

Toward Utopia:

Feminist Dystopian Writing and Religious Fundamentalism in

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*,

Louise Marley's *The Terrorists of Irustan*,

and Marge Piercy's *He, She and It*

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Printed in the United States of America

First Edition, 2015

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Library of Congress Cataloguing Publication Data.

Mercer, Naomi.

Toward Utopia: Feminist Dystopian Writing and Religious Fundamentalism in
Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Louise Marley's *The Terrorists of
Irustan*, and Marge Piercy's *He, She and It*/ by Naomi Mercer—1st ed

Includes bibliographic references and index.

ISBN

1. American literature—Women authors—History and criticism. 2. Feminism
and literature—United States and Canada—History—20th century. 3. Women and
literature—United States and Canada—20th century. 4. American literature—20th
century—History and criticism. 5. American and Canadian literature—religious
influences. 6. Abrahamic and Islamic influences in literature. 7. Fundamentalism and
feminism. 8. Women in utopian literature. 9. Women in dystopian futures.

Dedication

for the partner and the offspring

Acknowledgments

Throughout this process, I have received support and encouragement from a great number of individuals. I would like to thank Dr. Batya Weinbaum, the editor of *Femspec*, who was so very willing to pursue a book project and saw the potential in this topic. I would especially like to thank two of my intellectual sounding-boards and feminist allies in a kyriarchal institution: Dr. Jessica Stock, my Jewish sister, and Dr. Mary Anne Meyers, for many an exchanged glance and raised eyebrow.

I would like to thank the people who enable me to pursue my scholarship by taking over some of the logistics behind the scenes: Deborah Daley, my very able executive officer; Lori at MJM Cleaning, who keeps my house in much better condition than I could; and Team Hunter, who picked up my daughter after school every day and treated her as their own.

I would like to thank my husband, Kerry Takenaka, for the amazing discussions that helped me work out my ideas, for accommodating not only my chaotic schedule but actively supporting my career goals, and for cooking many meals while still providing turn-down service. Lastly, I thank my daughter, Aurora, for enduring Army life in conjunction with my scholarly pursuits with resilience and forbearance (most of the time).

The views expressed in this book are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the United States Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense.

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Preface

Femspec is pleased to announce its first full-length critical work to be published in what we hope to offer in a developing series. Five years ago, we moved from publishing just a journal dedicated to challenging gender through the speculative arts, to opening up a branch, *Femspec Books and Productions*. Until Naomi approached us at the sign-out table of WisCon a few years back—2013 to be exact—we had published full-length memoir, fiction and books of New Age spiritual self-help, but no full-length critical works.

When she came up to our table, covered with these books and various issues of the journal itself, our mutual experience was kind of like love at first sight. She was excited about the possibility of doing a book with us, and we found the idea of publishing a book about the backlash against feminism in the 80s and 90s as examined through novels of Atwood, Piercy and Marley to be exciting as well.

A few aspects on the book itself to note:

First, the imagined societies described in the texts that Naomi Mercer examines here exhibit characteristics of kyriarchy, which she defines as “the interlocking axes of domination and privilege that determine the nature of relationships and the power differentials that affect them.” While gender is the primary focus of her analysis, she argues that “an individual’s positioning in power structures depends on multiple aspects of identity that fluctuate depending on the individual’s interactions with others, who are also multiply positioned.”

Mercer argues that “gender or other aspects of identity may be more or less important, more or less identifiable in unequal power relationship.” I understand this framework to be similar to that of overdetermination, originally a concept from psychoanalysis developed by Sigmund Freud. He first used the idea to critically ponder how one aspect of a person’s psychology or the same manifesting symptom may be determined by more than one cause. The French philosopher Louis Althusser subsequently introduced the notion of overdetermination as a critical lens used to examine culture and society. In doing so, Althusser effectively offered a challenge to the Marxist economic reductionist interpretation of historical materialism. For Althusser, things are not explained by a single, pure contradiction, but always by the whole structure.

