

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AND EXTRATERRESTRIAL INTELLIGENT LIFE

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[The author considers the basic theological issues regarding the possible existence of extraterrestrials, i.e. intelligent and free beings with some form of body or matter. After reviewing the considered opinions of five theologians chosen from the history of theology, he then asks whether any biblical passages (e.g. Colossians 1:15–18) might counter the existence of non-tellurians. If extraterrestrials do exist, how would this affect our understanding of supernatural grace and redemption from evil?]

MY PURPOSE HERE is to pursue the cosmic in light of the terrestrial and to ponder the hypothetical in light of the believed. From the viewpoint of some Christian theologies, I briefly consider the condition of potential intelligent creatures in places in the universe other than the planet earth and inquire into the possible relationships of extraterrestrials to what our tellurian race calls religion and revelation.

A theologian would not presume to decide whether there are other intelligent beings in the universe, or to insist on one sole relationship for extraterrestrials to the triad of person, divine presence, and evil composing human religion. Outlining the basic theological problematic raised by the idea of extraterrestrials, this article faces a basic challenge. Is the Bible such an inspired book that the only salvation history possible is the one that it records, and is Jesus so central a figure that all intelligent species away from earth must include knowledge of him? Or rather, cannot Christian revelation and theology entertain several perspectives concerning how a free intelligent person is related to a cosmic Source or loving Parent, and cannot evil enter into various forms and sources?

Fundamental theological issues surface with the possibility, probability, or existence of other intelligent creatures. In what follows I do not offer arguments for the existence of God, for a creation, or for further planetary

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disciples of Jesus of Nazareth, but I inquire rather into the deepest religious issues from a Christian viewpoint, issues concerning not so much God and cosmos but divine presence and creatures. I begin with the conviction that among beings with intelligence and freedom there would be some slight similarity to earth, an analogous communality in knowledge, science, and communication. I conclude that what we call “revelation” and “grace” might have a variety of divinely bestowed forms.

EXTRATERRESTRIALS AND RELIGIOUS VIEWS

The subject of this speculative theology is creatures living on other cosmic bodies. For them to be the subject of revelation and religion they must be intelligent and free; that is, they must have a cognitive openness, a capability for understanding analogies, symbolisms, and other imaginative and intellectual activities, as well as a personal liberty receptive of subtle influences from God.¹ My concern is with intelligent beings having some form of body, some matter. Beings without corporeality (traditionally called angels) are difficult for us, tied as we are to sense knowledge, to treat at length. Moreover, they already have a place, albeit a very slight one, in some terrestrial religions. I am considering bodily life on planets and moons in this and other galaxies. Such bodily life might be quite different from that of terrestrial animals and humans but, no matter how thin or translucent those distant thinking creatures are in their corporeality, their free intelligent life has some relationship to animal life as we know it.

Writers of science fiction and some scientists tell us that it is likely there are intelligent modes of life on other planets circling around the countless suns in billions of galaxies.² On television and in movies the starship “En-

¹ For a neo-Scholastic presentation of the openness of human intelligence and freedom to special revelation, see Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *De Revelatione* (Rome: Ferrari, 1950) 1.347–91; for a post-Kantian and existential expression of the same positive relationship of consciousness to divine presence, see Karl Rahner, *Hearers of the Word* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969).

² Carl Sagan wrote, “We are now on the verge of trolling through thousands of nearby stars, searching for their companions. To me it seems likely that in the coming decades we will have information on at least hundreds of other planetary systems close to us in the vast Milky Way Galaxy—and perhaps even a few small blue worlds graced with water oceans, oxygen atmospheres, and the telltale signs of wondrous life” (*Billions and Billions: Thoughts on Life and Death at the Brink of the Millennium* [New York: Random House, 1997] 59). A group of scientists produced the Drake equation which looked at the percentage of galaxies with the right kinds of stars, the number of stars forming planets, the percentage of planets hospitable to life and to intelligence, and to intelligence adequate to communicate out into space. “If the average civilization does in fact endure for between one thousand and one million years, then the number of communicating civilizations in

terprise” of *Star Trek* tours the universe encountering intelligent and communicative life-forms, some benign, some malevolent. If there are many kinds of such creatures, nonetheless, terrestrial science and fiction are weak in picturing or imagining them; they all look pretty much like distorted or magnified humans, talking vegetables, reptiles, or mammals.³ Extraterrestrials are what we call persons: creatures with intellect and freedom. There might be countless forms of animal and vegetal life in the universe, as there are certainly various combinations of gases and elements, but if they lack mind and freedom they are not in the realm of religion.

Have the influences of the Book of Genesis, Ptolemy, or Aristotle been so extensive upon all past Christian theologians that their thought never escaped the stolid centrality of earth, the uniqueness of the human race, and a religion of *sola scriptura*? Michael Crowe has explored at length Christian positions—Catholic, Protestant, and deist—on this topic, particularly in the last two centuries.⁴ His history of explicit considerations ranges from the 15th century to our own. Already in 1440 the influential Nicholas of Cusa in *Of Learned Ignorance* held for the idea of a plurality of worlds and for the existence of life on the moon and sun.⁵ The Franciscan School

the galaxy is between one thousand and one million” (Michael D. Lemonick, *Other Worlds: The Search for Life in the Universe* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998] 56). Books on the history of the universe and on extraterrestrials contain very little on religion. When a metaphysical or religious topic appears, the context is anthropomorphic, not in a sophisticated Leibnizian or Aristotelian sense but in a more existential style of the modern self. Stephen Hawking apparently understands the totality of intelligible structures in the cosmos as God: “If we discover a complete theory . . . then we would know the mind of God” (*A Brief History of Time* [New York: Bantam, 1988] 191). For John Horgan, writing on the end of science, God is becoming, suffering along with the universe, but that theology is weakened by myriads of populated planets with different relationship to God and evil (*The End of Science: Facing the Limits of Knowledge in the Twilight of the Scientific Age*, Helix Book [Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1996] 261–66). Paul Davies treats cursorily philosophers of design and causality or panentheistic mystics but no theologians as such (*The Mind of God: Science and the Search for Ultimate Meaning* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992]). When authors touch on a religious thinker, e.g. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin or Giordano Bruno, the presentation is very sparse or erroneous (e.g., Bruno was not executed for his scientific ideas), and religious allusions ends up reflecting little more than the authors’ feelings.

³ See Thomas M. Disch, *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World* (New York: Free Press, 1998).

⁴ Michael Crowe, *The Extraterrestrial Life Debate 1750–1900: The Idea of a Plurality of Worlds from Kant to Lowell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1986); “A History of the Extraterrestrial Life Debate,” *Zygon* 32 (1997) 147–62.

⁵ “For if God is the center and circumference of all the regions of the stars and if from him natures of diverse nobility proceed, living in every region—many regions of heavens and stars are not empty—since intellectual nature living on this earth is what is most noble and perfect . . . , there would be other kinds of inhab-

in the Middle Ages was open to the idea of several worlds, while the Dominicans opted for a single, tightly ordered world. However, in the Renaissance, two Dominicans, Tomasso Campanella (1568–1634) and Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), did hold for multiple worlds. Bruno concluded that there was an infinite universe and a plurality of worlds; he not only populated the planets and stars but endowed stars and meteors with souls. In his view, we see from earth these complex worlds as single stars because they are so remote, but in fact a star includes planets and moons and comets and other bodies.⁶ Campanella summoned up passages from the Bible and early theologians to defend the view of a plurality of worlds. “If there are humans living on other stars, they would not be infected by the sin of Adam since they are not his descendants. Hence they would not be in need of redemption, unless they suffered from another sin.”⁷

The Protestant Reformation introduced a different perspective, one thoroughly biblical and drawn less from science and metaphysics. By 1550 the Lutheran systematic theologian Philip Melancthon warned against the idea that Christ’s Incarnation and Redemption could have occurred more than once. This was based upon the central Protestant conviction that salvation came from the Word Incarnate in Jesus and from the words of the Bible.

The Son of God is one: our master Jesus Christ, coming forth in this world, died and was resurrected only once. Nor did he manifest himself elsewhere, nor has he died or been resurrected elsewhere. We should not imagine many worlds because we ought not imagine that Christ died and was risen often; nor should it be thought that in any other world without the knowledge of the Son of God that people would be restored to eternal life.⁸

Where Christian faith is centered solely in Jesus of Nazareth, where a few Pauline passages linking Christ to the creation are taken to refer to the

itants of other stars” (*De docta ignorantia* 2.12, in *Nikolaus von Kues, Werke*, ed. P. Wilpert [Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967] 1.65).

