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## Exo-Theology: Speculations on Extra-Terrestrial Life

Ted Peters

Astronomer and exo-biologist Carl Sagan has written: "Space exploration leads directly to religious and philosophical questions."<sup>1</sup> Just what are these questions? Unfortunately, some of the first questions typically asked are very misleading. At the top of the list is a question posed all too frequently by skeptical scientists and tabloid journalists. The question goes like this: "If we discover living beings in outer space as intelligent or more intelligent than we, will the Christian religion collapse?" Physicist and popular science author Paul Davies provides an example. In his *God and the New Physics* he lays down the gauntlet:

The existence of extra-terrestrial intelligences would have a profound impact on religion, shattering completely the traditional perspective on God's relationship with man. The difficulties are particularly acute for Christianity, which postulates that Jesus Christ was God incarnate whose mission was to provide salvation for man on Earth. The prospect of a host of 'alien Christs' systematically visiting every inhabited planet in the physical form of the local creatures has a rather absurd aspect. Yet how otherwise are the aliens to be saved?<sup>2</sup>

What is misleading here is the assumption that the Christian religion is fragile, that it is so fixed upon its orientation to human beings centered on earth that an experience with extra-terrestrial beings would shatter it. An alleged earth-centrism renders Christianity vulnerable. Yet, I find little or no credible evidence that such a threat exists. To the contrary, I find that when the issue of beings on other worlds has been raised it has been greeted positively. Nevertheless, it is important to observe that the issue has only seldom been raised; and so to Davies credit it is not crystal clear how theologians would react should extra-terrestrial intelligence (ETI) suddenly become part of our

*Ted Peters is Professor of Systematic Theology at the Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, and Acting Director of The Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences. His theological interest in the possibility of extra-terrestrial life in the universe is longstanding. He authored UFOs—God's Chariots? Flying Saucers in Politics, Science and Religion in 1977. While the issues presented in this essay may seem speculative and peripheral, it is often the case that examinations of this sort help to sharpen our focus on central aspects of Christian theology such as Christology and soteriology. Here Peters presents both historical and constructive material from his reflection on extra-terrestrial life. Among his several books are GOD: the World's Future, and The Cosmic Self.*

everyday world. So I believe the theological community should view the Davies challenge as an opportunity to think more deeply about the matter. I advocate exo-theology that is, speculation on the theological significance of extra-terrestrial life.

In what follows it will be my task to show that theologians following philosophers in the ancient and medieval periods consciously confronted the prospect of life on other worlds and on more than one occasion actually integrated such thinking into their theological understanding. Then I will survey examples of contemporary religious and theological spokespersons who represent Roman Catholic, evangelical Protestant, liberal Protestant, and Jewish theological perspectives. Here we will find that the topic of extra-terrestrial intelligence is seldom raised; but when it comes up it seems to present no significant difficulty. Nevertheless, such study would not be complete without examining

the fundamentalist literature of the 1970s that may have contributed to the misunderstanding alluded to above. This literature sought to demonize the UFO phenomenon—presuming that UFOs are associated with extra-terrestrial intelligence—and this literature might have given the impression that the Christian faith is more fragile than it in fact is. To this agenda we now turn.

### **Historical Theology: Might God Create Many Worlds?**

The question of the existence of extra-terrestrial intelligent life as we pose it today was, in the ancient world, subsumed under a slightly broader question: Are there many worlds or only one? The story begins prior to the Christian era. It begins during the rise of philosophy in Greece in the fourth century before Christ.

Yes, there are many worlds, said the atomistic philosophers Democritus (460-370 BC) and Epicurus (341-270 BC). The basic assumption of atomism is that the things we know in the world are the result of chance. They are formed by the chance coalescence of atoms moving about within the void, within empty space. Atoms are in constant motion, colliding, sticking together, and forming things. This is how our world came into existence. And because the number of atoms is infinite, it follows that there is an infinite number of other worlds (*aperoi kosmoi*) resulting from the same cause and effect chance formations. A Roman disciple of these earlier Greeks, Lucretius (98-54 BC), wrote in his famous *On the Nature of Things*: “Since there is illimitable space in every direction, and since seeds innumerable in number and unfathomable in sum are flying about in many ways driven in everlasting movement,” the existence of other worlds must be admitted, “especially since this world was made by nature.”<sup>3</sup> Just as there are many kinds of fish, there are many earths. Just as there are many kinds of life on earth, there are many kinds of worlds.

