



Birch, J. C.P. (2023) Science and Religion in Western Literature. *Expository Times*, 134(11), pp. 497-499. (doi: [10.1177/00145246231181774](https://doi.org/10.1177/00145246231181774)) [Book Review]

The material cannot be used for any other purpose without further permission of the publisher and is for private use only.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<https://eprints.gla.ac.uk/306043/>

Deposited on 08 September 2023

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of
Glasgow

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

BOOK OF THE MONTH

SCIENCE AND RELIGION IN WESTERN LITERATURE

Michael Fuller (ed.), *Science and Religion in Western Literature: Critical and Theological Studies* (London: Routledge, 2022. £130.00. pp. vi + 179. ISBN: 978-1-032-07712-3).

When C.P. Snow advanced his famous ‘Two Cultures’ thesis in the 1950s, he lamented a disconnect between literary intellectuals and natural scientists. In the intervening decades, new trends pertinent to religious culture include the emergence of (1) natural scientists with a strong literary style who are either hostile to religion (Richard Dawkins *et al.*), or seek peaceful co-existence (such as Stephen J Gould); and (2) the science and religion dialogue as a theological discipline, pioneered by Ian Barbour. This collection, edited by Michael Fuller, intersects with both traditions while providing something distinctive: ten original studies on the interweaving of science and religion in Western literature before and after Snow’s intervention.

The Early Modern Crucible: The importance of early-modern natural philosophy to the construction of the science and religion debate cannot be overstated: the mechanistic picture of nature and methods of quantitative analysis, guiding Galileo and others in their revolutionary investigations, initiated the elimination of teleology from nature while placing consciousness beyond scientific study. But as Alison Millbank shows, this was resisted at the time by philosophers from Ralph Cudworth to John Ray, with their ‘Plastic Nature’ thesis—an unconscious, immanent agency which realises the will of God in nature. Along with the poetry of Henry Vaughan, the monistic ‘cabala’ of Anne Conway (p. 89), and theological writings of Coleridge, this forms a minority report in European philosophies of nature.

Weird Tales: Gothic and Scientific: Alison Jack’s intruding and disquieting essay analyses the reception of the infamous Scottish Covenanter Thomas Weir. Weir had embodied the virtues of military and Presbyterian discipline but died in ignominy: executed for witchcraft, incest, and bestiality. Some have suggested that Weir was a model for the titular character(s) in Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Whatever the truth, Weir continues to haunt Scottish fiction, a notable example being James Robertson’s *The Fanatic*, which stands ‘in the tradition of *Frankenstein* and *Jekyll and Hyde* in opening up epistemological possibilities and its refusal to offer definitive answers, whether scientific or theological’ (p. 38).

While cosmological ‘fine tuning’ has preoccupied many within the science and religion dialogue, the aforementioned mystery of consciousness represents another entry point. In the nineteenth century, curiosity about mental phenomena led to the emerging field of ‘psychical research’. Mark Eaton recounts the formative role in this of William James, who operated on the controversial assumption that he could use *empirical* methods to investigate *supersensory* reality. Eaton’s essay is funny and moving at equal turns, documenting the fraternal love manifest in the sceptical Henry James reading a paper, penned by his older brother, to the London Society of Psychical Research. Despite his unease with the paranormal, Henry drew on the literature for one his most celebrated works, *The Turn of the Screw*.

David Jasper recovers a forgotten giant of popular fiction with an essay on Mary Corelli’s ‘electric creed’. Although lacking formal theological and scientific education, Corelli ventured definite opinions on both in such *fin-de-siècle* novels as *The Mighty Atom*. For Corelli, the applications of modern science were ‘making the miraculous come true’ (p. 128) in everyday experience, so rather than undermining the fantastical elements of revelation, this made them more plausible. An autodidact with a large readership can be dangerous, but Jasper paints a picture of a benign eccentric who entertained her public with fiction so heavily laden with the science and religious fashions of her day that it is difficult to transport to ours.

Genre Matters: When searching for unifying concepts in religion, science, and literature, the act of creation (ποίησις) has proven suggestive. But as Wilson Poon shows, looming behind these svelte theological approaches is a materialist colossus—Lucretius’ *De rerum natura*. Poon illuminates an ambivalence towards natural science within a poetic tradition from John Donne to R. S. Thomas, demonstrating how the agenda of the early Royal Society was not only observational and experimental but linguistic: pairing down language to avoid the ‘vicious abundance of Phrase, this trick of Metaphors, this volubility of Tongues’ (p. 98). Thomas reacted against the tendency in his claim that when it comes to ‘the unifying power of imagination [...] Science destroys as it gives’ (p. 96). For Thomas religion was essentially poetry, but he was compelled to steal from the tree of (scientific) knowledge in his later work, looking beyond the ‘aggression of fact’ to the contemplation of nature, under different descriptions, and a ‘cruciform poetics’ (p. 107).

