Burning the Good Book:
Religion and ideology in Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*

Henric Frenning
ENGX54
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Centre for Languages and Literature
Lund University
Supervisor: Cian Duffy
Abstract

The literary genre of dystopian fiction grew out of the larger science fiction genre during the first half of the 20th century. Distinctive of dystopian fiction is a tendency towards allegory. Books in the genre use allegory to make statements on a wide range of subjects. Dystopian novels often tackle political and religious issues, as well as societal issues more generally. Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) most obviously deals with the rise of new media—television in particular—and the potential for manipulation of the populace inherent within this new cultural medium. There are also strong religious themes in *Fahrenheit 451*, however, and the book includes many references to the Bible. Religious metaphors are also tied to new media at several points throughout the book. This essay explores the representation, in *Fahrenheit 451*, of religions which exist in our world—primarily Christianity. The theories of Foucault and Althusser on ideology and religion are also applied to the government which rules the United States in the future which the book depicts, and the new media which is under the control of that government. This is done in order to examine the ways in which the ideology of that government, and the way in which it operates, makes it a kind of ‘religion’. Ultimately, the conclusion is drawn that Bradbury celebrates the cultural aspects of religion, and generally depicts Christianity in a favorable light. Simultaneously, he uses the new ‘religion’ of state-run new media to illustrate the danger religion can pose when it is taken to an extreme, and when used as a tool of control and manipulation by the wrong people.
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Introduction

This essay explores the representation of religion in Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). The ways in which religion is present in the language and narrative of Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* is examined, and that presence is related to the context, in terms of the time and place, in which the book was written. The religious zeitgeist of 1950s America, as well as similar dystopian fiction written at that time, is thus included in the discussion in order to provide further context. A brief exploration of the concepts of religion and ideology, and the differences and similarities between them, are also included so as to form the basis of an examination of any potential new ‘religions’ in the book, meaning ones which do not exist in a recognizable form in our time and our world. In relation to the above, the role which religion in both old and new forms plays in the narrative is explored. This is done in order to argue that Bradbury celebrates the cultural aspects of religion—especially religious literature—whilst also warning against both the incredible power religion can have over people and against the ‘false gods’ of new media.

*Fahrenheit 451* takes place in the United States in a distant future. This future is separated from the present by more than one nuclear world war and several decades, at the very least. In this future, new media has replaced books to such an extent that the government has started to view these as dangerous objects. This government has started to both spread this view amongst the common people and to take physical action against the very books themselves, as well as against those who possess them. The people of this future world live such sheltered and comfortable lives, absorbing only what is handed to them on the silver platters of television broadcasts, that they have become like parrots and drones; they are uninterested in any original thought or in forming any meaningful relationships with their fellow humans, whilst only repeating what they are told. This extreme comfort has nurtured an environment of intellectual malaise and a hostility towards any and all information which might provoke reflection upon deeper issues. This notion is embodied in the profession of the novel’s protagonist: Guy Montag. Montag is a fireman, but unlike the firemen of our world, he and his colleagues do not put out fires. In fact, systems for automatically putting out such things are incorporated in every building, thus rendering traditional firemen obsolete. The firemen of *Fahrenheit 451* start fires instead. More specifically, these men are tasked with burning the books, newspapers etc., of those people found to be in illegal possession of such items.
Every single work of literature ever written, aside from comic books and magazines containing the very shortest and least thought-provoking of articles—vehicles of entertainment rather than information—is in fact banned in the world of *Fahrenheit 451*. This ban can thus be said to apply to everything which would, in Bradbury’s time, have been considered ‘high literature’, as well as most other texts. The ban includes even the Bible, the burning of which would today, and historically, be considered by many an act of heresy. This holds especially true for the generally very religious citizens of the United States of America in our time, as well as the time in which the book was written. As it is the future of that country which Bradbury ultimately attempts to depict, there is also an extreme irony to the holy Bible being the subject, albeit one of many, of tomecide, or book-burning. This is especially true as it is one performed by at least nominally god-fearing people. The act of book-burning is one which has been encouraged by the followers of the ‘Good Book’ many a time throughout history, but then directed at other books/works of literature. It is also often performed by new regimes, or new religious movements, upon the central texts of the regimes/movements which they replace.

There are numerous references to the Bible throughout *Fahrenheit 451*, and it ends up becoming a guiding beacon of sorts for the main character. At the same time, the dystopian future America portrayed in the book is controlled and pacified through an ideology supported by new media, television, which operates in a manner analogous to religion in many ways. This, the ideology of the state, through its televised propaganda, seems to have incorporated the religions of old in its machinery. The Gods of old—or at the very least Jesus Christ—appear on television in watered-down and product-hawking forms, having become commercialized tools of propaganda and control.

