



## Conference Talk

# Epiphany for a Small Planet: Christology, Astronomy and Mutuality

Alan Padgett



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*This published lecture builds upon a mutuality model for the relationships between theology and science. The basic idea is that theology and science (natural and social) are colleagues in helping to develop a Christian worldview. Because both use informal reasoning, there are avenues in which they can reasonably influence each other. I also discuss what it means to “redeem reason” since this lecture was originally part of the Redemption of Reason conference. These preliminary moves set up a focused example, drawn from Christology and astronomy. Accepting the view that the cosmos is bio-friendly, and assuming there may well be intelligent life on other planets, I discuss what the implications of this are for Christology. I conclude that we do not need to alter our orthodoxy Christology, but we do need an expanded Christian imagination.*

One of my passions as a theologian and someone who loves science is reflection on the current debates and dialog between theology and the sciences. What I propose to do this afternoon is talk about the science and theology relationships from the point of view of Christian thought or from the perspective of Christian theology. I will present a *mutuality model*. This replaces the old medieval idea that theology is the queen of the sciences and the other disciplines are handmaidens. I propose that today we think of theology and science as working together as colleagues. What we are working on together is reforming and developing Christian worldviews that are spiritually deep and scientifically sound. This is an ongoing task, and what I am interested in as a theologian.

### Redemption of Reason

The topic for our conference is the redemption of reason. But we have not said that much about what we mean by the redemption of reason. So I thought at the beginning I would address that from my perspective.

After a general discussion, and as an example of this kind of mutuality, I am going to discuss astrobiology and Christology.

Theologians and Christian evangelicals of all kinds are rightly interested in the teachings of Scripture as the Word of God, so we will begin with two verses from the Bible. One that is not so well known is 2 Cor. 10:5 where Paul says in addition to destroying the enemies of God, they are destroying speculation and every lofty thing that is raised up against the knowledge of God, taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. That is maybe one metaphor about what it is to redeem reason—to take it out of slavery and bondage. You are buying it out, you are redeeming it, you are liberating it, you are going to bring it from obedience to other powers, other spirits, and other goals and bring it into a Christian perspective. But I think my favorite verse comes from Jesus’ teaching about what is the greatest commandment in the whole Old Testament. “Jesus replied, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all you soul and with all your mind’” (Matt. 22:37, NIV). To love the Lord with your mind is something that any scholar can do.

One of the things I noticed in our conversations over dinner last night is this idea that some people may have a special calling from

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God, a "religious vocation." I agree with that but I would just like to remind everyone here that all of us are called by God. All of us have a religious vocation. It is one of the fundamental breakthroughs of the Reformation and the evangelical tradition that all activities are equally spiritual when we do them unto Christ: car mechanic, astronomer, pastor, or theologian. There is nothing more spiritual about being a theologian than there is about being a computer scientist. Both can be spiritual when they are done in the right Spirit, that is, the Holy Spirit. At this conference, we are all academics, we are all interested in the life of the mind, and so we are all called by Christ to do this as a way of being obedient to the greatest commandment. Redeeming reason then begins with these kinds of reflections, recognizing that everything we do, we want to do out of the joy of the Spirit and out of the knowledge of the Father and surrendering to the Word of God, that is, the Living Word, Jesus the Messiah.

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Central to the notion of redeeming reason is talking about worldviews. The term "worldview" has been around since Immanuel Kant (the German term is *Weltanschauung*), and the notion in broad terms is something like a philosophy of life. Any adult who can read and write and think is going to have some kind of worldview. The worldview may perhaps be implicit: some picture, some understanding, and some framework of values, meanings and basic concepts that guides his or her action in the world. To be involved in the life of the mind then is to be self-critical about our own worldview. We all have slightly different worldviews but it is possible to broadly classify them in terms of beliefs, traditions, and perspectives. So when we say "Christian worldview," there is really not just one Christian worldview but there are all these different worldviews which we can broadly say are Christian. They are Christian because they are oriented on Jesus Christ, they are founded on the Christian faith, they take divine revelation, Scriptures, seriously, and so forth. We will come back soon to this notion of worldview.