Thus similarly serving as a point of departure for critical inquiry from merely explaining all manifestations as stemming from gender, the way Althusser by extending Freud’s notion of overdetermination from psychology to society and thus adding nuance to the consideration of economics and class as solely determinant, what Mercer identifies as kyriarchal positioning she discovered to be evident in the religious societies of the feminist authors whose utopian and dystopian novels she explored.

Second, Mercer creatively organized her chapters discussing the novels as to degree of utopian vision each offered, rather than chronologically. As she explains, as her critical narrative unfolds, she moves “from dystopic extremes with faint utopian impulses toward alternatives for utopic religious communities.”

Third, you will find her successfully weaving in aspects of her own and her authors’ biographies, thus exhibiting true feminist reflexivity—a tradition which we endeavor to keep alive.

Thus in conclusion, we look forward to your discovery of how she does indeed saying something new about each of these texts. We consider this book to be an outstanding example of critical works to proceed, and encourage you to contact us with your ideas.

Thanks and enjoy!

- Batya Weinbaum, Cleveland Heights, April 18, 2015

Introduction

“Religion without humanity is a poor human stuff.”

– Sojourner Truth (Gilbert and Titus 26)

“For this is what dystopian future fictions recount: what *would have happened* if their empirical and implied readerships had not been moved to prevent it.”

– Andrew Milner, “Changing the Climate: The Politics of Dystopia” (354)

Science fiction is an ideal vehicle for distributing progressive social theories to a popular audience, distilled through narrative form. However, the common perception of science fiction and its related utopian and dystopian sub-genres has traditionally tended to focus on male-centered quest narratives that may appear to push against the boundaries of social norms—yet these narratives seem to almost exclusively expand the universe for white, heterosexual, upper-class, able-bodied men. In doing so, these genre texts frequently re-inscribe patriarchal standards for women and subaltern Others. In utopian and dystopian writing, the fascination with science and technology functions as a means for male protagonists to exert power and control over their societies and shape them to fit an androcentric ideal of a fulfilled life, free of work and want. Although writers such as Lois McMaster Bujold and Kim Stanley Robinson transgress the predictable generic outcomes of science fiction, many writers rarely do so in ways that remove white, heterosexual, upper-class men from their position as representative of the universal human being.

Genres of fiction in popular culture, such as science fiction, fantasy, mystery, romance, and other forms produced primarily for consumption in mass-market formats, generally follow certain formulae: readers come to texts with a set of expectations based on the genre in which the book is written and marketed. In hard science fiction, for example, readers generally expect a text to combine advanced technology with space exploration or colonization that is clearly set in a future time relative to the reader’s own lived reality. Generic formulae influence cultural values, in some cases, by reinforcing traditionally-held social norms and in others, by questioning those values. As John G. Cawelti, whose scholarly work focuses on genre writing, observes, “Formulas assist in the process of assimilating changes in values to traditional imaginative constructs” (36). Often, writers press against the boundaries set by the formula of a specific genre in the service of changing cultural and social values.

Feminist science fiction writers use science fiction and its widely recognized appeal to distill social and political theory as well as to comment on social and cultural conditions to a wide audience. Feminist science fiction writers have taken seriously not only the emergence of the counter-culture in the 1960s and the Second Wave of the feminist movement in the 1970s, but also the rise of the Religious Right and the conservative swing of the political pendulum in the United States that resulted in the 1980s backlash against feminist civil rights as documented by journalist Susan Faludi,

feminist religious studies scholar Karen Armstrong, and anthropologist Karen McCarthy Brown. The politicization of fundamentalist Christianity in US politics created an environment hostile to the changes in society that Second Wave feminist activism and the Civil Rights Movement had made possible and reflected an on-going obsession with returning the status of women and subaltern Others to 1950s—or earlier—norms. In concert with feminist theorists¹ who called for examination of multiple states of identity and the oppression that arises from sexism, racism, classism, and more, feminist science fiction writers address multiple sites of oppression in their fiction.

