

Peters, Ted, 2023. "Extraterrestrial Incarnations? Theogony and Theophany in the Cosmos." *God, Humanity, and the Universe: At the Crossroads of Christian Theology, Modern Cosmology, and Astrobiology*. Edited by Alexei V. Neşteruk. Eugene OR: Pickwick.

194-211.

---

# 5

## Extraterrestrial Incarnations?

### *Theogony and Theophany in the Cosmos*

TED PETERS

What is not assumed is not healed, but what is united to God is saved.

—GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, *TO CLEDONIUS AGAINST APOLLINARIS*, EPISTLE 101:7.

IS THE HISTORICAL INCARNATION of the universal Logos in Jesus Christ unique to Planet Earth? Or, might the cosmic Christ become incarnate multiple times, once for each of those planets harboring intelligent species?

With the discovery of nearly 5,000 exoplanets within the Milky Way Galaxy, some of which are earthlike, the question arises: will we soon welcome an extraterrestrial civilization as our new space neighbors? Will we invite them to share the Eucharist with us? And coffee following worship?<sup>1</sup>

1. The present discussion points the theologian to the scientific field of astrobiology, not to the UFO phenomenon. Is the idea that we on earth are being visited by space beings in UFOs divine or demonic? Demonic is the conclusion of Orthodox interpreter of culture Seraphim Rose. The devil has placed what looks like spaceships in our skies to satisfy the hunger of modern, spiritually starved Earthlings with a meal

One minor discouraging factor is that our space scientists cannot figure out how to protect earth-grown human astronauts from ionizing threats to their health and wellbeing. The reverse would be true for extraterrestrial astronauts traveling here. In short, we earthlings do not need to turn down the bed for extraterrestrial overnights quite yet. To be realistic, the best we can hope for is electronic communication, perhaps periodic Zoom sessions. We'll become virtual space neighbors, at best.

Even so, theological questions sprout up like sweet corn in August. Would our extraterrestrial neighbors belong to a humanity shared with us? Or, would they be the product of a separate genesis? This question already arose early in the Copernican-Galilean era. Theologians speculated about other worlds among the stars, asking about the implications of alien life. Thommaso Campanella (1568–1634), when defending Galileo in *Apologia pro Galileo*, speculated: "If the inhabitants which may be in other stars are men, they did not originate from Adam and are not infected by his sin. Nor do these inhabitants need redemption, unless they have committed some other sin."<sup>2</sup> In short, intelligent extraterrestrial creatures deriving from a second genesis may or may not find themselves in a fallen state and, thereby, relate differently to God than we do. This is not the question of the present article. Even so, this approach to astrotheological cosmology raises similar issues.

Regardless of whether our space neighbors belong to our genesis or a second genesis, now we ask: if intelligent beings live on extraterrestrial planets, would the God of Jesus Christ need to provide a separate incarnation event for each of those species? If a theologian answers *yes*, then scoffing critics would dub the idea of a planet-hopping Christ absurd. If a theologian answers *no* and affirms that the incarnation of Christ on Earth is efficacious for the entire cosmos, then scoffing critics would complain that a pre-Copernican Earth chauvinism is at work. This is a quandary each theologian must face with intelligibility and courage.

It appears to me that the answer to the question of one-versus-many incarnation events would depend on one's soteriological assumptions. On the one hand, if one believes that the historical event of incarnation performs atoning work with ontological impact—such as the forgiveness of sins or rendering resurrection from the dead possible for us mortals—then

---

of naturalistic and futuristic religious belief. The eschatological utopia offered by alleged aliens who are more evolutionarily advanced than we is a delusion, a temptation to take us away from the true revelation in Jesus Christ. "Dabbling with UFOs can be as dangerous as dabbling with black magic" (Rose, *Orthodoxy and the Religion of the Future*, 12).

2. Crow, *Extraterrestrial Life*, 12.

a single historical incarnation would suffice for the entire cosmos. On the other hand, if one believes that the incarnation event manifests or reveals what is already true in God's ongoing creation, then multiple incarnations that reveal this truth would follow. Here is my hypothesis more briefly: an atonement soteriology would imply a single incarnation, whereas a revelatory soteriology would imply multiple.

To say it a bit differently, we may distinguish between theogony and theophany. In theogony the eternal God acts ontologically, whereas in theophany temporal rationality learns about God's action. According to Sergei Bulgakov, "it is equally impossible to speak of a theogonic process, for in God everything is pre-eternally super-existent, and in relationship to creation and for creation, only theophany is possible."<sup>3</sup> If the incarnated Logos is imparted by eternity to temporal creation and has always been present, then the task of the historical Christ event is to reveal an eternal and abiding truth. This distinction would imply multiple incarnations, one theophany for each planet of spiritually ready rationalities. Let us proceed to see whether or not my hypothesis holds.