Now to redeem reason is to re-orient the life of the mind toward its proper end or goal, making it obedient to Christ. Part of the purpose of reasoning is to discover the truth, to figure out reality, to know the world and what is real. And of course from a Christian point of view, God is ultimately the source of all reality. So the ultimate

end of reasoning is to come to know God and the things God has made. I am not a Calvinist or Reformed but I do like the beginning of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. The first question is "What is the chief end of man?" (And of course by man, they meant men and women.) So what is the chief end of human existence? The answer is "To know God and enjoy him forever." So the first part of redeeming reason from a biblical, Christian theological point of view is to say we want to orient our reasoning and our rationality not just on any old thing but on the ultimate and proper end, to know God. This does not imply a rejection of knowledge concerning the world, but rather implies putting such world-oriented knowledge in a broader perspective. The ultimate end, the highest goal, in all human knowledge is to recognize and know God by means of knowing all these other things.

Thus we want to see in God and find in God the final ground of all reality, the ground of all being and therefore to understand truth in a way that is not limited to just the natural world, so that there is more to truth than what the scientist can discover. There is spiritual truth, there is moral truth, there is social and historical reality that goes beyond what lab science is able to figure out. In no way does this devalue the scientific method or achievements of science; rather it places it in a proper system of values with Jesus Christ as the center. It does not allow science and technology to be our savior, for we already have one!

There is an important caveat here: by beginning with Christian faith and then seeking understanding, which is one of the mottos of Saint Anselm, *fides quaerens intellectum*, we are not going to be smarter than other people. We ought not to assume or imply that Christians are better musicians, scientists, authors, or computer programmers than non-Christians. That strikes me as intellectual arrogance. Instead, because we know the source of all truth, we understand and know some things beyond what our friends who are not religious or are not Christians can know. We have truth that goes beyond their truth. We have greater access to the whole of reality, which they do not have.

## Worldviews: Christian or Materialist

What is necessary then to redeem reason from my perspective is this idea that there is a Christian worldview in which all the disciplines of the academy work together from a Christian perspective to give us a complete and wholistic understanding of reality, including God as the source and ground of truth and reality. It was in the late nineteenth century that Christian thinkers began to appropriate and use this idea of worldview. One was a Scot named James Orr, a very influential Bible scholar, theologian, and editor of the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. He contributed the paper on science and theology to the five volumes, *The Fundamentals*, which is where we get the name fundamentalist. Yet Orr was no fundamentalist.



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### *Epiphany for a Small Planet: Christology, Astronomy and Mutuality*

He did not really like a lot of the things that were being taught at Princeton, for example. He gave a series of lectures called *The Christian View of God and the World*. Not only did he use the words “Christian worldview” throughout the whole book but he argues that theology and the sciences need to come together and help us to have an academically respectable Christian worldview. Theology and biblical studies take their place as one of many disciplines.

Probably better known today than James Orr is another Calvinist, Abraham Kuyper. I think he is better known in this area just because of Calvin College and the influence of Dutch reformed thinking on evangelical thought. Kuyper was an amazing individual. He started his own newspaper, he was the prime minister of the Netherlands, and he founded the Free University of Amsterdam where he was the chancellor and a professor. One of his most famous quotations on this topic implies that no single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest. “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ as sovereign over all does not cry, ‘Mine.’” What he is saying is there is no world of the university that is sealed off from theology, philosophy, or Christian thought. So there is no science, in other words, that is foreign to Jesus Christ. All sciences can be done from a Christian perspective.

The main alternative to the Christian worldview in the academic world in North America today seems to be *naturalism*. This can also be called materialism or scientific materialism. It is a philosophy—not a science—that claims that all that exists is natural things and phenomena that are wholly dependent upon natural objects. For many who hold to naturalism, science itself provides us with a complete worldview. This is a philosophical position that Christian academics have to question.