⁶ “[This infinite world] is the true subject and infinite material of the infinite divine actual potency, as this was made well understood both by regulated reason and discourse and by divine revelations that state that there is no count of the ministers of the Most High, to whom thousands of thousands assist and ten hundreds of thousands administer. These are the great animals of which many, with the clear light which emanates from their bodies, are from all sides visible to us” (Giordano Bruno, *The Ash Wednesday Supper*, Dialogue 4, trans. Stanley L. Jaki [The Hague: Mouton, 1975] 134).

⁷ Tomasso Campanella, *A Defense of Galileo* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1994) 112; Campanella treats opposing arguments of Aquinas (mentioned below) carefully, noting that for Aquinas the oneness of the universe is the scientific issue.

⁸ *Initia doctrinae physicae*, *Corpus Reformatorum* 13 (Halle: Schwetschke, 1846; reprint, Frankfurt: Minerva, 1963) 1.221.

man Jesus without qualification, and where Christian revelation is one single light in an extensively fallen race and world, theology has difficulty with the existence of extraterrestrials because their mode of religious life would not be centered on Jesus Christ.

The Enlightenment had weakened the two pertinent Protestant principles influential in viewing a broad universe: the total corruption of sin, and the Incarnation of the Word in Jesus. As Crowe has researched in detail, liberal Protestant thinkers in the U.S. in the 18th century, drawing away from the Reformation and moving in the direction of deism, came to hold a different viewpoint. For Thomas Paine, the breadth of the universe is as densely filled with creatures as is the earth; a wise God populating planets is likely. That perspective immediately rendered original sin and redemptive Incarnation unnecessary. Would the creator neglect

the care of all the rest and come to die in our world? . . . Are we to suppose that every world in the boundless creation had an Eve, an apple, a serpent, and a redeemer? In this case the person who is irreverently called the Son of God, and sometimes God himself, would have nothing else to do than to travel from world to world, in an endless succession of deaths, with scarcely a momentary interval of life.⁹

Paine is stating succinctly the contradictions that arise from projecting a simplistic and universalist Christianity on an expanding universe. In May 1832, Ralph Waldo Emerson asked in a sermon how can one be a Calvinist (or an atheist) in light of the modern astronomy that has exalted our view of God and humbled our view of humanity. After stating that the earth is not the center of the universe and realizing that other creatures may not resemble humans, he found it likely that in the universe there are “inhabitants of other worlds.”¹⁰ In contacting them we would need to leave behind much of Christianity but not the moral law. Such a new religion teaches no “expiation by Jesus . . . ; no mysterious relations to him. It will teach great, plain, eternal truths.”¹¹ Christianity had been purified by modern astronomy and lost the atonement, but on the other hand the New England Transcendentalist could not quite give up the role of Jesus; he saw him retaining some vague and general role as “the gracious instrument of [God’s] bounty to instruct men in the character of God and the true nature of spiritual good.”¹²

Michael Crowe has extensively surveyed perspectives after 1700 and offers a remarkable list of Americans, ranging from Mark Twain to Joseph

⁹ Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason* (Secaucus: Citadel, 1974) 90; see also 84–87.

¹⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Sermon CLVII,” in *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Wesley T. Mott (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1989) 4.158.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 4.159.

¹² *Ibid.*

Smith, who combine not just an Enlightenment theodicy but an enthusiastic sectarianism with belief in extraterrestrials. One of the founders of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, Ellen White, argued in 1890 that the Logos, passing “from star to star, from world to world, superintending all,” found sin on earth and became incarnate to save the human race; this was “a mystery which the sinless intelligences of other worlds desired to understand.”¹³ In the 19th century, new Protestant movements which one might expect to be narrow pursued this theological perspective. According to Crowe, “[b]y 1917 more than 140 books dealing with the question of extraterritorial life had appeared. By 1917, however, the confidence prevalent a century earlier that the universe teems with life had seriously diminished.”¹⁴ At that time calculations led astronomers to conclude temporarily that they would have to give up hypotheses that implied a large number of planets. However, after World War I, with the discovery of multiple galaxies through the fashioning of more advanced telescopes, the possibility of other intelligent life reasserted itself.

IEWS OF THEOLOGIANS

A few theologians have held implicit or explicit ideas about a wider inhabited cosmos. While hardly resembling scientists after Hubble and Einstein, their principles are nonetheless worth considering. A few of these theologians state their convictions about the modern issue. The others maintain principles or expositions that have implications for this notion. Here I look at Origen, Thomas Aquinas, Guillaume de Vaurouillon, Joseph Pohle, and Karl Rahner.

Origen

Teacher and preacher, Origen (c. 185–c. 254) was also a polymath; he pioneered textual criticism while mastering the schools of philosophy and science of his time, as well as being the author of the first Christian systematic theology. The Alexandrian thinker’s ideas are remarkable and curious, and show that speculation on kinds of intelligent creatures in light of the Christian teaching on creation and the Incarnation is not new.

For Origen initial creation produced free intelligences (material and nonrational creatures were made at a second stage). A vast number of minds were created by God to enjoy happiness with him. However, their attention wandered; they partly lost interest in celestial life, and through that decline in contemplation and love they fell away from their pristine

¹³ Ellen White, *The Story of Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific, 1948) 69.

¹⁴ Crowe, “A History of the Extraterrestrial Life Debate” 159; see Crowe, *The Extraterrestrial Life Debate 1750–1900*.

state. In terms of limitation and matter they fell in different degrees, so that the degree of the fall diversified angels and demons in their finite modes of existence, and diversified human beings in their sensual animality. The pre-existent intelligence that was to serve as the soul of Jesus born in Bethlehem did not fall, always being the center of all creatures' life with God. The Word of God joined to this intelligence animates the man Jesus who comes to earth to explain what has happened, how to live above finitude and materiality, and how to pass beyond the fall into future spirituality.¹⁵ Origen is a great advocate of freedom. Thus the fall and the return to future life after death involve the freedom of each intelligence. Since evil and sin are never the result of determined forms of nature in the cosmos but of freedom, a journey forward to God is always offered to all.¹⁶

All the angels have some form of ethereal body. While the planets and the moon are heavenly material bodies, Origen thought the stars were some of those primal intelligences in fiery forms, free stellar minds with some service for people on earth.¹⁷ While some intelligences fell only slightly and are high angels, others fell into the bodies of people whose governing inclination with greater or lesser force is sensuality. Teaching and power came with the Word Incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth to lead human beings back to a higher life, away from gross matter (which the philosophical and religious world of the second and third century looked down on) to a higher life that serves, conducts, illumines the mind. Clearly

¹⁵ "Origen raises several times the question of successive worlds. He does so hypothetically: otherwise, those successive worlds, implying indefinite possibilities of new falls would be incompatible with the final end which is the *apokatastasis* [the happy resolution of all in the incarnated Word who is the Risen Jesus Christ]" (Henri Crouzel, *Origen* [San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989] 205). The passage in question speaks of "another world" for "the improvement of those who stand in need of it," a kind of purgatory, but it is not a further cycle of worlds and redemptions (*On First Principles*, bk. 2, ch. 3 [New York: Harper and Row, 1966] 83).

¹⁶ See Crouzel, *Origen* 205–18.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 212. Most of the early Greek theologians held that the angels were somewhat material, something distinguishing them from God (only God could be pure spirit); unlike our corporeality, but serving to limit them in space, it was a matter of almost infinite lightness. In the fourth century with Didymus, Eusebius of Caesarea, and the Cappadocians this changes, and angelic materiality is rejected by many; a similar progression during the fourth and fifth centuries occurs in the West. For Augustine it is an open question, while later Gregory the Great rejected angelic bodies; see G. Bareille, "Anges d'après les Pères," in *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* 1/1 (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1930) 1195–98; J. Michl, "Engel IV," in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 5 (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1962) 119–22; Crouzel, *Origen* 212. In his opening lines on angels Aquinas argues firmly against the idea that these powerful and different creatures have any trace of corporeality, although he knows that some early theologians held this (*Summa theologiae* 1, q. 50, a. 1 and 2).