What about life in those other worlds? Epicurus and Lucretius positively asserted the existence of plants and living creatures on other worlds. Speculation on this question sometimes focused on the moon. One late Greek source known as pseudo-Plutarch says that “the moon is terraneous, is inhabited as our earth is, and contains animals of a larger size and plants of a rarer beauty than our globe affords.”<sup>4</sup> Note the assumption that we live on a globe, not a flat, earth. Note also the hint of utopianism: the “rarer beauty than our globe affords.”

No, answered the towering giant of ancient philosophy, Aristotle (384-322 BC); there is only one world and not many. He rejected the arguments of the atomists, especially the idea of chance formation. Aristotle’s primary argument was based on his belief that all things naturally seek their proper place. The motions of the four simple elements which

make up reality—earth, air, fire, and water—were governed by two principles. They would move toward their natural place by nature, or they would move away from their natural place by violence. The natural place for the earth is the center of the world, and the other elements are oriented accordingly. Fire seeks its natural place by ascending to the heavens, while water and air seek their places in between. What results is a cosmological vision of a single reality with the earth at its center. Extending out from the center we find concentric spheres until we reach the one and only heaven. The heart of the argument is what we might call a “natural-centrism” toward which all of nature tends. And, of course, there can exist but one center. Therefore, there can exist one and only one world.<sup>5</sup>

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It is well known that Aristotle’s philosophy made a significant impact on Christian theology. It dominated the medieval tradition of scholasticism. Perhaps this accounts for the assumption made by Paul Davies and others that Christian theology places the earth or humanity at the center of the universe. Although Aristotle’s influence was doubtless formidable, nevertheless, it would be simplistic to say that Christians say it just because Aristotle says it. There was a good deal more flexibility and even controversy than we might assume.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) of the University of Paris is the best known and most influential of the scholastic theologians and, to be sure, he was dedicated to reconciling the Christian faith with Aristotelian philosophy. The particular question he confronted which leads into our topic here was this: Is God’s omnipotence compromised if God creates only one world? The counter assumption seems to be that an omnipotent God could, if desired, create an infinite number of worlds. Thomas’s position is that “it is necessary that all things should belong to one world.”<sup>6</sup> The key premise is that perfection is found in unity. One world which is constituted of everything that exists would be perfect, a definition which, by the way, derives from Plato. In sum, it would be more in accord to say that God has created a single perfect world than a great number of necessarily imperfect worlds. Hence, divine omnipotence and the existence of only one world are compatible.

Note what is missing here. Thomas is not arguing according to some principle of earth chauvinism that the earth must be the center because it is the best; he is not arguing that the human race is the be-all and end-all. Rather, he is exploring where the logic of certain premises might take him. He is agreeing with Aristotle that our world is ordered, not by chance as Democritus and the atomists said, but by the principle of unity tending toward perfection. Be that as it may, the Thomistic view is definitely in favor of one world, not many.

But Thomas was not the only one to consider this issue. Others did with other opinions. John Buridan (1295-1358), also at the University of Paris, said, "...we hold from faith that just as God made this world, so he could make another or several worlds."<sup>7</sup> Note that Buridan's position is based upon faith, not philosophy. Yet Buridan did not want to fly in the face of Aristotle's arguments. So, he added a premise. Different elements which operate according to different laws could be produced in other worlds. Other worlds, then, would not have to obey what we earlier identified as Aristotle's law of natural-centrism. This would permit God to create another world; and he could order the things in it to that world and not to the center of ours. Thus, Buridan could meet the demands of both faith and philosophy.

Nicole Oresme (1320-82), Bishop of Lisieux, extended Buridan's thinking in his treatise, *De coelo de mundo*. But rather than make peace between faith and Aristotle, Oresme simply repudiated Aristotle. To do so he reformulated the definitions of 'up' and 'down', the directional indicators for the movement of light and heavy things. Heavy things go down, toward the center of the earth. According to Oresme's reformulation, however, 'up' and 'down' no longer refer only to the center and circumference of our world alone. Another world with another center could have its own version of up and down. All things do not have to orient themselves to our world's center. There could exist a plurality of centers. This denies the position of both Aristotle and Thomas that all things in the same universe must have a relation to one another. Two worlds sufficiently removed need not have a relation to one another, but only relations between their own respective parts. In the 14th century it was easier to disagree with Aristotle than it would be later when Aristotle's metaphysics became almost a criterion of Christian orthodoxy.

So Steven Dick can unravel a litany of medieval theologians prior to the Copernican revolution who could accept the many worlds idea, including Albertus Magnus, John Major, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Spanish Jewish scholar Hasdai Crescas. With some theologians, such as Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464), we not only get a plurality of worlds but also of extra-terrestrial life.

