

## Article



## Special Issue: Author Meets Critic (AMC)

# From Big History to Cosmic History: A Critical Response to Ted Peters

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**Abstract** | In *God in Cosmic History: Where Science & History Meet Religion*, Ted Peters makes an important contribution to our thinking about a crucial set of dialogues among science, history, and religion. His goal is to expand a secular view of Big History to one of Cosmic History that includes a view of God as its author or co-author. I quibble at a number of points: (1) big historians and some scientists see meaning in nature and history despite Peters' claim to the contrary; (2) even though most big historians are atheists or agnostics they are still interested in religion because they want to know why people believe what they do; and (3) it is a mark of hubris or pride that a religious person (or even a scientist) would claim total knowledge about ultimate reality. Ted Peters adds to a discussion that is taking place along our current pilgrimage, but he would be the first to say that is not the final word about ultimate reality.

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**Citation** | Gustafson, L. (2017). From big history to cosmic history: A critical response to Ted Peters. *Science, Religion and Culture*, 4(1): 1-5.

**DOI** | <https://dx.doi.org/10.17582/journal.src/2017/4.1.1.5>

## Introduction

In *God in Cosmic History: Where Science & History Meet Religion*, Ted Peters makes an important contribution to our thinking about a crucial set of dialogues among science, history, and religion. His goal is to expand a secular view of Big History to one of Cosmic History that includes a view of God as its author or co-author. He reviews the evidence based narrative of the entire past within which the human experience is a most recent part. Traditional historians who limit their research to the great books of the past and other archival materials were not the ones who revolutionized our idea of the past. They restrained their analyses to the human experience over recent decades, centuries, and millennia.

The past of traditional historians was similar to the

past of traditional Judeo-Christian religion. Traditional religious calendars were consistent with traditional history. The Jewish calendar starts with the creation of the world and finds us living now 5778 years later. The Christian calendar locates us now living 2017 years after Christ's birth, with earlier events some number of years before Year 0. Dating events with years Before Christ, or B.C., was manageable if the time between Christ's birth and the creation of the world was a few thousand years. Both religious traditions placed humans in a past of 6,000 years or so. Traditional history and religion gave humanity its sense of when it had lived in time. Reading archival materials and sacred texts gave no hint that time was much longer than had been thought.

It was the geologists first, and then biologists, astronomers, and others who found the evidence that blew

up this sense of where we are in time. Their analyses of light, stones, bones, and blood established a past that reaches back millions and billions of years. Peters takes the scientific narrative of the past as a given. His view of religion has nothing to do with Young Earth Creationism. His view of history shares with Big History the realization that the known past does not begin with the written record of humans some thousands of years ago, but with the origin of our known universe 13.82 billion years ago. He then goes through the major developments between the big bang and our own time: the origins of stars and galaxies, our solar system, Earth, life, the evolution of complex life forms, and eventually the evolution of hominins and humans. He accepts that human nature comes out of the fuller story of nature. The story of the entire past can be studied only with the help of the sciences. All of this is familiar territory for big historians, if not traditional ones.

### Myth, Symbolism, and the First Axial Age Religions

Peters follows his review of the evidence based narrative of the entire known past with a discussion of myth and symbolic thinking by hominins and humans before the development of writing. Exactly how consciousness and self-consciousness, language, purpose, and symbolic thought developed – or even exactly how to define them – is not yet clear to anyone. From the time around 3.8 billion years ago when the first prokaryote cell used its flagellum to move towards the light or away from danger to a time just hundreds of thousands of years ago of coordinated human activity, when did consciousness and purpose develop first? When and why did religious thought and practice develop first? There is considerable evidence that our early ancestors thought about and practiced religion for tens of thousands of years before there were any sacred texts. They often buried their dead with grave goods, suggesting views of an after-life. Their artwork from tens of thousands of years before any sacred texts were written suggest religious ritual. The human religious experience before any of the great current world religions were developed is part of the archaeological and historical record that big historians well recognize. The insights of our ancient forbearers continue to merit reflection.

Following this discussion, Peters then examines the two biblical Genesis creation accounts. He usefully

reminds us that the first creation account may have come from a Priestly tradition that was told to ancient Hebrews who were in captivity in Babylon in the sixth century BCE. This may suggest a political reason for the creation account in Genesis. If the belief was that Yaweh or El, two names for the Hebrew god, was powerful and promised the Hebrews their land in Canaan, then why were they held in captivity in a far-away empire? The answer they seemed to have given themselves was that their God created all the world, controlled their captors, and used the Assyrians and Babylonians to punish themselves for their own wrongdoings. The Hebrews' captivity proved to themselves that their captivity was a sign of their god's power. Their account empowered themselves as captives. The lesson they drew was not to repeat the mistake of disobedience but in the future to scrupulously follow the law. When they wrote this into their religious texts, it was a case of the losers writing, if not history, then what would become very influential ideas. They used their best understandings of nature to express a deeply felt need for meaning and identity in a hostile setting. The creation account may not now be useful as a literal account of exactly how nature emerged, but it is inspiring in the social and political message it developed in the face of hostile conditions. Even in the absence of evidence that the near-term future would be better, the authors or editors seemed to tenaciously hold on to their identity and their hope. Peters then widens the discussion by covering the cosmologies of Daoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, ancient Greek philosophy, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. It is useful in our globalized era to consider what we can draw from all of humanity's profound expressions and insights over the millennia. It is helpful not only to think about what various religious traditions meant to those who practiced them in the past, but also for what we might learn from them now. Peters contributes to our efforts to learn from all past cultures and to see what resonates now in our own time. The attempts to integrate science with what is still true about all religions that originated in the first axial period make our own time something of a second axial age.