Explicating this hypothesis constitutes an exercise in *public systematic theology*.<sup>4</sup> It is systematic, because we feel the obligation to maintain coherence between the various doctrinal *loci*. It is public, because we incorporate the contemporary space sciences into our list of theological sources.<sup>5</sup> Even if we decide to reject scientific knowledge and rely solely on Holy Scripture plus the Fathers, this decision would still send a message to the wider public beyond the Church.

Explicating this hypothesis is also an exercise in astrotheology. *Christian Astrotheology* "is that branch of theology which provides a critical analysis of the contemporary space sciences combined with an explication of classic doctrines such as creation and Christology for the purpose of constructing a comprehensive and meaningful understanding of our human

3. Bulgakov, *The Unfading Light*, 8462-64.

4. "Public theology is conceived in the church, reflected on critically in the academy, and addressed to the world for the sake of the world" (Peters, *Public Theology*, 153).

5. "Theologians need to take seriously SETI [Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence] and to examine some central doctrines of religious belief in light of the possibility of extraterrestrial life, hopefully with a spirit of curiosity" (Wilkinson, *Science, Religion, and the Search*, 3-4). Science may supply one source for theology yet, Gayle Woloschak rightly reminds us, the principal subject of theology, God, transcends what can be known scientifically. "It must be realized that the ways of science are limited to studying only nature and aspects of nature. Because God is not limited to action within nature, God's creation is not limited to nature; God acts in nature but also beyond nature" (Woloschak, "The Broad Science-Religion Dialogue," 141).

situation within an astonishingly immense cosmos.”<sup>6</sup> In what follows we will explore the thinking of both Orthodox and non-Orthodox theologians to confirm or disconfirm my hypothesis.

### Multiple Theophanies of the One Universal Logos

Protestant systematic theologian Paul Tillich belongs squarely in the school of multiple incarnations. In his influential *Systematic Theology*, Tillich addresses directly the question of the efficacy of redemption on earth for life on other planets. How should we

understand the meaning of the symbol ‘Christ’ in the light of the immensity of the universe, the heliocentric system of planets, the infinitely small part of the universe which man and his history constitute, and the possibility of other ‘worlds’ in which divine self-manifestations may appear and be received . . . The function of the bearer of the New Being is not only to save individuals and to transform man’s historical existence but to renew the universe . . . The basic answer to these questions is given in the concept of essential man appearing in a personal life under the conditions of existential estrangement. This restricts the expectation of the Christ to historical mankind.<sup>7</sup>

For Tillich, revelation itself is salvific. What gets revealed is a theogonic truth, and the theophanic event itself reaps salvific transformation on those to whom this truth is revealed. The historical event of incarnation is primarily revelatory, but it has soteriological efficacy along with it.

How might our new space neighbors connect with the eternal Logos incarnate? Tillich “leaves the universe open for possible divine manifestations in other areas or periods of being. Such possibilities cannot be denied . . . Incarnation is unique for the special group in which it happens, but not unique in the sense that other singular incarnations for other unique worlds are excluded.”<sup>8</sup> Positing multiple incarnation events would be reasonable to Tillich, even though to date we have no empirical proof that such a thing has happened.<sup>9</sup>

6. Peters, “Introducing Astrotheology,” 9–10.

7. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 295.

8. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 296.

9. Process theologians in the Whiteheadian tradition belong strictly in the theophany school. A divine incarnation within an extraterrestrial civilization would reveal what is already theogonically true. “We may define God as that dynamic source of values which lures the evolutionary process to an ever-richer complexity productive of

Roman Catholic theologians Karl Rahner, Thomas O'Meara, and Ilio Delio attend the multiple-incarnations school for the same reason. These three believe God is impelled to self-communicate. This implies that divine self-communication will take place on whatever planet we find rational creatures ready to accept communication. "The world and its history are from the outset based on the absolute will of God to communicate himself radically to the world. In this self-communication and in its climax (that is, in the Incarnation), the world becomes the history of God himself."<sup>10</sup> Significant to the Rahnerian divine self-bestowal view is that through the incarnation God's own life becomes historical; the world becomes internal to the divine life. By implication, that would include all histories, including histories on other planets.

Thomas O'Meara dives from Rahner's hint straight into the multiple-incarnation natatorium. "As incarnation is an intense form of divine love, would there no galactic forms of that love? An infinite being of generosity would tend to many incarnations rather than to one . . . A succession of incarnations would give new relationships and new self-realizations of God . . . Incarnations among extraterrestrials would not be competing with us or with each other."<sup>11</sup> Perhaps O'Meara is the Roman Catholic who best illustrates my hypothesis: a revelational or theophanic Christology is more likely to spawn the multiple-incarnation speculation.