Life, as it exists here on earth in the form of men, animals and plants, is to be found, let us suppose, in a higher form in the solar and stellar regions. Rather than think that so many stars and parts of the heavens are uninhabited and that this earth of ours alone is peopled—and that with beings perhaps of an inferior type—we will suppose that in every region there are inhabitants, differing in nature by rank and all owing their origin to God, who is the center and circumference of all stellar regions.<sup>8</sup>

This is what we find in the medieval period. What happened at the dawn of the modern period? What happened to religious thinking about life on other worlds in the wake of the Copernican revolution and the heliocentric theory of the universe where each planet, including earth, has its own center of gravity?

This heliocentric view, of course, met with resistance from some leaders. Not all church theologians objected, only those who had committed themselves to Aristotelian metaphysics. We recall here that heliocentrism was condemned in 1616. Yet it is important to note that this condemnation was not based directly on the issue of many worlds. In his defense of Galileo, Tommaso Campanella in effect gave support to the many worlds point of view. He made it clear that the idea of multiple worlds violated no decrees of the Roman Catholic Church and certainly was not contrary to Scripture. It was contrary only to the opinion of Aristotle. Then, lifting the argument to a higher level, he pointed out that Galileo's heliocentric view does not actually posit a plurality of worlds, rather, it discloses one world, the universe, with many subsystems within it.

Theological accommodation to the new science and the vast view of the universe opened up by astronomy moved sufficiently rapidly so that Arthur Lovejoy could write:

[B]y the first or second decade of the eighteenth century not only the Copernican theory of the solar system but also belief in other inhabited planets and in the plurality of worlds seems to have been commonly accepted even in highly orthodox circles.<sup>9</sup>

In his important study on the history of Protestant thought and natural science, John Dillenberger reports how the debate over many worlds continued in the Reformation churches. "The debate hung on the assumption that human life existed on other planets," writes Dillenberger. A second and more troubling assumption was that Scripture nowhere mentions extra-terrestrial life. In the event that life on other planets is discovered through science, then this significant truth about our universe would be revealed apart from Scripture. The recognition of this possibility could mean a

shift in the focus of Christian theology toward creation; creation would be thought to be more extensive than redemption. In the tradition of the Two Books—Scripture and Nature—nature seemed to be revealing more about creation than Scripture about redemption.

Now creation, interpreted as the wisdom of God in His works, was more significant than redemption...there was an entire realm where science was valid and where the Biblical tradition had nothing to say.<sup>10</sup>

The significance of this historical observation for our study here is that, although a theological debate took place, the theologians did not deem it important to reject the notion of other worlds with living creatures.

So Steven Dick can list numerous natural theologians of the 17th and 18th centuries, following the Copernican Revolution, who could affirm many worlds such as Richard Bentley, John Ray, William Derham, Immanuel Kant, and others. Similar to Nicholas of Cusa, Richard Bentley, a theologian and contemporary colleague of Isaac Newton, posited the existence of ETI. As he did so, he anticipated contemporary ethical concerns regarding the centrality or non-centrality of the human race on our planet. He was preparing to combat what we might today call “earth chauvinism.”

...we need not nor do not confine and determine the purposes of God in creating all mundane bodies, merely to human ends and uses...all bodies were formed for the sake of intelligent minds: and as the Earth was principally designed for the being and service and contemplation of men; why may not all other planets be created for the like uses, each for their own inhabitants which have life and understanding?<sup>11</sup>

In sum, during the formidable period of medieval scholasticism, despite the forceful impact of Aristotelian philosophy, Christian theology was by no means wedded to the idea that God created only one world. An honest debate persisted well past the Copernican revolution into the modern era. More than one position was put forth. Some of our best minds not only affirmed the idea of multiple worlds, but even spoke positively regarding the existence of extra-terrestrial life.

### Contemporary Theology: What About ETI?

The period of history following World War II is the space age in many respects. We have been putting satellites in orbit and astronauts on the moon, and we have been sending probes to Venus, Mars, and beyond. We have been searching for extra-terrestrial life with radio telescopes.<sup>12</sup> Budgetary arguments regarding space exploration rage annually in the U.S. Congress. Our theaters have been showing

sci-fi films depicting inter-planetary space travel and even wars between extra-terrestrial civilizations. Nine percent of the U.S. population claims to have seen what they believe to be a UFO, and half the people who think of UFOs as a reality believe they come from outer space. Our culture is shot through and through with space consciousness.

