



SPACE EXPLORATION

Religion in space

A sense of divine entitlement pervades private space colonization efforts

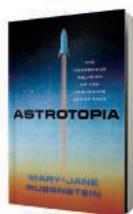
By Roger D. Launius

Human space exploration has always been about a quest for utopia, laced with a fair measure of religious conceptions. In the early 1970s, Chris Kraft, the godfather of NASA's Mission Control Center and a leader in the Apollo Moon landing program, characterized his support of space exploration in this way: "This step into the universe is a religion and I'm a member of it."

Kraft's statement made clear that those interested in moving beyond Earth, like the migrants to the Americas of the 16th and 17th centuries, endeavored to create a more perfect human experience free from the strictures of known society. Of course, what constitutes "a more perfect human experience" depends very much on individual perspective. Many observers of the space exploration community recognize this reality and have provided stinging critiques about what this might mean for extraplanetary regions explored by hu-

mans, who will bring with them all their beliefs and practices, for better and worse.

Mary-Jane Rubenstein, a professor of religion and science in society at Wesleyan University, adds her voice to these critiques with *Astrotopia: The Dangerous Religion of the Corporate Space Race*. She notes how human spaceflight supporters have long insisted that space is the next step in humanity's "natural" and therefore irrepressible need to explore, often framing this inclination as a spiritual quest, a purification of humanity, and a search for absolution and immortality. These deep-seated convictions, she observes, have energized space exploration from the dawn of the space age.



Astrotopia

Mary-Jane Rubenstein
University of Chicago
Press, 2022. 224 pp.

Many of Rubenstein's historical examples are well known. Captain Kirk's soliloquy—"Space, the final frontier"—at the beginning of *Star Trek* and John F. Kennedy's 1962 speech about setting sail on "this new sea" invoked journeying to a different land, settling an uncolonized region, and creating a new civilization. Such conceptions conjured images of self-reliant people moving to untouched territories in sweeping waves of discovery, exploration, and settlement. Implied therein were utopian ideals of optimism, individuality, and democracy. But flattening space into a mythological frontier reduced the complexity of events that would transpire during

A rendering of a proposed space habitat offers an idealized view of space settlement untroubled by problematic aspects of migration and colonization.

such exploration to a static morality play, avoided matters that challenged or contradicted the myth, framed the settlement experience as inherently good, and ignored the cultural context of migration.

Aspiring space colonizers disappointed with NASA's declension in the 1970s began to imagine an alternative agenda aimed at achieving a bountiful future on a pristine planet, increasingly without government involvement. "New Space" advocates may be thought of as orphans of Apollo who found their way into myriad economic, political, and social camps. They evince distrust of authority, especially governmental authority, and celebrate the entrepreneurial spirit of Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Sir Richard Branson, whom they believe will finally open a boundless space frontier. Such individuals may support NASA's efforts when they converge with their own interests, but they have grown increasingly critical of the space agency and any other large governmental activities.

Along with criticisms of NASA, "New Space" advocates also accept a dystopian future on Earth. They argue that in the 21st century, exponential growth of population and diminishing resources will create cataclysm. The answer, they believe, is to escape. And although humanity does not yet possess the technological capability to send human colonies elsewhere in the Solar System, these obstacles, they maintain, can be overcome.

Such beliefs are why, as Rubenstein makes clear, Musk and Bezos have become messiahs for the "New Space" community. In building the rockets necessary to get off this planet, presumably without government sponsorship, these entrepreneurs are opening the regions beyond Earth to settlement as never before. All will be the better for it, they believe. Notwithstanding the corporate ethos of Musk and Bezos, their supporters view their efforts as immensely more acceptable than the efforts of NASA.

Ultimately, Rubenstein succeeds in highlighting both the debate over whether future space exploration and exploitation should be led by government or entrepreneurial entities and the manner in which neoliberal, private-sector emphases have come to dominate the thinking of a particular segment of the pro-space community. Her criticisms of this phenomenon—part of a growing body of literature in environmental studies, Afrofuturism, and anticolonialism investigations—are on point. ■

The reviewer was associate director for collections and curatorial affairs at the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum in Washington, DC, prior to retirement in 2017. He is the author of *Apollo's Legacy: Perspectives on the Moon Landings* (Smithsonian Books, 2019). Email: launiusr@gmail.com

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