Relying more on theogony than either Rahner or O'Meara, Ilio Delio places God's self-communication in the embodied Word within a Teilhardian scheme of theistic evolution. The Christ principle already imbues biological development wherever that biological development takes place, guiding it, perfecting it. Ontologically, evolution guides both creation and redemption.<sup>12</sup> This universal Word of God can then take on specific

increasing freedom and intensity of experience. As such, God is necessarily operative in the development of every life and in every culture, whether terrestrial or extraterrestrial" (Ford, *The Lure of God*, 63).

10. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, 5:186. It would be impossible to conceive of the world as the history of God himself within an Orthodox framework. Maximus the Confessor, for example, denies divine involvement in physicality to the extent that God projects no final causes for the created order. "The substantive and essential Good is that which has no origin, no consummation, no cause of being and no motion whatsoever, so far as its being is concerned, towards any final cause" (Maximus, *Various Texts*, 164).

11. O'Meara, *Vast Universe*, 47.

12. According to Gayle Woloschak, "Maximus focuses not only on the physical change (which includes biological evolution) but goes beyond it to include humanity's ultimate deification and uniting with God" (Woloschak, "The Broad Science-Religion Dialogue," 140). This leads Thomas Mether to aver: "The Orthodox Church has its own theological theory of evolution. On this interpretation, the Orthodox Church's theory

embodiment and be perceived as the divine Word by any creatures who are intelligent. "Incarnation on an extraterrestrial level could conceivably take place, as long as there is some type of intelligence within the extraterrestrial species to grasp the Word of God through knowledge of the divine embodied Word . . . many incarnations but one Christ."<sup>13</sup> The divine self-bestowal school—Rahner, O'Meara, Delio—makes a formidable case for the multiple incarnation option.

When thought of as theogony, incarnation becomes an ontological principle that belongs to God's ongoing history of creation; the universal Logos already embedded within the cosmos leads all things toward their eschatological transformation. As a theophanic event, God's rational creatures have this truth revealed to them, and this manifestation carries a transformative power with it.

To render the distinction more clear, we need to be more specific about atonement<sup>14</sup>. By *atonement*, Christian soteriology contends that the historical Christ-event did some work. Here is how Saint Symeon the New Theologian (AD 949–1022) describes Christ's atoning work.

One Person of the Holy Trinity, namely the Son and Word of God, having become Incarnate, offered Himself in the flesh as a sacrifice to the Divinity of the Father, and of the Son Himself, and of the Holy Spirit, in order that the first transgression of Adam might be benevolently forgiven for the sake of this great and fearful work, that is, for the sake of this sacrifice of Christ.<sup>15</sup>

Whether Christ's atonement is aimed primarily at the forgiveness of sins or the resurrection of the dead or both, we are asking: does the incarnation event within history do any work, so to speak? Is soteriology tied to the historicity of the incarnation event in Jesus Christ? Is the forgiveness of sins or the defeat of death the result of Christ's victory over the cross? Does this amount to an efficacious work that adds a divine redemptive act to what had previously been identified with creation? If so, would a theologian ask for multiple events of atonement, one for each planetary civilization? Or, would the theologian search for off-earth revelations of what has happened historically on the third planet from the sun?

---

of evolution is not a process that happens by natural selection and random genetic mutation, but by a synergistic sacramental mysticism" (Mether, "Toward an Orthodox Philosophy of Science," 180).

13. Delio, *Christ in Evolution*, 169.

14. Peters, *Six Ways of Salvation*.

15. Symeon the New Theologian, *The First-Created Man*, 46.

If a theologian would advocate strongly that the historical incarnation event occurring within earth's history constitutes a soteriology of ontological and cosmic import, would this imply geocentrism? Would it violate the Copernican Principle?

### Geocentrism versus the Copernican Principle

Twenty-first century astrotheologians cannot avoid taking a stand on the Copernican Principle. Must it be incorporated into the theological worldview? Or can it be ignored?

Herman Bondi (1919–2005) coined the term *Copernican Principle* to refer to the de-centering of Planet Earth and the demotion of the human race to marginal status in a giant universe. "This removal of the Earth from any position of great cosmological significance is generally known, even today, as the *Copernican Principle*. It has become a cornerstone of modern astrophysics."<sup>16</sup>

What was originally a geographical re-centering has become an intellectual re-centering, almost a moral re-centering. The revolutionary book by Roman Catholic Nicholas Copernicus, *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* (*On the Revolutions of the Celestial Orbs*) was published in Nuremberg by the German Lutherans in 1543. Copernican cosmology was advanced in Germany by Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) and in Italy by Galileo Galilei (1564–1642). The latter used a telescope, whereas Copernicus and Kepler did not. Even though Kepler and Galileo were avid Copernicans, the heliocentric model of the universe only gradually garnered general public acceptance. Theologians of the Reformation era found it difficult to assess the credibility of Copernicanism; but by the time of the Enlightenment many theologians were scanning the skies through telescopes to locate their space neighbors. When the scientific discovery became accepted, it gradually morphed into a moral maxim: repudiate geocentrism! Physicist and astrophysicist Paul Davies draws out the philosophical implications. The *Copernican Principle* "says that our location in space isn't special or privileged in any way, so that what happens in our part of the universe should happen elsewhere too."<sup>17</sup>

16. Bondi, *Cosmology*, 13.

17. Davies, *The Eerie Silence*, 205. The Copernican Principle should be distinguished from the Cosmological Principle. The latter presupposes that the laws of nature obtain everywhere in the cosmos exactly as they are studied here on earth. Yet, Vatican Observatory Jesuits give the latter an interpretation that looks like the former. According to the *Cosmological Principle*: "there should be no location in space or time that is special or privileged in any way" (Consolmagno, *Would you Baptise*, 275).

