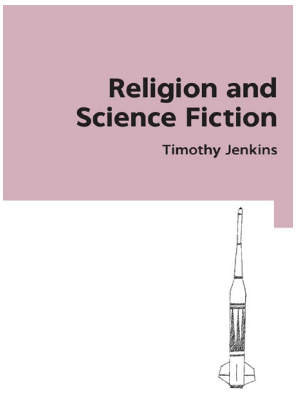
Religion and Science Fiction, by Timothy Jenkins

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Timothy Jenkins. *Religion and Science Fiction*. Peter Lang, 2025. Images of Elsewhere vol. 2. Paperback. 156 pg. $30.95. ISBN 9781803741703.



As I am interested in the intersection between religion and science fiction, I opted to review this book based on its title. The title suggested to me something along the lines of the identically-titled books by McGrath (2011) and Thrall (2024), or something like the other books that have grappled with this intersection. I should have sought further information before my decision, so it is perhaps not entirely the book's fault that I will be giving it a negative review. That said, the title does not provide prospective readers with anything like a clear idea of what to expect. First off, the "religion" in question is Theosophy, the status of which as a religion, I would submit, is debatable, especially since it was promulgated by a charlatan. (I know one can assert that all religions are invented, but somehow the more recent ones—Theosophy is less than 150 years old, despite cadging from numerous ancient texts and traditions—seem less valid to me than the ones with longer histories.) Second, the book explicitly says it "is concerned with reading a single story drawn from 1940s pulp science fiction [the classic "I Remember Lemuria," by Richard S. Shaver—with modifications to make what Shaver claimed was a factual account into a putative fact/fiction blend by an uncredited Ray Palmer], together with exploring the images upon which it draws, which are to be found in the writings of a movement known as Theosophy" (1). So, the focus is on one SF story that channels a movement only dubiously classifiable as a religion, thereby bringing into SF many key tropes that subsequently informed the genre. The sacredtexts.com website actually offers a more concise and cogent indication of the SF elements one can trace from Shaver than does this book: "vast caves under the earth, where lurk the dero: prehistoric, devolved cannibals who prey on our minds with ancient super-science. Also in the mix: lost continents, hollow planets, starships the size of a moon, titanic god-like races of beings, and ... sexy aliens. A heady combination of pre-fabricated sci-fi memes" (https://sacred-texts.com/ufo/irl/index.htm). Needless to say, most of these don't need Theosophy to be explained, and some appeared in earlier texts and traditions.

Jenkins's claim that the "Shaver Mystery," as the series of stories that followed "Lemuria" is known, influenced 1940s and 1950s SF is not new, nor is the notion that Shaver's work channelled Theosophical thought into SF. However, Jenkins's book does not really address this in convincing

detail. Jenkins seems far more interested in providing detailed information about Theosophy than in exploring its SF manifestations. About 20% of the book takes readers through the story, noting elements that can be seen as derived from, or at least analogous to, Theosophical concepts. The rest of the book—including an "Appendix: A Study of Alfred Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883)," which takes up about a third of the text—rarely references SF at all. Indeed, other than Shaver, only a literal handful of other SF writers are even mentioned, and them mostly in passing; Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871) gets some attention, but probably less than it deserves, given that at least some of the SF elements Jenkins wants to trace to Theosophy (e.g. the underground people, advanced super-science, idealized humanesque figures) appear in *The Coming Race*, a pre-Theosophy text that also was massively popular for some time in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Bovril's name derives from "Vril," the vital force invented for this book). Also mentioned briefly: Wells, Orwell, Lovecraft, Huxley, Gernsback, as well as, in one sentence, "Stapledon, Smith, Van Vogt, Heinlein, Asimov, Herbert and Le Guin" as "Classic instances" of the Theosophical 'mind over matter' ideology in SF (36). None of these authors are dealt with in any detailed way to demonstrate how their particular invocation of a trope can be seen as Theosophical (indeed, in most cases, Jenkins does not even name their work). Not mentioned at all: L. Ron Hubbard, whose own invented "religion," Scientology, not to mention his SF, might more credibly be linked to Theosophy than can at least some of the SF authors Jenkins name-checks.

Instead of making his case about the pathway from Theosophy to the depiction of alien life in SF, Jenkins seems rather more interested in making a case for Theosophy itself. While he does acknowledge that Blavatsky has credibly been accused of plagiarism, invention, and fraud, he also seems to think that "Whether it [the documents she claimed to have received via spirit communication and transcribed] was her conscious self at work, or evidence of multiple personalities (an emerging trope of the period), or the sources she channelled, seems of minor importance" (103-104). One can make a case that whether Blavatsky was a charlatan, mentally ill, or a genuine seer is "of minor importance" to how her ideas influenced SF, but the question does not seem to me to be "of minor importance" to how Theosophy should be viewed. Jenkins fails to demonstrate his case for the influence of Theosophy on SF via Shaver, and he fails to make a compelling case for Theosophy as a valid "religious" movement

This book is inessential to SF scholars and to libraries interested in growing their SF holdings

Notes

1. Bovril is a concentrated beef extract paste created in the late 19th century that can be diluted in liquid to make a drink, used as a flavouring, or as a toast spread. The "Bo" part of the name derives from the Latin for ox, basically making the name mean something like "ox energy." Never having tasted it, I have no idea whether it is as appetizing as it sounds.

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