President John F. Kennedy, with his famous 1961 speech at Rice University, set in motion the publicly-funded endeavor to send a man to the Moon and return him safely to the Earth. The space race that followed was a central chapter in the history of twentieth century science. The early space program was an enormously risky scientific endeavor, which combined scientific pursuit with a nationalist goal. Unlike the Manhattan Project, another publicly-funded scientific endeavor which aimed to build the world’s first atomic weapon, the American space program would take place fully in the eye of the American public. Every step and misstep by NASA would be witnessed by millions of Americans, who would collectively look toward the skies as the first men left Earth.

This summer, I explored the complex relationship between technology and religion, using as my primary lens early American manned spaceflight—specifically the effect of religious imagery on the Apollo Program. My goal was to understand spaceflight not as merely a moment in the history of technology, or a chapter in the political history of the cold war, but as a central moment in the lives of common Americans, who saw something in spaceflight which transcended its political or technological aims. First and foremost, I studied the available scholarship on religion and technology, to understand how religious narratives and religious imagery have been used to both explain the development of technology, as well as used to justify the use (or criticize the use) of various technologies. In my analysis of the Apollo Program, I focused on three central events: the deaths of the astronauts in the Apollo 1 fire, the first manned voyage to the Moon on Apollo 8, and the first Moon landing on Apollo 11. For these events, I analyzed the various media reports, as well as applicable congressional hearings, lawsuits, and memoirs, in an attempt to understand the impact of religion and religious narratives on the Apollo Program.

I found that religion was fundamentally linked with spaceflight in both explicit and implicit ways. Besides the overt use of religious rhetoric—such words as “mission,” “prayer,” and “heaven” were all commonplace in contemporary accounts of manned spaceflight—there were explicit mentions of religion in such events as the reading of Genesis 1 onboard Apollo 8 during their telecast on Christmas Eve in 1968. I also studied the impact of a variety of religious images, including those related to manifest destiny, sacrifice, martyrdom, and of religious redemption. I analyzed the Apollo missions through the lens of other historians of science—who had not applied their theses directly to spaceflight. I do not believe these various narratives—such as the martyr narrative which emerged in primary accounts immediately following the Apollo 1 tragedy—were random or out of place. Instead, they were manifestations of a long and deep-rooted historical connection between religious images and modern technology.

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