The background section of this essay will contextualize *Fahrenheit 451*, and will thus include a discussion of the genre of dystopian fiction as it existed in the mid-20th century. This section will also discuss the general zeitgeist of the time in which Bradbury wrote *Fahrenheit 451*—which was first published in 1953—as this ‘time spirit’ would likely have influenced the writing of the book. This section will also include a discussion of how religion is defined, and what differentiates religion and ideology. This part of the discussion will briefly summarize the writings of Foucault and Althusser on these subjects, and will also include a brief summary of the history of book-burning, and the ideological ties and implications of that act.

The first part of the essay’s main body of text will be an analysis of the many references to the Bible made throughout the book, their significance, as well as the potential reasons for their inclusion in the novel. The second part will discuss how the novel presents new media, as
well as the ways in which certain aspects of the society of *Fahrenheit 451* has taken on traits of organized religion. New media has in so doing taken the place of the older faiths in many ways, and has commercialized and adopted the remnants of them into its machinery. The discussion in these two parts will largely build upon the definitions and the contexts presented in the background section.

Halabu, Sisario, and others, have written about Christianity in Fahrenheit 451, if not very extensively. The two concepts of religion and ideology—which are naturally linked—have been studied in great depth, however, prominently by Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault. In this essay, I attempt to present a fuller picture of Fahrenheit 451’s representation, and depiction, of religion. This is done by incorporating the theories of the two aforementioned philosophers, and applying them to the ideology of the state in the book’s universe, whilst also studying the role which Christianity plays in the narrative.

Ultimately, I will illustrate how the concept of ‘Religion’ in the novel is thus portrayed as a part of the oppressive, mind-numbing and adversarial society of the future United States, whilst also playing an important part in the salvation and intellectual rebirth of the main character. It does this by acting as a structural link to the past. Religious imagery is also used in essentially non-religious contexts, and linked to the non-religiously motivated actions of characters. *Fahrenheit 451* ultimately laments the loss of religious culture in a world in which religion is solely the domain of the government, which is itself actively anti-cultural in nature aside from those cultural expressions which are under its own complete control—new media in general and television in particular. Bradbury’s work is neither fully antagonistic towards religion, nor fully sympathetic towards it. Instead, the book warns against the danger which aspects of religion can pose when used in the wrong way by the wrong people, directing its critique of religion not towards Christianity, but rather the ‘religion’ of the government and the new media in *Fahrenheit*’s world. *Fahrenheit 451* is also a defense of literature as an artform, prompted by the threat against literature which new media was perceived as posing by many. In *Fahrenheit 451*, Bradbury uses the very thing he defends—literature—to lend weight to that defense.
Background

The Dystopian genre grew out of the science fiction genre, of which it can thus be considered a sub-genre, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The futuristic writings of H.G. Wells depict both utopian societies, where technology and progress have enhanced the lives of human beings, and dystopian societies, where the opposite has happened. In these dystopian societies, people have lost their liberties and have become slaves to whatever futuristic innovations, be they technological or ideological in nature, they have created. Wells’ stories are some of the earliest in the genre, and later writers owe much to him (Huntington 123).

It is in the very nature of dystopian fiction to be a warning against some extreme form of something in the culture and way of life of the author’s current time and location which he or she deem to be potentially harmful. Government surveillance in George Orwell’s 1984 (1948), fanatical American religiosity in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale (1985) and new media in Fahrenheit 451 are all examples of this. These novels all depict worlds where these respective aspects of society have been taken to such extremes, and allowed to have such a large impact on both individual people and society as a whole, that they have severely restricted the rights and liberties of the general population. It is not necessarily the basic concepts themselves which are portrayed in a negative light, but the forms they take if allowed to run rampant. A dystopian novel is thus by its very nature allegorical. The characters, places, and events in such novels represent occurrences in the real world, and are written to convey aforementioned warning against a particular aspect of our world and/or society.

Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World (1932) is a prime example of a dystopian novel in which an essentially positive thing—humanity’s quest for ever greater comfort—has ultimately had a negative impact on the individual, infantilizing and stripping away any ability to think in critical and artistic terms (King 820). There are echoes of these same concepts in Fahrenheit 451, which also portrays a world where humans live comfortable lives but are worse off for it, at least on a mental level. Bradbury specifically ties the decline of human rationality, intelligence, and even morality to the decline in literature as the dominant cultural medium.