We can agree that the sciences are complete in principle, given the domains they have chosen to study. Take biology which studies living organisms on this planet. Now given the domain that biology has chosen to study, it may finally be complete in the area it has chosen to analyze—but there are plenty of questions we have about life that

biology will never answer. There are limits to what biology *per se* is going to be able to do. Even all of the empirical sciences taken together will not discover all the truth that is out there. There is much that we do not know in any of the natural sciences. But even if you think that eventually we might be complete in principle, there are still going to be many things science does not tell us. No, the sciences do not give us the total worldview.

We have to value the principles that go into science, into the practice of science, like telling the truth, even though these principles cannot be proven true by science itself. A major part of scientific materialism is simply scientism, that is, treating science and technology in quasi-religious ways. Two assumptions in scientism are that science will, in the end, tell us all we can actually know, and that the scientific method is the only method by which we can answer genuine questions. We might have many questions that just have no answer and one cannot go there, but scientism claims that any real question that has an actual answer is going to be answered through the scientific method. So it is a scientific worldview that we are standing against as Christian scholars, not science itself.

## Mutuality in Theology and Science

I want to reflect a little about the relationship between worldviews and theories and theory choice in the particular sciences, even though science is a lot more than theories. Theory choice is an important part of the rationality in any academic discipline. Theories and theory choice are embedded in what Thomas Kuhn called paradigms. The academic disciplines have these larger paradigms that guide research and help us understand what counts as good work in that discipline. Paradigms themselves are part of a history that I will call a “tradition of inquiry” or an academic discipline. Each of the academic disciplines is a tradition of rational inquiry that is limited and focused. This narrowing of the field of study and approved methods provides power in that you can now focus inquiry in a powerful way. Of course, you are limited in what you can discover, since you have already limited it methodologically.



We should also notice that all rationality is based on tradition. The Enlightenment idea was that there is pure universal reason and that every method, every science, everything that dares to call itself academic has to follow this method. I find that philosophy highly dubious. Part of developing a Christian worldview is to see that this does not make sense philosophically. But then these ideas are themselves grounded in the worldview of *individual* scholars.

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I want to emphasize the individual because it might look like the disciplines themselves are grounded in a particular worldview—but that is not true. The great thing about being in a scientific discipline or in one of the social sciences or in the humanities like American history is that you are invested in your discipline of inquiry but *you can share it with lots of people with different worldviews*. Of course the worldview may influence the way you look at American history and the way you interpret it but there is this common rationality, this common approach that you can share. This is important for questions like: How do I demonstrate the truth of my theory to my colleagues, say, in astronomy? To drag out the book of Genesis is going to be a mistake because you do not share that data, you do not share that insight with your other colleagues in astronomy. You are going to have to go to what you were trained in during your apprenticeship as a grad student in astronomy and the way that you make an argument in the larger discipline. So worldviews are pluralistic, while disciplines are unifying. At this conference, we have common worldviews as Christians and this brings us unity despite our many different academic specialties. On the other hand, when geologists get together, what unifies them is their tradition. The worldviews that they bring to geology are some of the things that make it interesting and different for them.

Now I do agree that theory choice and the interpretation of the theories, especially to a broader audience, can only be done by drawing upon larger worldviews or philosophies of life. So when scientists write popular

books about their science they never just do science. They are always doing science plus their own philosophy of life which they draw on to interpret that science. Thus in popularizing books to broad audiences of thinking human beings, there is always a worldview perspective that is being drawn on. That is the place where Christian scholarship comes in. We are going to interpret the results of the science from a Christian point of view. Even if it is not as explicit and obvious in the way we make our arguments, there will be a deep resonance with Christian truth in the way we understand the data and the theories that are currently being developed in our science.

