



BOOK REVIEW:

*Science Fiction and Catholicism: The Rise
and Fall of the Robot Papacy*

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Clarke, Jim. *Science Fiction and Catholicism: The Rise and Fall of the Robot Papacy*. Gylphi, 2019. ISBN: 978-1780240862.

Eight decades after the publication of Isaac Asimov’s 1941 short story “Reason”, my SF survey students are still bemused by the cheeky resistance of robot QT-1, or “Cutie”, to the “secularism” of its human custodians. To its android mind, the two fleshly occupants of their shared space station are delusional: QT-1 rejects the absurd notion that this obviously inferior species could be responsible for its manufacture. For their part, Powell and Donovan move from proselytising outrage to pragmatic resignation, realising that if the aim is for Cutie and its metallic comrades to perform with minimal supervision, the robots’ devotion to their “Master” (i.e., the station’s Energy Converter) may prove more benefit than hindrance.

Jim Clarke’s consistently insightful monograph pauses over this eventual entry in Asimov’s famous compilation, *I, Robot* (1950), because “Reason” epitomises the genre’s fascination with questions of religious authority and epistemology. *Science Fiction and Catholicism*’s foundational premise is that a faux Catholicism has long functioned as SF’s imaginary foe. Clarke does not pretend the genre is alone in this regard: “literature in Britain and America has tended to fetishize, misrepresent and confront Catholicism as a radical Other” (22). However, in both building on and sometimes contesting work by literary critic Adam Roberts, Clarke shows how this straw-man version of the institution plays a unique role in a genre so interested in science’s significance. Indeed, the genre’s riffs on Catholicism sometimes bear little resemblance to the actual religion, the pontiffs of which offered encyclical

support for evolutionary biologists in 1950 and climate scientists in 2015. Even when concocted science-fictional faiths utilise tropes more redolent of other world religions – as when, in “Reason”, Cutie recalls Muhammad rather than a Catholic pontiff by intoning, “There is no Master but the Master, and QT One is his prophet” – Clarke’s argument remains intriguing. SF has repeatedly positioned itself against a modified Rome that opposes itself to science and reason, and major authors in the genre have relied on such parodies both fondly and ferociously. The result is ironic, Clarke concludes: “Catholicism, perhaps of all of the world’s faiths, has demonstrated the most interest in topics close to sf interests, most specifically the possibility of alien life. In return it has been rewarded with a significant though largely malign presence within the corpus of sf works” (251).

With a brief introduction and conclusion sandwiching four chapters, *Science Fiction and Catholicism* begins with the birth of Western science not just from the religious springs of the Enlightenment, but also from those of the Reformation. Clarke relies effectively here on the work of Robert Markley and Diarmuid McCulloch to dispatch with a secularist caricature of perpetual warfare between science and Christianity. His more nuanced picture of early scientists drawing upon theological inspiration, but also questioning assumed authority, lays what is effectively a postsecular foundation for Chapter Two’s expansion on the technological sublime via robot protagonists. As Clarke explains there, SF featuring posthuman supplicants and pontiffs has long served to “test the limitations of Roman Catholic notions of universality” (62), whether with the good humour my students find in Asimov’s story or with the harsher tone found in Anthony Boucher’s response, “The Quest for St Aquin” (1951). In Chapter Three, Clarke reveals how journeys to other worlds – other Creations – have provided occasion to ponder doctrines like sin and salvation outside traditional constraints. This chapter’s readings of exotheological novels like Mary Doria Russell’s *The Sparrow* (1996) and its sequel *Children of God* (1998), Patricia Anthony’s *God’s Fires* (1997), and Michael Flynn’s *Eifelheim* (2006) provide more recent testimony to the impoverishment that comes with simplistic bifurcations of faith and knowledge. Finally, in Chapter Four, Clarke uses SF uchronias or “alternate histories” to illustrate how one may gain a greater sense of historical balance, paradoxically, via counterfactual narratives. The close look here at Gregg Keizer’s “Angel of the Sixth Circle” (1982) is especially convincing since – as Clarke notes of the Sad Puppies’s attempted Hugo Awards sabotage – the “conflict is not so much between Protestantism and Catholicism as with the idea of modernity itself” (239). There is a misdirection here, a sly substitution, and what Chapter Four says of uchronic SF applies throughout the volume: the genre habitually treats Catholicism as a “proxy for magical thinking, anti-rationalism, retarded sociocultural development, and superstition” (207).

