

**Review of Alan P. R. Gregory, *Science Fiction Theology: Beauty and the Transformation of the Sublime*
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What does science fiction have to do with Christian theology? For Alan P.R. Gregory, the connections (and disconnections) between the two arise from “the sublime.” The opening chapter of Gregory’s *Science Fiction Theology: Beauty and the Transformation of the Sublime* traces a history of the sublime from the eighteenth century, through figures like Immanuel Kant, John Dennis, Edward Young, John Baillie, James Ussher, and Joseph Addison. The sublime names the human imaginative and emotional response to the wonders of nature or technology. It involves enjoyment of both the natural world and humanity’s own creativity. Addison and others privileged the sublime experience as a chief virtue, both for humanity and the divine. Throughout the rest of this book, Gregory shows how notions of the sublime shaped the development of science fiction and its intersections with Christianity.

Gregory begins with pulp magazine science fiction of the early twentieth century. In the John Carter stories by Edgar Rice Burroughs and the Stuart stories of John W. Campbell, Gregory finds a regular displacement of religion and Christianity. In Campbell’s stories, the sublime stimulates human flourishing toward hopeful human achievement. Humans must overcome nature, putting human and natural sublimities into conflict. In these stories religion is seen as an impediment to human achievement. Around the same time, H.P. Lovecraft’s stories like “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928) portray inquiry and scientific progress as unveiling an inhospitable cosmos. Supposed human progress actually uncovers madness and incomprehension. The sublimity of human progress dominates all of these stories, whether it is celebrated or satirized. In each case though, Gregory notes, science fiction puts humanity at odds with theology.

Science Fiction Theology then turns to the writings of H.G. Wells and Olaf Stapledon, who both composed their stories in the wake of theories of evolution coming to prominence. Wells discounted the “bio-optimism” among his Darwinian contemporaries. Instead, his novels engage hopes for social evolution. The harrowing visions of humanity’s future in *The Time Machine* (1895) undermine assumptions of human evolutionary progress, while *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) shows the possible cruelty of so-called human “progress” unchecked. Positive visions arise in *A Modern Utopia* (1905) and *The Food of the Gods and How it Came to Earth* (1904) where science and hope for human change occur in worlds absent of religion. In texts like *Mr Britling Sees it Through* (1916) and *God the Invisible King* (1917), Wells suggests that Christianity failed to provide the God that humanity needs to aid its sublime social evolution. Stapledon’s novels *Last and First*

Men (1930) and *Star Maker* (1937) likewise suggest that Christianity cannot sustain the Western world with compelling visions of the future. His stories portray humanity's successive evolutions to higher cosmological and transcendental forms, with Christianity but a step along that path. Both Wells and Stapledon then find qualified hope in humanity's future and sublime accomplishment, absent religion holding it back.

Philip K. Dick's novels provide an alternative engagement with the sublimity of human technological accomplishment. Dick's writings examine "technologies of illusion" that constitute all-encompassing threatening orders within which humans exist (Gregory 2015, 121). Hopes for salvation come from humans inadvertently thwarting the technologies that control them. In Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), empathy separates humans from their android counterparts. The bounty hunter Deckard seeks the natural sublime of a nearby desert, hoping to experience the real after "retiring" a group of synthetic androids. However, he finds the boundaries between fake and real to be illusive. He discovers empathy for androids, abandoning his search for the sublime to embrace a technologically-conscripted freedom. Dick's novel *VALIS* (1978) incorporates Valentinian gnostic mythology in a grand critique of authoritarian soteriologies. Using the technologies of "the Empire" against itself, humans can subvert its powerful information technology through their own instabilities. The sublime technologies of Dick's novels stand for all-encompassing ideologies that deny the human its mystery. As Gregory explains, it is that human mystery which can provide salvation.

The final science fiction subgenre Gregory explores is the modern fascination with apocalypticism. He notes how both Judeo-Christian and science fiction apocalyptic texts underscore humanity's contingent existence. In Thomas Disch's *The Genocides* (1965), aliens use Earth to grow and harvest giant plants. In doing so, they eradicate human life in successive waves. Humanity is portrayed as stripped of their inner life and their very lived existence. Religion in such a story signals naïve hope. John Christopher's *The Death of Grass* (1956) similarly shows the breakdown of human society and life itself in the face of a destructive virus, making Christianity irrelevant. In James Blish's *The Triumph of Time* (1958), religion opposes the great transcendence of human scientific accomplishment in the face of cosmological danger. However, in George Zebrowski's *The Omega Point Trilogy* (1983), God emerges during a future apocalypse as the mental triumph of an eternal community of human minds. Meanwhile, the cyberspace of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) envisions its own apocalypses. Cyberspace offers numerous sublime dangers through disembodied sublime pleasures, but Gregory shows how the human body's inconsistencies undermine them. He argues that all of these science fictional apocalypses make the future immanent, operating on the logic of the sublime.

For Gregory, science fiction typically criticizes the Christian God by denying God's sublimity and reserving it for humanity. However, he argues that the God of the sublime is the watchmaker God of theism. A sublime God is not the God of "classical Christianity." Instead of the sublime, Gregory turns to American theologian Jonathan Edwards to offer "the beautiful" as an alternative.

Based on the mutual consensual love of the Trinity, the beauty of God and creation is a more properly Christian conception of the divine and humanity. From this arises what Gregory calls the “agapeic imagination” privileging a mutual and consensual love mimetically related to the Trinitarian relationship. He points to Stanley Weinbaum’s “A Martian Odyssey” (1934) and C.J. Cherryh’s *Serpent’s Reach* (1980) as science-fictional examples of consensual agapeic relationships with otherness. For Gregory, this is the power of science fiction: imagining genuinely being with non-/post-human alterity, which unsettles anthropocentric distortions of both God and creation.

Science Fiction Theology makes strong arguments regarding early English-language science fiction’s engagement with ideas of the sublime. While the authors analysed are overwhelmingly white and male, the generalized arguments are compelling. The book’s focus on explicit evocations of religion in these science fiction tales serves the book’s arguments well but limits the analysis. It intensifies the wedge between science fiction and theology so that Christian Theology can triumph. However, beyond the appeal to Jonathan Edwards, “Christianity” is loosely albeit monolithically defined. It seems that the alterity within the Christian tradition, which Gregory frequently excludes (neither “Gnosticism” [*sic*] on pg. 152 or “postmodern theology” on pg. 234 are properly Christian according to Gregory), remains to be reckoned with. Perhaps more recent and diverse science fiction would aid in this, along with a critical eye toward “classical Christianity.” Such endeavours might unveil more fundamental connections between the Christian tradition and science fiction than *Science Fiction Theology* allows. That, in turn, may help envision genuine mutual human engagement with nonhuman alterity without cumbersome strategies of exclusion that presume a particular religion’s theological primacy.

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