Another way of talking about Christian scholarship is Christian learning. This is a project of interpreting and forwarding all of the arts and sciences on Christian grounds. To do that is not something that we do alone. We need the community of academics who share our Christian perspective. I think it is interesting that in many disciplines, almost all the ones I can think of, there are already Christian organizations of scholars who meet together to forward Christian learning in their disciplines. Many people have already talked about the American Scientific Affiliation, but there are Christians in the visual arts, too. I was just talking to a grad student today doing an MA in history who did not know there was the Conference on Faith and History and a journal called *Fides et Historia* that forwards Christian scholarship in history. There are many other examples, such as the Society of Christian Philosophers or *Christianity and Literature*. Get involved with them. They can help you understand what it means to redeem reason in your own specialties, as part of the great commandment which says to love God with our minds.

## Theology as “Science”?

In all of this, then, where is theology? I will give you two meanings of theology: the traditional one is “the study of God.” I like that because the words “*theos*” and “*logos*” mean the study of God. But at places like the University of Chicago Divinity School, which is one of the top spots for the academic study of Christian theology, they would think of theology as “second order academic reflection on faith.” I am going to argue that both of these are correct, to some degree. The root purpose of theology is in seeking to know God and all other creatures as they relate to God. Take one of the great works of theology, *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas. The structure of this massive book is from the start of the world leading up to the belief that there has to be a creator; then one studies God and his relationship to creatures, the culmination of which is the Incarnation. Aquinas then teaches us about Christology, the Church, and the sacraments. He stopped writing this when he had a mystical vision of God. He died soon after that. But he would have gone on to talk about the restoration of all things in God and the way that all creation has the ultimate goal to return to God.



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Ecology and ethics are important themes for theology today, and I am very happy to know that Cal DeWitt is here. He is going to help us think about what it means in the present to think about God and creation from a Christian point of view. Theology is interested in all creation—but specifically in creation and all things that are real and exist *as they are related to God*. So it is God's relationship to everything that is specifically theological.

Aquinas says, writing in Latin, that theology is a sacred science, *Sacra Doctrina*, which was a *scientia*, that is, a science or a knowledge. If we were speaking in Greek, we can say, "Well, yes, theology is *episteme*, it's a science." But in modern American English, science really means empirical science, natural science, and especially the physical sciences. Sometimes it means nothing more than a lab science. To that degree, I would have to say theology is not a science, not an empirical study of the natural or the social world. Because Christian theology is founded upon spiritual truth and supernatural revelation, it is, therefore, not a science in the way I think most Americans use the word "science." But it is an academic discipline. It is what the Germans call *Wissenschaft*. I will insist on that but that is only one level of theology. I like to think of theology on at least three levels. One level is the one where we are all living right now. All of you are theologians right now. Everyone in this room is a theologian in that you have a theology that you live out in your everyday life.

A second level of theology is the language of the Church. There is a load of theology in worship, preaching, prayer, and liturgy. In the Methodist tradition, one of the great ways that Methodists have taught theology is through hymns. Charles Wesley wrote over 5,000 hymns and poems. When the Methodists taught the people who could not read, the ordinary coal miners and workers, their theology came through preaching and through the hymnal. Congregational singing was a very Methodist thing to be doing. So there is theology there already. Theology is not done only at the divinity school.

Finally, there is a level of theology that is an academic discipline. It is like a science. It is an academic discipline with a tradition of inquiry, but unlike all of the natural and social sciences, theology has a rationality

which insists on faith in Jesus Christ and the Holy Scripture as the Word of God. Without these things, you do not have Christian theology. What that means is that theology is a kind of worship. I love this quotation from Deodorus found in the four volumes called the *Philokalia*, some writings of the Greek Fathers: "Divine theology brings into harmony the voices of those who praise God's majesty." The idea here is that theology brings together the voices of all the Church as we all think about and pray to God. That is, the heart of Christian theology is praise.