One would expect, therefore, that theological leaders would want to respond to the rise in space consciousness by providing some intellectual guidance. Yet, surprisingly, relatively little is being done. The subject is too widely ignored, in my judgment.

Be that as it may, in those instances during the post World War II period when the subject has been seriously taken up, the possibility of the existence of ETI has been positively affirmed. Beginning with the Roman Catholic theologian George van Noort of the manualist tradition, it has been held that it is not in the least incompatible with faith to admit that rational beings exist on other heavenly bodies. Fr. Theodore Hesburgh, past President of the University of Notre Dame, served on a NASA commission and argued that he could legitimately accept the possibility of life on other planets. His argument was that because God is infinite in intelligence, freedom, and power, that we cannot take it upon ourselves to limit what he might have done. German theologian Hans Küng, while making an argument to de-center the place of humanity on planet earth, says “we must allow for living beings, intelligent—although quite different living beings, also on other stars of the immense universe.” And Karl Rahner, whom many see as the theological giant of Catholicism in the twentieth century, refers to “the many histories of freedom which do not only take place on our earth.” Francis J. Connell, C.S.S.R., Dean of the School of Sacred Theology at the Catholic University of America during the 1940s and 1950s, sums the matter up: “It is good for Catholics to know that the principles of their faith are entirely compatible with the most startling possibilities concerning life on other planets.”

Turning to the conservative wing of Protestantism, evangelical preacher Billy Graham welcomes both the prospect of ETI and UFOs. “I firmly believe there are intelligent beings like us far away in space who worship God,” he told an interviewer, “but we would have nothing to fear from these people. Like us, they are God’s creation.” In his book on angels, Graham writes:

Some...have speculated that UFOs could very well be part of God’s angelic host who preside over the physical affairs of universal creation. While we cannot assert such a view with certainty...nothing can hide the fact that these unexplained events are occurring with greater frequency around the entire world...UFOs are

astonishingly angel-like in some of their reported appearances.

Moving a bit more to mainline Protestant theology, we find New Testament scholar Krister Stendahl, former Bishop of Stockholm and former Dean of Harvard Divinity School. At a NASA sponsored symposium in 1972, Stendahl was asked about communication with ETI. "That's great," he said. "It seems always great to me, when God's world gets a little bigger and I get a somewhat more true view of my place and my smallness in that universe."

A. Durwood Foster poses the very question central to this essay. Given the prospects of contact with extra-terrestrial intelligent beings, "is faith in any way threatened by the possibilities here in view? Why should it be?" He answers that a faith already steeped in God's mystery should be prepared for the unexpected and even affirmatively open to it. He goes on to cite the New Testament recognition that there are other sheep of which we do not know (John 10:16). Then he concludes, "[t]he love of God manifest in Jesus Christ has surely not remained unknown wherever there is spiritual receptivity."

Paul Tillich would agree. Tillich, the renowned systematic theologian with one foot in neo-orthodoxy and the other in liberal Protestantism, takes the question of ETI quite seriously. The prospect of extra-terrestrial life raises important issues for the doctrines of creation, anthropology, and Christology.

...a question arises which has been carefully avoided by many traditional theologians, even though it is consciously or unconsciously alive for most contemporary people. It is the problem of how to understand the meaning of the symbol "Christ" in the light of the immensity of the universe, the heliocentric system of planets, the infinitely small part of the universe which man and his history constitute, and the possibility of other worlds in which divine self-manifestations may appear and be received.

...our basic answer leaves the universe open for possible divine manifestations in other areas or periods of being. Such possibilities cannot be denied. But they cannot be proved or disproved. Incarnation is unique for the special group in which it happens, but it is not unique in the sense that other singular incarnations for other unique worlds are excluded...Man cannot claim to occupy the only possible place for incarnation.

The issue Tillich debates here is the one cynically referred to as "absurd" by Paul Davies. The issue is this: Does the existence of multiple worlds with intelligent life

require multiple divine incarnations and multiple acts of redemption? Tillich seems to be answering in the affirmative. Tillich so conflates the doctrines of creation and redemption that he believes God's saving power would already be at work regardless of the situation in which ETI found themselves. One implication of this position is that we earthlings would not necessarily need to send missionaries to initiate aliens into God's plan of salvation.

