



**Eric Michael Mazur and Sarah McFarland Taylor (eds), *Religion and Outer Space* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023), pp. xvi + 267, ISBN 978-0367542276. £35.99**

Humanity's interest in the stars has existed since time immemorial, alongside its interest in religion and spirituality, and at times the two intermingle. For example, in ancient Greek mythology the giant huntsman Orion is transformed into a constellation by Zeus and dwells among the stars. In the sixteenth-century Chinese Buddhist novel *Journey to the West* by Wu Cheng'en, the author mentions a deity named Kui Mulang, considered to be one of the 28 Mansions (Chinese constellations), who is disguised as the Yellow Robe Demon on earth. In the Hebrew Bible, specifically the Book of Job, God challenges Job on his accusations against his rule of the universe by asking whether he, Job, can bind the Pleiades or loosen Orion's Belt (Job 38:31). These are just a few examples involving religious and spiritual life intersecting with outer space. The book *Religion and Outer Space*, edited by Eric Mazur and Sarah McFarland Taylor, has many more examples discussed in each of the sixteen chapters. It begins by exploring how ancient religions imagine outer space and continues into the modern day, with selections from pockets of history from across the globe by different authors. The book is organized into three main parts. The first deals with how various religions have imagined outer space. The second part deals with what might reasonably be thought of as 'religious imaginings' of outer space, regardless of confessional boundaries. The third and final part concerns speculations on how religions might exist in outer space. I will discuss two chapters that I found to be particularly interesting, which come from Parts Two and Three. I will expand my overview of the volume, and identify a dimension of the subject which is missing from discussion, and which might have enriched the study even further.

In Chapter 7, "The Evolving Light: The Transformation of Christianity in Deep Space Travel", Jason Batt, Alires Almon and Theodore Vial discuss how Christianity could evolve in outer space, should human civilization ever be established there. The authors explore this through an analysis of the science fiction books *Dune* (1965) and *Hyperion* (1989), by Frank Herbert and Dan Simmons respectively. Both novels incorporate religious elements into their stories. In each fictional setting, humanity has expanded to the stars, and society and religion have evolved in complex



ways. This evolution includes their understanding of pilgrimage: ‘Both works see the archetypal imagery and language of Christianity as maintaining its significance, being recycled, and reinfused with psychic power and meaning in the encounter with the truly alien [...] The future of Christianity is the pilgrimage on which it travels even now’ (p. 112). The authors in the section do an exquisite job using past speculative and fantastical literature to conceive of future possibilities of different religions and their potential contact with alien life. However, it would have been interesting to see discussion of more science fiction works that deal with the subject, such as C. S. Lewis’s *The Space Trilogy* (1938–1945) or works from lesser-known authors.

In Chapter 12, “Outer Space Religions, 20<sup>th</sup> Century & Beyond”, Benjamin E. Zeller discusses the formation of ‘outer space religions’, religious or spiritual movements whose practices and doctrines are centred on ideas about outer space, its inhabitants and their technologies. These include ‘true UFO religions, which generally focus on interactions between human beings and extraterrestrial spacecraft and their operators’ (p. 177). He focuses on multiple UFO religions, and each one, he argues, was born out of the Cold War era and the anxiety of nuclear annihilation. One such religion was the British Aetherius Society, founded in the 1950s by George King. King claimed to have been in contact with extra-terrestrials who told him that worldwide devastation from atomic power needed to be prevented. They also said that Jesus Christ was the ‘Cosmic Master’, implying that Jesus had extraterrestrial origins and that his teachings are for beings across the entire universe, not just humans. Zeller mentions other religions related to extraterrestrials like Scientology and Heaven’s Gate and gives good background information on the history of their origins and on how they conceptualize the universe. This chapter does an excellent job at giving readers a basic rundown of the history of UFO religions and their origins.

