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Steven Hrotic

***Religion in Science Fiction: The Evolution of an
Idea and the Extinction of a Genre***

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Reviewer: Kristin M. Peterson

(University of Colorado at Boulder, USA)

Religion and various issues related to rituals, faith, spirituality and belief systems have long been significant among the topics discussed and debated in science fiction. The author of this volume,

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Steven Hrotic, is right to acknowledge that a book about religion in science fiction could take many different approaches. As a cognitive anthropologist, Hrotic chooses to trace what he terms a metanarrative of religion as it has been featured and transformed throughout the history of science fiction literature. Instead of examining all instances of religion in any single type of science fiction, Hrotic is focused on a specific community of science fiction writers and readers, which he terms “genre science fiction” or gSF. This book does not spend a lot of time on the more mainstream forms of science fiction literature, TV shows or movies.

Before going through an analysis of various gSF texts, Hrotic defines religion as social behavior within a formal system that is motivated by a belief in a supernatural being. Hrotic needs a fairly narrow working definition of religion because otherwise he would be analyzing every instance of the supernatural or spiritual within science fiction. He also designates that his focus will only be on gSF because he wants to be able to trace how religion is discussed within this specific cultural group, which has specific schema and narratives that must be followed.

Hrotic explains that gSF “is not a particular kind of story, but rather a product of the collective, creative acts of a community of individuals who, by virtue of shared experiences, share similar schemas which evolve within the bounded group” (p.22). Hrotic’s goal in this study is to understand how this community of gSF writers and fans is formed around certain cultural narratives, and, in turn, how this community and these narratives can evolve and change. This approach would resonate with readers who are interested in cultural studies and exploring how culture makes meaning for social groups.

This focus on gSF might be a disappointment to readers who have only tested the waters of more mainstream science fiction, but the narrow focus allows Hrotic to make a sustained argument about this community. Through an analysis of the main gSF texts from 1920-2000, Hrotic argues that religion evolved from being seen as a dangerous opponent of science that needed to be stamped out to being seen as a complex and significant element of society. He also asserts that the conflict between science and religion, which was quite strong in the early days of gSF, has now been resolved. Most current science fiction work has no problem presenting both religion and science as positive and negative forces in society.

After providing some historical background on the authors that influenced gSF, Hrotic goes through each historical period in gSF, discussing the key works in that period and presenting the shifts in the metanarrative about religion. In the early years of gSF (1920-1940), religion was hardly discussed in the stories, or religion was shown as a tool to manipulate people in order to gain social power. Early gSF also portrayed religion and science as in frequent conflict, but science usually won out as the social force that could solve more problems. Hrotic explains that a major shift happened in gSF after World War II, because members of the community were forced to consider how science and technology could be used to do evil in the world. Religion began to be seen as a necessary check on the powers of science. Within gSF from the 1960s and onward, we see how religion can be a positive force for social change. Stories also feature more and more religious characters, and there is more of a focus on the deeper faith struggles of individual characters.

The strength of this study can be found in Hrotic's extensive research, which highlights the main works, both novels and short stories, of gSF and organizes these works into distinct periods. Readers with just a cursory knowledge of science fiction will recognize some of the authors that Hrotic features, such as Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke, Frank Herbert, and Orson Scott Card. Those interested in the topic of religion in science fiction will come away from this book with an extensive reading list of not just the heavy-hitters but some more obscure titles as well. Each chapter features summaries of the stories (without ruining their endings) and clear arguments about how these stories illustrate the evolving metanarrative of religion. This book would be a fascinating read for a non-academic audience of science fiction fans, but unfortunately, the price of the book will likely limit access.

While Hrotic is clear throughout the book that his focus is just on gSF, the book may be a disappointment for readers looking for a deeper analysis of why science fiction has been the space where these spiritual, religious and philosophical issues have been examined for so many years. The structure of this book allowed Hrotic to make an argument about a certain portrayal of religion within gSF, but this organization does not allow him the flexibility to discuss the outliers, to delve into other religious themes besides the conflict with science, or to conduct a deeper analysis of some of the key texts. Hrotic successfully makes an argument about the

history of gSF, which he also argues is a cultural group that has now dissolved, but the author cannot push this argument forward to make substantial claims about popular, mainstream science fiction and what this historical period of science fiction means for contemporary society. Readers outside of the gSF community and its scholarship might not expect to find great interest in reading this extensive cultural history. Nonetheless, this book will have relevance to any readers who study the role that media texts and narratives play in shaping cultural groups.