One element of Clarke’s writing that I appreciate is his self-aware, nuanced, and historicised approach to material that has more often inspired ideological diatribe. He immediately acknowledges how divisions in academic discourse have too often hindered readings of SF with religious components. On one hand, there are “critics approaching the intersection from a theological or overtly religious perspective [who] have sought to utilize the presence of religious elements and transcendence within SF as either a legitimation of revelation or an outright opportunity to proselytize”. On the other hand, those

critics “approaching the intersection from a literary critical background have largely tended to be, if not overtly Marxist or utopian, then certainly still inclined to look upon religious elements within SF as at best misplaced” (7). Long operating in parallel universes, both conversations would be strengthened by more regular convergences. Yet this phenomenon also points to an area where I am unconvinced: possibly thinking of books like Gabriel McKee’s *The Gospel According to Science Fiction* (2007) or James McGrath’s *Religion and Science Fiction* (2011) and *Theology and Science Fiction* (2016), Clarke regards the “existing methodology shared by both strains of criticism, pursuing holistic attempts to engage with sf and religion *in toto*, [as] too expansive”. In its place, he would prescribe a

body of critical exegesis that examines how sf depicts and responds to individual religions and creeds, and issues of importance raised in sf that are of interest to or derived from those individual religions and belief systems. (10–11)

I am all for the specificity and efficiency that comes with tightening one’s lens, and I am particularly eager to see scholars of the genre consider its intersections with traditions beyond Christianity. However, I am unsure that individual treatments of specific creeds need be the principal means. In fact, what I find most evocative about *Science Fiction and Catholicism* is its successful connections of one religious tradition to others. Had I been helping to title Clarke’s book, I might even have suggested zooming a bit further out, e.g. “Science Fiction’s Anti-Rational Faux: Catholicism, Religion, Modernity”. This is not to deny that the volume is particularly useful for those interested in Catholicism, nor that its strengths might be replicated in a book focusing on, say, Taoism, but only to resist downplaying more hybrid approaches. It seems to me that much of the genre – whether we focus on Golden Age texts like “Reason”, Robert Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), and Frank Herbert’s *Dune* (1965), or more recent ones like Octavia E. Butler’s *Parable* novels (1993, 1998), N. K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015–17), and the stories of Ted Chiang – are fascinating precisely because they refuse categorisation according to a single religious influence.

Ultimately, fellow scholars and many nonacademic readers are likely to appreciate Clarke’s book for its recognition of the epistemological hesitation, the theological and ideological self-consciousness, that has often shaped science-fictional treatments of the ultimate. This book highlights the whipping boy that a misshapen form of Catholicism has often provided, but it consistently demonstrates how the real target in the crosshairs has usually been any form of mysticism or superstition that would explicitly array itself against reason or science. Where religions have contorted themselves into dogmatic purveyors of Absolute Truth, Clarke shows how quickly SF has arrived, ready with the equivalent of a nun’s stern ruler. Read his book, then, for its insightful treatments of the works mentioned above and many more, including C. S. Lewis’s *That Hideous Strength* (1945), James Blish’s *A Case of Conscience* (1958), Keith Roberts’s *Pavane* (1968), Robert Silverberg’s “Good News from the Vatican” (1971), Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* (1980), Dan Simmons’s *Hyperion* (1989), and Robert Charles Wilson’s *Julian Comstock* (2009). Enjoy its ability to reference Chaucer and Shelley right alongside *Star*

Wars and *Star Trek*. Most of all, ponder the concluding, perhaps counterintuitive suggestion at work in the entire monograph: “Neither Catholicism nor sf have suffered through their lengthy interaction, even though they may often have misunderstood one another. Indeed, it is arguable that they may even have benefited each other greatly” (252). Similarly, gaining from Clarke’s argument does not require blinding oneself to the horrors committed by representatives of any particular monotheism or polytheism (or for that matter, atheism). It demands only a readiness to reach beyond the easy binaries with which we frequently frame religious versus secular cultures. Asimov’s robot characters may not always welcome such challenges, but we should.

Biography: Everett Hamner is Professor of English at Western Illinois University in Moline, Illinois. His scholarship focuses on the intersections of genetics and climate with literature, film, and popular culture. Recent work of potential interest includes *Editing the Soul: Science and Fiction in the Genome Age* (Penn State, 2017), a 2018 special issue of *Science Fiction Film and Television* on the television series *Orphan Black*, and a chapter in *The Palgrave Handbook of Literature and Science* (2020) on the climate novels of Kim Stanley Robinson.