To praise or to worship someone is related to the English word, "worth," to tell the worth of somebody—unlike flattery or marketing where you do not really need to speak the truth about the person. So worship, praying, and truth speaking are connected for Christian theology, understood as a spiritual discipline. This brings us back then to theology as *praxis* because this is lived out in all that we do, including our academic callings and vocations. Really all of you are already theologians in the way you live your lives, in the way you pray, in your spiritual practices, in your teaching, and in your Bible study.

## Theology and Science as Colleagues

What about theology versus science? How can they ever work together? The aims and methods of different sciences and disciplines are distinct but theology and science do have some similar methods and approaches. I like to sometimes think of theology as Christian doctrine, the academic discipline called "Dogmatics." I have a very broad conception of the natural sciences as the study of natural things, living and inorganic, according to natural properties and explanation. So theology and science are different. How can they work together if they are so different? They have different approaches, different methods, and a different focus. Yet they work together because the Church needs a Christian worldview on the basis on which they can understand and love God and proclaim the Gospel. This is a task that is ever new. Each generation has to be constantly updating both theology and science in the sense that we are learning new things and have new situations. We need this larger

perspective on truth in order to wisely praise and worship God, to see the mission of the Church, and to live out our obedience to Christ.

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One thing that leads to mutuality is the theologian's need for Christian scholars in science. As a theologian, I will never understand all the stuff you guys know about your disciplines. But I need to know enough as a theologian to be aware of what is going on in the sciences so when I talk about the meaning of the Scriptures and theology for our world today, which is a scientific age, I am not talking about something that is completely nonsense. To understand what the world is like and to see how God is related to the world I need to know enough about the world so it does not look like I am a nut when I am talking about God's relationship to creation. In trying to develop a doctrine of creation, for example, it is very important to have some understanding of natural science. But of course no natural science interprets itself. We need Christians who are thoughtful scientists, who can do the interpretation which theologians can rely on. It makes my life a whole lot easier. So I believe that a theologian needs scholarship in the arts and sciences.

On the other hand, it seems to be also true that scholars who are Christians need some theology in their discipline. Someone just asked me how much theology he needs to know. I answered, "How much time do you have?" I do not think any of us need to be experts in other people's disciplines. There are a few examples of people who are, like John Polkinghorne or Arthur Peacocke, but they are very few in number. So we need to depend on what we learn from Christian scholars in other disciplines without pretending to know everything. To be a Christian and to be in chemistry, you are going to want to think about some things in chemistry from a Christian point of view and to that degree you want to know some theology. I do not think you need to become an expert unless you have

a specific calling to retire from your career and take on another one. The Christian disciplines of systematic and moral theology, what I call Christian doctrine, help us to understand, develop, and update core concepts in our Christian worldview. As a theologian, I want to point out that theology is not fixed any more than science is. There are certain core doctrines which define orthodox biblical traditions over the centuries but how we perceive and understand those doctrines has to be updated. The Gospel is not frozen in time. God's Word is always moving forward and being developed, so theology is an ongoing discipline.

Inspired by Bob Russell's chart of the relationships of mutuality between theology and the sciences,<sup>1</sup> I recently constructed the following diagram (Figure 1) at another conference. I reproduce it here because I found this process forced me to think more clearly about my understanding of the multifaceted, mutual connections between theology and the sciences in a Christian worldview.

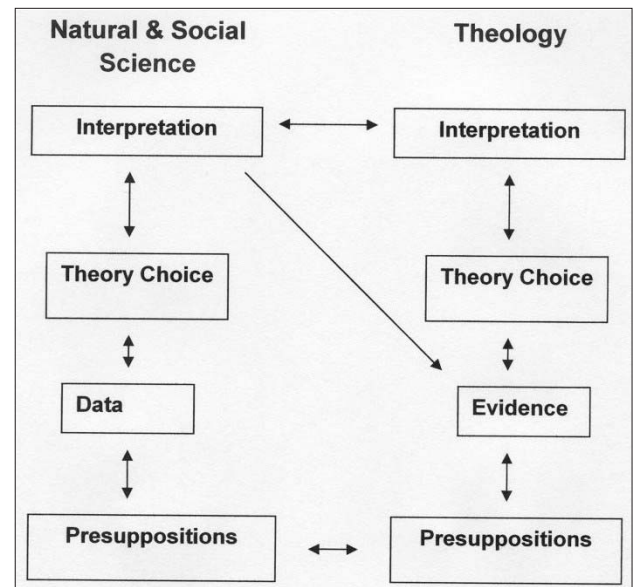
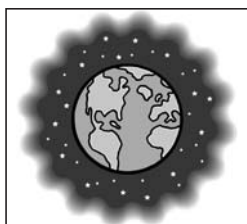


