
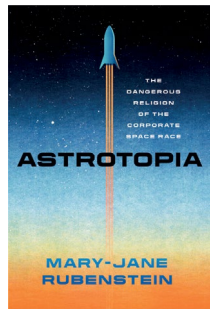


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Astrotopia: The Dangerous Religion of the Corporate Space Race

By Mary-Jane Rubenstein
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It's coming down to the wire. The Earth is roasting, many ecosystems are starting to collapse, and with each passing year it becomes clearer that we aren't doing enough to stop man-made global warming. It seems like we're just sitting ducks, keeping our heads down and pretending we're not living through a slow, drawn-out extinction event. Luckily, a handful of billionaires have the answer: we just need to pack our bags, board giant rockets, and leave.

Hasn't space always been the ultimate dream, a clean slate, a chance to shrug off our primitive planet and start again? In the stars lies salvation; we just need to put our faith in the very people whose wealth is a by-product of their environmental recklessness. This dilemma lies at the core of philosopher of science and religion Mary Jane-Rubenstein's *Astrotopia: The Dangerous Religion of the Corporate Space Race*, a slim book packed with strong criticisms of the zany, pie-in-the-low-orbit ideas touted by our billionaire saviours. Rubenstein doesn't think the solutions lie in ideas straight from science fiction novels; to her, it's much simpler – it's the “old, destructive myths behind the escalating new space race” that need to be examined. In short, we need to look at the religious drivers that underpin these narratives and reconsider how we negotiate with the Universe; if we pause and take a long look at the Earth and our responsibilities to it, perhaps we might rethink our place in the stars.

It seems anathema to mention religion in any discussion about space. But why? Both religion and science focus on a search for truth, a search for meaning, which underpins our spacefaring efforts. As Rubenstein argues, “the idea of a human mission to colonize unknown lands has a specifically religious

history that still animates the contemporary space programme and justifies our claim to whatever we lay our probes on.” In 2020, President Trump declared space as “our manifest destiny in the stars” during the unveiling of the US Space Force, a new branch of the military designed to wage orbital warfare. Vice President Pence espoused America's space mission as ‘divinely ordained’ in a speech laden with pious symbolism. The theme is constant: we're heading for the heavens, and space is ours for the taking.

As Rubenstein notes, it's “the Bible that reaffirms the belief that the Universe is ours,” and the modern space race is rich with allusions to the story of creation, only this time we get to play God. SpaceX founder Elon Musk wants to terraform Mars by blasting its poles with ten thousand thermonuclear warheads as a way to kickstart a planetary warming process and make it fit for human habitation. In short, he wants a crack at restarting Genesis. Blue Origin's Jeff Bezos wants to get us all off-world and into huge cylindrical space stations that simulate the ideal climates and atmospherics of Earth, so we can live out our days playing make-believe. Why should we do any of these things? Why are we so obsessed with remaking Earth if we've made such a mess of it in the first place? According to Rubenstein, these motivations go right back to Genesis, because “humans were created as creators and told to continue the work God had begun.” And never mind the practicalities, like how we would conceivably launch ten thousand missiles at Mars, or how we'd even create space stations the size of our current planet – these details haven't been ironed out yet. Just have faith, because that's what this is all about.

It's an unfortunate consequence of late-stage capitalism that two billionaires are elevated to modern-day messiahs; now, with everything else going to hell, these venture capitalists are trying to sell our own mortality to us. They're conscious of it, too: Musk has already told potential candidates for his Mars colonization programme that “some of you may die”. But it's worth it to complete Musk's holy mission – and besides, it's for the betterment of humankind, isn't it? Rubenstein notes that this kind of language is dangerous. Beneath all the “spirit of exploration” and “light of consciousness” jabber

is a concentrated effort on the part of the super-wealthy to avoid discussing the damage they've done to the world already. Musk can pollute the world with failed rocket launches, plunder lithium mines and command people to their death – he assures us it's all worth it for a higher purpose.

Of course, the rich selling space as the next frontier is nothing new; in the middle of the twentieth-century Walt Disney “presented space as the extraordinary destiny of ordinary people.” The Tomorrowland region of Disneyland, California, situated right across from the wagons and wigwams of Frontierland, not-so-subtly hints that America's future has the potential to simply turn into an extension of its pioneering, imperial past. Mars Society CEO Robert Zubrin warned that “Western society will disintegrate unless it finds a new world to colonize.” It's the familiar, theologically charged language of zealots, and Rubenstein argues that this endeavour is indeed a modern crusade to export the status quo to the stars, set against a backdrop of economic freefall and environmental collapse.

So, there's a time bomb ticking away. We need to get off the world and into orbit before the consequences of our actions catch up with us. We need to abdicate the environmental stewardship bestowed upon us in Genesis and leave this world behind. Of course, we could be focusing our energies and our money on fixing the plethora of issues at home, but Musk has a final answer: “Fuck Earth, who cares about Earth?” Earth is old, it's running out of resources, it's got very little money left in it. Space is new, space is infinite, and we can't ruin space, can we?

Well, maybe we can. Our track record with space debris is already quite poor when you consider the amount of junk we've dumped up there, including, of all things, a Tesla Roadster. What'll we do to another planet? How can we avoid the same issues as here on Earth? Rubenstein presents an alternative, however, when she asks us to consider an apparent absurdity: the rights of rocks themselves. If the Moon and even Mars had rights, how would we treat them? If it sounds silly, Rubenstein argues, it's only because Christian teachings have stripped away the animist beliefs of so many indigenous cultures and “made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the

feelings of natural objects.” It’s not scientific nor data-backed, but it is a different approach to how we might align ourselves in the cosmos. Rubenstein believes that this ancestral back-to-basics is exactly what we need, a breath of fresh air from “the 19th century marriage between science and technology” that laid the foundations for today’s environmental crisis.

I’m not a pantheist but the argument does carry some weight: our rationalistic relationship with the modern world has denied us of any real, meaningful connection with Mother Nature. We’re instead too focused on our divine destiny in the stars. But if we ruin the Moon or Mars or any other planet, then what

is really the point of it all in the first place? If we view every planet as a new resource-mine to plunder and colonize, then we’ll forever be stuck in the same cycle of needing to escape a dying world. It certainly seems like the ideas of billionaires are far-fetched at best, which is, of course, why they rely so heavily on the language of faith. Modern space tycoons place more attention on ways we can make Mars habitable than on fixing problems here on Earth, and we seem more focused on saving the status quo than rethinking it.

In the conclusion of *Astrotopia*, Rubenstein asserts the need for a pantheist revolution against the Western view of God as a single entity. Instead we should embrace God as

being within everything. It’s a fundamental rewriting of our position in the cosmos, and a repositioning of the cosmos around us. A more spiritual approach to spacefaring might just allow us to avoid our earthly mistakes, and explore space ethically. And if we learn any lessons from our time here on Earth, it should not be “how space belongs to us, but how we belong to it.” As Carl Sagan said, we are, each of us, made of star-stuff.

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