
Book Review

Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Astrotopia: The Dangerous Religion of the Corporate Space Race* (University of Chicago Press, 2022), 224 pp., 24 (cloth), ISBN-13: 978-0-226-82112-2.

In this book, Mary-Jane Rubenstein wonders why space technologies could not be invested in ‘weather tracking, energy efficiency, disaster relief, and environmental protection’ instead ‘of making profits for a very small cadre of wealthy folks (e.g., Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos) by means of a powerful myth’ (p. 110). She adds that the ‘clearest indication of the limits of infinite space is the growing pile of garbage around us’ (p. 113). The myth itself is that of the American belief in an unlimited extra-terrestrial frontier—an astrofrontierism grounded in an earthly frontierism itself grounded in biblical land claims. The ‘strategy—of justifying political domination through religious rhetoric—has a long, unsavoury history in the Americas in particular’ (p. 32), one that, according to the author, begins with the Genesis admonition to take the lands of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Gergashites, and the Jebusites.

While the Old World was likened to Egypt, the New World was coded as Jerusalem, with European Americans proclaiming themselves to be God’s New Israel. Under a perceived divine mandate, these settlers asserted their right to take, mine, and recreate the entirety of North America for the glory of God. (p. 70)

Just as God had called the Israelites into Canaan, the Europeans into Connecticut, and the Homesteaders out to Colorado, so was he now—in the face of its Soviet rival—calling America to the Moon [initially through the Apollo missions, 1962-1972]. (p. 71)

In the wake of religiously justified imperialism such as Pope Alexander VI’s fifteenth century *Inter Caetera* Doctrine of Discovery, the 1513 *Requerimento* document, eighteenth century America as the New Canaan of Manifest Destiny, the nineteenth century declarations of *terra nullius* (‘no one’s land’) and now the competitive extra-terrestrial space race endorsed religiously by Presidents Kennedy, Obama, Trump, Vice-President Pence and others, ‘private enterprise... with national interest to establish a permanent human presence and a cutthroat economy beyond our Earth...[has become] rhetorically justified [in the US especially] with the language of destiny, freedom, salvation, and even divine will’ (p. 8).

As far as the American settlers were concerned, Indigenous nations 'had let their resources go to waste,' neglecting or even refusing to 'own' or 'improve' the land as God directed Adam when he told him to till the earth and keep it Genesis 2:15. (p. 66)

Likewise, growing up in the 1950s, I, Michael York, remember being shown, in school, photos comparing the former desolate and barren desert in Palestine with the now flourishing agriculture instituted by the new state of Israel.

While at present, the foremost nation-state intruders into outer space are the United States, China and Russia, Rubenstein focuses upon the United States in particular and understands Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams as no less endorsing of the Exodus story for the westward expansion and conquering of the land's Indigenous peoples who became then the New World equivalents of heathen and satanic Canaanites.¹ In short, the author states that 'Space' is the most recent arena of massive deregulation and privatization under the reigning economic strategy known as neoliberalism' (p. 25).

Just as the Europeans had claimed the Americas by reading a sacred text and planting a cross or flag, the Apollo missions claimed the Moon with the recitation of Genesis and a highly choreographed raising of the star-spangled banner. (p. 81)

What becomes crucial for Rubenstein in her excellent and clear-cut, yet fully conversational examination of the destructive myths behind the escalating New Space race is the need to get right with religion and turn to 'Indigenous philosophies, more-than-human worldviews, religious ecologies, and Afrofuturist visions of extra-terrestrial justice' (p. 8). She acknowledges the tension between American nationalism and benevolent universalism, and she points out that the 1967 United Nations ratification of the Outer Space Treaty declares that outer space is 'for the benefit of all peoples' and must only be used 'for peaceful purposes' (p. 102). But the US, China and Russia have all refused to ratify the OST.

So it all comes together like some diabolical 4-D puzzle: nations like the US, UAE, and Luxembourg go rogue, making their own legislation to protect the investors who fund the private companies that drive down

1. For a more positive view of the Founding Fathers, one can suggest Barbara McGraw's *Rediscovering America's Sacred Ground* (2003), but such current West End musicals like Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* and, concerning Commodore Matthew Perry's 1853 demand that politically isolated but contentedly self-contained Japan open its ports to US trade, Stephen Sondheim's *Pacific Overtures*, as well as the present growing global perception that the Biden administration's support of Israel in not insisting on an immediate ceasefire for the genocide in Gaza all underscore the country's persistent imperial colonisation.

prices so the space agencies can hire them to mine the materials to build the colonies that send more probes prospecting for space gold on the endless frontier, with all of it backed up by a dedicated branch of the military. (p. 131)

