

## Olli-Pekka Vainio, *Cosmology in Theological Perspective: Understanding Our Place in the Universe*

(Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), pp. xi + 212. \$24.99.

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The relatively recent discovery of an abundance of exoplanets raises the possibility, if not the probability, that intelligent life exists beyond our solar system. These discoveries have piqued public curiosity into cosmology and rekindled time-honoured theological speculation about the extent of creation and God's interaction with it. This volume therefore makes a timely contribution, bringing theological insights to bear on the questions posed by contemporary cosmology.

Vainio introduces the volume by observing that cosmology lies at the 'slippery' boundary between science, philosophy and theology. He navigates this uneasy terrain by engaging in a wide-ranging interdisciplinary exploration (no doubt aided by conversations at the NASA-supported Societal Implications of Astrobiology project at the Center for Theological Inquiry, Princeton, where the underpinning research took place). The first three chapters provide a sweeping overview of key moments in the history of theological thought concerning cosmology, addressing the ancient world, early Christian thought and early modern scientific revolutions (Galileo, Newton and Darwin) respectively. Vainio identifies Christianity's general 'hermeneutical openness' to cosmological questions, whilst drawing cautionary tales from instances where theologians failed to approach scientific questions with sufficient care.

The second trilogy of chapters turns to recent cosmological discoveries and theories, focusing on their treatment in analytic philosophy of religion. First, Vainio introduces various multiverse theories and explores their ramification for fine-tuning arguments, perfect being theology and the problem of evil, all the while acknowledging the highly speculative nature of both the cosmological and theological ideas at stake. Second, he examines the theological consequences of a cosmos teeming with extra-terrestrial intelligent life versus a human cosmic solitude. Third, the question of human insignificance in light of a vast and potentially diversely populated cosmos is raised. Various criteria for ascribing significance are considered; particularly insightful is the discussion concerning Christian transvaluation (to borrow a Nietzschean term), which demonstrates how theology shapes judgements about significance.

The third group of chapters addresses explicitly theological questions: God and Being, the *imago Dei* and the question of multiple incarnations. Divine transcendence poses a challenge for relating the cosmos to God, but Vainio argues for an *analogia entis* which allows for a minimal natural theology. He surveys classical definitions of the *imago Dei* and helpfully enumerates the various questions which versions of the doctrine attempt to address. Arguing for a wholistic *imago Dei* which combines structural, functional and relational definitions, he explores the conditions under which angels, animals, aliens and artificial intelligences might be said to reach this threshold. Finally, arguments for and against multiple incarnations are explicated in the book's characteristically clear fashion, though this chapter is less conclusive given degree of speculative assumptions required.

The concluding chapter takes a step back to consider the meta-question of how we can constructively think about our place in the cosmos. Following C. S. Lewis, it contends that reason and imagination require each other. Allowing these two aspects of thought to function cooperatively rather than competitively allows scientifically uncovered facts to be united with their meanings. This insight is embodied in the preceding chapters which combine rigorous philosophical reasoning with imaginative speculation. Each chapter is playfully and punchily titled with a quote from a science fiction film, the kind which a contemporary publisher would never allow on the front cover lest it be passed over by search algorithms. These classical sci-fi tropes are more than merely ornamental: they point to the importance of the imagination in exploring cosmological possibilities.

One method of theological reflection which is largely overlooked is the drawing of analogies between cosmological possibilities and past theological challenges (the opening historical chapters are not deeply integrated into subsequent chapters). With the exception of a few paragraphs on whether animals could possess the *imago Dei*, the analogy between intelligent extra-terrestrial life and intelligent animal life on earth (does this also call for multiple incarnations?) goes largely unexplored. Moreover, does Christianity's first contacts with non-Christian human cultures have anything to teach us about theological questions concerning extra-terrestrial life? (Mary Doria Russell's sci-fi novel *The Sparrow*, in which it is Jesuits who make first contact with alien life comes to mind, as does Schleiermacher's interest in missionary reports from New South Wales.) Granted, the book is already thoroughly interdisciplinary; nevertheless, these analogies provide further imaginative possibilities.

The publication of this accessible introduction to theology and cosmology represents a maturation of the field. It sets out the terrain with admirable clarity and combines summary with illuminating clarification and novel interventions. Moreover, the volume goes a long way to 'future-proofing' classical Christian claims in the light of potential new discoveries as we continue to search the stars.

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## **Christian C. Sahner, *Christian Martyrs under Islam: Religious Violence and the Making of the Muslim World***

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In *Christian Martyrs under Islam*, Christian Sahner investigates a relatively large collection of martyrological texts written about Christians ('neo-martyrs') who were executed by Muslims between the seventh and ninth centuries. He does so in order to explore the role religious violence played in the reshaping of what we now call the Middle East. In what way did martyrdom help to transform the region from one that was