Feminist science fiction writers transgress genre through querying the legitimacy of genre boundaries, gender binaries, and traditional, male-centered master narratives. Feminist writing across many genres has frequently engaged in challenging the inequalities of readers' and authors' cultural and social milieus while also offering ideas for activism and ideals of equality and humanity worth striving toward. Feminist science fiction writers actively rebel against the master narrative formula of science fiction, and literature more generally, by focusing on women's experiences of the world, while still adopting some of the genre characteristics of science fiction. However, feminist science fiction texts can and do revise these characteristics. Some feminist critics² maintain that feminist writers' scrutiny of gender pushes at genre boundaries, as well as societal ones, in their texts.

Moreover, other feminist critics³ argue that the utopian and dystopian sub-genre of science fiction blurs generic boundaries by incorporating multiple genres into single texts. For example, feminist utopian and dystopian novels often combine elements from fantasy, slave narrative, detective story, fable, epistolary novel, romance, quest narrative, historical novel, satire, polemic, ecotopia, and more. Instead of the static societies depicted in most non-feminist, traditional utopian writing described by a traveler or newcomer, feminist utopian writing in the twentieth century contrasts utopia with a dystopia that is frequently misogynistic and actively attempting to destroy the utopic community. Feminist utopias do not necessarily center on a single protagonist (male or female) and a quest for self-realization or knowledge of the utopian society presented. Feminist dystopian writing is nearly always set in the future or the near-future. Yet as a collective, the works tend to confront contemporary social and cultural models that subordinate women and subaltern Others to white, heterosexual, upper-class, able-bodied men. Because feminist dystopian writing often draws from multiple genres, this literature engages a history of generic and literary narratives generally perceived as ignoring, silencing, erasing, and oppressing women and demands a re-reading of women and their experiences.

Feminist writers, especially in the utopian/dystopian subset of science fiction, recognize the dangers of fundamentalism and its infusion into American politics. Writers who critique fundamentalist religion and its intersection with gender also integrate

¹ Susan Stanford Friedman catalogues a plethora of feminist critics engaged in and calling for intersectional analysis in the 1980s and beyond: Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Gayatri Spivak, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, among others (21, 50, 246 n12, 246 n13).

² See Gubar, Barr's *Feminist Fabulation*, Baruch, and Rohrlach.

³ See Baccolini and Donawerth.

multiple genre styles into single texts. This hybridity contests the boundaries of generic formulae while simultaneously employing social commentary, interrogating cultural norms, and “represent[ing] resistance to a hegemonic ideology” (Baccolini 18). Through these hybrid texts, late twentieth-century feminist science fiction writers present commentary on organized religion, specifically fundamentalism, in ways that demonstrate the intersection of various aspects of identity with religious faith.

Feminist science fiction writing, especially in the utopian/dystopian sub-genre, closely follows political trends and circulates alternative viewpoints on politics, culture, and society. Although female-dominant utopias had been written earlier in the twentieth in America before by authors such as Leslie F. Stone, Lilith Lorraine, and even in the nineteenth century congruent with the rise and achievements of the suffrage movement, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the political and social gains of the Second Wave feminism⁴ led to a new peak of American feminist utopian writing. Subsequently, the resurgence of a period of backlash⁵ in the 1980s and the heightening of Cold War militarization wrought changes in the feminist movement and in feminist utopian writing, resulting in a distinctive, and persistent, dystopian turn.⁶

Generally, fundamentalist religions demonstrate ideologies that secular Muslim feminist Haideh Moghissi categorizes as “anti-modernity,⁷ anti-democracy, and anti-feminism” (70). The didactic force of feminist authors’ narrative messages against fundamentalism problematizes the conservative backlash of the 1980s and also intervenes in theoretical (and theological) arguments in the political arena through a popular medium. The writers of such texts directly respond to the continued denial of universal human rights to women and subaltern Others. Transgressions of genre abound through the hybridity of these texts and their challenge to traditional master narratives, that is, male-centered narratives that promulgate Western ideology. The female and/or feminist point of view furthermore undermines male-centered norms by using women’s voices to defy the assumed universality of human experience. Furthermore, feminist voices demonstrate that utopia is not “the good place,” or in any sense ideal, without equality for women and subaltern men. Feminist utopian and dystopian texts demonstrate that utopia is a process, rather than a static state, and that utopian communities must continually strive for improvement.

