



Space Cowboy Books Presents: Simultaneous Times Newsletter

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Letter from the Editor

It's summer in the Mojave, over 100 degrees most of the time, so days at the bookstore are pretty slow. Which means that I get to work on other projects and bring you plenty of science fiction goodness. We're hosting tons of events online with international authors, and we continue to produce our monthly podcast *Simultaneous Times*. We're also getting ready to release a new book, I don't want to make the announcement yet, but we'll be sharing the news later this year. In this issue we bring you an interview with Andy Dibble, editor of the new *Strange Religion* speculative fiction anthology, about this fascinating new book. As always, we'd love to hear from you. Get in touch at spacecowboybooks@gmail.com Jean-Paul L. Garnier



How did you come to be the editor of the Strange Religion anthology?

I got involved with editing for TDotSpec, the publisher of *Strange Religion*, when I sold my story "[Bang the Drum](#),"

about the birth of the Buddha, to *Speculative North*, TDotSpec's general SFF magazine. I volunteered to do copyediting and the lead editor for TDotSpec, David F. Shultz, eventually offered me a position as Articles Editor for *Speculative North*. He had already edited [Strange Economics](#), and was looking to publish more anthologies that engage with an academic topic through SFF.

What is the intended audience for Strange Religion, and what ideas and concepts do you hope come through most in the collection?

Strange Religion is mostly geared at general readers of SFF that are interested in religion, although we hope it and other *Strange Concepts* anthologies will eventually be used in classrooms. Readers that don't have a background in religion won't have trouble following the stories, although some have a little higher barrier to entry, like "Al-Muftiyah" by Jibril Stevenson, which has a fair amount of Arabic, and "The Devil is a Shape in the Brain" by Joachim Glage, which is theologically denser and steeped in occult traditions.

If there's one lesson I want readers to take away from *Strange Religion*, it's that religion is a human activity that's integrated with everything else people do: art, science, grieving, raising families. It's only occasionally about creed, as it sometimes is in Christianity. More than anything else, religion is about agency and solving problems in ourselves, our society, and the cosmos.

This anthology has a large team behind it, can you tell us about the process of putting it together?

This is where I'm very much indebted to David and other editors at TDotSpec, in particular Don Miasek and Martin Munks. We

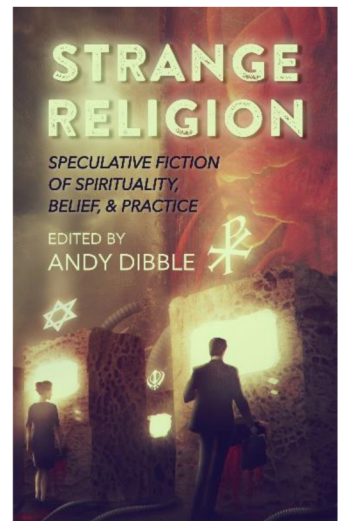
expanded existing processes to include a separate reader score for quality of engagement with religious tradition(s), the idea being that stories that treat particularly well with religion deserve extra consideration and those that fumble religious themes probably need to be passed over, even if they succeed as stories.

Our first readers were predominately readers for *Speculative North*—members of the [Toronto Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Group](#)—although we also got help from students at the University of Toronto Multi-Faith Centre. Originally, we planned to have a couple of religious studies scholars take a significant role in selecting stories and writing discussion questions, but over time as commitments changed and the story line-up solidified, we brought in scholars versed in particular traditions that the line-up engaged with. Many were old contacts from Harvard Divinity School where I did my master's.

What issues and misconceptions about religion are frequently portrayed in science fiction, and how have you attempted to remedy this?

A lot of misconceptions about religion in SFF come from most SFF authors being raised in Christian or secular cultures. In Christianity—at least in the developed world—it's common to think of religion as something that only occupies people at a certain time of the week. But this attitude is by no means universal. About half of all languages don't even have a word for religion because what we would call religion in a given culture is so integrated with everything else people of that culture do. To counter this

misconception, *Strange Religion* has stories like "The Rebbetzin Speaks" by Daniel M. Kimmel, which discusses difficulties with reconciling Jewish law to everyday life struggles after the solar system has been colonized by humans. There are several stories in *Strange Religion* that engage with Christianity, but most are from little-seen or colonized perspectives, e.g., Filipina-Catholic witches in "Dying Rivers and Broken Hearts" by Gabriella Buba and a Protestant convert in an Igbo-Nigerian village in "The Man Who Misused His Manhood" by Chukwu Sunday Abel. When we think of religions on the model of Christianity and theology, it's natural to think of religions as "belief systems," as primarily concerned with how we operate cognitively than in terms of identity formation, emotions, or practice. *Strange Religion* has stories like "Jizo Rides the Bus" by Karl Dandenell, which depicts how a modern-day Pure Land Buddhist bodhisattva helps others grieve. The protagonist of



“Samsara” by J. A. Legg claims a Hindu identity even though she admits to not knowing much about Hinduism.

There are also secular-minded science fiction writers that sometimes portray religion in general as backward, silly, or dogmatic. These stories were a hard pass for *Strange Religion*, although there are some stories that take a more critical stance, like “Father Jake’s Teen Demon Prevention Lesson” by Brenna Harvey. When talking about religion in SFF, there’s no requirement that we only say things that religious insiders agree with, but authors have to pay attention to what insiders and their scripture/other sources of authority are actually doing and saying.

When selecting stories did any issues arise with cultural sensitivity?

There weren’t too many issues. One reason for this is that quality of storytelling tracked well with quality of engagement with religion. There was one case where we had to reject quite a strong story after it was read by one of the religious studies scholars affiliated with the project. The story concerned her research area, and she thought the story reflected stereotypes seen in movies. It was difficult because I knew the author personally, and knew he was writing about a culture he was familiar with, but I could also understand where the scholar was coming from. I think it’s the only time a submission to a TDotSpec publication has received both our highest rating and our lowest rating by first readers.

Each story includes proposed discussion questions, what was your aim behind this, and what has been the result of their inclusion?

The aim behind the discussion was to help readers engage with the stories more like scholars. There are a lot of tropes in religious studies concerning syncretism (borrowing and merging of traditions), historical research, mass movements, identity-making, theodicy (justifying evil in the world), and the like that readers without an academic background in religion can miss.

One of the scholars that wrote discussion questions chose to write them in a more critical mode than the others. At first, I found the approach slightly off-putting (I think it’s natural for editors to want to defend their authors), but it grew on me because scholars don’t just pat each other on the back. They disagree, sometimes quite starkly. *Strange Religion* is about helping readers think more deeply about religion, and this means being open to the possibility that a story has potential it failed to realize.

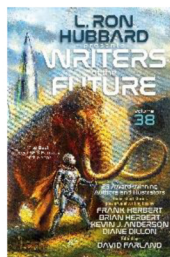
What are you currently working on, and what’s coming up next for you?

Still writing short stories, although I’m thinking of dipping back into essays. I’ll likely be editing a *Strange Languages* anthology at some point. Language is a topic that we often think about in terms of formulas and abstract systems, and it is that—some of the time—but like religion, it’s much more commonly integrated into life and human activity.



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