At the same time, the anti-technological message of Fahrenheit 451, or at the very least its cautiously conservative attitude in regard to progress, also seems a natural reaction to the quite literally world-shattering new weapons which were dropped on Japan only a few years
before *Fahrenheit 451* was written. That mankind has a potentially inherent appetite for destruction is not a particularly controversial opinion, especially not after the First World War, but after World War II it was suddenly clear to everyone that this appetite could eventually, if allowed to run rampant, swallow the world. Wholesale destruction of the planet was suddenly a very real threat, with the advent of nuclear warfare. An anti-technological message is typical of dystopian, or anti-utopian, literature (Watt 72-73). Since technology is one of the most obvious signs of change in the world, as well as the actual source of many social changes, it is unsurprising that it plays an important role in a genre of literature which centers around warning against potential futures. In broad terms, a dystopian novel’s antagonist can be said to be an exaggeration, a caricature, of something lifted from the author’s present. That villain is naturally not the only influence of contemporary society on such a book, nor is it necessarily the only issue being tackled.

*Fahrenheit 451* is, due to its inclusion of those common aspects mentioned above, an archetypical dystopian novel in many ways. However, its specific focus on literature, as well as its many allusions to religion, is what separates it from many of its predecessors, contemporaries, and successors in the genre. *Fahrenheit 451* revolves mainly around new media replacing, or displacing, books. It is this development which has allowed the government depicted in the book to manipulate the populace and to enforce their ideology and the control which comes with it. It is a defense of literature against those forms of entertainment which are perceived as seeking to replace it. This is the most obvious interpretation of the book, and is certainly one of its main themes. However, *Fahrenheit 451* also has clear, if less overt, religious themes. It is on these themes that this essay will mainly focus. The religious aspect is entwined with the book-burning aspect through the central role which the Bible plays in the narrative, due to the main character’s eventual theft and possession of a copy of that particular book. Of course, due to the Bible being the best-selling book of all time, it would not be unreasonable to assume that the inclusion of the Bible in *Fahrenheit 451* is simply due to it being a prime example of literature. However, as will be shown later in this essay, the religious allusions and references are numerous, and they go far beyond mere mention of Christianity’s holy book.

‘Religion’ is a broad and constantly changing concept, however. Thus, in order to better understand the way in which that concept is handled in *Fahrenheit 451*, the religious zeitgeist of 1950s America, the time and place in which the book was written, needs to be discussed. Unlike in Europe, where religiosity dwindled after the Second World War, religion managed to maintain its grip on both American politics and the everyday life of the American people during
that same period. The reasons behind this religiosity, and its upsurge during the 1950s, have been theorized as having many different causes (Allitt 453). Regardless, religion, in the form of Christianity, became involved in political struggles during this time. This happened in spite of the strict secular nature of the American state, as the Christian religion was elevated as a counterpoint to communism, the spread of which throughout the world at this time frightened many. Some saw communism as a “substitute religion” and a twisted mockery of Christianity (454).

Religion is also, by its very nature, strongly connected with the concept of ideology. A religion is an ideology, but an ideology is not necessarily a religion. The border between the two concepts is often blurry, but they are both central to many dystopian novels, Fahrenheit 451 included. Books in the dystopian genre often depict worlds in which an authoritarian regime has gained an inordinate amount of control over society through some twisted use of one ideology or another. Sometimes that ideology is completely based around a religion, such as the totalitarian Christian theonomy which rules the future United States in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale (1985).

Whilst one could attempt to draw a line between religion and ideology by pointing to the supposedly divine origins of a religion’s teachings compared to the more mundane ones of ideologies such as communism, Confucianism etc., the ways in which religions and ideologies operate are strikingly similar. Traits of the former can be seen in the latter and vice versa. Religious traits can also consciously be adopted by the promoters of an ideology, in order to legitimize it. For example, the pastoral metaphor of God as a shepherd and his followers as the metaphorical cattle (Foucault 138), can easily be transposed to the state. This metaphor is closely connected with the Abrahamic religions. If the state is perceived as the shepherd of the populace, its control over that populace comes naturally, regardless of any perceived divinity, or lack thereof. Foucault claims that it was within the Jewish faith that this pastoral theme was “developed and intensified”, but that it was only God who was named as Shepherd of the people in a positive sense. The one exception to this rule is king David. When the word Shepherd is applied to other leaders, it is most often done in a negative context. (137)

