

Editorial

FAR AWAY AND AT HOME: MULTIPLE INTERACTIONS OF RELIGION AND SCIENCE

by Willem B. Drees

FAR, FAR AWAY—A MIRROR FOR OURSELVES?

On a planet far, far away, in our Galaxy or in some other one, there might be beings who are more or less like us. Imagining “other worlds” and extraterrestrial life has a long history, from antiquity to the present (Dick 1982, 1996; Crowe 1986). In recent years, science has provided evidence for planetary systems with many other stars—a great achievement based on high-precision measurements, as stars outshine such companions. In this issue, Durham theologian David Wilkinson, also an astronomer and Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society, informs us on strategies and results in the search for exoplanets. Their discovery has given new impetus to the age-old debate about the possibility of life on some of those planets, and perhaps social and intelligent life, like us.

Michael Crowe, a major historian of debates on extraterrestrial life, returns to the nineteenth century, and in particular the position of William Whewell. The theologian and natural philosopher Whewell invented the word “scientist,” and wrote major works on the history and philosophy of the inductive sciences. During his life, Whewell changed his mind on extraterrestrials, from pro to contra, at least within our solar system. Why did he do so? Crowe gives a fresh assessment of this issue, and with that an interesting view of the way science and theology co-existed and interacted in nineteenth century England. In his later work, Whewell treated the question as one which is to be decided on scientific grounds, and not on theological expectations. However, theology seems to have been important in this development, not in his arguments but as a motive to question the arguments pro.

Another interesting figure is the eighteenth-century Swedish natural philosopher and theologian-turned-mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. David Dunér traces his arguments in favor of a plurality of inhabited worlds, both in his earlier works in natural philosophy (“science,” anachronistically

speaking) and his later theological works. By then, Swedenborg claimed to have had conversations with spirits from five different extrasolar planets.

Subsequent essays present a few contemporary theological and philosophical voices. Ted Peters argues that we should be prepared for extraterrestrial life, and thus engage in astrotheology, as he did in a previous essay (Peters 2014). He holds that Christians should hold on to a single incarnation, on Earth, though of cosmic significance. This works if the incarnation is assumed to heal a broken creation, rather than if it were understood as God's self-communication.

Howard Smith takes a rather different view: for all practical purposes, we should understand ourselves as alone in the universe. Planets discovered so far do not have the conditions one would expect to favor the development of life. Nor have we received any signals so far. We should think through the implications of a misanthropic conclusion: we are probably alone. He draws on Jewish resources to formulate the joyous ethical lessons that follow from the absence of extraterrestrial intelligence (ETI): We must live, alone with our uncertainties, our doubts, and ourselves.

Lucas Mix considers the impact of images such as those of the Earth seen from outer space and ideas about extraterrestrial life on our values. In the light of the expanded cosmological narratives, how do we understand ourselves, relative to the rest of creation? We tend to operate with narratives of progress, but might also develop more holistic narratives, as in romanticism and existentialism.

Andreas Losch, a theologian employed in Bern, Switzerland, at the Center for Space and Habitability, who has put this section together, has provided an informative introductory essay.

ON EARTH: THE UNITED KINGDOM

In 2015, *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* had various essays on religion and science in different countries around the world, in Asia (Balslev 2015; Kim 2015; Li and Fu 2015), Latin America (Silva 2015), Africa (Conradie and Du Toit 2015), the Middle East (Guessoum 2015), and Europe (Brožek and Heller 2015; Evers 2015; Oviedo and Garre 2015). One more essay in this series appears in this issue.

Christopher Southgate surveys authors and initiatives in the United Kingdom. In many ways this has been a core country for "religion and science," with a long history of rational theological reflection and natural theology; for example, in the seventeenth century John Ray, and early in the nineteenth century William Paley, and astute critics such as David Hume in the eighteenth century. More recent scientists who became theologians have been Arthur Peacocke and John Polkinghorne. In Oxford there is the Andreas Idreos Chair as an endowed chair at a major university. The first two professors to hold the position were John Hedley

Brooke and Peter Harrison, both historians who have offered challenging contributions to systematically inclined thinkers, pointing out the complexity of issues (Brooke 1991, 4ff.; see Dixon, Cantor, and Pumfrey 2011) and the historicity of key concepts (Harrison 2015; we will have a symposium on this book later this year). In 2013, Alister McGrath was appointed as the third Andreas Idreos Professor. Cambridge has a lectureship, funded by novelist Susan Howatch on the basis of proceeds of her Starbridge novels on the Anglican Church. This position was long held by Fraser Watts, psychologist and theologian. England is more than Oxford and Cambridge. There is Exeter, where Christopher Southgate, Andrew Robinson, and others have developed a strong program. An example of a recent initiative is the “Science and Religion: Exploring the Spectrum” at Newman University in Birmingham, directed by Fern Elsdon-Baker, focusing on popular perceptions of science, religion, and their relations. And the United Kingdom is more than England; Scotland’s four classic universities, in Aberdeen, Saint Andrews, Glasgow, and Edinburgh have the Gifford lectures, which have often been relevant for the field, and Edinburgh has a major masters program on religion and science, run by David Fergusson, Mark Harris, Mike Fuller, and others. Much more, informed by his personal perspective, can be found in the contribution by Southgate in this issue.

