

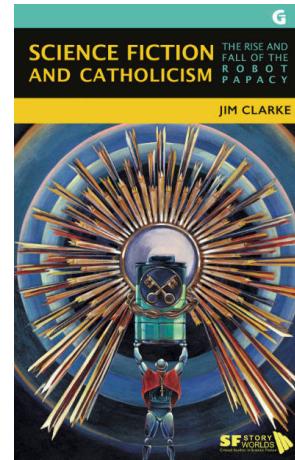
Science Fiction and Catholicism: The Rise and Fall of the Robot Papacy, by Jim Clarke



Dominick Grace

Jim Clarke. *Science Fiction and Catholicism: The Rise and Fall of the Robot Papacy*. Gylphi, 2019. SF Storyworlds. Paperback. 292 pg. \$29.99. ISBN 9781780240848.

Jim Clarke tackles an ambitious topic in *Science Fiction and Catholicism*; though he notes that “this study [...] tracks a series of historical narratives about how Anglophone literary sf has dealt with Catholicism in the late twentieth century” (4), he in fact traces the overlap between Catholicism and SF back to the Middle Ages and provides a formidably-researched analysis of how ideological conflicts between Catholicism and Protestantism have (mis)informed the treatment/representation of Catholicism in SF. (He also considers a few texts that are arguably earlier than the “late twentieth century” framework.) His assertion in his conclusion, that Catholics, rather than representatives of other religions, have featured more prominently than representatives of other religions as rigid antagonists of irrational revelation is because of the “role which faux Catholicism has played in sf as the genre’s Other, a role foisted upon actual Catholicism by an anti-Catholic literary tradition which dates back to the post-Reformation pamphlet wars” (251). He argues that “Catholicism, perhaps of all the world’s faiths, has demonstrated the most interest in topics close to sf interests, most specifically the possibility of alien life. In return it has been rewarded with a significant though largely malign presence within the corpus of sf works” (251). While these might seem like tendentious claims—and indeed, Clarke has nothing to say about how non-Catholic manifestations of Christianity (e. g. the Gileadean regime in Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* [1985], to name but one example) also are common in SF—Clarke’s extensive exploration not only of SF but also of the history of the Catholic Church provides strong support for his arguments. The overlap between those deeply conversant with SF traditions and those with deep knowledge of European intellectual history is perhaps smaller than it should be. Those already well-steeped in both will not be surprised by much that Clarke says, but for those lacking such twin expertises, this is an eminently useful book.



Especially important here are Clarke’s introduction and the first chapter, “Critical Mass: How Catholicism Became Science Fiction’s Counter-Narrative,” which between them take up close to a quarter of the book, and in which he builds a well-researched and thorough exploration of how

an understanding of the Reformation's influence on how Catholicism came to be represented in literature (not only in SF but more generally, including in important antecedent genres such as the Gothic) lies beneath recurrent patterns in how Catholicism is treated in SF. Readers who know the SF but not the history will find these chapters extremely useful. Clarke follows with three further chapters, each focusing on a particular popular SF subject and considering examples of how Catholic perspectives on those issues have figured in SF, and how those perspectives compare (or contrast) with what the Catholic Church has actually had to say on these subjects. Again, Clarke's contextualization of SF representation with the Catholic Church's actual positions is often very illuminating because his focus is not just on works of SF but on how they can be seen in dialogue (or debate) with actual Catholicism.

Chapter two provides the book's subtitle: "The Rise and Fall of the Robot Papacy: *Catholicism and Machine Intelligence*." Chapter three looks at "Missionaries to Alien Utopias: *Exotheology and Catholicism in Science Fiction*." Chapter four, "Unwriting the Reformation: *Anti-Catholic Uchronias in Science Fiction*," explores alternate versions of or analogues to the Catholic Church in alternate worlds narratives such as John Brunner's *Times without Number* (1969), Keith Roberts's *Pavane* (1968), Kingsley Amis's *The Alteration* (1976), and most intriguingly, Robert Charles Wilson's *Julian Comstock: A Story of 22nd Century America* (2009), among others. His discussion of Wilson is perhaps the most intriguing element of his book, as he sees in the novel "what may be a new juncture for sf—the depiction of a future made up entirely of allied or warring conservatisms" (247). For Clarke, *Julian Comstock* is a novel that "actively turns its back on the Enlightenment, progressive science and political liberalism, and additionally, rejects sf's characterization of itself as a product of the Enlightenment in opposition to conservative Christianity" (248). Time will tell as to whether Clarke's bold claim about how this novel may have established a new paradigm going forward for how SF deals with Catholicism plays out, but it makes for a rousing final argument in this insightful and readable book.

Libraries with extensive SF holdings should acquire a copy of this book. Teachers of courses on the intersection between SF and religion will find it a valuable resource. Scholars interested in the topic will also find much worth careful thought here, as well—and possibly, a few more SF books to add to their to-read pile. I know I did.

Dominick Grace is Professor of English at Brescia University College in London, Ontario. His main area of research interest is popular culture, especially comics and Science Fiction.