Feminist utopian and dystopian writing which criticizes religious fundamentalism challenges the legitimacy of the underpinnings of Western thought and culture in ways that political dystopias do not. In the 1970s, primarily using the utopian sub-genre, feminist science fiction authors introduced positive views of goddess- and Earth-mother-centered religions into science fiction texts. In their estimation, in order to

⁴ See Gamble.

⁵ See Faludi.

⁶ See Barr’s *Lost in Space*, Cranny-Francis, Fitting’s “The Turn from Utopia in Recent Feminist Fiction,” and Patai.

⁷ “Modernity” is a fraught and much contested term; scholars have extensively criticized “modernity” as a “master narrative” of Western progress and its neglect of alternative narratives. Moghissi uses “modernity” as diametrically opposed to “tradition.” For this project, I have adopted Moghissi’s usage and meaning of “anti-modernity” as a resistance to progressive ideas, including democracy and feminism, justified through reliance upon tradition.

overthrow patriarchy permanently, at every level of society, gynocentric religions needed to replace paternalistic gods, male leadership and male control of the religious sphere. This would accomplish debunking the masculinized view of women as impure or blameworthy and therefore subordinated to men. Feminist utopian writers, in many respects, reclaim religion from fundamentalist orthodoxy and its resistance to recognizing the full humanity of women through gynocentric religions. Their critique of fundamentalist religious institutions is implicit in their texts, rather than directly narrated. These implications are accomplished through contrasting contemporary fundamentalism with the peaceful and compassionate goddess-centered religions depicted in utopian writing.

Concurrent with the 1980s backlash against Second Wave Feminism, feminist writing underwent a dystopian turn from some of the goddess-centered utopian visions of the 1970s, by authors such as Sally Miller Gearhart, to frightening dystopian imaginings that often featured the dangers of fundamentalism. In the 1980s and into the 1990s, feminist dystopian writers tended to follow the science fiction rejection of religion as a meaningful aspect of life. However, feminist science fiction did not generally participate in the science fiction trope of elevating women into “gods” with ultimate control over their environments and other sentient beings as occurs in such male-centered stories as *The Worthing Saga* (1990), *The Man who Folded Himself* (2003), and *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961).⁸ While feminist science fiction writers are very conscious and conspicuous in their estimations of religion, specifically fundamentalist forms, they seem to lack the elements of an “inward search” for “some sort of absolute truth or transcendent reality” (Reilly 5) which characterizes male-authored science fiction texts with religious themes. Rather, feminist dystopian writers use their appraisals of religious fundamentalism as a way to examine contemporary trends in US culture, particularly the rise of the Religious Right and the conservative backlash against feminist advancements for women. Through the utopian impulse in dystopian texts, feminist voices undermine religious justifications for maintaining the male-dominated systems of power in Western societies; they warn that the goal of fundamentalism is male control of women’s fertility and, by extension, control of women. Moreover, they argue that legal changes are not enough to ensure equality since laws can be reversed and liberal progress can be legislated out of existence. Feminist dystopias and utopias that investigate religious fundamentalism seek to expose, and possibly to change, the inherent misogyny in Western culture as well as the unequal structures of power that Western ideology has perpetuated so that a privileged few retain control of the social order.