Althusser claims that a key trait of ‘religious ideology’ is that it addresses individuals, rather than groups. It does so, however, in order to transform the individual into a subject, a part of a larger hierarchy which retains a nominal yet ultimately pointless individuality and personal identity. Althusser calls this “interpellation”. The individual is told who he/she is, and what his/her place in the world is (Althusser 48-52). The relationship between Mildred Montag,
the protagonist of *Fahrenheit 451*’s television-addicted wife, and ‘the family’, i.e. the manifestation of governmental control which speaks to the population through ‘interactive’ television shows, echoes this claim of Althusser’s (Bradbury 30). Mildred Montag’s inability to fully grasp her position in society is also reminiscent of the notion of ‘False Consciousness’, a concept within Marxist theory which states that members of the lower classes “misperceive their real position in society” and “misunderstand their genuine interests” within that society (“False consciousness”). Her relationship with ‘the family’ also touches upon religion as both a cultural and a political force, rather than one which is exclusively political, and one which can serve as both a tool to effect and to inhibit social change (Williams 373-374). The interplay between these two aspects of religion is complex, and both are relevant to the portrayal of religion in *Fahrenheit 451*. These aspects, along with Althusser’s definition of religion, will be discussed in greater detail later in this essay.

The act of book-burning, also known as ‘biblioclasm’ or ‘tomecide’, is also closely connected to both ideology in general, and religion in particular. It is an act which is performed by an ideological faction in order to suppress thoughts and ideas seen as threatening to the status quo which this faction seeks to maintain, or in order to tear down old institutions which can then be replaced with those which the faction performing the act control. It is “a signal that social discord has progressed to a critical point and that the foundations of modern civilization are at risk” (Knuth 2-3). This definition seems somewhat at odds with the role which biblioclasm plays in the world of *Fahrenheit 451*, in which the act is part of the accepted status quo rather than a desperate attempt to maintain it, having become tied to the established and respected profession of ‘Fireman’.

**Remnants of the ‘old-time religion’**

*Fahrenheit 451* takes place in North America in a not-so-distant future, and was written during the 1950s in that same part of the world. It is thus unsurprising that Christianity, among all the religions of the world, is the one to which the book most often refers. Any mention of ‘God’ can be understood from its context to be a reference to the Christian God, or at the very least to be some verbal device which, although devoid of any meaning beyond lending power to a phrase or statement, stems from the nominally Christian culture of the speaker. If nothing else, this is proven by the similar usage of ‘Christ’ and ‘Lord’ as common exclamations in the
everyday speech of characters in the novel. Jesus also exists in a more commercialized form on television, selling products and generally being amiable but vacuous:

“[…] Lord, how they’ve changed it in our ‘parlours’ these days. Christ is one of the “family” now. I often wonder if God recognized His own son the way we’ve dressed him up, or is it dressed him down? He’s a regular peppermint stick now, all sugar-crystal and saccharine when he isn’t making veiled references to certain commercial products that every worshipper absolutely needs.” (Bradbury 106)

The Bible itself, and more specifically the book of Ecclesiastes, also plays an important part in the narrative. As Guy Montag, the main character, turns from the anti-book sentiments which he has perpetrated through his job as a book-burning ‘fireman’, the Bible is one of the first books to come into his possession, and he eventually memorizes part of it, that part being Ecclesiastes. Montag ends up taking on the role of ‘being’ Ecclesiastes upon joining a group which aims to preserve literature by storing books in their memories, becoming a keeper of that particular book upon his memorization of it (Bradbury 193). The book ends with Montag thinking about the words of Ecclesiastes, and what part of it seems most appropriate for him to ‘read’ aloud to his companions, in order to lighten their hearts (Bradbury 210-211).

Other parts of the Bible also play important roles in the story. A reference is made to the “Lilies of the field” (King James’ Bible, Matthew 6:28), when Guy Montag struggles to memorize as much of the Bible as he can whilst on his way to meet with Faber (Bradbury 102-103), an old ex-professor who has seen society slide into its current state of anti-intellectualism and television-worship during his lifetime. The parable of the lilies of the field tells us that we should not worry, and to leave everything to God, who will provide for us as he does for the lilies growing tall out on the fields. There is an irony to the inclusion of this passage in a book which condemns a society which has made its people intellectually slack, with minds devoid of deeper thought. Leaving everything to God would seem in many ways to be exactly the same thing as giving up one’s inquisitive nature and thirst for knowledge in exchange for a comfortable, if monotonous, life under the thumb of an authoritarian regime which keeps its citizens sedate through propagandistic television. An argument could be made that the biblical message forms a contrast with the commercial for a toothpaste—“Denham’s Dentifrice”—on the train, which in its appeal to personal vanity is symbolic of the highly commercialized and superficial world of Fahrenheit 451 (Sisario 205), and which intrudes upon Montag’s thoughts
in the same scene (Bradbury 102-103). The contrast seems to apply only if one takes the commercial at face value, however. It is indeed symbolic of commercialization, which stands in contrast to the biblical message, but it is also a symptom of the larger problem which is the authoritarian regime mentioned above. This regime mirrors rather than contrasts with the message of Christianity, and more specifically the meaning of Matthew’s floral parable.