Origen sees a variety of creatures in the universe, but ultimately he follows Jewish and Christian traditions and divides them into angels and humans. Still his thought is driven by a pluralistic idea of intelligent life in the cosmos. Created free intelligence exists in higher and lower angels, in grades of demons, in stars of diverse luminosity, in types of human beings. He sees the world of matter and intelligences as having a unity, but a unity caught up in the dynamic of fall and rebirth.

Is Jesus the center of this universe? In his body Jesus of Nazareth could not escape the vicissitudes of matter, and even some of the effects of the original fall such as fatigue and death, although the willed effects of sin are absent. Nonetheless, the pre-existent soul/mind of Jesus is the center of the earlier worlds of intelligences, and further the Logos has, at least as a hypothesis, a wider incarnational context.¹⁸ In the universe, Christ (this seems to be the Son incarnationally extended) works salvation in several forms. Not only is he a man for humanity, but he is an angel, perhaps various kinds of angels, for angels. J. A. Lyons has written: "Because Origen holds that angels and men have essentially the same nature and are consequently transformable into one another, his meaning is that the body of the soul united to the Logos acquires an angelic condition among the angels, just as among men it acquires a human condition."¹⁹ Origen wanted to give a cosmic scope to Incarnation as the source of grace and in so doing intimated various incarnations. Nonetheless, did he not imply that terrestrial Incarnation is paradigmatic?

Origen located the biblical life and work of Jesus in a dynamic cosmic framework where sin and salvation involved a drama of which the earthly segment recorded in the Bible is a part. Salvation history is a cosmic history, a process that is extraterrestrial. Because of the fall into matter and Origen's view that at least an ethereal matter is universal, this theology draws creatures into a cosmic communality.

Thomas Aquinas

A millennium later Aquinas understood God to be not a static supreme being but an all-active reality vastly different from us, not one greatly

¹⁸ In Origen, the created, temporal pre-existence of the soul of Jesus of Nazareth should not be confused with the eternal pre-existent Word of the Trinity who is the metaphysical ground of that human revealer and redeemer.

¹⁹ J. A. Lyons, *The Cosmic Christ in Origen and Teilhard de Chardin: A Comparative Study* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1982) 139. "Taking the view that redemption is operative throughout the cosmos, Origen tries to evade the restrictive geocentricism which a unique terrestrial sacrifice seems to impose. It is possible to indicate the doctrine's essential feature: an omnipresent saving action which, in order to be efficacious, depends on its being expressed as a particular event in creation" (ibid. 141).

transcendent being but a being realized in activity unlimited, an infinite source of potential and real beings some of whose actions are directed by knowledge and freedom. Needing nothing and not existing alone in a lengthy cosmic night, infinity was motivated by generosity to create and sustain other beings. Love carries the divine plans into external realizations: God is “most generous to the highest degree (*maxime liberalis*),”²⁰ and the divine motive for both creation and the Incarnation is unlimited goodness diffusing itself by bestowing existence on others. “God is a living fountain, one not diminished in spite of its continuous flow outwards.”²¹

God intends a universe that is diverse but coherently arranged. The mutual harmony of what appeared to Aquinas to be considerable multitude and diversity points to a mind, to a wisdom. Whatever little we can know about God comes from traces left in creation by a cause who is an artist; revelation too employs human words drawn from being and life. “To the extent that a creature has existence it represents the divine existence and the divine goodness.”²² Jesus Christ is the center of the universe because he is the divine Word.

Aquinas, it should be noted, affirmed only one world: he prized an overarching unity in the universe that gave place and order to each reality, a single unity finding support from faith as well as from science. Aquinas knew that there were some who posited a number of worlds, but he concluded that those cosmologies located the origin of the universe in chance and neglected wisdom’s order. For Aquinas plural worlds meant worlds with no interrelationship and no single source. In a commentary on Aristotle’s *De caelo et mundo* Aquinas raised as objections against his own position of one world, questions that might occur today. First, he asked, since the power of God is infinite and this one solar world does not place necessary limits upon it, why not think there is another world? He answered that God’s power has other goals than fashioning worlds, and that if other worlds are just like ours they have no purpose, while, if they are different, this world would be incomplete and poorly conceived. Second, something high and noble implies multiplicity, but, Aquinas responded, while individuals in a species are imperfect, the cosmos is a kind of completed totality. Finally, he opted for the goodness of the world’s diversity precisely as supported by its unity.²³ What exactly is Aquinas considering?

²⁰ *In Scripta super libros sententiarum magistri Petri Lombardi* 2, d. 3, q. 4, a. 1, ad 3.

²¹ *Super Evangelium Ioannis Lectura* (1:4) (Turin: Marietti, 1952) chap. 1, lect. 3, 20; *ST* 1, q. 20, a. 2; and 3, q. 1, 1.

²² *ST* 1, q. 65, a. 2, 1.

²³ *In Aristotelis de caelo et mundo expositio* (Turin: Marietti, 1952) 1, lect. 19, 94. Elsewhere Aquinas gave a narrow argument, the centrality of earth in its gravity: “For it is not possible for there to be another earth than this one, because every

It would seem not to be other units within the one universe much greater than the Ptolemaic system but other totalities, other universes, that have no connection to ours.

If Aquinas's appreciation of unity, drawn from traditional astronomies, did not allow him to expand this visible universe, his theology gives us some principles that point to a possible variety in intelligent life. God is "an infinite ocean of reality"²⁴ potential and actual, a creator-artist who freely and variously leads forth beings.²⁵ Intelligent creatures are the summit of the universe, existing on earth and in countless angelic forms. All creatures bear divine traces of goodness in their existence and their activities, but intelligent creatures bear the image of God mentioned by Genesis, an image found in the ability to know and to be free.²⁶ Aquinas's voluminous writings, however, are not formally about metaphysics and science but about a shared life with God, something revealed by Jesus. This "grace" finds its reception in the free, knowing personality and brings friendship with God and the spark of immortality. Given his emphasis upon higher forms of life, is it not likely that the universe contains a variety of them? Here we must also recall Aquinas's opinion that a single free intelligent creature silently touched by God's grace is more valuable than clusters of galaxies.²⁷

Beyond his theology of God, cosmos, and intelligent creatures, Aquinas made an interesting marginal observation in his theology of the trinitarian Incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ that has implications here. To some Christians, Jesus appears as identical with the Word of God; to others he is a body containing God, a creature monopolizing the divine enterprises. Both views, he concluded, are heretical and absurd. For a careful thinker

earth, wherever it might be, would be born by nature to this middle point. And the same reason applies to the other bodies which are parts of the universe" (*ST* 1, q. 47, a. 3; 47, a. 3, 3). When the former Parisian professor Peter of Spain was elected pope, he asked the archbishop of Paris, Stephen Tempier, to look into ideas of various Aristotelianisms injurious to the faith. A commission came up with 219 propositions, a few of which were positions of Aquinas; one of those condemned held that there could be only one world. See Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas 1: The Person and His Work* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1996) 298–301; J. F. Wippel, "The Condemnations of 1270 and 1277 at Paris," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 7 (1977) 169–201; "Thomas Aquinas and the Condemnation of 1277," *Modern Schoolman* 62 (1995) 233–72. Aquinas observed that those arguing for a plurality of worlds seem to understand "world" to be exactly like ours, but another world would be "a totality diverse in kind from ours" (*ST* 1, q. 16, a. 79). In the *Summa theologiae* he described "*mundus*" as a "unity of order for all things" which, centuries later, could apply to a universe of worlds (*ibid.* 1, q. 47, a. 3).

²⁴ *Ibid.* 1, q. 13, a. 11 (Aquinas is citing John Damascene).

²⁵ *Ibid.* 1, q. 14, a. 8; q. 47, a. 2, 3. ²⁶ *Ibid.* 1, q. 93, a. 4 & a. 5.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 1–2, q. 113, a. 9, 2.

like Aquinas the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth remains distant and minute compared to the Word of God. The Word metaphysically sustains the man Jesus: the “hypostatic union” is an intimate, unique union of the man with the Word at the central point of existence (the “person” in Greek metaphysical terms but not in American psychological ones). Aquinas wrote: “The power of a divine person is infinite and cannot be limited to anything created.”²⁸ Could there be other incarnations? While the Word and Jesus are one, the life of Jesus on earth does not curtail the divine Word’s being and life. All three persons could become incarnate because incarnation is one aspect of divine power. Aquinas asked if the Word of God (or the two other divine persons) could be incarnate in a further creature. He answered affirmatively. Incarnation is only one divine activity, involving one creature as the object of that one special divine relationship: it hardly presents all that God can do and is doing. “If a divine person could not assume another [created nature], then the personal mode of the divine nature would be enclosed by one human nature. But it is impossible for the Uncreated to be circumscribed by the created. Whether we look at the divine power itself or its personhood (the term of the union [with Jesus]), one must say that the divine person can assume more than one human being.”²⁹

Guillaume de Vaurouillon

The views of Guillaume de Vaurouillon (c. 1392–1463), a Franciscan, are of particular interest.³⁰ Whether God could or did create several worlds either simultaneously or temporally was treated by some medieval writers in the Franciscan School. They showed more openness to a positive conclusion than did the Dominican followers of Aquinas. Bonaventure, biographer of Francis of Assisi and author of speculative and mystical writings, asserted that God could have made others worlds: “He was able to make a hundred such worlds, and still one embracing all of them, and too one in

²⁸ Ibid. 3, q. 7, a. 3.