Rowan Williams, until recently Archbishop of Canterbury, is the focus of the other contribution on the United Kingdom. Williams has returned to a more scholarly life in Cambridge. In this issue of *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*, Peter Jordan analyzes his work, and argues that in recent years Williams has written more about the relation between theology and the natural sciences than previously. I value that alongside a few who focus on “religion and science,” there are scholars in the humanities, social scientists, theologians, philosophers, and scientists who occasionally address these issues within the larger frame of their research. One of the books reviewed in this issue is by Keith Ward, another British philosophical theologian.

AND EVERYWHERE: DIVERSITY

China and Confucianism is the topic of the opening article, by Tom Wang. Is the use of the Internet compatible with Confucian values or not? Might a Confucian perspective help us all in envisaging and realizing a different practice in social media? This topic is a welcome addition to earlier articles on Confucianism, China, and science and technology, alongside articles in the first issue of 2016 focusing on “East Asian Voices on Science and the Humanities” (Chen 2016, Hsu 2016) and a contribution on Confucian environmental ethics last year (Wong 2015).

Typically North American is “Groundhog Day,” the second of February. Supposedly, this is the day groundhogs (woodchucks) emerge from

their hibernation. It is said that they if on that day they see their own shadow, they will return to their burrows and winter will last for six more weeks. Nowadays, some people will have an early morning celebration to watch a particular groundhog emerge from its burrows. Daniel Capper, who previously contributed an article on a Vietnamese Buddhist ecological monastery in the USA with the main title “The Trees, My Lungs,” thus linking us to plants (Capper 2014), analyzes groundhog oracles, and through this lens the sense of loss of “sacred” human–animal relations.

Though the natural sciences have become global phenomena, the reception of symbolically sensitive ideas differs from country to country and continent to continent. That is why in 2015 we had a series on religion and science in various contexts, and opened 2016 with a special issue with East Asian voices (Hastings 2016; Kamata 2016; Inagaki 2016, Kang 2016, Shin 2016). In this issue, we have a study on the reception of evolutionary theory in another underrepresented region, by César Marin and Guillermo D’Elía on the reception among scientists and science students in Chile, in Latin America. However, as argued in detail by Fern Elsdon-Baker (2015), the way such surveys are set up, they frame the issues in a particular way, and thus might be taken to “create creationists.”

We all may encounter in ourselves or with dear friends, nasty diseases such as cancer. How to understand this, scientifically but also philosophically? Gayle Woloschak, herself a major researcher on cancer, and Leonard Hummel draw on Jacques Monod’s *Chance and Necessity* (1971) and the criticism and reinterpretation by Arthur Peacocke, up to his final “Nunc Dimittis” (Peacocke 2007). As they see it, the work of scientists to cope with cancer can be considered a work of divine love.

Views that seem to give the “mental” primacy or independence relative to the “matter” have been popular among some religious, spiritual, or philosophical believers. One voice has been Ervin Laszlo, Hungarian philosopher of science and in the past member of our editorial advisory board. He has promoted the theory of the “Akashic Field,” presenting it as drawing on quantum physics, while allowing for spiritual phenomena. By drawing on a term from Sanskrit, this is presented as Indian in origin, though perhaps it is better understood as an example of Western esotericism. Anna Pokazanyeva offers a careful analysis of such approaches in relation to Western science and spiritualism, and how these views found their way into Theosophy.

A more traditional religious context, Methodism as a tradition that goes back to John Wesley, emphasizes conversion. How to understand conversion in an age of neuroscience? Is it sudden or gradual? Does the Wesleyan view presuppose a particular understanding of the relation between mind and body? Can it be understood as a normal biological and neurological process? Such issues arise in the contribution of Alan Weissenbacher.

We also offer three reviews of books. One is of a detailed biography by Dominique Lambert on the Belgian priest and cosmologist Georges Lemaitre, well known for his contribution to the development of the view of the universe that later became labelled the Big Bang theory. The others are by Christoffer Grundmann. He reviews a book by Clifford Chalmers Cain, with some colleagues from Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, in which Cain offers a process-inspired view of the possibilities for Christian theology in the context of a scientific understanding of reality. Grundmann's other review is of a book by Keith Ward, on Trinitarian theology in a modern cosmological context.

As always, I wish you well with these contributions on a wide variety of discussions, related to human traditions and practices, speculating on issues far away and closer to home.

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