In sum, the Copernican Principle connotes a cultural shift away from geocentrism and anthropocentrism toward a more humble appreciation for our tiny planet amidst an immense universe. It further connotes a shift away from religion toward science, away from human hubris toward an openness for sharing our cosmos with extraterrestrials.

### Geocentrism, Antrhopocentrism, and Christocentrism in Orthodox Theology

To our question—one incarnation or many?—Orthodox answers are complicated. If my hypothesis obtains, then we would expect an Orthodox theologian to affirm right along with Tillich, Rahner, O'Meara, and Delio: each rational species on an exoplanet will experience a theophanic incarnation event. Is this what we find? Not exactly.

Theologically, the incarnation is already built into creation, according to Doru Costache. The historical Christ event reveals "the original mystery at the heart of reality," he reports, following Maximus the Confessor.<sup>18</sup> "Specifically, from the outset the natural processes within the universe entailed a mutual adjustment of the kenotic, humble, and patient God and the cosmos, manifested in the fundamental interaction between the divine and cosmic energies. . . The historical event of the incarnation made manifest the inner, fundamental mechanics of a divinely imbued universe that, so to speak, naturally functioned supernaturally."<sup>19</sup> In short, the incarnate Christ principle is already present on every exoplanet. Might each exospecies expect its own theophany of what is already theologically the case?

Again, here is the logic that I hypothesize. On the one hand, such an Orthodox commitment to theogony could imply the ontological sufficiency of a single incarnation, a temporal incarnation with creation-wide impact, with cosmic impact. The atoning work of incarnation has decisively impacted God's creation. This implies that the Logos is already present on each exoplanet, thereby precluding its repeat. On the other hand, if the historical incarnation is only a manifestation of an already existing ontological truth,

18. On the one hand, the incarnation of the eternal Logos is coextensive with creation while, on the other hand, it is a historical event when Jesus Christ becomes fully divine and fully flesh. "The divine Logos is eternally made manifest in different modes of participation" (Maximus, *Two Hundred Texts*, 166). Maximus and the entire Orthodox tradition is most likely to embrace a *Christocentric cosmology*. "The term 'Christocentric cosmology' is meant to indicate that the whole history of the cosmos, of its beginning and end, and of its ontological constitution and purpose, has its centre in Christ, the Logos of God" (Tolleben, "Christocentric Cosmology," 307–8).

19. Costache, *The Orthodox Doctrine*, 59.



then many such manifestations would be welcomed. Many theophanies would be predicted.

Alexei Nesteruk largely follows the first option. He rejects the Copernican Principle in order to defend geocentrism along with anthropocentrism and Christocentrism. Why? Because the hypostatic union belonging to the *imago Dei* in *Homo sapiens* preeminently incarnated in Jesus Christ makes earth the location where consciousness constitutes the cosmos as it really is, as a contingent creation of God. The scientific version of cosmology unnecessarily restricts our view of nature to an agglomeration of physical things that marginalizes our small planet within a large universe of such material things. But, in terrestrial human consciousness the love of the universe unites the universe, making a whole out of a totality. The rise of this unifying consciousness took place within a history which took place here on earth.

This conviction entails not only geocentrism, related to the planet Earth as that place where history is being created, but also a spiritual anthropocentrism implying the vision of humanity not only in terms of nature subordinated to the necessities of the physical and biological order, but as *persons*, that is, hypostatic existence, from within which one can only talk about the existence of the universe as an articulate reality. When theologians affirm humanity as hypostasis of the universe, they implicitly point to Christ as the archetype of the human person . . . The geocentrism and anthropocentrism of cosmology inherent in the theological commitment mean Christocentrism.<sup>20</sup>

Or, more briefly, our earth is “spiritually central as that place from which the disclosure and manifestation of the sense of the created universe takes place.”<sup>21</sup> What is disclosed is an archetypal memory of the divine Logos, “by whom and through whom all was made.”<sup>22</sup> The historical event of the incarnation in Jesus Christ sums up or incorporates—“assumes” in the words of Gregory Nazianzus—all that has previously happened in the history of creation and—not unlike the German idealist notion of the *Aufhebung*—institutes an ontological advance. This earth event is indelibly a cosmic event of eternal efficacy.