Fantasy and science fiction (SF) have long engaged this volume’s subjects, and Victoria Lorimmar discusses two of most celebrated works of fantasy in the English language: *His Dark Materials* and *The Book of Dust*. A Roman Catholic educationalist once told me that Philip Pullman was ‘the best theologian writing today’, albeit his ideas were decidedly ‘Gnostic’. Lorimmar does not cast Pullman as a theologian, Gnostic or otherwise, but she does locate the worlds he constructs ‘within the context of the Judeo-Christian tradition’ (p. 10)—albeit in the subterranean spaces of dissent and heterodoxy. She does this convincingly, analysing Pullman’s engagement with the fall since Darwin, the science of consciousness, and the relationship between reason and imagination. But it is misleading to identify the ‘archetypical relativist’ character Simon Talbot (*Dark Materials*) with the ‘illusionist ideas of reality put forward by the likes of Daniel Dennett’ (p. 17): Dennett is an ‘illusionist’ about common first-person notions of consciousness, not the world described by the natural sciences. Donald Hoffman would be a better example.

Moving closer to SF, Mark Harris offers a fresh reading of Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Against a tradition which reads the novel as a dystopia where science dominates at the expense of religion, Harris argues this interpretation is underpinned by the outmoded conflict thesis concerning science and religion, and ignores the persistence of the latter. In Huxley’s world of biological mass production there is a quasi-civil religion venerating Henry Ford; and there is soma, the tablet which neutralises pain during quasi-Eucharistic celebrations: ‘the embodiment of this society’s realised eschatology in pill form’ (p. 43). And in Huxley’s account science is as much a loser as religion: the unfettered testing of hypotheses is considered ‘heretical...dangerous, and potentially subversive’ by the world controllers, antithetical to the ‘stability’ that science and technology actually serve in this oppressive vision (p. 53).

Beth Singler offers a window onto a subgenre of SF: the ‘Singularity story’ (p. 137), captured apophatically as ‘an event horizon beyond our current intelligence’ (p. 138). Singler utilises the metanarrative of Steven Hrotic, charting the history of religion within SF from ‘rejection to acceptance’ (136). But if there is a subgenre which captures the spirit of the ‘new atheists’, it is ‘Singularity’ literature, complete with Dawkins’s ‘religion as virus’ metaphor. Singler engages the work of Charles Stross and Cory Doctorow—*Rapture of the Nerds*—with its technologically realised eschatology. In this tradition the question is not who will be left behind come the rapture, but whether it is possible or desirable to leave religion behind in SF. This has been an enticing prospect for SF writers, but Singler shows that it is difficult to implement without falling into the very patterns selected for exclusion.

In a fine essay, going beyond the Anglosphere, Fuller recalls the Czech writer Karel Čapek. Čapek’s most enduring and widespread contribution to culture is probably giving the term ‘robot’ its familiar meaning, but the author was a seven-time Nobel Prize nominee. His work was guided by distinctive epistemological principles, rarely popular in Britain: pragmatism and qualified relativism, in defiance of the certitudes which characterise some

religious and scientific thought. Fuller's chapter is worth reading alone for his introduction to Čapek's *War with the Newts*, and the ethical and religious questions it raises.

Concluding Ecological Postscript: In the final essay Jaime Wright raises the question, 'Can Religion Save the Planet?' (p. 151), and searches for answers in the eco-religions of climate fiction. No contemporary author has constructed more vivid, sinister futures than Margaret Atwood. Her *MaddAddam* trilogy engages environment crises, although Atwood resists any suggestion that she is writing about climate change – 'I call it the everything change' (p. 155). These novels deal with the interconnected excesses of capitalism, biotechnology, ecological destruction, and social disintegration. In the trilogy Atwood introduces 'God's Gardeners', an eco-religion with its own mythology and liturgy, contrasted with the 'Church of PetrOleum'. Not a subtle juxtaposition, but an effective one. Wright concludes her beautifully written essay with the hope that climate fiction will raise consciousness and inspire action.

Christopher Southgate completes the volume with a well-integrated discussion of issues arising from the collection while offering a plausible narrative explanation for the persistence of the 'conflict thesis.' Southgate's afterword is seasoned with poetry, including his own, and concludes with a Larkin inspired affirmation of poetry as a form fit to 'occupy [...] a serious place on serious earth' (p. 175).

The limitations of this volume are acknowledged by the editor. It is dominated by English literature from Christian and post-Christian cultures. But the collection should serve as an invitation to those with the expertise to contribute to what could be a new turn in the discipline—less focus on the formulation of theoretical typologies accounting for the relationship between science and religion as stable categories, and towards a decentred set of encounters between natural sciences, world religions, and world literatures.

JONATHAN C.P. BIRCH
University of Glasgow