Along with her frequent humorous asides, the author paints a dire picture of human/global imbalance. And in contrast to the virtual impossibilities of an imagined life on a terraformed planet such as that of the 'hellhole' Mars, Rubenstein asks how we could instead remove CO₂ from our poisoned Earth's atmosphere or plastic from the oceans, acid from the rain and infestations from the trees. She draws from evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis, Gaia scientist James Lovelock, philosophers Holmes Rolston III and Robert Sparrow, cultural historian Thomas Berry, and Australian archaeologist Alice Gorman who collectively may be said to have helped formulate the principle behind the 'Rights of Nature Laws' (p. 148), namely, the granting of legal standing to natural formations and the extension of personhood status from corporations to rainforests, sacred rivers and mountains, nonhuman animals, the moon, the Red Planet, asteroids and other celestial agents. When a rock is not considered just dead matter to be consequently mined but something which possesses rights of its own, it becomes then an entity 'not to be decimated by human pollution, extraction, or war' (p. 148). For Rolston, rather than being either subjective or objective, nature may be approached as projective and, as such, merits respect when various projects are named, paramount, creative, aesthetic, transformative, or of historical value. While younger advocates of terraforming, such as Astronism's founder Cometan, consider that the impending danger is the death of humanity on earth, regarding our global record against any attempt to establish outer space colonies and a galactic immortality of the species, the likelihood is that humans might become nothing more in effect than cosmic cockroaches. As Rubenstein maintains, in the very least 'the question of the right of rocks asks us to slow down and consider the possibility that there are some things that can't be property' (p. 151).

The book raises many questions yet provides few answers. This book, however, is significant and most important in delineating the alleged universal humanitarianism of the American-led, corporate-backed conquest of space. Apart for the detail, there is little here that is surprising. Behind much of Christian-influenced Western culture is the belief underlying capitalism that earthly suffering is to be rewarded in the afterlife vis-à-vis the quest simply 'to stay alive by going forth, increasing, and multiplying' (p. 161). Despite the eco-destructive consequences from Christianity, 'most contemporary Christian texts, leaders, and communities are solidly committed to environmental stewardship (p. 38) ...[yet] the churches wield far less influence in the contemporary world than they did during the medieval and early-modern periods' (p. 39). Rubenstein presents such alternate modes of thought as Indigenous Futurism, Afrofuturism and the reactionary disgust of both astrotopianism and the dangerous legacy of colonialism in space. She adds that 'the only thing likely to trickle down from space is more pollution' (p. 178). Despite the admonition to live in accordance with nature, to her question of whether the space agencies are ready to hear from the rest of us in connection with the development of sustainable practices encouraged through caretaking and listening, the answer is undoubtedly a clear 'No!'

But Western rationalism and its rejection of the intuitions of the more-than-human world as absolute nonsense are only one part of the West's cultural heritage—despite America's 'Drill, Baby, Drill!' remaining a shamelessly and embarrassingly pathetic endorsement vis-à-vis anything close to coming from a mature and mindful mentality.

Perhaps Rubenstein's thorough and undeniably devastating analysis of the team of imperial Christianity, European expansion, capitalism, and a racist form of science might find a possible amelioration through what Jennie Thomas (2024) covers as the change in the astrological landscape into its becoming 'a vibrant, mainstream phenomenon, casting its influence across media, fashion and music'. In her research project as part of the Cultural Astronomy & Astrology MA programme at Trinity Saint David in Wales, she explores the current interconnections between astrology, paganism, and ecological movements that appear to be re-kindling a sense of enchantment, wonder and reverence. With astrology, connection to the divine is not considered to be one that links to some transcendent reality outside our physical world but rather something that generates an expanded significance to be found within the world in which we actually dwell. What then becomes encouraged is the adoption of a more inclusive and adaptable worldview. And paganism itself is found similarly in a profound sense of belonging to nature in which the natural world is deemed intrinsically valuable and sacred.

The neo-pagan worldview captures the perspective that there is a cosmic life force which courses through not only the external environment but also through the human body itself and weaves together all living entities. If these living entities include Rubenstein's rocks, then at the heart of ecological spirituality and any fusion it has with astrology and nature religion could lie 'a call for responsible and sustainable interaction with our finite resources, entwined in a dynamic relationship with our beloved planet' (Thomas 2024). With Thomas' respondents, 'not a single respondent upheld an anthropocentric outlook, signalling a clear departure from the belief that humans are the centre of the universe' (Thomas 2024). She admits that the 'stars may not reveal all the answers, but they certainly beckon us to explore the profound array of beliefs that enrich our lives and deepen our connection to the extraordinary world we inhabit' (Thomas 2024). 'Dark Green Religion' is mentioned specifically. And Thomas adds that if 'neo-paganism evolves into a genuine religion or moral philosophy with a unique way of life, astrology stands poised to provide the symbolic and philosophical guidance it currently lacks' (Thomas 2024).

Echoing Margo Adler's (1986) [1979] clarification of paganism, what matters for Rubenstein is behaviour rather than belief. Mythologies themselves she claims are what prompt us to interact with the world to which we belong. The argument in Rubenstein's book is that the imperialistic space race is 'as much a mythological project as it is a political, economic, or scientific one' (p. x), and if the problem is religious, the solution must be as well. Through art and perhaps especially music we might be able to imagine genuinely other worlds, and, after all is said and done, 'maybe ancient pantheistic mysticism is exactly what we need' (p. 181).

References

- Adler, Margot. 1986 [1979]. *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America* (Boston: Beacon Press).
- Cometan and Michael York. 2021. 'Astronism and the Astronic Religious Tradition', *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 12.1: 3–31.
- McGraw, Barbara. 2003. *Rediscovering America's Sacred Ground: Public Religion and the Pursuit of the Good in a Pluralistic America* (New York: SUNY Press).
- Thomas, Jennie. 2024. 'The State of Astrology as We Enter 2024', *The Astrological Journal / The Astrological Association of Great Britain*.

Michael York
Bath Spa University
exchange@michaelyork.co.uk