Figure 1. Theology and Science Connections.

It is important to realize that the arrows go both ways in every part of this diagram *with one exception*. It is naive to think that one moves directly from data to theory choice, for example, or from theory choice to the larger interpretation of results in either theology or science. No, these rational connections are more complex, more dialogical and dialectical than the "scientific method" many of us learned in high school. Notice, too, that there is a direct influence of science upon theology, and vice versa, at the level of presuppositions and at the level of larger interpretation. This is just what we mean when we talk about theology and science being colleagues in the development of a Christian worldview. The worldview issues are most obviously at work in the presuppositions and in the larger interpretation of results in any Christian view of the sciences (or of theology, for that matter).





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The only one-way arrow goes from the *interpretation of the results of the sciences* into *evidence for theology*. In other words, what the sciences are telling us about the human and natural worlds provides important evidence for the evaluation of theological constructs (theories). Now this evidence is secondary to that of Scripture and the creeds for any theology centered on Christ and the Word of God, but it is still a vital element in the rationality of Christian theology.

### Epiphany for a Small Planet

I have given an overview, and now I would like to give specific examples of the theories I have been talking about. Are we alone in the universe? Here the focus is, on the one hand, on astrobiology and, on the other, on Christology. Is there any mutuality here? Can we learn from each other? How does one shape our thinking about the other? I am calling this section “Epiphany for a Small Planet.” After Christmas is Epiphany, the celebration of the fact that God has come to us in history as a human being. God has appeared to us, to be with us. I was giving a lecture at an evangelical Episcopal church in the Twin Cities—I happen to have a deep love for the Church of England and the Anglican liturgy—and as part of the worship service, they had in their prayers:

Grateful as we are for the world we know and the universe beyond our reach, we particularly praise you, who Eternity cannot contain, for coming to earth and entering time in Jesus.

That is a beautiful sentiment about what is wonderful about Epiphany. Here is this vast, incredible universe and this amazing, deep time, the billions of years it had taken for the universe to evolve to the point it is right now. In this whole vast universe, the God who is beyond time and space, Creator of all things, has come to us in person in the womb of Mary. That is amazing news! That is the most amazing event in the history of the universe.

But what about other life forms on other planets. What about SETI? (SETI = the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence.) What if there is intelligent life on other planets? The background of this, I think, is this long tradition of trying to be stoic about looking at the vastness of the cosmos and the depth of time and the fact that we may be the

only beacon of intelligence in the universe. Maybe the universe is the cold, dark swirl of meaningless matter, and out of the jumble of chaos, the universe happens to cough up you and me. Of course we will die and that will be the end. The sun will super nova or we will run into a black hole and all that we have done will be totally meaningless at that point. There is this dark, stark sense that everything is just meaningless because the cosmos is very big and very old. I think we as Christian thinkers have to respond to that view.

One way we respond is by thinking in a different way about the vastness of the universe and the depth of deep time and asking, “Could it be that the universe is bio-friendly, that there is a kind of purpose that you can detect here, not as a proof, of course, but as an interpretation of the data? Could part of the purpose of the universe be to bring forth life in vast array?” That would be very different from thinking that the universe is this dark, cold material chaos that happened to burp up a few naked apes who are like digital watches, the way that Douglas Adams puts it. I use Stephen Weinberg, too, as an example. He writes: “The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it seems pointless.” This is the kind of worldview I am talking about. As Christians, as scholars and academics, we want to interpret the world in a different way. We cannot let this view of astronomy go without challenge.