The book of Job is also referenced, and read aloud by Faber to Montag in order to help with the latter’s memorization of the Bible (Bradbury 120). The tale of Job is one of the Bible’s most famous stories, and revolves around the titular character. Job is tested by God, who takes away all of his wealth and kills all of his children. God does this to find out if Job’s faith is dependent upon his blessings, or if it will remain strong through hardship and suffering. This allusion is difficult to tie to any of the major themes in the story, in the way one can with the parable of the lilies. Instead, it applies more directly to Guy Montag’s own situation, as it is made at a point in the story where he is about to face a series of trials. Like Job, Montag has to ‘keep his faith’—faith in the righteousness of his cause in this case—whilst going through personal suffering. Job is mentioned again later on, as he pops into the thoughts of Montag, along with Ruth—another biblical figure—and Shakespeare (Bradbury 136). Ruth is the main character of the Old Testament book of Ruth. She converts to Judaism, and is thus a symbol for people who are Jewish by choice rather than by birth. Like Ruth, Montag makes an active choice as he opts to pursue learning through literature, rather than accepting the ideology which is passively imprinted upon him by the state through television and other new media. Job and Ruth being mentioned along with Shakespeare firmly establishes the value of the Bible as literature, but also takes away any conventional sacrality of that text. That is, unless one looks at it the other way around, and chooses to regard all literature as sacred. In Fahrenheit 451, there is certainly a case to be made for the latter viewpoint.

At the very end of the book, Montag thinks of a passage from the book of Revelation, parts of which he has also memorized in order to be its keeper:

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 211)

This is, once again, an allusion which can be applied directly to the unfolding story of Fahrenheit 451. At the moment Montag recites this passage in his mind, the world lies in ruins
around him and his companions. They walk towards “the city” (211), where they will seek a healing of their nation and society, through intellectual rebirth. This too can be read as a biblical reference, this ‘city of rebirth’ being reminiscent of the ‘New Jerusalem’—a rebuilt Jerusalem which is to be constructed during a future of prosperity and glory—which the Israelites are promised in the biblical book of Ezekiel.

There are also non-biblical intertextual references in the book, which yet carry strong religious overtones. The inclusion of these particular references in the text are likely deliberate on the part of Bradbury, who had all of the world’s literature to draw from. First and foremost, Matthew Arnold’s poem “Dover Beach” (1867), which the main character of Guy Montag reads aloud to his wife and a couple of her friends (Bradbury 129-130), is often interpreted as being about a perceived loss of faith, humanity and love amongst fellow humans in the latter half of the 19th century. It is not difficult to apply this theme to the world of Fahrenheit 451. This is a world of instant gratification, in which a mentality which discourages any deeper thoughts and musings on the state of the world, the state of one’s own life, and the state in the sense of the government is widespread. This mentality in turn suppresses the individuality, as well as the emotional and intellectual freedom, of the people.

Another religiously tinged reference comes from the mouth of a woman who gets burned by the firemen along with her books (Bradbury 49). The woman quotes the last words of one Hugh Latimer (c. 1487 –1555), a man who was burnt at the stake for heresy in the 16th century (“Hugh Latimer”). Beatty, Guy Montag’s superior in the fireman organization and one of the book’s main antagonists, repeats the same quote a few pages later:

“We shall this day light such a candle, by God’s grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out”, said Beatty. (Bradbury 54)

Latimer was a martyr for his specific denomination, Anglicanism, but can be seen more generally as a symbol of resistance against ideological tyranny and oppression. He becomes an analogue for the main character, and his fate is also mirrored in the woman who first mentions him and her fiery end. Her defiance and her death draw direct parallels between her and Latimer. Ironically, Latimer’s death also parallels that of the other person who mentions him: Beatty, who is burnt to death by Montag (Bradbury 154). However, Beatty represents the complete opposite of both the previously mentioned woman and Latimer: submission to, and integration into, an oppressive system. The first name of the main character, ‘Guy’, could also be a
reference to a religious and political martyr: the even more famous Guy Fawkes. Fawkes and Latimer were, also quite ironically, on complete opposite sides of the conflict between Catholicism and Anglicanism in England which started with the reformation and continued well into the 17th century.