There is more here than merely pre-Copernican recalcitrance. Nesteruk’s argument would obtain with or without Copernicus. It has to do with methodology. The method of scientific cosmology begins with a purpose,

20. Nesteruk, *The Sense of the Universe*, 74–75.

21. Nesteruk, *The Sense of the Universe*, 75.

22. Nesteruk, *The Sense of the Universe*, 479

namely, to find the meaning of the human place within the universe. This purpose becomes temporarily forgotten during the gathering of data by the scientist, forgotten in the phenomenologist's sense of forgetfulness. When the theologian reminds the scientific cosmologist of what is forgotten, the facticity of the very existence of the cosmos testifies to the fact that it is the creation of a creator saturated by divine communion.

The purpose of cosmology is to explicate the sense of the universe. This purpose originates in the innate urge of human beings to understand their place in the universe and, in general, to understand the sense of human existence. . . Human beings are still in the center of the universe because the universe becomes palpable and self-conscious through human beings who live in a particular period of cosmic evolution.<sup>23</sup>

One might extrapolate from these precedents to the following surmise: a single incarnate event in Jesus Christ on earth suffices to articulate human communion throughout the universe. For Nesteruk, what is human and what is christological and what is earthly all come in a single package, and this package is not likely to be duplicated on an extraterrestrial world. The uniqueness of Christ's incarnation is linked to the uniqueness of humanity, to the hypostatic constitution of humanity. Christology is anthropological, while anthropology is Christological. Both are ontological.

It seems to me that if Nesteruk were to exemplify my hypothesis, then he would testify to a single theogonic incarnation on earth along with multiple theophanies for extraterrestrial civilizations. After all, the theogony of the cosmos has already been established here on earth. The Divine Spirit only needs to spread the word, so to speak, with extraterrestrial theophanies.

Yet, Nesteruk is less than fully clear on the status of extraterrestrial humanoids belonging to a second genesis. If we have humans everywhere in the universe, then, Nesteruk concedes, it is legitimate to explore the possibility of multiple incarnations. If extraterrestrials are not human, then terrestrial anthropocentrism obtains. After all, it is the distinctively earth-generated hypostatic humans that hosted the salvific work of the historical incarnation of the eternal Logos. Terrestrial anthropocentrism becomes justified accordingly.

23. Nesteruk, *The Sense of the Universe*, 361. Nesteruk does not attend to "the universe" but rather performs a phenomenological analysis of the "sense of the universe." Rather than nature Nesteruk analyzes the science of nature. This precludes developing a theology of nature, although it does encourage the development of a theology of science.

For Nesteruk, this is an epistemological and not a metaphysical judgment. What could this imply? With the microcosm-macrocosm correlation presupposed in Maximus the Confessor along with much of the Orthodox tradition, the incarnation may not have macrocosmic implications at all.<sup>24</sup> Astrotheological cosmology may not have to deal with the cosmos as a physical entity, but rather with the plight of the human soul as it ascends beyond the cosmos to the supraphysical realm of the divine. Certainly this is the method of Maximus. "The Logos came down out of love for us. Let us not keep Him down permanently, but let us go up with Him to the Father, leaving the earth and earthly things behind."<sup>25</sup> Might this mean we leave stars and exoplanets behind as well?

The title of Nesteruk's tour de force, *The Sense of the Universe*, makes clear that he is concerned with the "sense of the universe" rather than the "universe" itself.<sup>26</sup> Nesteruk's question is this: what does our "sense" of the universe mean to our deification?

What, then, would be the place for God's eschatological promise? Is God's promised consummation a gift to the macrocosmos or only for the deified microcosm? Rather than interpret Jesus's Easter resurrection as a prolepsis of the cosmic consummation, Maximus interprets the resurrection as the consummation of the ascending soul: Christ "is resurrection because He raises the intellect from its lethal attachment to material things."<sup>27</sup> If the human soul follows the path of the intellect to a deification that leaves the physical universe behind, then physical cosmology could add only a diversion to theological cosmology. This appears to be the logic of Nesteruk's argument.

To invest resources in investigating such matters risks missing the entire spiritual message of Christian cosmology, Nesteruk fears. It follows that "the invocation of other worlds is dangerous and soteriologically futile."<sup>28</sup>

24. In Genesis, avers Andrew Louth, "the human was regarded as a microcosm, a little cosmos, in which all the structures of the cosmos were reflected" (Louth, *Introducing*, 73).

25. Maximus, *Four Hundred Texts on Love*, 149.

26. Bruce Foltz seems to deny anthropocentrism. Rather, Foltz might apply both creation and redemption to the universe and not merely the sense of the universe. "First, the Byzantine tradition has preserved the rich, cosmological scope of ancient Christianity, viewing both the Fall and its redemption as cosmically extending to all creation, to humanity and *nature* alike, and insisting that Christ's redemptive work was undertaken not just for the sake of human beings, but for the renewal of all creation, to reconcile heaven and earth" (Foltz, *Discerning the Spirit*, 111).