Returning to the Roman Catholics for a moment, two contemporary scholars have tackled this issue and, at some variance from Tillich's position, argued for the universal efficacy of the Christ event on earth. In an interview, Jesuit journalist L. C. McHugh was asked: What would be the relation of intelligent beings inhabiting a far corner of the cosmos to Jesus Christ? McHugh responded saying, such people "would fall under the universal dominion of Christ the King, just as we and even the angels do." Similarly, J. Edgar Bruns, a New Testament scholar and president of Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans, writes that "...the significance of Jesus Christ extends beyond our global limits. He is the foundation stone and apex of the universe and not merely the Savior of Adam's progeny." This position would probably imply that, should ETI be discovered, missionaries would be called for much as they were when Europe discovered the Western hemisphere.

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This is not the case for Roman Catholic Karl Rahner, who seems to side more with Tillich. Rahner, as mentioned earlier, argues that the possibility of extra-terrestrial intelligent life "can today no longer be excluded." Then he raises the question of "Christ as head of all creation." He speculates: "In view of the immutability of God in himself and the identity of the Logos with God, it cannot be proved that a multiple incarnation in different histories of salvation is absolutely unthinkable." He concludes that theologians on earth will "not be able to say anything further on this question," because they are limited by revelation. The purpose of Christian revelation is limited to "the salvation of humankind, not to provide an answer to questions which really have no important bearing on the realization of this salvation in freedom."

In this debate over the need for multiple incarnations, we need to keep one item in mind. Even though there are

slight differences of opinion regarding the relationship between ETI and the historical event of redemption here on earth, what is important is the common assumption that possible ETI belong within the realm of God's creation and are well worth serious theological consideration.

Back to the Protestants. Moving a step in the liberal direction on the spectrum, German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg affirms at least the vague possibility of intelligent life living in other solar systems in our own or in remote galaxies. With regard to redemption, however, he differs from Tillich. Pannenberg understands Jesus Christ to be the incarnation of the eternal *logos*, and the eternal *logos* is the medium through which the whole of creation has come into being. The significance of Jesus Christ extends to the farthest reaches of the universe, because through Christ, God has promised to draw the whole of time and space into a consummate unity.

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***In every instance, however, the same creative and redeeming work of the same God is operative.***

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The issue of the universality of earth's Christ event is taken up as well by Lewis Ford, a spokesperson for the school of process theology. Disciples of the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, process theologians usually find themselves on the liberal end of the Protestant spectrum. Ford begins by stating that "salvation is not just limited to men but applies to all intelligent beings wherever they may dwell." Ford embraces the concept of evolution, applies it to every location in the universe, and then asserts that God is always and everywhere drawing the evolutionary process toward greater complexity and higher value.

...we may define God as that dynamic source of values which lures the evolutionary process to an ever-richer complexity productive of increasing freedom and intensity of experience. As such, God is necessarily operative in the development of every life and in every culture, whether terrestrial or extra-terrestrial.

The Ford position is close to Tillich's. It virtually collapses salvation into creation. As with Tillich, Ford affirms multiple manifestations of the divine, each one appropriate to the species for which redemption is aimed. Jesus Christ constitutes the incarnation aimed at the human race on earth. Other parallel incarnations are then possible for other intelligent races. In every instance, however, the same creative and redeeming work of the same God is operative.

Although I wish more theologians would take the matter of other worlds and ETI seriously, I still find the spectrum of theological considerations of ETI and even UFOs impressive. Yet the above mentioned theologians are all Christians. When researching this topic, I began to wonder what a Jewish theologian might say. So I telephoned my friend and colleague, Rabbi Hayim Perelmuter. Dr. Perelmuter is former President of the Chicago Board of Rabbis and a professor at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. He is one of those renaissance people who covers the waterfront: he is an author, a scripture scholar, knowledgeable about the history of intellectual thought, experienced in Jewish-Christian dialogue, up to date on the politics of Israel, and most apt to know the broad sweep of current Jewish thinking. I described the issue on which I was working. His response was forthright and clear. Contemporary Jewish theology would have no difficulty whatsoever in accepting new knowledge regarding the existence of extra-terrestrial life. In fact, it would simply broaden the scope of our understanding of God's creation. Then he added a note of tragic humor. "We Jews have had to adjust to all kinds of things in history, including Nazi Germany and the difficulties with Israel. I am sure we could adjust to space beings emerging from flying saucers as well."

