices, outrages of all kinds. When I see what's happening, I sometimes wonder if the human race deserves to survive.

FI: In recent years a lot of ethical issues have arisen from advances in technology, as they have, for example, in cloning.

CLARKE: Yes, and such issues will continue to arise at an increasing pace. They will challenge all of us—but especially those who hold rigid moral outlooks like those found in most religions.

By the way, I was—in a strange way—involved in a cloning project. There was a project afoot to send me into outer space along with a lot of other people. Not the whole me, though—just a hair from my head, while I still had some. It was quite a serious project by a company that launched a lot of spacecraft. The idea was that maybe in a hundred million years or so, an advanced civilization would find this little space capsule containing my hair, an Arthur C. Clarke would be cloned from it, and I would thus pop up in another galaxy in the distant future. Interesting thought.

FI: Yes, but perhaps a little disturbing.

CLARKE: Well, it's better than the Celestes Project, in which you have to be dead before your ashes are sent into space.

FI: You have written a great deal about possible technologies of the future. For example, you're well known for thinking up the idea of geostationary orbit. But as we look into the next century or even the next millennium, what do you see as the big technological changes that are likely to alter the direction of the human species or will present major new dilemmas or problems to the human race?

CLARKE: I think most of the major changes will be biological, involving advances in DNA research and technologies, among other things. But there's also potentially revolutionary research going on in the physical sciences. The thing that I'm most interested in at the moment is the so-called Infinite Energy solution—the possibility of finding new ways of tapping into virtually limitless sources of energy. It's been about ten years since cold fusion was touted and then laughed at. But since then there's been a groundswell of scientific opinion and lots of experimentation suggesting that maybe there's something important going on, that maybe we can solve our energy needs once and for all. This field is subject to hype and disappointment, yet I'm seeing evidence now that hints that we may be on the verge of an energy breakthrough.

This would cause a total transformation of our society, an

end of the fossil-fuel age and all the geopolitical implications of that. No more worry about global warming; now we start worrying about global cooling. So an energy revolution is the biggest joker in the pack at the moment.

FI: Do you think that the breakthrough will be in cold fusion or something different?

CLARKE: I don't know whether it will come in cold fusion or warm fission or something else. I suspect it might be something totally unexpected—perhaps a way of tapping into quantum fluctuations of space—zero-point energy, as it's sometimes called. Now, this new finding may turn out to be an experimental laboratory curiosity that can't be scaled up. But remember, nuclear power started as a small laboratory curiosity.

FI: But what about that giant leap into the future that you foresaw so many years ago—space travel?

CLARKE: Yes, I'm still intensely interested in that, of course. And the whole field is very exciting now—with all these fleets of robot explorers to come, the new space station going to be assembled, new forms of space propulsion. There will be a big space conference involving all the top people at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration this spring. I'm recording a video address to them soon.

FI: Have you been disappointed by the lack of progress in the space program since the 1960s?

CLARKE: Good heavens no! I've seen far more than I ever imagined would happen. I mean, I never dreamed we would have explored the solar system as we have. It's the most exciting time. Of course, I'm sorry for the youngsters who thought they'd be flying into space by now, and you know that manned—or womanned—space flight has been rather limited, but efforts are still being made and will continue in the next century.

I'm astonished by what we've seen. I've got this beautiful panoramic three-dimensional painting of Mars based on Martian photos. It's 30 feet wide. You can pick out every pebble on the Martian landscape. And who'd have dreamed you could do that?

FI: What are your thoughts regarding the future development of something else you've often written about—religion?

CLARKE: Well, I suspect that religion is a necessary evil in the childhood of our particular species. And that's one of the interesting things about contact with other intelligences: we could see what role, if any, religion plays in their development. I think that religion may be some random by-product of mammalian reproduction. If that's true, would non-mammalian aliens have a religion? Anyway, that's one of the nice things about the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) project; if it is successful, we could perhaps answer such questions one day. I've just seen *Contact*, by my late friend Carl Sagan. It's quite an impressive film that offers hints on this subject.

FI: If religion does indeed represent an immature stage of humanity, do you see any prospects for humanity growing up?

CLARKE: Yes, there is the possibility that humankind can outgrown its infantile tendencies, as I suggested in *Childhood's End*. But it is amazing how childishly gullible humans are. There are, for example, so many different religions—each of them claiming to have the truth, each saying that their truths are clearly superior to the truths of others—how can someone possibly take any of them seriously? I mean, that's insane.

And such insanity concerns me, especially now that waves of lunacy are washing over the United States and the world in the form of millennial cults. *Time* magazine recently reported on them. The crazy thing is, according to traditional Christian dogma, the *real* millennium was four years ago, for Jesus was supposedly born circa 5 B.C.E.—so it's already 2004! Apparently some millennial nuts are blithely ignoring their own dogma.

FI: Do you see any value at all in the various religions?

CLARKE: Though I sometimes call myself a cryptp-Buddhist, Buddhism is not a religion. Of those around at the moment, Islam is the only one that has any appeal to me. But, of course, Islam has been tainted by other influences. The Muslims are behaving like Christians, I'm afraid.

FI: What appeals to you in Islam?

CLARKE: Historically, Islam had a great deal of tolerance for other views and offered the world its priceless wisdom in the form of astronomy and algebra. And, as you know, Islam helped rescue Western civilization from the Dark Ages by preserving classical texts and transmitting them to the West. We, on the other hand, burned the library at Alexandria. If Islam hadn't fallen into internecine warfare and had gone on to conquer the rest of Europe, we'd have avoided a thousand years of Christian barbarism.

FI: Your television series, *The Mysterious World of Arthur C. Clarke*, is still a classic. It appeals to the human yearning for mystery but also shows how to apply some scientific principles to get answers. Do you feel that the human yearning for unexplained mysteries will always be greater than the need for scientific explanation? That is, will people always reject scientific explanations if they can have an inspiring mystery or wonder?

CLARKE: There does seem to be a tendency to do that. People get very exasperated when people like James Randi show how some trick is done or reveal the true, naturalistic explanation. They say, "No, the trick is really paranormal." How can you argue with people who want so badly to believe?

Harry Houdini and Arthur Conan Doyle had a friendly argument about that. Conan Doyle was convinced—and tried to convince Houdini—that Houdini did his tricks with supernatural powers. Somewhere I have my door key bent by Uri Geller. I don't rule out the possibility of all sorts of remarkable mental powers—there are even things like telekinesis and so forth. And I'm sure that there are many things we don't know about. But they've got to be examined skeptically before they're accepted.

An example is reincarnation, which everyone in Sri Lanka believes in. An American, Dr. Stevenson, has done a lot of papers on that, and has produced studies of about 50 cases that are hard to explain. But the problem with reincarnation is that it's hard to imagine what the storage medium for past lives would be. Not to mention the input-output device. I hesitate to rule it out completely, but I'd need pretty definite proof. fi