



To Touch the Face of God: The Sacred, the Profane, and the American Space Program, 1957–1975 (New Series in NASA History)

By Kendrick Oliver



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"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth..."

In 1968 the world watched as Earth rose over the moonscape, televised from the orbiting *Apollo 8* mission capsule. Radioing back to Houston on Christmas Eve, astronauts recited the first ten verses from the book of Genesis. In fact, many of the astronauts found space flight to be a religious experience. *To Touch the Face of God* is the first book-length historical study of the relationship between religion and the U.S. space program.

Kendrick Oliver explores the role played by religious motivations in the formation of the space program and discusses the responses of religious thinkers such as Paul Tillich and C. S. Lewis. Examining the attitudes of religious Americans, Oliver finds that the space program was a source of anxiety as well as inspiration. It was not always easy for them to tell whether it was a godly or godless venture.

Grounded in original archival research and the study of participant testimonies, this book also explores one of the largest petition campaigns of the post-war era. Between 1969 and 1975, more than eight million Americans wrote to NASA expressing support for prayer and bible-reading in space. Oliver's study is rigorous and detailed but also contemplative in its approach, examining the larger meanings of mankind's first adventures in "the heavens."



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Editorial Review

Review

"Lively and interesting, this book accurately reflects the disorienting effects of ventures into Heaven by men in space suits."

(James Gilbert, University of Maryland, College Park)

" *To Touch the Face of God*... support[s] the importance of the strength of individual faith, the power of community, and the American need for both heroes and villains of biblical proportions to change the world."

(David Rosman *New York Journal of Books*)

"Oliver analyses spaceflight and religion in a sophisticated manner, well informed by the scholarly literature of 'new aerospace history,' which examines intersections between space history and other disciplines or themes... Oliver engages histories of theology and religious practice in a broad conversation of motivations, implications, transformations and reinforcements of religion in the history of spaceflight."

(Margaret Weitekamp *Times Higher Education*)

"Religious and science collections alike will relish this survey."

(*Midwest Book Review*)

" *To Touch the Face of God* is well-written, with short, precise excursions into what almost amounts to poetry, for example: 'They [the astronauts in space] could not sit for a morning in the manner of Thoreau, slowly incubating epiphany' ... It is an important contribution to the study of the complex connections between spaceflight and religion and thus highly recommended."

(Thore Bjørnvig *Quest: History of Spaceflight Quarterly*)

"Oliver's well-research book sparkles with graceful prose and cogent insights... Also refreshing is Oliver's breadth of knowledge, which leads to pregnant thoughts... *To Touch the Face of God* is a stimulating and original examination of the long Sixties. Looking at America through this unique window?actually a spaceship's portal?reveals things I had not seen before."

(Robert Spinney *Fides Et Historia*)

About the Author

Kendrick Oliver is a reader in American history in the Faculty of Humanities, University of Southampton, United Kingdom.

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