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I Am Sophia: A Novel

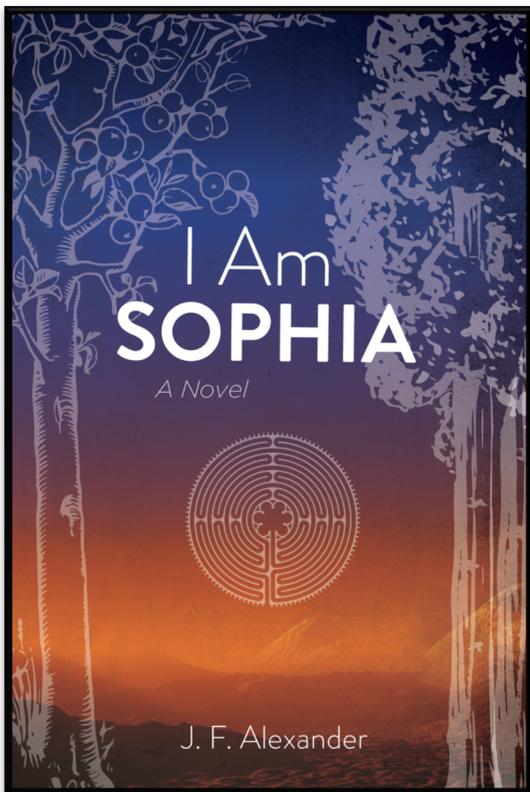
by J. F. Alexander

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New Title from J. F. Alexander
I Am Sophia: A Novel



When a mysterious and charismatic woman insinuates herself into a fringe religious group, its dozen members wonder whether she is a lunatic, a con artist, or a messiah. Sophia quickly upends the routines and expectations of the group—the last Christians in the inhabited solar system—while Peter, their struggling leader, becomes increasingly obsessed with her. Before long, Peter finds himself following Sophia on a perilous interplanetary adventure which may cost both of them their lives.

J. F. Alexander is writer-in-residence at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in San Jose, California. Raised in the Texas panhandle, he earned degrees at Austin College, Tufts University's Fletcher School, and Stanford Law School and was a Newbigin fellow in theology. He has worked in law, business, and NASA's human spaceflight program. For more information visit jfalexander.net.



What inspired *I Am Sophia's* premise?

Some years ago, I worshipped with an aging and dwindling congregation that was teetering on the cusp of closing its doors. It was a tough situation but not an uncommon one. I think the shape of the novel emerged from wondering what it would be like if the entire Christian church—Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, all of it—were on the verge of dying out.

Are any aspects of the novel based on real life?

None of the characters are based on real people. Part of the novel takes place at a future version of San Francisco's Grace Cathedral. The descriptions of the cathedral, including the main entrance, north chapel, labyrinths, and stained-glass window designs, accurately reflect what you can see there today, although my fictional future finds them in a dilapidated state.

In what year is the novel set?

I leave that to the reader to decide. In my mind, it's about a century or two from now, bringing us into an era that sees human expansion into the solar system amid continuing ecological and social challenges on earth.

What makes *I Am Sophia* special?

In addition to being a good yarn, it offers an approach to Christian faith that looks forward, not only backward. Such an approach makes space for three things to happen: to honor what is ancient and perennially valid; to crucify oppressive and life-destroying ideas which have worked their way into the tradition; and to resurrect faith through a revitalized Christian vision.

What do you hope to accomplish with this ambitious novel?

I can only describe this project as a calling, so the question in my mind is what the Holy Spirit intends to accomplish through it. I imagine the novel's purpose is to serve as an invitation to fall in love with holy wisdom, perhaps for many or perhaps for just a few.

Do you recommend the novel to everyone?

I'm told an author should never say this, but no, it's probably not for everyone. Folks who are convinced atheists or doctrinaire believers are unlikely to "get" the novel. It's really for people who are seeking, questioning, and exploring, especially those inhabiting the borderlands of Christianity: people who wonder whether this tradition has been completely co-opted by patriarchal power and privilege or whether it can still be a path to divine communion.

Did you always want to become a novelist?

I never expected to write a novel until I started *I Am Sophia* in 2015. Indeed, I initially saw the story as merely a thin dough around the meat of my theological ideas, which I had developed over a quarter century of questioning, study, and prayer. As the writing progressed, the characters and plot took on vibrant, exciting lives of their own and captured center stage. Writing was never a chore or a discipline, and I never had a moment of writer's block.

Which authors have most influenced you?

In the spiritual and theological realm, I would point to Catholic and Protestant writers such as Richard Rohr, Elizabeth A. Johnson, Evelyn Underhill, Thomas Merton, Marcus Borg, and Catherine Mowry LaCugna. Myriad science-fiction authors also influenced the novel, including Kim Stanley Robinson and Dan Simmons.

How does it feel to see the publication of your first book?