The Intersection of Science Fiction, Religion, and Gender

Although much science fiction is secularist and venerates technological advancement over belief in the supernatural or divine, this perspective does not reflect the reality of many people’s lives—of which religion is an abiding part. Specializing in religious studies though primarily concerned with Christianity, sociologist Linda Woodhead has pointed out the “lacunae” of scholarship on the intersection of religion and

⁸ By Card, Gerrold, and Heinlein, respectively.

gender in sociological studies despite the large numbers of women who make up the majority of attendees of religious services in the United States (72). Moreover, despite a small number of science fiction anthologies whose themes involve the treatment of religion in science fiction settings,⁹ few feminist and non-feminist critics have explored the interplay of religion and gender in science fiction and/or in the utopian/dystopian sub-genre other than as incidental to a larger analysis of patriarchy. Feminist science fiction writers criticize this religiously-justified oppression of women and the subsequent cultural implications of women's inferiority while simultaneously questioning the validity of science fiction's marginalization of religion and its potential to create meaning in people's lives.

Feminist writers reject science fiction's re-inscription of patriarchal gender roles—roles perpetuated throughout mainstream Western philosophy and frequently justified through tenets of religious faiths that resist modern progress. Feminist science fiction writers view religious fundamentalism as inherently misogynist, due to selective literal interpretation of sacred texts, internal Othering, and boundary-policing of women that subordinates women to men. They also regard fundamentalism as corrupt because of its hypocrisy, based on its tenets, toward women.

Although mainstream religious faiths have made progress to varying degrees toward equality, I argue that religious fundamentalism and its insistence upon "tradition" plays an essential role in the perpetuation of women's inequality in Western thought and culture. Feminist dystopian visions exhibit the reality of fundamentalist oppression of women and Others through the auspices of religious faith. This book engages in an expanded dialogue on the intersection of various aspects of identity and fundamentalist religion in feminist science fiction. I additionally explore implications for gender, race, sexual orientation, and class.

Like feminists in the political arena, many contemporary feminist writers ask whether the inherent patriarchal structures of religion can be reformed, revised, or reclaimed to be gender equal. Yet some seem to maintain that certain faiths are so enmeshed in patriarchy that they are irredeemable from a feminist standpoint. In particular, many feminist utopian writers of the 1970s seem to judge traditional religions of any type as hopelessly incurable.¹⁰ However, feminist dystopian writers since the 1980s who may find fundamentalist manifestations of faith irredeemable do not unilaterally condemn all religion as such. Despite science fiction's tendency toward secularism and use of technology to exemplify the human condition, oppression of women and subaltern men by social and political institutions continues to present an ever-growing need for equality across many facets of identity. Without such considerations, infusing equality in lasting and meaningful ways into our culture may present an insurmountable task.

What interests me as a woman, a scholar, an Army officer, and a Jew are the ways in which feminist science fiction writers deploy accounts of religious fundamentalism in

⁹ See Mohs's *Other Worlds, Other Gods* (1971); Dann's *Wandering Stars* (1974) and *More Wandering Stars* (1981); Hayward and Lefanu's *God: An Anthology of Fiction* (1992).

¹⁰ See Charnas's *Walk to the End of the World* (1974), Gearhart's *The Wanderground* (1976), and Russ's *The Two of Them* (1978).

their fictional texts and why this is central to an interrogation of social conditions. I analyze why and how a number of feminist science fiction authors are participating in this debate, especially in late twentieth-century feminist dystopian writing. I focus on texts that engage with the three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These faiths have a god-figure in common, share some sacred texts and tenets, and are highly influential in national politics in many parts of the world. Moreover, I was raised in a Southern Baptist home that made gestures toward fundamentalist practices and doctrine, and converted to Judaism, in the Reform denomination specifically, as an adult. While stationed in Iraq on a deployment with the US Army, I worked with a Department of State Provincial Reconstruction Team to interface with local women's charities; to prepare for these cultural interactions, I studied Islam and became aware of the differences and commonalities in various branches of Islam and Muslim observance. I loudly professed feminism at the age of twelve, which caused me to question much about the world around me, particularly the fundamentalist bent of my parents' religious faith and practice. Although I cannot remember when I first started reading science fiction—it was always there—I turned to the scholarly study of the genre as a college undergraduate, specifically focusing on feminist utopian and dystopian writing. How these texts responded to religious fundamentalism seemed, during my own journey of religious faith, a natural next step.