This is how most of the chapters in the book proceed, with authors giving details of some strand in the history of religion and its connection to outer space. For example, in Chapter 3, “Mahāyāna Mind-Bending: Buddhist Visions of Outer/Inner Worlds”, James Mark Shields discusses how the different realms of existence in Buddhism could be associated with other planets or galaxies. This is an interesting idea to play with in fiction, and to perhaps also explore through research questions: have some Buddhists thought of the Six Realms of Reincarnation as other planets, galaxies, or universes? In Chapter 9, “Space Dust, Religious Practice ×



Blackness”, Philip Butler speculates on how people of African descent may connect outer space and its objects with their own religious experiences. It would be interesting to consider how the Orishas, in the Yoruba religion, would be understood in relation to the other worlds in our universe. The author mentions Black religions, primarily from and in Africa, but I would categorize African-American Islam and African-American Christianity as Black religions as well. I would be interested in how the author imagines Black religious practices that did not originate from African religions would adapt to and interpret the experience of being in outer space. Examples would include Black people who participate in Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism.

Overall, the authors succeed in showing how religion, spirituality, and outer space are intermingled in past and present religious and spiritual life. I agree with the editors’ statement that the authors ‘think seriously [...] and provide a possible roadmap of the encounter of religion and outer space’ (p. 6). If a person is looking for an overview of the subject then this book is a good introduction. However, if there is one criticism I have about the topic selection, it would be the omission of research on how religious thinkers, outside of UFO religions, have interpreted claims of extraterrestrial contact in the modern world. There is a brief mention of this in the Introduction, but it does not delve into specific examples. The editors say, ‘Theologians ponder what it might mean for their religious communities to encounter beings from other worlds’ (p. 2), however there is no chapter exploring how theologians and other religious thinkers may interpret these beings, whether encountered in the present or the past. I will give three examples of Christian religious thinkers and scholars to show what I mean, but this form of research could be applied to potentially all religions and spiritualities.

First is the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible scholar Michael S. Heiser (1963–2023) who believed that the reports of extraterrestrial visitors were either hoaxes, another expression of humanity’s interest in the transcendent, or the remnants of the idea of ancient aliens encountering humans in the distant past. He took particular issue with the latter. Heiser argued that the idea of ancient aliens interacting with humans in the past was a form of racism that originated in Europe – the idea being that ancient non-European cultures were not intelligent enough to build civilizations, so needed aliens to help them. Since Heiser believed God gave all humans intelligence, it would not be necessary for an extraterrestrial to help non-



Europeans build cultures.<sup>197</sup> A second view is that of Gary Gromacki, an associate professor of the Bible and Homiletics at Baptist Bible Seminary in Pennsylvania. He has discussed the idea of ancient aliens in a biblical context and agreed that ancients had contact with non-human entities. These entities were not aliens, however, but the biblical Nephilim who were born from angels having children with human women.<sup>198</sup> Finally, Fr Seraphim Rose (1934–1982), an American Orthodox hieromonk, examined supposed encounters with extraterrestrial beings, and argued that all encounters with alleged extraterrestrial beings originate on earth as an ‘occult phenomenon which has existed throughout the centuries’.<sup>199</sup> Claims of encounters are, for Rose, a sign of the approach of the Christian Eschaton, the end of the world, as the Antichrist creeps closer to humanity to lead people astray from God.

I would highly recommend this book for scholars who are interested in ideas regarding religion and outer space and how the two interact with one another. It would also be a good source for an undergraduate course on the same subject. The citations provided are good starting points for anyone who wishes to do scholarly or personal research into the various topics mentioned in the book. Finally, it is also a good source for speculation on how religion might adapt if humanity ever settles in other worlds.

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<https://doi.org/10.15664/tis.v31i1.2761>

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<sup>197</sup> See Michael S. Heiser, “Is the Pseudo-Archaeological Belief That Aliens, Nephilim, Or Descendants of Atlantis Were Responsible for Pyramids, Mounds, Megalithic Architecture, Etc. Racist?”, [website of] *Dr. Michael S. Heiser*, 23 June 2019: <https://drms.com/pseudo-archaeological-belief-aliens-nephilim-voyagers-responsible-pyramids-mounds-megalithic-architecture-etc-racist/>; and his contribution to the film *Ancient Aliens Debunked*, produced by Chris White, 2021: <https://www.ancientaliensdebunked.com/>.

<sup>198</sup> See Gary Gromacki, “Ancient Aliens or Demonic Deception?”, *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 16, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 24–62.

<sup>199</sup> See Seraphim Rose, *Orthodoxy and the Religion of the Future*, rev. edn. (Platina, CA: Saint Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1990), 131.