#### **Fundamentalist Literature: UFOs as Chariots of Satan**

During the decade of the 1970s numerous magazine articles and books appeared that dramatically challenged the alleged existence of UFOs and depicted the entire phenomenon as a Satanic plot. This literature sought to frighten Christian readers into disbelief in ETI, and in doing so to capitalize on the fascination that usually accompanies fright. The literature influenced many conservative and evangelical clergy persons and eventually found its way into sermons and Christian education programs. This approach was most likely stimulated by the wide publicity given to the Pascagoula, Mississippi abduction of Charles Hickson and Calvin Parker on October 11, 1973 as well as the extremely large sales of books such as *Chariots of the Gods?* by Erich von Däniken. A brief upsurge in fright publications followed the release of Steven Spielberg's movie, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* in December 1977, but then it died down. In the 1980s and 1990s anti-New Age and then anti-Satanism literature seems to have rushed in to fill the gap in Christian terror literature.<sup>13</sup>

Puzzled at such extremism at a time when Billy Graham had spoken so favorably about ETI, I engaged these proponents in conversation. As best as I can reconstruct it, their theological argument follows three steps that lead us to the question of biblical authority. First, there can be no life on other planets because the Bible has not revealed this to be the case. Because the Bible does not anywhere mention life on other worlds, belief in ETI is anti-biblical.

If there were intelligent beings with origins in outer space, we would expect the Bible to support the fact. However, the Bible takes no such position...the Bible doesn't even mention the existence of other planets...the person of Jesus Christ and His redemptive work underscore the uniqueness of life to the planet earth. He came to die for man's sins, exclusively.<sup>14</sup>

Note how blatantly this argument commits the fallacy of *argumentum ex ignorantia*, the argument from ignorance: because the Bible ignores UFOs and ETI, therefore, UFOs and ETI do not exist. This is fallacious because no one has ever claimed that the Bible constitutes the exhaustive supply of all knowledge that can be known. It is logically possible for things to exist that are not mentioned in the Bible. Toyotas and Swiss watches and Big Mac hamburgers exist indisputably, but they are not mentioned in the Bible.

Note also the earth-centrist assumption here. Perhaps this shows that Paul Davies has some grounds for predicting a radical challenge to Christian belief—at least this brand of Christian belief—should the existence of ETI be empirically confirmed.

The second step in the fundamentalist fright argument is to acknowledge that belief in ETI seems to presuppose the theory of evolution. This observation is correct. The UFO phenomenon and the concept of evolution converge in our culture to form a kind of mythical view of reality.<sup>15</sup> Since the 1950s, and perhaps even before, a myth has been under construction in our society that pictures Ufonauts as coming from a civilization in outer space that is more advanced than ours—further advanced in science, technology, and morality. This means they have evolved further than we on earth. According to this emerging myth, the Ufonauts are traveling to earth to teach us how to evolve faster, to save ourselves from disaster as we cross the nuclear threshold. The space beings constitute our own future coming back in time as well as space to rescue us, to save us.<sup>16</sup> What the fundamentalist interpreters believe they see in this emerging UFO myth is the human imagination gone wild. By presuming validity to the theory of evolution, earthling imagination has projected evolutionary advance to the point of developmental salvation onto imaginary civilizations in outer space. What we find here, complain the fundamentalists, is a subversive plot to convince our people to believe in evolution and, of course, then to deny the authority of the biblical account of creation in the book of Genesis.

The third step in the argument is to declare all this demonic. Scientists who propound the theory of evolution have with some frequency in the past been denounced by fundamentalists as enemies of the Bible. Indirectly, this denouncing is repeating itself between the lines of anti-UFO

literature. Further and more decisively, the UFO phenomenon, with its accompanying evolutionary myth, provides a temptation for earthlings to look for salvation in someone other than the biblical Jesus Christ. Responding specifically to the movie, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, as well as to the generic cultural UFO myth, Frank Allnutt considers the implications of believing in a race of ETI who are “smart enough to have outlawed crime and war.” He goes on:

That line of reasoning sees the possibility that these extra-terrestrials have become masters over those things which cause death and that they hold the key to the mysteries of immortality. And, maybe, they intend to teach us the secret way to obtain eternal life.<sup>17</sup>

Allnutt can only conclude, then, that “the UFO phenomenon is being caused by Satan and his demons. Their purpose is to confuse people about the true source of salvation, the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>18</sup>

It seems to me that the fundamentalist interpreters perceive accurately the salvific structure inherent to the developing UFO myth in our society and, further, that this myth stands at some variance with what Christians want to teach. For this the appropriate response is Christian apologetic theology, to be sure. Yet, the apologetic argument as actually raised here is unnecessarily confused with fallacious appeals to the exclusive authority of the Bible.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