The fact that Beatty is so well versed in literature himself as to be able to quote a 16th-century heretic seems to be the book’s only real mention of the potential for abuse there is in literature, religious literature in particular. Beatty at one point quotes a line from Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice which applies very well to himself:

“The Devil can cite scripture for his purpose.” (Bradbury 138)

In this moment, in which he tries to subdue Montag by battering him with literary quotes, Beatty also becomes an avatar for the government, holding knowledge over the heads of the populace and partaking himself in that which is denied to others

A New Media ‘Religion’

Judging from the ways in which Christianity, and ‘religion’ more generally, are referenced in Fahrenheit 451, one gets the impression that the characters in the book, whilst certainly aware of the characters God and Jesus, are bordering on being irreligious. They are, at the very least, apathetic when it comes to the ‘classical’ religions of our world. One could argue, however, that the citizens of the future United States which the book depict are still very religious. They have simply found a new religion to worship—one which incorporates elements of older religions, and yet stands apart from them.

Religion, in the form of Christianity, is infused into the narrative and language of Fahrenheit 451. However, Christian imagery and language are used repeatedly in contexts which are wholly disconnected from the Bible, churches etc. Aside from the frequent and casual use of ‘God’, Jesus Christ’, and similar religious terms by characters in their speech, for example, there are instances where the words uttered by different characters have less direct religious overtones. One such example is Beatty’s use of pastoral metaphors in conversation with the main character, likening the latter to a “sheep” who “returns to the fold” (Bradbury 137). In this case, whilst the metaphor is religious—and more specifically Christian—in nature,
‘the fold’ is not some religious congregation. Rather, those ‘sheep’ who are in ‘the fold’ are those people who submit to the government, and propagate and support their agenda and way of thinking. This is thus religious imagery, or more specifically Abrahamic imagery, applied to the authorities of the world of Fahrenheit 451, whether one chooses to interpret ‘the fold’ as being the firemen, society as a whole, or followers of the state. There are echoes here, in the use of pastoral metaphors, of the theories of Foucault in particular on that subject, which were discussed briefly in the background section.

Beside the above, there are several other examples in the novel of a link being made between religion, or religious imagery, and the state, as well as the media which is under the control of that state. Bradbury seems to suggest that this state is a ‘religion’ of sorts. Going back to Althusser’s definition of religion, and applying it to the ideology of the state in Fahrenheit 451, one can see that many aspects of the way in which this state operates are religious in nature.

As an example of the above, individualism is repressed by the state in the world of Fahrenheit 451, as individuals are incorporated through the medium of television into “the family”. This ‘family’ is a sort of personification of governmental control, and it speaks to the population through ‘interactive’ television shows (Bradbury 30). This televised manifestation of the collectivistic government addresses every viewer by name; it addresses individuals in a manner which is strongly reminiscent of one of the key points of Althusser’s theories regarding religion, which was touched upon briefly in the background section. In order to incorporate the individual into a larger hierarchy, he/she is told who he/she is, and what his/her place in the world is by the religious authority seeking to do the incorporating. By appearing to speak directly to every single person, and giving them a token individual identity, they are ironically more easily separated from any real individualism. The individual is ‘interpellated’ into a power structure as a subject. The relationship between Mildred Montag, the wife of the protagonist, and the ‘family’ echoes this claim of Althusser’s in a very direct way. Mildred actively plays out a scripted role in the television shows which she watches daily. She responds to lines spoken by the characters in the show(s), and is thus interpellated (30). To Mildred, they are not ‘the’ family, but rather “my family” (65). She has been fully incorporated, through interpellation, into the system. She is also wholly reliant on the medium of television, receiving all her information through it. The thought that any source of information, besides that of television and a few select government pamphlets, could have any credibility at all seems foreign to Mildred Montag, who does not see any point in reading (Bradbury 95). She has started to live
vicariously through the people on television, and this projected ‘hyperreality’ seems just as real to her as her own life, if not more so (Abootalebi 11).