²⁹ Ibid. 3, q. 3, a. 7. Each created intelligent creature touched by incarnation would have a similar stance in terms of the divine person but culturally and religiously has something proper to its world. This suitability implies two things in human nature: dignity and necessity. “God by assuming flesh does not diminish his majesty; and in consequence did not lessen the reason for reverence toward him which is increased by this further knowledge of him. On the contrary, from the fact that he willed to approach us through the assumption of flesh he attracted us thereby to know more of him” (ibid. 3, q. 1, a. 2, 3). For Aquinas, earth presents a dual challenge: not only incarnation but incarnation in a fallen race (ibid. 3, q. 4, a. 6).

³⁰ Vorilongus, Vaurillon, Vorrilon are common forms of the name; on the name and the facts of his life, see Ignatius Brady, “William of Vaurouillon, O. Min.” *Miscellanea Melchior de Pobladora* 1 (Rome: Institutum Historicum O.F.M. Cap., 1964) 291–315.

a higher place than another. And too God could make a time before this time and in it make a world."³¹

A son of the friary of Dinan in Brittany, Vauouillon lectured after 1427 on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard in Paris and attained a doctorate. After teaching from 1429 to 1431 he attended the Council of Basel in 1433 and returned to Paris to become a professor only in 1448. In 1462 in the presence of Pope Pius II he debated with the Dominicans concerning the relationship of the dead Jesus to the hypostatic union. He was the author of a commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard and a commentary on the *Opus Oxoniensis* of Duns Scotus whom he viewed as his master; he also wrote a series of meditations. His professorships, his presence at Basel, and his role in papal disputations led to special praise from Pius II.³² In the view of experts, there is little original or new in the Scotist commentary on Lombard, but it was highly regarded and printed five times in twenty years.³³ Vauouillon was a typical figure in the late-medieval Franciscan School. "His principles for lecturing on the *Sentences* give access to various issues in scholastic education but at the same time carry a new humanistic spirit which will have some effect on scholasticism."³⁴ He was interested in history, paid attention to a pedagogical literary style, treated contemporary issues under an overarching goal: "to clarify, ground, and defend the teaching of Scotus."³⁵

In terms of our theme, Crowe refers to Vauouillon as "the first author who raised the question of whether the idea of a plurality of worlds is

³¹ Bonaventure, *Commentaria in Quattuor Libros Sententiarum*, Lib. 1, d. 44, a. 1, q. 4 [*Opera Omnia* 1.789] (Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1882).

³² See Erich Wegerich, "Bio-bibliographische Notizen über Franziskanerlehrer des 15. Jahrhunderts," *Franziskanische Studien* 29 (1942) 195.

³³ On the edition of the commentary on the *Sentences*, see Brady, "The 'Declaration seu Retractatio' of William of Vauouillon," *Archivum franciscanum historicum* 58 (1965) 394. Vauouillon wrote a *vade mecum* of Scotist theology published in Strasbourg in 1501; those meditations on God, Mary, Francis, Paul, Bonaventure, Scotus, and angelic precepts (*regrationem seriosam*) had two editions in Lyons, 1489 and 1495; a work on the real presence is also mentioned (*Bibliotheca universa franciscana* [1732] [Farnborough: Gregg, 1966] 1.48–49). See Franz Pelster, "Wilhelm von Vorillon, ein Skotist des 15. Jahrhunderts," *Franziskanische Studien* 8 (1921) 48–66; P. Appolinaire, "Vorilongus, Guillaume," in *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* 15:2 (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1950) 3471–72; François Tokarski, "Guillaume de Vauouillon: Le problème des idées divines dans son Commentaire des Sentences," *École Pratique des Hautes Études, Annuaire*, Ve section, 89 (1980) 595–98; see also Grant McColley and W. H. Miller, "Saint Bonaventure, Francis Mayron, William Vorilong, and the Doctrine of a Plurality of Worlds," *Speculum* 12 (1937) 388–89; Karl Werner, *Die Scholastik des späteren Mittelalters* 4/1 (Vienna: Braumüller, 1887) 304.

³⁴ Pelster, "Wilhelm von Vorillon" 48.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 62.

compatible with the central Christian notions of a divine incarnation and redemption.”³⁶ In his commentary on the *Sentences*, Vaurouillon asked whether divine power surpasses limitations and whether the absolute power of God could have created a better world; he concluded that God could create an infinity of worlds, and an infinity of worlds better than this one. “Infinite worlds, more perfect than this one, lie hid in the mind of God. . . . It is possible that the species of each of these worlds is distinguished from those of our world.”³⁷ But he did not imagine knowledge of those worlds, far and separate, coming to earth except through angelic communication or some other special divine means.³⁸ The insightful theologian considered not only the nature of revelation but also sin and the role of a redeemer on another world. “If it be inquired whether people, existing on that world, have sinned as Adam sinned, I answer, No. They would not have contracted sin just as their humanity is not from Adam.”³⁹ Vaurouillon’s answer concerning the role of Christ was nuanced. His view of original sin as solely terrestrial removes the need of redemption, but apparently he wants Christ somehow to be a universal figure. “As to the question whether Christ by dying on this earth could redeem the inhabitants of another world, I answer that he was able to do this not only for our world but for infinite worlds. But it would not be fitting for him to go to another world to die again.”⁴⁰

Vaurouillon’s theological distinctions concerning a wider universe makes him “an important intermediary between the writers of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries who declared that God could create a plurality of worlds, and those of the sixteenth and later eras who asserted that God had created such a plurality.”⁴¹

Joseph Pohle

Born in the Rhineland and ordained in Rome, Joseph Pohle (1852–1922) taught first at a seminary in Leeds, England, and subsequently from 1889 at the newly founded Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. Prior to teaching in Washington he had been professor of philosophy in Fulda; after Washington, in 1894, he taught dogmatic theology at Münster and Breslau. He wrote a three-volume text in dogmatic theology, part of which was translated into English. In 1884 he published *Die Sternenwelten*

³⁶ Crowe, “A History of the Extraterrestrial Life Debate” 149.

³⁷ *Quattuor librorum Sententiarum Compendium venerabilis patris Guillelmi Vorrillonis* Lib. 1, dist. xlv (Basel: Langerdorf, 1510) folio 105.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ McColley and Miller, “Saint Bonaventure, Francis Mayron, William Vorilong, and the Doctrine of a Plurality of Worlds” 389.

und ihre Bewohner (Star Worlds and Their Inhabitants) which became a popular illustrated book that reached a seventh edition in 1922.

Pohle's point of departure was neither science fiction nor aliens but simply the array of stars in the sky. Furthermore, the plurality of life-forms on earth and further analogies between earth and the planets and stars argue for other populated worlds. "The most effective weapon in arguing for many worlds with living beings is the complete analogy between our earth and so many other celestial bodies."⁴² Why would not other visible worlds have intelligent life? Pohle's book included a history of the issue from ancient Hindus to two Jesuits of the 19th century, Angelo Secchi and Carl Braun, followed by chapters on astronomy. He looked carefully at planets, moon, and comets to evaluate their capability of housing life and then at nebulae and families of comets and stars, presuming that they are not simply individual suns but worlds of stars.