In sum, although there are partial grounds for thinking the Christian faith is so earth-centrist that it could be severely upset by confirmation of the existence of ETI, an assessment of the overall historical and contemporary strength of Christian theology indicates no insurmountable weakness. The Aristotelian metaphysical tradition within medieval theology, and recent fulminations by fundamentalists, have admittedly propounded versions of earth-centrism that might give one pause in this regard. Despite St. Thomas's use of Aristotelian arguments against many worlds, however, Christian theologians have routinely found ways to address the issue of Jesus Christ as God incarnate and to conceive of God's creative and saving power exerted in other worlds. This applies, of course, to historic Christianity in its contemporary Roman Catholic, evangelical Protestant and liberal Protestant forms. Although Paul Davies's challenge does apply to some expressions of fundamentalism, we must note that, in the giant story book that constitutes the two thousand year history of the Christian religion, fundamentalism makes up at best one tiny sub-chapter. It would be a mistake to take the fundamentalist fright as representative of Christianity as a whole.

At this point in time we can only speculate. The UFO mystery remains unsolved. The question of the actual existence or nonexistence of ETI remains open. Should contact between terrestrials and extra-terrestrials occur, we cannot predict with certainty how hitherto earthbound societies will react. Some scenarios present themselves as likely. In the event that the ETIs appear rich, friendly, and benevolent, we will at first greet them with open arms. In the event that the ETIs appear to be warlike conquerors or disease ridden contaminators or in some other way a threat, we may see the diverse peoples of earth uniting together in a common defense. In the event that the ETIs appear to be much like us, we can expect both of the above reactions initially, and then we will eventually see the development of alliances and counter-alliances between segments of both earth and ETI populations. In all three cases, alert Christian theologians will attempt to extrapolate on the basis of existing knowledge of earthling behavior and try to guide us all toward a peaceful and fraternal bond of friendship. Such theologians would affirm with St. Thomas that "all things should belong to one world," and this one world would include both earthlings and extra-terrestrials. In the meantime, while we wait for contact, I recommend that some scholars take up Paul Davies's challenge and engage in a preliminary form of exo-theology.

<sup>1</sup> Carl Sagan, *The Cosmic Connection* (New York: Dell, 1973) p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Davies, *God and the New Physics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Touchstone, 1983) p. 71.

<sup>3</sup> Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, Book II, lines 1052-66. See the overall account of the development of the idea of many worlds by Steven J. Dick, *Plurality of Worlds: The Origins of the Extra-Terrestrial Life Debate from Democritus to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); hereinafter abbreviated *PW*. For his citing of Lucretius, see p. 11. After the rediscovery of Lucretius's book in medieval Europe in 1417, there was considerable Christian opposition raised against atomism. The heart of the opposition did not stem from the many worlds theory *per se*, but rather from Lucretius's overt atheism.

<sup>4</sup> Cited by Dick, *PW*, p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *On the Heavens*, Books 8 and 9. Dick wants to argue that in only one place does Aristotle commit himself to one world only. (*PW*, p. 193, n. 18.) But the texts Dick gives as evidence of variation (*Physics* II: 196a: 25-30; III: 203b: 20-30; IV: 218b: 4-10; VIII: 250b: 20-3) do not, in my judgement, support his claim. In fact, what Aristotle says in *Metaphysics* XII: 1073a: 33-40 reiterates what he said in book 9 of *On the Heavens*.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, First Part, Question 47, Article 3. Shortly before his death, Thomas wrote a

commentary on Aristotle's *On the Heavens*. It is *Aristotelis libros de caelo et mundo, generatione et corruptione, meteorologicorum expositio* (Rome, 1952).

<sup>7</sup> John Buridan, *Quaestiones super libris quattuor de caelo et mundo*, cited by Dick, *PW*, p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, trans. Fr. Germain Heron (New Haven: Yale, 1954) pp. 114f, cited by Dick, *PW*, p. 41. It was Nicholas, in discussing the boundlessness of God's universe, who gave us the line which Carl Jung likes so well, its "center is everywhere and its circumference is nowhere."

<sup>9</sup> Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (New York: Harper & Row, 1936) p. 130.

<sup>10</sup> John Dillenberger, *Protestant Thought and Natural Science* (New York: Doubleday, 1960) p. 136.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Bentley, "A Confutation of Atheism from the Origin and Frame of the World" (London, 1693), reprinted in *Isaac Newton's Papers and Letters on Natural Philosophy*, ed. by I.B. Cohen (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958) pp. 356-8.