27. Maximus, *Four Hundred Texts on Love*, 154.

28. Nesteruk, *The Sense of the Universe*, 408.

In sum, no subsequent historical event would be required to establish what is already theologically true everywhere in the cosmos.

I note that Nesteruk's advocacy for geocentrism is based strictly on a theological argument. It is not based on scientific conjectures regarding the discovery of exoplanets, doubts about the capacity of biological organisms traveling great distances in space, or the failure of SETI to date to identify a message-sending extraterrestrial civilization. Contra the Copernican Principle, earth remains special because it is the home of the historical incarnation of the universal Logos in Jesus Christ.

### Multiple Theogonic Incarnations

Nesteruk's underdeveloped astrotheological speculations neither confirm nor deny my hypothesis. When we turn to Reformed Theologian Robert John Russell, however, we confront a straightforward denial.

Russell, who holds the Ian G. Barbour Chair in Theology and Science at the Graduate Theological Union, says that "God provides multiple incarnations wherever ETI has evolved."<sup>29</sup> In making his case, Russell grants the distinction between theogony and theophany or, in his terms, the ontological and revelational categories. Yet, he rejects limiting the multiple incarnational position to strictly the revelational. He believes those holding the ontological interpretation of Christ's atoning work could also embrace the many incarnations position.

The ontological and the revelational views are not distinct and separate views, as Peters claims. Instead the revelational view requires an ontological incarnation, and one that can be communicated to ETI in the context of its particular history, just as the incarnation of the Logos on earth was suffused with and made intelligible by the history of God's revelation to the Jews and, through Paul and the others, to the Gentile world. This then is my basic argument for multiple incarnations.<sup>30</sup>

Here is the lynch pin for Russell: the theogony requires theophany to be efficacious. A secret ontological work of atonement is insufficient, whether it occurs on earth or Enceladus or a planet orbiting Alpha Centuri. It must be revealed to be salvific. Not only must the historical event of the incarnation perform its soteriological work, the news of that work must be

29. Russell, *Many Incarnations*, 303.

30. Russell, *Many Incarnations*, 308.

revealed and believed. This leads to positing second genesis incarnations that unite both theogony and theophany.

Russell contends that ETI could not be included in the revelational efficacy of the incarnation without an ontological incarnation on their planet, embedded in their own species and their respective histories. From a revelatory perspective our participation by faith in Jesus's resurrection requires that this revelation be based on an ontological act of redemption by God *and* that it be known to all species needing redemption. In this perspective a single incarnation on earth alone is insufficient for the redemption of the universe.

### One Incarnation as Prolepsis of Cosmic Redemption

Of the available alternatives, I recommend a single theogonic incarnation event occurring in Jesus Christ on earth as efficacious for the entire cosmos. This eliminates the need for duplicate events of the same type within the context of each intelligently receptive off-earth species of extraterrestrials. The ontological efficacy of the historic incarnation is not dependent on any theophany. With or without public knowledge, God's atoning work is accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus the earthly Christ.

Georges Florovsky (1893–1979) fittingly articulates the atonement interpretation of the incarnation event. "The decisive reason for the death of Christ is the mortality of mankind. Christ suffered death, but he conquered death and corruptibility and destroyed the power of death."<sup>31</sup> The historical event of the cross and redemption introduce an ontological change to the human condition: forgiveness and resurrection for redeemed creatures. "The resurrection of Christ was not only his victory over his own death, but over death in general."<sup>32</sup> The objective truth of this soteriological action within history obtains whether or not terrestrials or extraterrestrials come to know it through a theophanic event.

Ontology is relevant here. It is my considered view that creation is not a single event that happened once in the ancient past, perhaps at the Big Bang. *Creatio ex nihilo*, yes, of course. But also *creatio continua*. God will continue creating until it can be genuinely said that our creation is "very good." God's atoning and redeeming action in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ functions ontologically to draw all things in creation to their eschatological consummation. The death and resurrection of Christ within

31. Florovsky, "In Ligno Crucis," 141.

32. Florovsky, "In Ligno Crucis," 146.

cosmic history is a prolepsis of all that will happen at the eschatological transfiguration of cosmic history itself.

Theogony is a historical process. We terrestrials along with our extraterrestrial neighbors all find ourselves within this single history of theogony that will find its completion only in its consummation. Only in the eschatological new creation will the present creation attain its full quiddity.