It's both thrilling and terrifying. When one has the chutzpah to write about the nature of God, some people may think you're a saint or a guru, and others may think you're a crank or a huckster. I'm just a normal, thoroughly flawed person who has spent time refining the craft of writing and reflecting on a deep and beautiful religious tradition.

So who is Sophia? Lunatic? Con artist? Messiah?

Sorry, no spoilers here—you'll just have to read the book!

Chapter 1

The Last Bishop

“See that crisscross up there? The cultists’ magical hero was murdered when his enemies nailed him to crisscrossed planks of wood.”

A little girl gasps.

“Oh, but don’t you worry.” The graying tour guide winks at the girl. “You see, he got resuscitated and flew up to a land in the sky.”

Momentarily the center of the adults’ attention, she brightens and claps her hands together. “Was it Meres? My aunt and uncle live there.”

“No, my dear. The G-Zeus story comes from before people lived offearth. The cultists believed he went to a place up in the clouds where there were shiny people who had wings like birds.”

“Ooh,” says the girl. She looks up at the scrap of blue sky visible between the summits of the towers surrounding the cathedral. “That’s silly!” The girl’s mother puts a hand on her shoulder.

The cathedral is the sixth attraction on the guide’s “Oldtime Sanef” walking tour. Like other earthside nations, Sanef has suffered through its portion of perpetual crisis—rising heat, rising sea, rising costs. Yet it never ceases to attract affluent tourists, refugees from parched inland nations, and investments by the international cartels. Gleaming two-hundred-story towers dominate central Sanef’s skyline from Yerba Buena halfway to the Golden Gate.

Wedged among the towers, the old cathedral property fills a city block, punching a deep hole in the crowded cityscape. Much as the surrounding towers dwarf the cathedral, so the cathedral’s sculpted concrete walls dwarf the dozen tourists and their guide. They stand clustered together near the building’s main entrance: a weathered portico framing a pair of heavy, locked doors. Brittle gothic façades practically ooze ancient nightmare.

A young man wearing a Sanef National University tee shirt tentatively raises a hand. “People used to come here to perform bizarre ritual sacrifices, didn’t they?”

“Excellent question. They not only ‘used to’ come here, I’m afraid.” The guide meets the eyes of his listeners one by one. This is the moment that makes

this attraction worth the stop. “There are still a few cultists who gather inside there every week and pretend to drink blood.”

“Ugh,” blurts a middle-aged woman. She covers her mouth.

“Gross!” squeals the little girl.

“Intriguing,” pronounces the student. He purses his lips. “I once accessed on the net that this cult had a special class of shamans who led their metafiz rituals.”

“As I understand it,” the guide says, “the fellow in charge here is the very last G-Zeus shaman in the entire System. His title is ‘bishop,’ which means ‘overseer.’ In ancient Europe, the G-Zeus cult’s overseers basically ruled everything.”

A balding man harrumphs. “Thank good the System has outgrown metafiz. What stupid inefficiency.” Heads bob in unanimous agreement.

The student raises his hand again. “How can it be that they’re still—” A distant but powerful burst of noise interrupts him. It thunders among the towers for several seconds before gradually fading to a low, tinkling rumble. The tourists and their guide crane their necks to scan their surroundings.

“Sounds like the explosion was high up in one of the towers,” mutters the balding man.

“From down here, it’s impossible to tell where it was,” says the guide. He wipes perspiration from his neck. “To be safe, let’s get under the little roof here for a few minutes, just in case any debris comes down from above.”

The tourists huddle together under the cathedral’s portico as the guide cranes his neck again. “Batshit nuns,” he mutters.

Praise for *I Am Sophia: A Novel*

“Beautiful, poignant, and theologically insightful, *I Am Sophia* grapples with the Christian church’s sins and shortcomings and points toward possibilities for its future. As with important literature in all faith traditions, it uncovers eternal truths by engaging with real life in all its grittiness.”

—**Mary Gray-Reeves, bishop in The Episcopal Church and managing director of The College for Bishops**

“Alexander combines the gifts of a compelling storyteller, religious scholar, and visionary. Many theological books, hymns, and litanies have celebrated the biblical divine image of Sophia, but this is the first novel. With vivid descriptions and character portrayals, it invites seekers on a suspense-filled quest for her sacred wisdom.”

—**Jann Aldredge-Clanton, author of *In Search of the Christ-Sophia* and *Breaking Free: The Story of a Feminist Baptist Minister***

“Captivating from the first moment, *I Am Sophia* takes you on an expansive journey across time and space.”

—**Lakshmi Karan, space entrepreneur and cofounder of the Future Frontiers Institute**

“A mind-bending vision of the near future which traces the outcomes of runaway climate change, income inequality, political collapse, and the decline of religion, *I Am Sophia* is ultimately a novel offering hope in the possibility of renewal, a gift for us at this time.”

—**Marc Andrus, bishop of the Episcopal diocese of California and co-author (with Matthew Fox) of *Stations of the Cosmic Christ***

