

Preface

It's something out of a bad dream—or a mediocre sci-fi story. Earth is becoming uninhabitable, so a wealthy fraction of humanity hitches a ride off world to live in a shopping mall under the dominion of the corporation that wrecked the planet in the first place. Meanwhile, conditions on Earth approach infernal. Meanwhile, the space colony amplifies every earthly social crisis thanks to unreliable technology, tight living quarters, and the oligarchic control of information, water, and air. We know this story never ends well, but the present moment finds us buying it wholesale from a few charismatic CEOs in agonistic partnership with the big national space agencies. This is the era of NewSpace.

The best-known of the NewSpaceniks is Elon Musk, who infamously wants to “save” humanity from its bondage to Earth. Earth is a disaster, a planetary prison where *Homo sapiens* will eventually meet its nuclear, microbial, or asteroidal end if someone doesn't colonize another planet—and soon. Faced with such imminent obliteration, Musk's aeronautical company SpaceX is aiming to build two starships a week to send a million cosmic homesteaders to Mars.

And Musk is not alone. There's Jeff Bezos, who resigned as CEO of Amazon to pursue his own vision of getting humans off a dying planet. There's the well-funded Mars Society, led by Robert Zubrin, who wants us to hightail it to the Red Planet to “bring a dead world back to life.” And there's the US government, making up rules as it

goes along and hoping the UN doesn't figure out a way to object. This American astronautic bravado knows no party lines; in fact, the only major Trump-era objectives the Biden administration has retained are (1) the creation of a space force to wage orbital warfare, and (2) the settlement of the Moon and Mars to enact what Donald Trump called America's "manifest destiny in the stars."

As much as ever, the outer space of today is a place of utopian dreams, salvation dramas, savior complexes, apocalyptic imaginings, gods, goddesses, heroes, and villains. As much as ever, there's something weirdly religious about space.

The big argument of this book is that the intensifying "NewSpace race" is as much a mythological project as it is a political, economic, or scientific one. It's mythology, in fact, that holds all these other efforts together, giving them an aura of duty, grandeur, and benevolence. As such, there's not much that's new about NewSpace. Rather, the escalating effort to colonize the cosmos is a renewal of the religious, political, economic, and scientific maelstrom that globalized Earth beginning in the fifteenth century. In other words, the NewSpace race isn't just rehashing mythological themes; it's rehashing Christian themes.

Now when I say Christian, I'm not referring to the Christianity of Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, Daniel and Philip Berrigan, or any of the other antiracist, antiwar, Earth-loving, creature-nurturing teachers and communities out there—including Pope Francis. Rather, I'm talking about the imperial Christianity, or "Christendom," that teamed up with early capitalism, European expansion, and a particularly racist form of science to colonize the Earth. We can draw an eerily straight line from the "doctrine of discovery" that "gave" Africa to Portugal and the New World to Spain, through the "manifest destiny" that carried white settlers across the American continent, to the NewSpace claim to the whole solar system and, eventually, the galaxy.

In each of these cases, the destruction of the Earth and the exploitation of both human and nonhuman "resources" become

sacrificial means toward a sacred end—namely, the wealth and prosperity of a particularly destructive subset of the species. Once the stuff of infinite possibility, outer space has become just another theater of greed and war.

The question, then, is whether there might be a different approach to exploring the universe. Is there a way to learn from other planets, moons, and asteroids without destroying them? Is there a way to see land as important in its own right rather than a mere container for “resources”? Is there a way to visit or even to live on multiple planets without ransacking them? How might we approach outer space without bringing our most destructive tendencies along with us? And might we find ways to heal our ravaged Earth in the process?

What I’m going to suggest is that since the problem is fundamentally “religious,” the solution will have to be, too. The challenge for justice-loving space enthusiasts will be to replace the destructive myths guiding our scientific priorities with creative, sustainable, and peaceful ones. Where are these destructive myths? They’re everywhere—even grounding some basic assumptions of the modern age that seem to have nothing to do with religion. Such basic assumptions include the idea that intelligence is the most valuable force in the universe, that humans possess more of it than anyone else, that minerals are only valuable as resources, and that land can be owned.

Western science, economics, and politics will tell us that each of these ideas is simply true, even universal. But they are actually the legacy of Western monotheism and Greek philosophy, whose gods and heroes continue to name our spacecraft and “missions.” In short, Western science, economics, and politics are most indebted to religion where religion is least obvious.

But there are other traditions, and even other interpretations of Western traditions, that privilege kinship over competition, knowledge over profit, and sustaining over stockpiling. Such other stories are already forming what some scholars call “a new scientific

method” that values the knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples, the dignity of nonhuman life-forms, and the integrity of the land—however lifeless it may seem.¹ Rather than extending infinitely the same old mess we’ve made before, such a “new” approach would aim to create sustainable, just, and joyful communities on Earth—and perhaps even elsewhere.