The resurrection of Jesus on earth's first Easter introduced into the history of theogonical creation a new natural principle, namely, the dead to do not stay dead. The dead shall rise. Robert John Russell, cited above, calls the Easter resurrection of Jesus the First Instantiation of a New Law of Nature or FINLON for short.<sup>33</sup> He's right. Earth's historic Easter is a theogonical moment in which the history of creation is brought one decisive step closer to that eschatological moment when God can utter, "behold, it is very good." This soteriological work of Christ is efficacious throughout the universe, whether our extraterrestrial neighbors learn of it or not. God is free to bestow a theophany—not necessarily a repeat incarnation—on any world within our cosmos.

ETI may very well experience non-incarnational theophanies, to be sure. We know from ancient Israel that God engages in self-revelation, and not infrequently. If Karl Rahner's disciples are right—that our God is a self-communicating God—then we would expect theophanies a plenty throughout the stars, planets, and moons in all the galaxies. One can fancifully imagine a future Zoom meeting in which extraterrestrial theologians will vie to exclaim, "and let me tell you what God did on our planet!"

### - Avoiding the Copernican Conniption

The Christian gospel proclaims that an event in our little planet's history has cosmic significance. Recall how the gospel-in-miniature, John 3:16, begins: "For God so loved the world . . ." The word for world is *kosmos*. The concept of *kosmos* both in archaic culture and ours includes all things, even all physical things. To be sure, when the biblical writers looked up in the sky they saw a lot less than modern scientists with telescopes can see. Yet, this does not change the fundamental insight: God loves the entire physical world and, in Jesus Christ, God took the existence of the physical world into

33. Jesus's Easter resurrection may look to us like a miracle, that is, if we think of a miracle as contradicting what is fixed by nature. Yet, contends Robert John Russell, there is another way to look at it: Jesus's resurrection is not an exception to the fixed laws of nature. Rather, it is the *first instantiation of a new law of nature*. What happened to Jesus at Easter is not simply a miracle within a world that will continue to see resurrection as anomalous, as unique, as miraculous (Russell, *Cosmology*, 129).

the divine life. What took place was a communication of attributes (*communicatio idiomata*) in which the world took on divinity and the creator took into the divine being what is created. This interchange of attributes means that the divine power of renewal—the promise of ultimate transformation through resurrection—now belongs in the world itself.

Does affirming this position risk violating the Copernican Principle? Are we offering theological justification for earth chauvinism? Is this a revival of an anachronistic defense of geocentrism? Do we owe moral allegiance to the Copernican Principle?

The Copernican Principle should not intimidate the public astrotheologian. As a scientific principle, we all must acknowledge the fact that planets orbit their respective stars. But this scientific observation does not justify any moral principles derived from it. The “is” of heliocentrism does not justify an “ought” for either pride or humility. The public theologian should proceed in the direction that sound reasoning takes us.

Complaints about geocentrism should take into account the *scandal of particularity*. A scandal is inescapable. Accordingly, it appears scandalous to posit that any particular historical event determines the ontological nature of all things universally. If scoffing critics assume that universal truths are typically derived universally, they are mistaken. Most universal principles are first discovered as effects of particular local events. From the local we extrapolate to the global. From the particular we extrapolate to the universal.

It follows that a criticism leveled against geocentrism would apply equally to any parallel claim made on behalf of incarnation on a planet orbiting Tau Ceti or any other star. No particular history, regardless of planet, could immunize itself from such a scandal.

So, the public astrotheologian should counter: for something to be real everywhere it must be articulated as real somewhere. We might argue that any redemptive event cannot escape particularity, even if it bears universal significance.

Our gratitude to God for the divine incarnation in the history of Jesus implies two things: first, this atoning event has efficacy for entire cosmos and, second, incarnation does not lead to geocentrism but rather to theocentrism. God belongs in the center of our reverence, not our planet.

## Conclusion

If the public systematic theologian pursues cosmology within either the Eastern Orthodox or Western Latin traditions, one methodological decision is unavoidable: should we count as a theological source what we learn about

the universe from astrobology and the other space sciences? Or, should we rely exclusively on Holy Scripture and the Church Fathers? I elect to include what we learn from the sciences as a theological source. Even so, I retain as our theological norm what we learn from special revelation regarding the gospel of Jesus Christ, namely, our creating and redeeming God is gracious.

Once astrobology and related sciences are incorporated as sources for theological reflection, eventually the theologian must confront a serious christological question: should we expect multiple incarnations of the Universal Logos for various extraterrestrial civilizations? In order to address this question, I have introduced the relationship between theogony and theophany, where the former connotes the ontological impact of divine creativity and the latter the revelation of that theogony. With this in mind, I have posed the following hypothesis: a theogonic emphasis would imply that the single terrestrial incarnation event would be efficacious for the entire cosmos, whereas a theophanic emphasis would imply multiple incarnation events happening within multiple extraterrestrial histories. I have stated my own position this way: the historical incarnation event of Jesus Christ is theogonically efficacious for the entire cosmos, yet we should expect theophanies—theophanies! not repeat incarnations!—to take place again and again in extraterrestrial contexts.