<sup>12</sup> The US NASA project known as SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence) under the leadership of Frank Drake at the University of California at Santa Cruz began using radio telescopes in 1960 to listen for signals coming from various locations in our galaxy. So far there has been no contact. On October 12, 1992 NASA added new channels and upgraded its technical listening capabilities by a factor of 10,000. SETI has also been renamed the High-Resolution Microwave Survey. See "SETI Faces Uncertainty on Earth and in the Stars," *Science*, 258: 5079 (October 2, 1992) p. 27.

<sup>13</sup> A relevant example is William M. Alnor, *UFOs in the New Age: Extra-Terrestrial Messages and the Truth of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992). Alnor cannot make up his mind as to whether or not ETIs exist. He is waiting for more facts. Yet he is confident that a combined UFO-New Age conspiracy seeks to entice us away from orthodox Christian beliefs into a vague mystical and universalistic religion. "Their foremost concern seems to be to change the way we think about God. They are almost equally interested in changing God's Word, the Bible, and inserting in its place a type of universalism that says it really doesn't matter what one believes in matters of religious faith as long as one is sincere. Truth is irrelevant." p. 133; see also p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Frank Allnutt, *Infinite Encounters: The Real Force Behind UFO Phenomenon* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1978) p. 80. In the same genre see John Weldon with Zola Levitt, *Encounters with UFOs* (Irvine, CA: Harvest House, 1975) reprinted as *UFOs: What on Earth is Happening?* (New York: Bantam, 1975); Clifford Wilson and John

Weldon, *Close Encounters: A Better Explanation* (San Diego, CA: Master Books, 1978).

<sup>15</sup> I outline this emerging myth in Ted Peters, *UFOs—God’s Chariots? Flying Saucers in Politics, Science, and Religion* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1977). The thesis I develop in this book—the evolutionary UFO myth projects a future salvation for earth descending to us from the heavens—follows the trail blazed by Carl Jung in *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Sky* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), and is expanded by incorporating the methods of Mircea Eliade, Paul Tillich, and Langdon Gilkey so as to uncover the covert religious dimensions of an otherwise apparently secular phenomenon. I see the myth as optimistic, greeting UFOs as celestial saviors.

The more recent abduction interpretation offered by Budd Hopkins, *Intruders* (New York: Ballantine, 1987) and John E. Mack, *Abduction* (New York: Scribners’, 1994) introduces a hostile image. This leads Anthony Mansueto to connect a myth and countermyth: the myth of UFOs bringing us a technological New Jerusalem and the countermyth of invasion by gray aliens. “Visions of Cosmopolis: UFOs and God,” *Omni* 17:1 (October 1994) 62-69, 110. A still different take is that of the previously mentioned work by Keith Thompson, *Angels and Aliens: UFOs and the Mythic Imagination*. Thompson’s fascinating thesis is that the very unsolvability of the split between surface appearance and mysterious underlying reality of UFOs provides the driving energy that keeps the UFO myth alive and generates its ongoing symbolic power.

<sup>16</sup> New Age spirituality is also cultivating evolution in mythological ways. In contemporary literature we find an interesting synthesis of UFOs and evolutionary spirituality in the work of psychologist Kenneth Ring. Ring compares and contrasts UFO experiences (UFOEs) with Near Death experiences (NDEs) and suggests that both are precipitated by what philosopher Michael Gosso calls the “Mind at Large.” UFO aliens enter our imagination through the Mind at Large, and our imagination becomes an “objectively self-existent” reality with a purpose, namely, to transform human consciousness. To what end? In order to persuade the human race to take responsibility for the ecological health of the planet. This leap in human consciousness constitutes a psycho-spiritual evolutionary advance, says Ring. “We are in the midst of an evolutionary spurt toward greater spiritual awareness and higher consciousness—and the occurrence of UFOEs and NDEs is an integral part of that progression.” *The Omega Project: Near-Death Experiences, UFO Encounters, and Mind at Large* (New York: William Morrow, 1992) p. 186. In contrast to the contactees of the 1950s for whom UFOs would save us from nuclear destruction, Ring says the UFOs will save us from ecological destruction (p. 180). And, because Ring incorporates an eschatological vision of a new heaven and a new earth (pp.

235f), I believe he represents a nuanced example of the celestial savior model of UFO interpretation I outline in *UFOs—God’s Chariots?*, chapter 7.

<sup>17</sup> Allnut, *Infinite Encounters*, p. 72.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>19</sup> I am not challenging the authority of the Bible here. I am challenging the fallacious form of arguing for application of biblical authority to UFO-ETI claims.