Additionally, if ‘religion’ is as much a cultural force as a political/ideological one, then the medium through which culture spreads, i.e. mainly television in the world of Fahrenheit 451, also has an impact on how religious culture is propagated and sold to the population. Television has taken the place of the Bible, as well as every other work of philosophy, fiction etc., as the main source of intellectual stimuli, knowledge, and entertainment for people in that society. Television provides all these things in a far more expedient manner, and so it pushes literature out of the public consciousness. Unfortunately, it fails to reach the same depths, be it of information or emotion, as literature. Even newspapers are a thing of the past in Fahrenheit 451, and the great boon their decline and eventual disappearance has been for the government is stated clearly by professor Faber:

I remember the newspapers dying like huge moths. No one wanted them back. No one missed them. And the government, seeing how advantageous it was to have people reading only about passionate lips and the fist in the stomach, circled the situation with your fire-eaters. (Bradbury 115)

Papers as conveyers of information were allowed to die, and only magazines which existed for the same purpose as television—quick and immediate entertainment—were allowed to remain. Faber also references God as he gives a description of the difference between books and television:

“Thank God for that. You can shut them, say, “Hold on a moment.” You can play God to it. But who has ever torn himself from the claw that encloses you when you drop a seed in a TV parlour? It grows you any shape it wishes! It is an environment as real as the world. It becomes and is the truth.” (Bradbury 109)

Faber makes the argument that there is something about the immediacy of television, and its ease of digestion, which makes it capable of having a greater impact upon people than books ever can. This, then, makes television all the more dangerous when used as a tool of propaganda and control.
Furthermore, history books are banned and burned if discovered, which has allowed the government to make extensive revisions to the past, as seen in the firemen’s handbook, which states that the job of a fireman was to burn books even back in the 18th century, and that Benjamin Franklin was “first fireman” (Bradbury 48). Without books, there is no way for the common man to fact-check whatever information is given to him through television or similar media. He has to take that which is given to him at face value, and so the authorities have full control of the ‘truth’. This highly restricted and governmentally controlled spread of information is reminiscent of one which would exist in a pre-literate society—meaning in this case one in which literacy belongs to a powerful minority—in the vein of medieval Europe. In such a society, the individual, similarly incapable of retrieving and fact-checking information on his or her own, would be forced to simply accept the word of the priest, imam, or other person of religious and political authority.

In the absence of books, the government can thus use television to completely manipulate old concepts and ideologies, including Christianity, to suit their ideological framework. This fact is reinforced by, as previously mentioned, Jesus Christ himself having become a part of “the family” (Bradbury 106). In Fahrenheit 451’s world, Christ has apparently become wholly disconnected from his holy book, and he and other central figures of the Bible have become figureheads for that organization which encourages the burning of that same book. Whilst Jesus’ presence on television might indicate that this future United States is still a Christian country, it is so in name only. Fahrenheit 451 thus seems to condemn the disconnect between teachings and deities; allowing religion to become something purely cultural, with little impact on morality or law, is apparently something negative according to the book. The government has, in Fahrenheit 451, managed to make itself a substitute for conventional religion, i.e. Christianity, by creating a fictional focal point—the family—which represents them. Around this focal point, they encourage the practice of what Halabu calls “sociopolitical idolatry” (47), meaning the worship of the state. This worship is directed at the state through the intermediary which is the family.

A further parallel between state-run television and religion is drawn by Guy Montag himself, as he at one point is reminded of a visit to a church he made as a boy, and the enameled wooden statues of saints which he saw there, and which appeared foreign and strange to him. This memory is brought on by seeing his wife and her friends watching television:
Montag said nothing but stood looking at the women’s faces as he once looked at the faces of saints in a strange church he had entered when he was a child. The faces of those enameled creatures meant nothing to him, though he talked to them and stood in that church a long time, trying to be of that religion, trying to know what that religion was […] (Bradbury 123).

Interestingly, the comparison is made between these watchers of television and inanimate objects, albeit ones shaped like human beings, and not between them and the church’s congregation. This seems a further indication of a perceived dumbing down and infantilization of people in a society which has become disconnected from books and all the more connected to the ‘God of television’. This is a development which was thought by many, and certainly by Bradbury himself (Boyle Johnston), to be taking place in our world during the 1950s. It is a subject which is still very much relevant in 2017, although the existence of the internet naturally makes things more complicated. In the world of the book, however, this development has reached a point where television has gained complete domination over people’s lives, and books are a thing of the past. Mildred Montag and her friends are as dead inside and mindless as pieces of wood, drooling in the dark as they stare at the lights. Television parlors have become the new churches, as the old ones have lost their congregations. This is shown quite clearly through the character of ‘reverend Padover’, who is a priest without a congregation and thus, to continue the pastoral imagery a ‘shepherd without a flock’ and a remnant of the old religion desperately clinging on to the past (Bradbury 192). Montag finds himself unable to connect with both the old religions and the new, as their superficial—and literally artificial, in the case of the former—nature leaves him cold (Bradbury 124).

