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Science Fiction and/as Theology: Review of *Science Fiction Theology: Beauty and the Transformation of the Sublime* by Alan P.R. Gregory

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Science Fiction and/as Theology. Alan P.R. Gregory. *Science Fiction Theology: Beauty and the Transformation of the Sublime*. Waco, TX: Baylor UP, 2015. x + 318 pp. \$59.95 hc.

On the question of the existence or nonexistence of God, sf as a genre has mostly agreed with the famous words attributed to the mathematician and scientist Pierre-Simon Laplace: “no need of that hypothesis.” The Holy Trinity of the Golden Age—Asimov, Heinlein, and Clarke—were all atheists, as were Kurt Vonnegut, J.G. Ballard, Stanisław Lem, Iain M. Banks, Douglas Adams, John W. Campbell, Boris Strugatsky, and so on, and as are Harlan Ellison, Samuel R. Delany, William Gibson, Ursula K. Le Guin, Greg Egan, Gregory Benford, Joss Whedon, et al. As one expands the scope of “atheism” to include those loose agnostic, deistic, and/or pantheistic conceptions of God that, while nominally still “religious” in some sense, are fundamentally at odds with the sureties of organized religion, one pulls in all the foundational authors of nineteenth-century sf—Shelley, Poe, Verne, Wells, Twain—as well

as nearly all the prominent writers of twentieth-century sf not already named above, such as Octavia E. Butler, Gene Roddenberry, H.P. Lovecraft, and Olaf Stapledon (to name only a few of my own personal favorites). While of course important exceptions to any generally applicable rule exist, both the epistemological assumptions and the ethico-philosophical worldview espoused by sf—considered as a literary-cultural phenomenon and as a “way of life”—have tended to see religion not only as a “problem” but almost as the genre’s diabolical opposite, the bad historical force that technoscientific progress (championed, naturally, by sf) has finally and blessedly rendered moot.

Alan P.R. Gregory’s *Science Fiction Theology: Beauty and the Transformation of the Sublime* provides some important counterpoint to this narrative. Gregory—a reverend, and principal of the South East Institute for Theological Education in Canterbury—has written a book that links sf cultural productions to the religious imagination not only through the theological fixations of major writers in the field (especially Stapledon, Lovecraft, and the VALIS-era Philip K. Dick) but also through the genre’s constitutive aesthetic, that famous “sense of wonder” (what thinkers such as Kant and Burke once called “the sublime”). The constellation Gregory delineates among Christian theology and apologetics, the British and American traditions in sf, and the sublime is not an exhaustive exploration of any of the three, but rather serves as a useful illumination of the many unexpected points of contact among these three mutually imbricated discourses. Different chapters in the book focus on each of the three points of the triad, culminating in the final chapter’s presentation of a contemporary “theological critique of sublimity that has learned a good deal from science fiction” (1) and, therefore, the articulation of a science-fictional imagination that “calls thus to the Christian imagination, too” (236). This framework allows Gregory to name a sub-canon of religious and religion-infused sf that does not simply “stake its claim to sublimity, over the body of a dead god” (40), but instead has interesting things to say about, and to learn from, religion.

Gregory’s lucid and engaging readings of key texts in sf such as *Star Maker* (1937), *Doctor Who* (1963-1989, 2005-), the CTHULHU MYTHOS, and the VALIS trilogy (1978-1982) is primarily grounded in the discipline of theology and does not engage much either with mainline sf studies in particular or literary theory more generally; it will fall to other writers to link this material to the sorts of utopian and countercultural critiques that have generally animated our discipline. Likewise, the book will likely fall short of many sf scholars’ expectations through its dedicated focus on the familiar, mid-twentieth-century white male sf “canon” that our field as a whole has largely moved on from, while ignoring the post-1970s demographic expansion and internationalization of the genre that has so vitalized contemporary sf and sf studies.

Still, from the perspective of an sf studies that has sometimes been guilty of reiterating—or, less charitably, regurgitating—the same core preoccupations over and over *ad nauseam*, the breath of fresh air can sometimes be

exhilarating. I was particularly gratified by the detailed (and multiple) readings of Dick's *VALIS* books, which benefit from taking *seriously* Dick's Gnostic mysticism in a way that literary scholars generally have not. The result both elevates Dick by turning him into a theologically significant theorist of salvation (see especially 139-53), while also exposing the limits of his approach to mystical exegesis as his later novels produce a "tragic world ... so sundered from the source of revelation that knowledge of the transcendent comes in spite of the world and as always strange to it" (235). It is no't easy to find new things to say about such a well-loved and well-studied author, but Gregory's complex reading of the late Dick through his career-long interest in the sublime somehow manages it, in the process finding PKD's science-fictional and theological modes to be not really at odds at all, but each functioning instead as the necessary completion of the other. This is not a reading that many literary scholars would have produced—but it is a rich one.

Gregory's book—along with Steven Hrotic's *Religion in Science Fiction* (2014), perhaps not incidentally the last book I reviewed for *Science Fiction Studies*—points towards a growing interest in science-fictional explorations of religion that are not oppositional in nature, and that have not preemptively and presumptively declared victory over a loathed enemy. They also point towards the rich and exciting project of rediscovering and re-contextualizing such beloved sf creators as Jonathan Swift, George Lucas, Orson Scott Card, James Blish, Margaret Atwood, and Clifford D. Simak—all of whom bedevil any reductionistic equation between atheism and sf—as well as encouraging us to interrogate more ambitiously the spiritualist bent of many contemporary writers working in sf (especially in the Afrofuturist, techno-Orientalist, and indigenous-futurist traditions) and the barely sublimated spiritualism of the transhumanist movement popularly known as Singularitarianism. But these books also point towards the ongoing problem of siloization among the different disciplines in the academy, and the continuing stasis in a popular conception of sf that seems entirely unable to move beyond the key names of two generations ago (even or especially among scholars becoming newly interested in the field). There are now myriad recent scholarly works making important statements on the contemporary relevance of sf to a wide variety of interdisciplinary questions, which by and large have not taken any notice of our community at all. The growing interest in sf on the part of academics outside our sub-discipline offers an exciting opportunity to expand the reach and impact of our work and of the work of the authors we champion—while at the same time regrettably exposing how precious little progress we have made towards that goal thus far.—**Gerry Canavan, Marquette University**