Female feminist authors write the majority of texts that criticize fundamentalism in dystopian and utopian writing. They thus write from positions of gender disadvantage within the political and social system. As such, they are inimitably qualified to challenge the status quo concerning patriarchal and other norms. Patricia Hill Collins's, Donna Haraway's, and Sandra Harding's theories about the situated knowledges of women of color¹¹ argue that women at the bottom of the system of power due to additional factors like class, age, disability, sexuality, and race receive the brunt of patriarchal oppression and are uniquely positioned to expose the misogynist underpinnings of Western institutions. The imagined societies described in the texts I examine exhibit characteristics of *kyriarchy*¹²—the interlocking axes of domination and privilege that determine the nature of relationships and the power differentials that affect them—either in the religion(s) examined and/or the societies in which those religions function that resemble religious and societal norms existing on Earth in the past and in this historical

¹¹ Agathangelou and Ling call the concept of situated knowledges “worlding”; Harding calls it “standpoint theory.”

¹² Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza defines kyriarchy succinctly as “a socio-cultural and religious system of domination constituted by intersecting multiplicative structures of oppression” (118). Kyriarchy represents a set of power relations which form the underlying structure of democracy as a political system in Western culture. Dovetailing with the movement among feminist theorists generally toward intersectional analysis of different axes of power and marginalization, the term “kyriarchy” is more broadly applicable than “patriarchy” because it functions as an analytic category that captures other nuances of domination and oppression beyond gender. Additionally Schüssler Fiorenza defines *kyriocentrism* as “the cultural-religious-ideological systems and intersecting discourses of race, gender, heterosexuality, class, and ethnicity that produce, legitimate, inculcate, and sustain kyriarchy” (211), an argument that echoes Kimberlé Crenshaw’s “intersecting patterns of racism and sexism” (1243) and other feminist theories of intersectionality.

moment. While gender is the primary focus of my analysis, an individual's positioning in power structures depends on multiple aspects of identity that fluctuate depending on the individual's interactions with others, who are also multiply positioned. Gender or other aspects of identity may be more or less important, more or less identifiable in unequal power relationships. Serving as a point of departure for critical inquiry, kyriarchal positioning is evident in the societies and/or religions of feminist utopian and dystopian novels on multiple levels.

Feminist intersectional analysis is especially suitable for analysis of feminist dystopias that focus on religious fundamentalism. A critical assessment of patriarchy and gender alone is not encompassing enough to fully analyze the context in which feminist dystopian texts attack religious fundamentalism. Although the primary focus here remains gender, feminist writers also exhibit cognizance of gender's intersection with other aspects of identity. Thus, their advocacy for equality is not limited to women but includes all marginalized and subordinated groups. Their works mesh with moves within feminist theory and criticism to address all structures of oppression.

Text Selection and Structure of this Book

The primary texts I examine are a part of or follow from the 1980s dystopian turn in feminist utopian writing; all were published between 1985 and 1999. In order to address the gap in feminist science fiction criticism of the intersection between religion and gender and other aspects of identity, I use texts that interrogate Judaism, Islam, and Christianity's religious traditions and practices in their fundamentalist and most dogmatic forms. Because all three major Abrahamic¹³ religious faiths have active and vocal fundamentalist sects that tend to receive the bulk of media attention, these off-shoots have become the representatives, to a degree, of the mainstream branches of the faiths from which they have diverged. Consequently, the messages of the more progressive mainstream branches seem lost underneath the cacophony of the extremist rhetoric of fundamentalist faiths. Therefore, the texts in this project function as exemplary representations of fundamentalist Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.