To claim that Fahrenheit 451 is an entirely anti-religious book would be wrong, much as it would be to make the opposite claim. Considering how one can apply Althusser’s and Foucault’s definitions of what ‘religion’ is to the book’s portrayal of the state and new media, which are effectively interchangeable, there is certainly an argument to be made that the book carries a message which is anti-religious in the sense of being against religion as an ideological tool—one which is used by an organization of some kind to control a group of people. On the other hand, however, the Bible is allowed to play a major part in the main character’s intellectual and cultural awakening, and the book is rife with Christian/biblical allusions. Thus, the purely cultural aspect of religion is celebrated whilst its political and ideological usage is condemned. It is perhaps not surprising that the message of the book is both pro- and anti-
religion, as Ray Bradbury himself would later describe himself as a “Delicatessen religionist” (Blake), meaning one who picks and chooses parts of many different faiths to construct his own religious view of the world. Such a view of religion would be inherently opposed to organized religions and their hierarchical structures, as well as to subscribing wholesale to every aspect of any faith.

As Bradbury himself saw value in religion, and grew up a Christian, it is not surprising that the portrayal of older religions—once again meaning, primarily, Christianity—is far more forgiving than that of the ‘religion’ of the state in Fahrenheit 451. Christianity is never portrayed in a truly negative light. It is a remnant of the past which has waned in power, and it is as much a victim of the new ‘religion’ as the culture which that ‘religion’ has dumbed down, destroyed, and generally suppressed. The new government-controlled ‘religion’ represents all the worst aspects of religion, whilst Christianity is allowed to retain some modicum of its status as a moral authority. The Bible is still presented as containing, or representing, some sort of moral ‘truth’. This is most clearly seen in the way in which ‘the Good Book’ acts as a guide of sorts in Montag’s intellectual and moral awakening.

Conclusion

Bradbury uses literature, ‘books’ in particular, to give depth to his own book, which ironically revolves around a world which is extremely anti-literature. He thus proves, on a meta level, the inherent value of literature, as well as, consequently, the vileness of the fictional society which he has created. The books Bradbury chooses to reference in his novel are generally closely tied to religion, and this is no coincidence. Through the inclusion of the Bible in particular as a central part of the main character’s arc, Fahrenheit 451 presents the cultural aspects of religion in a positive light. Fahrenheit 451 is in this sense not an indictment of religion, but rather a celebration of religion as a cultural force and a keeper of morality. It is in this form the old religions—Christianity in particular, although Judaism is also included through references to the old testament—are present in the novel. The book is essentially a defense of literature, and it uses religious texts, in their capacity as works of literature, to reinforce this defense.

For the most part, Christianity, through references to that religion in general as well as specific parts of the Bible, is used symbolically; it lends an added depth to the happenings in
Fahrenheit 451, and give the narrative a weight which it would otherwise not have. The Bible is sacred in as much as all literature is sacred, but there is no sign of any faith in any ‘God’ in the conventional sense of that word amongst the characters. The book thus uses religious imagery in its portrayal of the non-religious actions of characters. Whilst Christianity and the Christian God are far from being influential or powerful in any direct way in the world of Fahrenheit 451, their influence, through literature, is never portrayed in a negative light. Christianity is instead held up as a moral beacon or compass, in that it, through the Bible, is allowed to play a central role in the ‘salvation’ of the main character. The application of biblical passages to the mundane thus reinforces the notion which Bradbury seemingly tries to convey: that the Bible has value beyond its sacrality due to its message of morality.

However, the book is also an exploration of what form religion could, or would, take in a world where it has become wholly disconnected from literature—a world where a government which is in complete control of culture has become the new arbiter of right and wrong, the only source of information, and even the ‘author’ of the past. That government, or state, has essentially become a ‘religion’ according to most definitions of that word. It utilizes not only the direct political power of religion, but also its cultural power. This cultural power is an essential component of the political power of religion, in that it is used to both spread and maintain the people’s belief in the state and its ‘religion’. Subjugation and interpellation of the populace is thus achieved through both direct and violent political action and through the more subtle and insidious power of cultural manipulation. Fahrenheit 451 is thus also a warning against the incredible powers of manipulation which can be marshalled through religion, if it is utilized as a tool of control. Critique of religion in the book is solely directed towards the ‘strawman’ of the future state, however, rather than any religion which exists in our world.
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