Concerned mainly with astronomy and the philosophy of natural science, Pohle intended that Christianity not be interpreted as a faith that rejects a priori this wider world. The question of life on other planets is to be settled through science and reason, not through a particular theology. Responding to narrow ecclesiastical attitudes towards astronomy and philosophy, he dedicated most of his chapters to science and devoted only a few concluding pages to theological issues. "We cannot avoid the conclusion that the many worlds capable of life, similar to our earth, need a major expansion through knowing creatures. The highest goal of the universe in the last analysis leads to this idea."⁴³ Pohle stressed the possibility of extraterrestrials living in a natural state and finding a natural happiness. There may be further realms of grace or there may not be. "No reason compels us to extend to other worlds our own sinfulness and to think of them as caught up in evil. . . . But even when the evils of sin have infected those worlds it does not follow that an incarnation or redemption must have taken place. God has many other means by which to remit guilt."⁴⁴ Pohle wonders whether the Incarnation did not occur on earth precisely because our world is weak, small, and not particularly significant. There might be much greater and more impressive planets and planetary systems that have or need no Incarnation, an event giving "little earth" a central significance in a wide cosmos.⁴⁵

Karl Rahner

In the second-half of the 20th century, Karl Rahner brought together in his theology speculative and existential perspectives and introduced

⁴² Joseph Pohle, *Die Sternenwelten und ihre Bewohner*, rev. ed. (Cologne: Bachem, 1899) 11.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 449. Later Pohle wrote his study *Natur und Übernatur* (Cologne: Bachem, 1913).

⁴⁴ Pohle, *Die Sternenwelten* 457.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 458.

into Catholic theology a modern approach, a subject-centered perspective that was also broadly historical. In 1964 he published an encyclopedia article treating the question of “star-inhabitants.” After noting that their great distance from us suggests that the issue has little to do with our personal existence and history (and also is not conducive to speculation), Rahner mentioned that such creatures are “not simply qualified by where they are located in the cosmos” but that “their intellectual subjectivity determines that space-time reality.”⁴⁶ Extraterrestrials do not inhabit bizarre moons but live in their worlds. Rahner argued in light of religion’s affirmation of angels that a cosmic unity of salvation history cannot be easily dismissed, and that one should not presume other intelligent forms of life exist in a natural sphere outside of grace. To presume that any and all intelligent creatures in the universe other than ourselves are living a life apart from grace and sin “does not do justice to the real and total relationship to God-spirit-grace in which grace is *always* the grace of Christ.”⁴⁷

Ten years later Rahner wrote several pages with more reserve concerning a “history of intelligence and freedom [*Geist*] on another star.” That essay treating a number of issues raised by contemporary natural science began with a preliminary consideration of a small earth revolving in a huge cosmos: “A further question that must be touched upon in this discussion pertains to the size of the cosmos as understood by natural science today. While it is true that in this question there is not even the semblance of a direct contradiction between the affirmation of natural science and those of traditional theology, since neither of them have put forth statements about the size of the universe, the question does contain, nonetheless, a difficulty of considerable proportions.”⁴⁸ An enormous universe stimulates psychological and religious reactions.

⁴⁶ Karl Rahner, “Sternenbewohner: Theologisch,” in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* (2nd ed.; Freiburg: Herder, 1964) 9.1061–62.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 1062. This is not an uncritical affirmation of a cosmic centrality of Jesus Christ but a reaction against the advocates in the first half of the 20th century for hypothetical human realizations of pure nature apart from grace, for instance, prior to or in Adam and Eve, or existentially in members of the world religions.

⁴⁸ Rahner, “Naturwissenschaft und vernünftiger Glaube,” in *Schriften zur Theologie* 15 (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1983) 55; “Natural Science and Reasonable Faith,” in *Theological Investigations* 21, trans. Hugh M. Riley (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 16–55, at 48. In a few lines in an article on angels Rahner mentioned the likelihood of beings which have a subjectivity different from ours and yet are of some similarity in biological corporeality. But they are “not drawn into our own existential and thereby theological circle of life and so in terms of personal and theological references have no greater relevance for us than a ‘dead’ star somewhere in the universe” (“Über Engel,” in *Schriften zur Theologie* 13 [Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1978] 414–15; “Angels,” in *Theological Investigations* 19, trans. Edward Quinn [New York: Crossroad, 1983] 235–74).

For at least as long as the geocentric view of the world prevailed, the cosmos was in the naïve experience of Christians their dwelling place. Created by God for them and for their history of salvation, they could see its contours. It was built for them and it was there for them. True, the earlier idea of the cosmos as the determining factor of their religious experience was not structured in a unified way. For example, it was not easy to fit angels into it. On the one hand, being pure spirits, they could not quite be accommodated in this edifice and yet, on the other hand, they were supposed to dwell in one of the heavenly spheres. . . . Nowadays the Christian has to live on a tiny planet in a solar system which in its turn is part of a galaxy of a hundred thousand light years with thirty billion stars and whereby this galaxy is estimated to be only one of a billion such galaxies in the universe. In such a universe it is certainly not easy for human beings to feel that they are the ones for whom this cosmos ultimately exists. In a cosmos of proportions so tremendous that they even defy the power of the imagination, it is quite possible for human beings to feel that they are an accidental, marginal phenomenon, particularly when they know themselves to be the product of an evolution which itself has to work with numerous and improbable accidents.⁴⁹

Rahner mentions the difficulty in imagining that “the eternal Logos of God who drives forward these billions of galaxies has become a human being on this small planet which is a speck of dust in the universe.”⁵⁰ How does one combine the discoveries of science about cosmic space with the assertions of theology in terms of the importance of the human race? The experience of human contingency (always an aspect of philosophy and religion) has received a high, “an ultimate” intensification in this kind of universe. And yet, Rahner thinks that the feeling of vertigo in the cosmos can be a moment of religious development for men and women as it points to the infinity of God. The disappearance of the universe as a small closed structure is part, first, of understanding a greater God and, second, of perceiving a greater destiny for the human race on earth.

In terms of “the history of *Geist* on another star,” one cannot entirely

neglect a question which is again laying claim to our attention, although it is not entirely new. Is it conceivable that on other ‘stars’ there are creatures consisting of body and soul equal or similar to human beings? The modern natural sciences will ultimately not be able to give any answer to the question of the *fact*. As far as the concrete *possibility* is concerned an answer is hardly to be expected either, since the

⁴⁹ Rahner, “Naturwissenschaft und vernünftiger Glaube” 56; “Natural Science and Reasonable Faith” 48–49.

⁵⁰ Ibid. Passages that Rahner wrote about the active self-seeking of the knowing subject in the context of earth also illumine the wider possibility of creatures seeking and open to divine life. “We presuppose, therefore that the goal of the world consists in God’s communicating himself to it. We presuppose that the whole dynamism that God has instituted in the very heart of the world’s becoming by self-transcendence (and yet not as that which constitutes its nature) is really always meant as the beginning and first step towards this self-communication” (“Christology within an Evolutionary Review,” in *Theological Investigations* 5 [Baltimore: Helicon, 1966] 173).

probability, given the enormous number of stars, and the difficulty of the development of life up to the point where the 'human being' emerges can hardly be factored out together.⁵¹

Nevertheless, in contrast to world-models from the past the possibility of a development of life to the point of intelligent consciousness cannot be excluded today, "especially because it would be an anthropomorphic idea that God the creator would bring the cosmic development at some other point so far that the direct possibility of conscious life would be present, but that then he would arbitrarily break off this development."⁵²

The traditional teaching about angels affirms the co-existence of other personal creatures along with human beings and has always suggested theological speculation on extraterrestrials. "In this context a number of theological problems have emerged even prior to our problem (a common vocation to the same final goal; Christ as head of all creation, etc.)."⁵³ What is the relationship of the first and fundamental reality of religion and Christianity—revelation and grace as the special self-communication of God in the depth of the free, knowing person—to other beings? Rahner's reflections expect a realization of grace but give other worlds their religious independence. "One might say that it would make sense to ascribe to these creatures of body and spirit a supernatural destiny immediately directed to God (not withstanding the gratuity of grace), but that we, of course, can discern nothing about the presumable history of freedom of these creatures."⁵⁴ Recalling that revelation and divine life lead to Incarnation, he wrote: "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 is absolutely unthinkable."⁵⁵ From the point of view of theology there is no absolute veto against a history of free intelligence on another star. "A theologian can hardly say more about this issue than to indicate that Christian revelation has as its goal the salvation of the human race; it does not give answers to questions which do not in an important way actually touch the realization of this salvation in freedom."⁵⁶ For Rahner, human spirit

⁵¹ Rahner, "Naturwissenschaft und vernünftiger Glaube" 58; "Natural Science and Reasonable Faith" 51.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid. Yves Congar also looked at this question in the 1950s. God has left us the scientific depths and the countless facts of a vast universe for our reasons to explore, while revelation "tells us what we need to know about the relationship he wants us to form with him in that we are immortal souls made in his image and called to a life of fellowship with him in Christ Jesus. . . . Revelation being silent on the matter, Christian doctrine leaves us quite free to think that there are, or are not, other inhabited worlds." Congar stresses that if there are other intelligent creatures, as beings of intelligence and freedom, they too are images of God, but whether they have been called to a deeper shared life with him Christianity has nothing to say.

calls forth (but does not determine) the higher Spirit of grace; Christianity suggests not a terrestrial elite behaving itself before a strict God but a universe aiming successfully at spirit and also at grace. Incarnation and Resurrection touch the material universe and its future. A salvation history of grace and revelation, the Incarnation of the Logos, and the Resurrection are particular events within the vast universe of matter, pointing not only to intelligence but to grace.

BIBLICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Our species on earth is the subject of the biblical narratives. At no point in the Hebrew or Christian Scriptures do we learn that there is another race elsewhere in the universe, or that there is not. Nor is there any reason to think that the "economy of salvation," a phrase of Greek theologians, is anything other than a divine enterprise for our terrestrial race, the people in and for which it is enacted. It is superficial and arrogant to assert that the Christian or Jewish revelation of a wisdom plan for salvation history on earth is about other creatures. Faith affirms that the Logos has been incarnate on a planet located, in past Ptolemaic astronomy, in a small, closed system. The Logos, the second person of the divine Trinity, indeed has a universal domination, but Jesus, Messiah and Savior, has a relationship to terrestrials existing within one history of sin and grace.

Do biblical passages (very few) counter the existence of other intelligent races? There is the hymn in Colossians linking Jesus Christ to the universe: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things

Congar also points out that we should not limit grace or incarnation. Congar continues in a surprisingly unnuanced way to note that because of the Incarnation of the Word Jesus is king "of all that is created" because incarnation is the pinnacle, and yet he seems inclined to find further incarnations from trinitarian persons ("Has God Peopled the Stars?" in *Wide World My Parish* [Baltimore: Helicon, 1961] 184, 185, 188); see also remarks in Congar, "Préface," to André Feuillet, *Le Christ, Sagesse de Dieu après les épîtres pauliniennes* (Paris: Gabalda, 1966) 8–11. One would have expected that Pierre Teilhard de Chardin would have figured in grand cosmic theologies. Teilhard was constrained by his difficult task of offering an evolutionary theology of Christianity centered on Jesus Christ, on the Christosphere and the Omega point. Hence his theology is quite creative and open-ended but also quite terrestrial: Christ is the guiding point of all that is. This perspective begins with his insight that nature aims at quality, but Teilhard concludes that the apex of cosmic evolution is intelligent life on earth; from that point on he must work to show how evolution and human evolution will rise upward into the Christosphere of love. Other and higher creatures are human beings who through and beyond death participate in the energy of God (Teilhard de Chardin, "Life and the Planets," in *The Future of Man* [New York: Harper & Row, 1964] 97–123).

have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church: he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything” (Colossians 1:15–18).⁵⁷ There are several questions here. First who is the subject of this passage? If this is the historical Jesus, how does he exist prior to creation? Or if this is the Logos, why is the Logos included in creation? And what is meant by creation?

Exegetes such as Eduard Lohse and Hans Hübner find Jewish speculation about Wisdom present in the pre-existent Christ as the first-born before all creation. If “all creation owes its existence to the pre-existent Christ,”⁵⁸ the purpose of this theology is to assert universally Christ’s unique superiority to mythical or real religious forces. Lohse, however, does not make precise the relationship of the pre-existent Christ to Jesus or to the Son or Logos of God: “the point is not a temporal advantage but rather the superiority which is due to him as the agent of creation who is before all creation.”⁵⁹ The conclusion is that no angels or projected intelligences or spiritual powers guiding stars and planets (1:16; 2:20) are bearers of God’s revelation for earth in any way comparable to Jesus’ role. Jean-Noël Aletti notes that locating Christ in God raises problems because the son of God is not a creature, not even a “firstborn” one. The point of the text is not the activity of Christ but “the superiority of the Son over celestial beings” and “the creative activity as totally impregnated with the presence of the Son.”⁶⁰ The text “implies a pre-existence of Christ to every creature without a distinction being made between the eternal Logos and Christ born, died, and risen. The title ‘Son’ of verse 13 intends precisely to go beyond every distinction which would make a separation between the pre-existing Logos and Christ (human, terrestrial).”⁶¹ Franz Zeilinger offers a more theological interpretation in which a subsequent verse referring to Church and Resurrection is the key: “He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead” (1:18). “If the three predicates—icon, beginning, firstborn of the dead—are understood eschatologically, they express, as particularly the third [predicate] does, a corporate relationship of Christ to Christians. Christ as firstborn of all

⁵⁷ A parallel passage is “One Lord Jesus Christ through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Corinthians 8:6).

⁵⁸ Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 50.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 49. Hübner understands the subject of the “firstborn of all creation” to be a pre-existent Christ related to the picture of Wisdom in Hebrew scriptures; the point of the passage is that in terms of personal or cosmic religion there are no rivals to Jesus who is unique (*An Philemon, An die Kolosser, An die Epheser* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1997] 59).

⁶⁰ Jean-Noël Aletti, *Saint Paul, Épître aux Colossiens* (Paris: Gabalda, 1993) 100.

⁶¹ Ibid. 117.

creation must be understood eschatologically.”⁶² Creation here means the new creation of life in Christ’s Body, the Church, and ecclesially Jesus is first. For these exegetes the text refers not to astronomy but to revelation about the superiority of Jesus Christ over intermediary beings; for some, creation here means primarily not the production of the universe but the new creation, the realm of God restoring the human image powerfully, the kingdom of God as preached by Jesus. The hymn in Colossians is not about locating Jesus in the act of creation past, but about his role as Risen Lord vis-à-vis the human race.

Jerome Murphy-O’Connor provides an important interpretation that also moves from the cosmological to the incarnational and ecclesiological. He believes that the pre-Pauline opening verses about Christ and creation, from an earlier hymn, were being corrected by Paul who criticized the Colossians’ theology as too much a cosmology and an angelology. Paul’s response was not to put Christ in the heavens, but to reassert the terrestrial moorings of the gospel, as he does in verse 18. “By the introduction of ‘bodily’ he directs the reader’s attention to the physical existence of him who is now the Risen Lord.”⁶³ The historical Christ is not to be disassociated from the risen Christ, and far from pursuing cosmology the subsequent verses introduce the Church. “Paul’s insistence that Christ is present in him (Galatians 2:20) and in all members of the Church draws the cosmic dimension of the christological reflections of Colossians down into ecclesiology.”⁶⁴ The mystery is no longer a mystery, and the subject is not an angel or a quasi-divine fullness but the historical Jesus who is the “power and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:24). This focus returns us to earth, not to an unclear Christ superimposed against the entirety of the universe.

THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Scriptural exegesis permits us to return to theology. The five theologians whose ideas I have briefly presented provide a propaedeutic, illuminate a

⁶² Franz Zeilinger, *Der Erstgeborene der Schöpfung: Untersuchungen zur Formalstruktur und Theologie des Kolosserbriefes* (Vienna: Herder, 1974) 18. André Feuillet agrees with Zeilinger: “The Pauline perspective [is] much more religious than cosmological. . . . The uncreated Christ is like a mirror in which God has contemplated the plan of the universe as he creates it. It is in this sense that all has been created in him” (“La création de l’univers ‘dans le Christ’ d’après l’épître aux Colossiens [I. 16a],” *New Testament Studies* 12 [1965–66] 7); see also Angelika Planitzer, “‘Er ist das Eikon des unsichtbaren Gottes’: Spiegelungen des Gottesbildes im Christusbild am Beispiel des Schöpfungslogos,” in *Gott-Bild: Gebrochen durch die Moderne?* ed. Gerhard Larcher (Graz: Styria, 1997) 150–62.