Though not as well known, Weinberg’s book, *Dreams of a Final Theory*, includes some religion and science. He offers this sentence, “The more we refine our understanding of God to make the concept plausible, the more it seems pointless.” Not only is the universe pointless but Weinberg says that “if you’re going to believe in a god, it seems like he doesn’t do anything—it’s all pointless.” As a theologian I am going to object to that. I do think there are views of natural science that are not only bio-friendly but Christian friendly. It is not like there is a one-to-one relationship between being Christian and thinking that the universe has the point of bringing forth life, but it does seem to be more in keeping with the overall Christian perspective.

What evidence do we have for a bio-friendly universe? One thing that has changed people’s minds in the scientific

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community is the fact that there are fine-tuning arguments from cosmology. Also, on this planet we have found amazing life-permitting environments. For instance, miles below the ocean surface, we have found incredible life, far away from the sun, energized by volcanic action, hot water, and minerals spewing forth—and there is life! People begin to say, maybe life is not such a big deal. Maybe the whole structure of the natural universe is set so that life can happen even in some very strange places. The physicist, Freeman Dyson, and the Nobel Prize winning biologist, Christian DeNeuve, have argued that the universe is bio-friendly and therefore life will likely exist in various forms throughout the universe. This is where theology comes into play. Of course, we have absolutely no evidence that there is life anywhere except on this little planet that we happen to inhabit and call home. If we are going to take this other perspective on how big the universe is, how old it is, plus all these chemicals, it just took billions of years to get around to life; what then do we think about Christ? As I put it, Jesus or ET? Which are you going to think about?

For the sake of argument and theological reflection, let us just imagine that there is life on other planets and some kind of intelligent life. What does this mean for theology? I want to give you an example of how science and theology can work with each other. The Christian worldview would want to think in terms of seeing the world and life as one of the purposes of the universe, so that it is not all pointless and meaningless. So what does this tell us about Christology?

At this point, I want to bring back Arthur Peacocke, because in one of his books, *Theology in an Age of Science*, Peacocke argues that the modern scientific world picture is going to radically alter what he calls the traditional Christian paradigm, including the significance of Jesus Christ. What he has in mind is something like this: If there is life on other planets and intelligent beings, how can Christ really be God Incarnate? We would have to think of Christ in the way Muslims think of Mohammed, as the Great Prophet or something like that. But classic Christianity holds that in Jesus Christ, God has come to the world. This is the truth of Epiphany. With Peacocke's suggestion that would have to be suppressed. That light of Epiphany would have to be put under a bushel. I think Peacocke is wrong about that. I do think that, assuming there is life on other planets, we need to enlarge our Christian imagination, our understanding of God, and the role of God in the universe. But this does not require altering our biblical or orthodox faith. It does mean seeing God in a new way, maybe a bigger way than we have before.

Interestingly it is in science fiction that some of this Christian imagination has already taken place. Dr. Hutchinson reminded me of a novel by James Blish, *A Taste of Conscience*. I had forgotten about it. This book explores the

odd relation between religion and life on other planets. Most people know about C. S. Lewis and his trilogy of science fiction books, *Out of the Silent Planet*, and so forth; but you may not know about a new book by Maria Russell, who is a linguist and a social scientist living in the Midwest. She wrote a novel entitled *The Sparrow*, which has been getting a lot of press. The difference is that while Lewis is a deeply Christian writer, Russell, who went to Catholic schools, is very critical of the church in this book. I will not give away the whole story because the book is worth reading. The point is that in science fiction these ideas are often explored. How can theologians just go on and ignore them and just keep doing nothing but, say, biblical exegesis? I think that is a mistake. Theologians often prefer to not speculate too much. There is a lot of speculation that is not helpful but when these ideas come up, we need to have some response.