With the rise of fundamentalist sects in Abrahamic religions since the late 1970s,¹⁴ I chose the following texts for their enduring relevance in the contemporary political, social, and cultural climate of the new millennium: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1984); Louise Marley's *The Terrorists of Irustan* (1999); and Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991). These writers engage fundamentalist Abrahamic faiths across two decades of the dystopian turn and the continued attacks on women's rights and autonomy. Atwood, an atheist writing in the midst of the 1980s backlash, challenges fundamentalist Christianity and the theocratic leanings of the Religious Right, which are still operating in American politics three decades later. Marley, a Roman Catholic convert, protests Islamic fundamentalism and presents an implicit comparison of the

¹³ Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all acknowledge Abraham as their common progenitor. Jews and Christians follow the line of Abraham's son Isaac, while Islam diverges by following the line of Abraham's son Ishmael. Additionally, all three religions share some sacred texts.

¹⁴ See Berlet and Quigley, Ruthven, Armstrong, Manning, and Sands.

Religious Right's influence in US politics with Islamist "barbarism" and theocracy that the West quickly condemns. Although Marley published her novel in the late 1990s, the intervening decade of the unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan spear-headed by the United States and the frequent demonization of Islam contribute to the text's continuing relevancy. Piercy, a Reconstructionist Jew¹⁵ writing in the early 1990s, engages Orthodox Judaism, and fundamentalism generally, in response to the rise of the Religious Right. At the same time, she also argues for recognition of religion as an aspect of identity with the capacity for positive benefits for the community and the individual.

Each text makes implicit and explicit arguments against fundamentalism. The narratives examine fundamentalist sects' inherent subjugation of women and subaltern Others in Western culture. In some sense, all three writers are observing fundamentalist phenomena from the outside, but they all recognize the dangers of what fundamentalist control of political and social arenas mean for women and Others. The dangers that fundamentalism presents for women and subaltern men have not decreased in the interim between the publication of these texts and the current historical moment. Some¹⁶ argue that, in the United States, we are closer than ever to theocratic rule that would return women to the status of minor children.

My non-chronological ordering of these novels in their respective chapters demonstrates a progression. We move from dystopic extremes with faint utopian impulses toward alternatives for utopic religious communities. Though by no means definitive or coercive, these utopic communities embrace egalitarian concepts and question fundamentalism and religiosity in myriad ways. In this respect, I follow utopian scholar Lyman Tower Sargent's exhortation to "*commit eutopia*," or to continue to work toward utopic ideals (230, emphasis in original). Despite the loss of hope within the feminist community and the apparent permanency of the dystopian turn, the authors I explore continue to "*commit eutopia*" as an essential facet of their social commentary.

The arc from dystopia to utopian potential begins in Chapter 1 with Atwood's dystopic *The Handmaid's Tale*, which represents fundamentalist Christianity. This text features a protagonist who is seemingly passive in her resistance but exhibits a faint utopian impulse. *The Handmaid's Tale* offers a critical assessment of a totalitarian regime based on Christian fundamentalism in which women are returned to the status of commodities of elite men and only valued for their reproductive capacities. While many feminist science fiction writers, such as Octavia Butler, Starhawk, and Sheri S. Tepper,¹⁷ have interrogated Christian fundamentalism in the United States in the late twentieth century, *The Handmaid's Tale*, the oldest text in this project, remains one of the richest literary contributions to the dystopian genre and to fictional accounts of religious fundamentalism; it also clearly represents the 1980s' dystopian turn away from the feminist utopian writing of the 1970s. This feminist dystopia identifies the kyriocentrism of religious regimes that do not allow alternative narratives for people's lives and insist

¹⁵ American Jewry generally has four main denominations: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstruction.

¹⁶ See Page, K. Brown, and Armstrong.