⁶³ Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, “Tradition and Redaction in Col 1:15–20,” *Revue Biblique* 102 (1995) 237.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 241.

little the few issues that fundamental theology raises in terms of extraterrestrial life. This topic recalls another topic of exploration and expansion, one of importance in the past and the present, namely, the Christian understanding of how other religions are bearers of revelation and salvation. We are not unlike European Christians at the time of Columbus who struggled with the shocking fact of large populations in newly visited regions. It is a mistake now, just as it was at the time of Columbus, to curtail God's creative love.⁶⁵

Are there various intelligent creatures in faraway galaxies? Are there only a few such races or many of them? Are there knowing and loving creatures on many planets, as numerous in the universe as species of animals and plants on earth? To consider extraplanetary and extragalactic forms of intelligent life is, from the point of view of Christian revelation, to ponder the possible psychologies and histories of free and intelligent creatures, and then to go further and consider the two religious atmospheres potentially surrounding those beings: revelation/grace, and evil/sin. Our conclusions are simple and preliminary, and not imaginative or dramatic. Reflections born of faith and theology and not of science, they do little more than ponder the fundamental triad of religion, only to withdraw in respect before its possible permutations.

The Religious Triad

To reflect on the possible conditions of unknown beings is not arrogance, for theology, acknowledging its ignorance and limitations, is only looking at a framework of modes of existence vis-à-vis religion, albeit in terms of Christian faith. What is most basic in religion is some contact by God within and yet beyond the forms of nature, a presence of what religion calls "revelation," "grace," "salvation." Does this or that intelligent creature receive some special life and information from God? Second, is there a rejection of God by self and others through free but destructive actions? The religious triad of created nature, grace, and sin is both framework and limitation for theological reflection on extraterrestrials.

Distant creatures might be without grace and revelation, and they might be without evil, suffering, and sin. (From what we know of God from the cosmos and from revelation loving wisdom does not create beings essentially evil). Are beings on untold planets called to a special relationship with God, to a share in divine life beyond intelligence? The ways in which

⁶⁵ "Granting that Christ did not die in the other hemisphere, many theologians including Augustine have concluded that that hemisphere does not exist. But today this argument has been refuted by experience" (Campanella, *A Defense of Galileo* 112).

supernatural life touches sensate intellect and will, the modes of contact in revelation may be quite diverse, and it is a mistake to think that our understanding of “covenant,” the “reign of God,” “redemption,” or “shared life” exhausts the modes by which divine power shares something of its infinite life. On the other hand, do another planet’s intelligences find in their world natural life and no more? They may have in their psychological and biological energies no aspiration to life after death, no longing for fulfillment from beyond, and no special contact from God. (Whether there can be a purely natural life without a special divine presence is a question often discussed.) To turn to evil and sin, a race might be involved in natural disasters, in illnesses and sufferings, or they might be free of all of them—except for a peaceful cessation of life. Beyond conflicts of natural forces there are the free destructive choices we call sins. A race might be touched by sin or it might never embark upon such destructive paths (I return to this below). Furthermore, their personal and religious life, their narrative of virtue or sin might be timeless, a divine presence (or absence) among people without story or history. These are open theological questions: they impose no conclusions but seek something of what Christianity (and most terrestrial religions) finds in the framework of person, sin, and revelation/grace.⁶⁶

Variety and Higher Orders of Life

Are we the only beings in the universe who know and analyze? For 50 years and more science has expanded the universe’s size and its perceived complexity. Is it not an understandable and traditional but crass form of anthropomorphic theodicy to limit intelligent life a priori to the human race? We should not presume that we are alone in the universe or project

⁶⁶ There was interest in this issue among Catholic theologians in the 1950s (a time so constrained in considering most theological topics). Domenico Grasso wrote that it was due to the discussion of flying saucers (“La teologia et la pluralità dei mondi abitati,” *Civiltà Cattolica* 103:4 [1952] 255). J. Salaverri concluded with a basic openness to several relationships to sin and grace, although he seemed to prefer extraterrestrials living in a state of nature without grace (“La posibilidad de seres humanos extraterrestres ante el dogma católico,” *Razón y Fe* 148 [1953] 23–43). A. Perego stressed the suitability of other worlds existing in light of the classical divine attributes and denied that doctrines of redemption or sin were compromised by other worlds, for if other peoples were descendants of Adam that was not through space travel from earth but due to a “miracle” (“Origine degli esseri razionali estraterreni,” *Divus Thomas* [Piacenza] 61 [1958] 22). Some authors of the 1950s drew on Pohle, and their bibliographies indicate the considerable interest this topic aroused. All concluded that extraterrestrial worlds, which might exist outside the order of providence concerned with the race of Eve and Adam, could have a number of orientations (“a great number of possible ones in terms of the intellectual creature” [Grasso, 263]) to natural and supernatural destinies, to sin and grace.

our species and planet onto the entire universe or onto the creator's being. No matter how thankful human beings are for special contacts with God, they do not honor revelation by projecting terrestrial religion (and its context of proneness to evil and sensuality) beyond earth and thereby limiting divine wisdom and power. We should be open to varieties of creatures imagined (the enterprise of science fiction) and unimagined. A true God is spirit-in-infinity. Since material galaxies are vast and life-species on earth display considerable variety, it is likely that the divine being sets forth a vast diversity of intelligent creatures.

The further question is whether intelligent creatures normally, rarely, or always draw forth from God's free plan some special contact. What religions call revelation and grace are real expressions of a special presence of God who is largely unknowable and intangible. Faith holds that God ceaselessly, silently, and really touches us in a special way that senses and sensors do not record. Although phrases and propositions are important (but not exclusive) human ways to express divine presence, faith is not simply words from Hebrew or English implanted in human minds about religious concerns. Faith is a way of knowing, of seeing darkly, some intangible reality. After the Middle Ages the term "supernatural" referred to a higher order of being, a manner of being, activity, and life above the material life and laws of the universe.⁶⁷ Grace and revelation are words for Jesus' kingdom of God, a realm existing in human history.

While Christian theologians, East and West, have called salvation or grace a share in the divine life, it is incorrect to reduce the supernatural realm to two modalities: one internal to God, and one capable of being shared with finite persons.⁶⁸ It is unlikely that there are millions of bands on the spectrum of natural life but only one form of created supernatural life, since the spiritual and graded existence is higher and richer. Revelation and grace (the missions and ministries of the trinitarian Word and Spirit) represent one facet of the divine interior life, that active on earth. But there might be a number of modes of supernatural life with God, a variety of God's more intimate life shared with intelligent creatures in a billion galaxies.

What we know of God's triune life is true but minute. Of course, modes of divine life would not be in contradiction with each other, or with creation. This stands in opposition to late medieval or modern philosophies and theologies which, emphasizing the divine transcendence, plunge earth into a metaphysical isolation, full of ugly or irrational conflicts, and which

⁶⁷ *ST* 1, q. 1, a. 1.

⁶⁸ Some Franciscan and Eastern Orthodox theologians seem to think that intelligent and free life inevitably calls forth the shared divine life. Perhaps intelligent creatures, although Western theologies easily imagined them living in a purely natural world, are incomplete without grace.

bestow on all creatures an uncertain existence before a capricious God whom no slight threads of similar goodness or being can reach. Modern neurosis fears that in worlds far away violence is venerated over life and creatures exist only for divine rejection. Far more diverse and complex than helium and hydrogen, the supernatural, suiting different kinds of intelligent and free life through modes of revelation and graced life, could differ from creature to creature, galaxy to galaxy. Roch Kereszty reflects on the probability of other worlds and their relationships to the Son through incarnation, redemption, or another stance. He notes that without qualifying God's freedom the divine plan, as we experience it, suggests the offer of divine personal communion to intelligent creatures, and in this hypothetical theology Kereszty grounds a view of the cosmos as populated by creatures who are—in graced nature—our relatives.⁶⁹

Evil

Toward kinds and degrees of evil too we must have an open mind. Evil does not exist necessarily; and if it exists elsewhere, it might be of various kinds. The actions and contagion of sin, as we see in daily life and learn from the Bible, can have an individual and a collective form. Another race, however, might be free of both. Sin in that race might not weaken the personality extensively (as it does on earth); or it might touch individuals but not the collectivity (as earth's transmission of original sin does), not infecting an entire species on one planet. Is the fall something brought inevitably by intellectual life (Origen) or by existence (Paul Tillich)? Playwrights and philosophers in the 20th century, a time marked by horror, consider sin an intrinsic concomitant of freedom. But freedom's purpose is to escape evil. It might be that in the universe a free choice for serious evil is an exception. Does evil have its own modalities or is there a dull sameness about evil, always the same self-idolatry and abuse of others? In the universe of C. S. Lewis's science fiction, evil is rare, and planets hold peoples who are benign and wise and loving—except for the isolated “silent planet,” earth.⁷⁰

A presumption of universal evil is found regularly in the popular and scientific imagination, but the forms of intelligent life on planets of incredible distance need not be threatening to us. The fear about invasions from aliens is the projection of our fallen condition upon other solar systems, a

⁶⁹ Roch Kereszty, *Jesus Christ: Fundamentals of Christology* (New York: Alba House, 1991) 380–81.