## Bibliography

- Bondi, Hermann. *Cosmology*. 1st ed. Cambridge Monographs on Physics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952.
- Bulgakov, Sergei. *The Unfading Light*. Moscow: Republic (Kindle Edition), 1994.
- Consolmagno, Guy et al. *Would You Baptize an Extraterrestrial?* New York: Image, 2014.
- Costache, Doru. "The Orthodox Doctrine of Creation in the Age of Science." *Journal of Orthodox Christian Studies* 2 (2019) 43–64.
- . "Orthodoxy and Science." *Ecumenical Review* 72 (2020) 396–408.
- Crow, Michael J. *Extraterrestrial Life Debate from Antiquity to 1915: A Sourcebook*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008.
- Davies, Paul. *The Eerie Silence: Renewing Our Search for Alien Intelligence*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010.
- Delio, Ilia. *Christ in Evolution*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012.
- Florovsky, Georges. "In Ligno Crucis: The Church Fathers's Doctrine of Redemption." In Georges Florovsky, *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky: Essential Theological Writings*. London: Bloomsbury 2019 (Kindle Edition), 138–49.
- . "Preface In Ligno Crucis." In *The Patristic Witness of Georges Florovsky: Essential Theological Writings*, 127–37. London: Bloomsbury, 2019 (Kindle Edition).
- . *On the Tree of the Cross*. Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Seminary Press, 2016.



PART 2: HUMANITY IN THE UNIVERSE AND THE INCARNATION

- Foltz, Bruce. "Discerning the Spirit: Orthodox Christianity and Environmental Science." In *Science and the Eastern Orthodox Church*, edited by Daniel Buxhoeveden and Gayle Woloschak, 105–18. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2011.
- Ford, Lewis. *The Lure of God: A Biblical Background for Process Theism*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1978.
- Louth, Andrew. *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013.
- Maximus the Confessor. *Four Hundred Texts on Love*. In *Philokalia*, 48–113.
- . *Two Hundred Texts on Theology and the Incarnate Dispensation of the Son of God*. In *Philokalia*, 114–63.
- . *Various Texts on Theology, the Divine Economy, and Virtue and Vice*. In *Philokalia*, 164–284.
- Mether, Thomas. "Toward an Orthodox Philosophy of Science." In *Science and the Eastern Orthodox Church*, edited by Daniel Buxhoeveden and Gayle Woloschak, 167–94. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2011.
- The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World*, 2016. <https://www.holycouncil.org/-/mission-orthodox-church-todays-world>.
- Moltmann, Jürgen. *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*. Translated by James W. Leitch. New York: Harper & Row, 1967.
- Nesteruk, Alexei V. *The Sense of the Universe: Philosophical Explication of Theological Commitment in Modern Cosmology*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015.
- O'Meara, Thomas. *Vast Universe: Extraterrestrials and Christian Revelation*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2012.
- Peters, Ted. "Introducing Astrotheology." In *Astrotheology: Science and Theology Meet Extraterrestrial Life*, edited by Ted Peters, 3–26. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018.
- . "Public Theology: Its Pastoral, Apologetic, Scientific, Political, and Prophetic Tasks." *International Journal of Public Theology* 12 (2018) 153–77.
- . "Six Ways of Salvation: How Does Jesus Save?" *Dialog* 45 (2006) 223–35.
- Polkinghorne, John. *Science and the Trinity: The Christian Encounter with Reality*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.
- Rahner, Karl. *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*. Translated by William V. Dych. New York: Seabury, 1978.
- . "Sternenbewohner: Theologisch." In *Lexicon für Theologie und Kirche*, edited by Karl Rahner, 1061–62. Freiburg: Herder, 1964.
- . *Theological Investigations*. London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1961–1988.
- Rose, Seraphim. *Orthodoxy and the Religion of the Future*. Platina, CA: Saint Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2004.
- Russell, Robert, J. *Cosmology from Alpha to Omega: The Creative Mutual Interaction of Theology and Science*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008.
- . "Many Incarnations or One?" In *Astrotheology: Science and Theology Meet Extraterrestrial Life*, edited by Ted Peters, 303–26. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018.
- Symeon the New Theologian. *The First-Created Man*. Platina, CA: St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1979.
- Tillich, Paul. *Systematic Theology*. 3 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951–1963.

- Tollefsen, Theodore. "Christocentric Cosmology." In *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor*, edited by Pauline Allen and Brownwen Neil, 307-13. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Wilkinson, David. *Science, Religion, and the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Woloschak, Gayle. "The Broad Science-Religion Dialogue: Maximus, Augustine, and Others." In *Science and the Eastern Orthodox Church*, edited by Daniel Buxhoeveden and Gayle Woloschak, 133-40. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2011.
- . "Technology: Life and Death." In *Science and the Eastern Orthodox Church*, edited by Daniel Buxhoeveden and Gayle Woloschak, 141-49. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2011