Other Worlds: Spirituality and the Search for Invisible Dimensions

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Christopher G. White. *Other Worlds: Spirituality and the Search for Invisible Dimensions*. Harvard UP, 2018. Hardback. 384 pg. $35.00, ISBN 9780674984295.

IN *Other Worlds: Spirituality and the Search for Invisible Dimensions*, Christopher G. White explores the history and imaginative power of the idea that the universe has higher, invisible dimensions. To accomplish his goal, White assembles an unusual cast of characters: visionary mathematicians, fantasy writers like George MacDonald and C. S. Lewis, mystical physicists, spirit channelers, television producers, hippie scientists, New Age prophets, social reformers, indefatigable parapsychologists, and artists like Max Weber (3). White argues that the diversity of this group is dictated by the desire to make a larger point about science and religion, which are often seen as implacable enemies. He posits that scientific and religious ideas come braided together and influence each other to a degree that has gone unnoticed, and he strives to address it (13).

White treats the idea of the invisible dimensions historically and structures his book accordingly. He begins with the mid-nineteenth century mathematical discoveries of the idea of the fourth dimension and moves through the evolution of the idea across various disciplines until the modern day. This historical approach to the subject makes the structure of the book easy to navigate, especially as chapters are also thematically focused on areas of interest. For example, chapter one is focused on Edwin Abbott's life and career, with special attention paid to *Flatland* (1884), a text that has become a classic for scholars of science fiction, students of mathematics, and spiritual seekers alike. Chapter two discusses the turbulent career and private life of Charles Howard Hinton, the inventor of the four-dimensional cube called "tesseract." The ideas fleshed out in these two chapters are fundamental to the rest of the book, because White traces and refers to them consistently in every chapter that follows. Abbott's allegory of the world existing only on a two-dimensional plane and Hinton's conceptualisation of the "tesseract" serve as two points of reference throughout the history of invisible dimensions. These points

create a referential springboard which White applies to move seamlessly between chapters, from one discipline to another, one time period to another. The example of the transition between chapter four and five illustrates it well. White devotes chapter four to a detailed analysis of the life and work of an architect Claude Bragdon, a man described by his contemporaries as fully as great an architect as Frank Lloyd Wright but lacking Wright's talent for self-promotion (108). Bragdon incorporated higher-dimensional philosophy in architecture by designing hypercubes and other objects into otherworldly ornamentation. By showing the links between Abbott's and Hinton's ideas and Bragdon's work in the early twentieth century, White sets up a transition to chapter five, in which the same ideas are highlighted throughout the art of the period. In chapter five the main area of interest is the evolution of impressionism into cubism and the life and work of Russian-born American painter Max Weber. The philosophy of invisible dimensions is a consistent lens through which White shows the last two centuries to his readers.

My only criticism of *Other Worlds* is that in his analysis of many famous literary works, such as C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956) and Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962), White rarely engages with the abundant literary scholarship produced on the works so far, but rather focuses on the bibliographies and philosophical views of the authors. In this, however, White remains true to his analytical lens of invisible dimensions. When discussing genre literature, White also remains true to his speciality. As a professor of religion, he is interested in how the mythopoeic nature of genre literature influences belief. He argues that "the lesson of modern Christian fantasy and sci-fi is not just that belief takes practice but that objects of belief have to be made believable again for new generations" (228).

Other Worlds is a generous hardback, as it offers over 300 pages of material, along with bibliographical notes, credits, and a useful index at the end, all of which enhance the reading experience. It is a valuable resource for those interested in the intersection of science and religion. Scholars and students, fans and creators, specialists in science fiction, fantasy, popular culture and art will be able to find something of interest in this volume. Its historical structure offers the story of invisible dimensions and encourages the reader to treat the book as one would treat a work of fiction. However, the chapters are so diverse and holistic in their internal structure that they can easily stand up to selective reading. I can imagine chapters from this book being used selectively as reading material for a variety of teaching

modules. A science fiction scholar might, in the words of L'Engle, "tesser with joy" through a selection of short stories analysed by White (242), such as Algernon Blackwood's "Victim of Higher Space" (1914), Robert Heinlein's "And He Built a Crooked House" (1941), William McGivern's "Doorway of Vanishing Men" (1941), and Mark Clifton's "Star, Bright" (1952), to name only a few. *Other Worlds* achieves its goal of delineating how the scientific idea of a higher dimension has spread across popular culture. More importantly, in an impressive feat of scholarship spanning across several disciplines, White manages to revise the conventional way of writing about the modern "conflict between science and religion" by showing how scientific insights were used sometimes not to attack spiritual beliefs but to buttress them in unexpected ways (3).