⁷⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (New York: Macmillan, 1990) 130. “In the hundred thousand millions of worlds dispersed over the regions of space everything goes on by degrees. . . . Our little terraqueous globe here is the madhouse of those hundred thousand millions of worlds . . .” (Voltaire, “Memnon,” in *Favorite Works of Voltaire* [Garden City: De Luxe, 1900] 265).

presumption that our debilitated existence and lengthy experience of evil is normative. In not a few writings contemporary scientists equate intelligence with evil and assert that the efforts to communicate with other worlds will meet only silence because technologically advanced societies would have destroyed themselves.⁷¹ In this respect science has implicitly but unfortunately allied itself with a narrow geocentric theology—a theology unsupported by what we now know of the universe’s beautiful coherence and called into question by Jesus’ revelation of God as love. We should not project our history of sin and salvation onto other worlds. It is curious that theologians have an optimistic view of life on other planets, while scientists and novelists have developed a pessimistic one.

Incarnation

An orthodox theology of the Incarnation, which in the councils of the fifth and sixth centuries is expressed as a hypostatic union of an individualized human nature with the divine Word, proclaims that the Word of God becomes a real and full human being: Jesus is a particular man on earth with particular physical, psychological, and social forms. “Incarnation” means a divine force or person becoming and grounding an individual of a particular race for the benefit of that species. The Incarnation’s milieu is the history of evil on earth, but its goal is to offer in a historical modality higher divine life to women and men. When some Protestant theologies identify salvation, sanctification, and redemption with Calvary’s atonement, they conflate quite different enterprises. Incarnation precedes and follows (in the Resurrection) the sufferings of Jesus. The Cross is not the only theology of redemption, nor is it doctrinally the necessary or full purpose of Incarnation.

There is, however, no incarnation when a divine presence assumes some form in a visible species different than the one being addressed. Such an arrival, such a being might be a divine messenger, but it is not God incarnate in this or that world. If the risen Jesus Christ visited another planet, it

⁷¹ Carl Sagan’s view is ambiguous. If we continue to accumulate power and not wisdom, we will probably destroy ourselves, and so we must become different: not just slightly but considerably less violent, selfish, and short sighted. “It will not be we who reach Alpha Centauri and the other nearby stars. It will be species very like us but with more of our strength and fewer of our weaknesses, a species returned to circumstances more like those for which it was originally evolved, more confident, farseeing, capable and prudent—the sorts of beings we would want to represent us in a Universe that, for all we know, is filled with species much older, much more powerful, and very different. The vast distances that separate the stars are providential. Beings and worlds are quarantined from one another. The quarantine is lifted only for those with sufficient self-knowledge and judgement to have safely traveled from star to star” (*Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* [New York: Random House, 1994] 398).

would be a celestial miracle and disclosure, but it would not be a further incarnation. Diversity of species in a religious encounter excludes incarnation. To repeat, the history of sin and salvation recorded in the two testaments of the Bible is not a history of the universe; it is a particular religious history on one planet. Earlier centuries saw wider intimations of Christianity, because the universe as they knew it centered on earth. Christians believed that Jesus was the Word of God come to this earth as a man. But the central importance of Jesus for us does not necessarily imply anything about other races on other planets. Jesus' teaching and life brings eschatology but not astronomy. However, the divine generosity that led once to the Incarnation on earth suggests that there might be other incarnations—many incarnations and in various species, many creatures touched in one or another special, metaphysical way by a person of the Trinity.

Clearly the divine Logos is lord of the universe it creates and governs. When supraterritorial roles are attributed to "the Christ," this indicates the unity of the Word with Jesus of Nazareth, or the biblical exaltation of the one incarnate and risen. In terms of the centrality of "Christ" (the historical Jesus of Nazareth risen into an eschatological life), if there were only one Incarnation and Resurrection, then Christ would have a special place in the cosmos. Further, if there are other intelligent creatures but not incarnations among them, then the union of the Logos and a terrestrial human would be a positive affirmation of the dignity of corporeal intelligent life wherever it is found. Finally, if there are other incarnations, each of them and all of them affirm God's intense love in this or that form, for incarnation for corporeal intelligences is the highest form of divine love; therein the Incarnation on earth finds a wider incarnational context.⁷² Alice Meynell expressed incarnational plurality in a poem:

But, in the eternities,
Doubtless we shall compare together, hear
A million alien Gospels, in what guise
He trod the Pleiades, the Lyre, the Bear.
Oh, be prepared, my soul!
To read the inconceivable, to scan
The million forms of God those stars unroll
When, in our turn, we show to them a Man.⁷³

⁷² The liturgical and devotional view of Jesus and Mary as presiding over the universe or angels is based not upon their human nature but upon their contact with the Word. If other intelligent creatures have hypostatic or particularly intimate contacts with God, then son and mother would not by virtue of the incarnation in our history be unique or supreme in the cosmos.

⁷³ "Christ in the Universe," *The Poems of Alice Meynell* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1947) 63–64.

In Pursuit of God

It is time for Christian theology, as it considers God, to pursue a cosmic context. It is time to leave behind transcendental analyses of God developed in the style of the past two centuries that in recent decades have ended up stalled in methods and language. Two hundred years of expositions of how the knowing subject forms and limits theodicy and religion have made a modest contribution, but they have exhausted themselves, leaving behind considerable agnosticism and emptiness. Interestingly, transcendental, modern philosophy began in a global, scientific, and astrophysical context, as the systems of Hegel and Schelling related the powers of the self, the history of religion, and the forms of art to nature newly explored by the sciences of chemistry and electromagnetism wherein was occurring the one "odyssey of the spirit."⁷⁴ That European modernity is ending, however, as most ages do, in linguistic constructs. As in the bare canvas with a single thin black line in nonrepresentational art, the subject triumphed too much over objectivity. A faith and Church that recognizes the liturgy of the world and graced mysticism of the human self refuses to be reduced to theory. Today the size and nature of the universe urges believers and theologians to pass beyond brittle terminologies and abstract methods largely worked through. Theology should reflect on God beyond the Copernican, Cartesian, and neo-Kantian revolutions with their declining audience in order to find a new scientific context for theology not in the probabilities of the laboratory or the mathematics of theories but in the exploration of the universe. New directions in theology will move outward, seeking divine traces while avoiding anthropomorphic resolutions, imagining the God of the universe we actually have. Kereszty points out with a positive originality some aspects of God in a wider cosmos. All universes have a common source in God, but their modes of development after creation would glorify him precisely in their diversity. Through both faith and reason intelligent creatures admire other universes in themselves as well as in their source and destinies.

In a theological sense all possible universes would converge in an ultimate unity, because there is only one God, the alpha and the omega of all created worlds. . . . [People on earth] would not face any being that would be completely 'alien,' or completely different from them. All universes would find a common home in God, and through God man would find an extended home in all the universes.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ See Schelling, *The System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), and *On the Relationship of the Fine Arts to Nature* (1807). See the various insights on theology and religion as fundamentally imaginative in Andrew Greeley, *Religion as Poetry* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1996).

⁷⁵ Kereszty, *Jesus Christ* 378.

Is the theological challenge of the almost limitless universe too negatively felt? One reason for the array of fundamentalisms (inevitably harboring anxiety and condemnation) might be the sensing of this world of worlds. Further, a reactionary attention to biblical and ecclesiastical authorities in their apocalyptic mode and a flight to recent devotions or curious ritual objects may in fact reflect an animal instinct to hide away from the cosmic challenge that is arriving.

Questions of the universe, questions of human perception, questions of God, questions of religion. Future cosmology will not argue against the salvation history recorded in the Bible, but believers must be prepared for a galactic horizon, even for further Incarnation. Of course, the wisdom of the creator and the Trinity's love for creatures is only heightened by these reflections. Perhaps the future is to be sought not in the last book of the Christian Bible, the Book of Revelation, with its colorful, swirling images and violent dramas, but in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. Perhaps God has said a million times, as he said in Genesis, "Come, let us make new beings in our own image and likeness."