¹⁷ See respectively, *The Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *The Parable of the Talents* (1998), *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (1993), and *Raising the Stones* (1990) and *Gibbon's Decline and Fall* (1996).

on a white, Christian, classist, heteronormative point of view for all, masking violence against women behind an aura of protectionism. Furthermore, Atwood exposes how technology might be used in the service of oppression rather than as a mechanism of liberatory progress. Atwood's text demonstrates feminist sociologist Nira Yuval-Davis's theorizing that links Woman (as symbol) with how ideological apparatuses police and shape women's material realities.¹⁸ Atwood also exposes the nature of religion when it is superimposed over an existing society and its values, and how religion becomes so intertwined in a culture's norms and mores that religion is no longer distinguishable or separable from the original culture.

In Chapter 2, I discuss Louise Marley's *The Terrorists of Irustan*. In particular, I explore her representation of fundamentalist Islam as a totalitarian dystopia featuring a protagonist who is more active in her resistance as well as a utopian impulse that is more clearly present in the text than in *The Handmaid's Tale*. This text criticizes religiously fundamentalist societies and cultures which overtly oppress women while also censuring contemporary American society and its lack of gender equality that is less explicit in people's lives. The drive of the text is the protagonist's recognition of the oppressiveness of her society's inherent unfairness due to the gendered nature of the theocratic structure, and her resolve to bring about change by embarking on a path of terrorist violence and covert resistance. The text offers a feminist analysis of kyriarchy, primarily the intersection of kyriocentrism and religion and its violent effects on women, particularly wives and mothers. However, the text focuses to some extent on other conflicts created by kyriocentrism such as class status, the visibly disabled, sexuality, and the oppression of young men by powerful older men. This novel offers a range of criticism of religious fundamentalism across multiple axes of kyriarchal oppression which makes it exemplary in its breadth and depth. The novel's Muslim overtones present specific sites for comparison with contemporary US culture and offers an exploration of Islamic fundamentalism. Additionally, Marley links religious fundamentalism with economic and technological motivations that might otherwise be masked by social and public discourse. Thus she furthers Atwood's gestures toward the nature of religion as superimposed over an existing culture and its traditions.

In Chapter 3, I turn to Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* and its engagement with Orthodox Judaism. This novel introduces dystopic but non-totalitarian religious elements, highlights a protagonist who actively resists kyriarchal oppression, and offers two somewhat ambiguous utopic religious communities. This text presents a future Norika (North America) in which affluent multi-national conglomerates have divided the Earth between them and labor for these conglomerates resembles indentured servitude. The plot follows Shira in her task to socialize the cyborg Yod in the Jewish free town of Tikva. Running parallel in the text is Shira's grandmother's retelling of the legend of the *Golem* of Prague who saved the Jewish ghetto from genocide in the late sixteenth century. In many respects, this text is primarily an interrogation of what it means to be human interpolated into implicit commentary on Judaic tradition and Orthodox fundamentalism. However, the question of what makes someone human (and when) is an enduring aspect

¹⁸ See also Sered and Narayan.

of Abrahamic religious traditions, and this text's depiction of religious faith in a secular dystopian environment confronts various aspects of religious belief and theology and their relation to or incorporation of ontology. Moreover, the text investigates the linking of technology to oppression of a sentient being and use of technology by conglomerates to oppress their employees. The text also foregrounds gender as a site of societal contention. *He, She and It* makes an explicit link between economic motivations and the potential for oppression. Furthermore, the novel proffers blueprints toward forming religious yet egalitarian utopias as well as a feminist reclamation of Judaism from paternalistic orthodoxy.

Through genre transgressions and women-centered narratives, feminist utopian and dystopian writing critiques fundamentalism and interrogates the very core beliefs of Western thought and culture. These critical subversions of Western ideology make evident the misogyny, homophobia, and class disparities that form the framework of kyriarchal systems of power, embedding privilege for an elite few and inequality for Others. Furthermore, feminism is itself an ongoing utopian project. Subsequently, using feminism as a critical lens through which to view literature, particularly utopian and dystopian writing that addresses the intersection of gender and religious fundamentalism, evinces utopia and the utopian impulse as a process of never-ending improvement rather than as an unachievable cultural stasis.