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*Assuming there might be life on other planets, the Christian is going to insist that the God we know through Scripture in Jesus Christ is the one true God of the universe ... There is no other God.*

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The first thing I want to say, then, is that assuming there might be life on other planets, the Christian is going to insist that the God we know through Scripture in Jesus Christ is the one true God of the universe. The blessed Trinity is the one true God. There is no other God. So whatever experience intelligent beings may have on other planets with God, they are going to have an experience that is relevant to them of the One that we know as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Creator we know in Jesus is the true God.

The other thing to think about is that science does not matter if you are an infinite Being. Time does not matter either. To God, the world is one week old, one thousand years old, 15 billion years old; the amount of finite time does not matter to an eternal God. Size does not matter either. I know in some things size does matter but in this case, it does not. The fact that the universe is huge is not significant. We tend to think the bigger a thing is the better it is. But it could be that for God a child is more valuable than a super nova. I think we need to get away from the idea that because the universe is very old and very large, it means that our little planet is just an obscure third rock revolving around the sun. That may not be the case.





## Conference Talk

### *Epiphany for a Small Planet: Christology, Astronomy and Mutuality*

God is going to relate to different beings in different ways.

There is no reason to believe that God the Son has to come to every planet incarnate. That does not follow from what we Christians believe. We are going to want to begin with the idea that this infinite God of the universe comes to us as a human in the womb of Mary. I do not think Christian theology as an ecumenical tradition of inquiry is going to give up on Incarnation. We might recognize that this is God's way of dealing with our planet and that God is free to deal in other ways on other planets, in ways that are beyond our imagination, beyond our understanding, beyond our knowledge. The Bible was written by human beings for this planet, even though the writers were inspired by the universal Holy Spirit. This is a serious limitation for what we as theologians can say with any certainty on this topic.

The fact is we do not know how God will deal with intelligent life on other planets. For example, intelligence does not necessarily imply morality. Dolphins are intelligent, chimpanzees are intelligent, and yet they do not make moral decisions. They engage in group bonding and behaviors, including shame and so forth, but that is just not the same thing as the application of ethical principles. Group-think and moral philosophy are not the same.

Another possibility we might think about is this: if there is intelligent life on other planets, they could be vastly more intelligent than we are, so intelligent and spiritually sensitive that it is obvious to them that God exists. On such a supposition, their faith would be radically different from ours. They are so rational and so spiritual that they all grow up knowing that there is a God and always acting in morally proper ways. So they never go through the challenges of sin and redemption that we go through. This is perfectly possible. It could be that we humans fit in a range of beings, in what the medievalist would call "a great chain of being," where some extra-terrestrials are smarter and more spiritual than us, and are never tempted. Others are intelligent but not complex enough for genuine moral consciousness. The point is that we cannot predict how God, the blessed Trinity, will deal with other intelligent life. Already in

classical theology, we have angels and animals, intelligent beings whose relationship with God we can only glimpse at a distance. There is another whole order of beings that God deals with, in a way that we do not know anything about. If this is true, then why do we expect God to be identical in every universe, in every planet that has life?

What I am trying to argue against is this idea that for every planet where there is intelligent life, God is going to be stuck in some kind of incarnation/crucifixion cycle. We do not know that this is true. We know that all of God's actions are and will be fair, just and life-giving. Why do we know this? Because we know the truth of Epiphany; because we know the fact that in Jesus Christ the True Light that enlightens the entire cosmos has come to us to love and redeem our wayward planet. I think that everyone in this room is going to agree with me. We are called to share that Light with the world that is still far too much in darkness. The light of the living *Logos*, God the Son, shines on every discipline, on every human, and on every intelligent being in this vast and beautiful cosmos. ♦

#### Note

<sup>1</sup>R. J. Russell, *Cosmology, Evolution, and Resurrection Hope* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2006), 119.

#### For Further Reading

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that God is free  
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imagination,  
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