Peters then reviews various models of God. He discusses a range of ideas about what or who God is or is not. We may still need a fuller discussion about what "God" means in our scientific and global age. We need the humility of the sciences in not saying anything too confidently about God when we really just don't

know. There could be an arrogance in asserting that God is this or that way because we assert it. And it does not further a dialogue with many in our time to claim that writings in sacred texts alone demonstrate anything particular about God. Assertions about God's existence or nature by citing tradition or sacred texts for authority do not serve dialogue. We are still searching for how we can best talk about creativity, what is beyond current evidence, love, being faithful, hope, the relationship between the universal and the personal, ethics, and other topics in ways that are consistent – or at least not inconsistent – with religious traditions and science.

Peters concludes his book with a discussion about what finding extraterrestrial life might mean for religious traditions, and how his topics may affect the sustainable common human good. How can we draw on our traditions to imagine what is not yet, but what we may be able to create, and then be able to say that it is good? There may be room for dialogue between cosmic historians and big historians within the idea of emergent complexity. Beginning with relatively simple plasma and then over time in some areas going through a process of increasingly complex relationships among parts within new units is a story of natural development. Nature shows us that not only are there new things under the sun, but that suns and stars were (and still are) themselves something new. Nature can move beyond what there had been evidence for beforehand. Can we say that nature transcends itself? Is transcendence part of nature? Is nature sometimes inherently creative? Can we find a process of increasingly complex unities among much that had not been unified? Does this process of self-organization or self-creation need an external author?

Do traditional historians say that God authored this or that event in history? Humans' beliefs may have a good deal to do at times with what motivates them to act, but does this show that a God was the author of this legislative bill or that judicial decision? Do we need a God to be involved in the Krebs cycle in order to find religious traditions of value? Is there a better question about God than if nature has an author?

### From Big History to Cosmic History

Throughout, Peters works to integrate science, a number of great religions and philosophies, and Big History in what he calls a Cosmic History. The dif-

ference between big and cosmic history is that the latter considers what he calls the God Question and how this can improve the human condition. This is an important effort and Peters contributes much to the discussion among those who share an interest in religion, science, and history. A slogan of the Augustinians, who founded and continue to run the university where I work, is "Ever Ancient, Ever New." Every age must reinterpret the traditions they inherit and express what they draw from the past in ways that resonate with contemporary culture and knowledge. Peters is seeking to do that here.

But his question about if God is the author or co-author is history is not a question big historians would know how to answer with available evidence. Peters does indeed take his discussion beyond what most big historians find evidence to discuss. He asks a question that they would not know how to address.

There are a few points to quibble with regarding how Peters' defines Cosmic History and then a larger issue to consider. First, the quibbles. Peters contends that Cosmic History differs from Big History in three ways: 1) Cosmic History raises "the question of human meaning through remembering the past," 2) it traces "the differentiation of human consciousness," and 3) it raises the "question of God" (page 18). I see no difference between big and cosmic history in the first two cases. When I search for "meaning" in Christian, Brown, and Benjamin, (2014)<sup>1</sup>, I get 107 matches. On page 2, they write, "And mapping our world like this can give us a powerful sense of meaning."<sup>1</sup> Books by secular scientists include such examples as *The Big Picture: On the Origins of Life, Meaning, and the Universe Itself* by Sean Carroll, or *The Meaning of Human Existence* by Edward O. Wilson. Meaning is not unique to religion. A quick bibliographic search on science and the evolution of {human} consciousness will also yield many results. Cosmic History has no monopoly on an interest in consciousness. Even in the third case, big historians do indeed raise a God question. A search of "god" in Christian, Brown and Benjamin's Big History textbook yields 85 results; a search of "religion" yields 51 matches. The authors discuss god and religion quite a bit. Admittedly, they do not ask the same God question that Peters does. Big historians ask when, where, and why in history

<sup>1</sup> Christian, David; Benjamin, Craig; Brown, Cynthia. *Big History* (Page 2). McGraw-Hill Education.

do people leave evidence of thinking about gods and religion. It is true that they do not begin by assuming that there is a God or ask if God is the author of history. But asking if God is the author of Cosmic History is not the only way to raise a God question. Big historians as a rule do fall into the atheist or agnostic camps. They do not deny that religion is interesting and important; they just do not assume that God exists or that they know how to find evidence for God's effect on matter, stars, galaxies, evolution, and so on.

There is the old problem of the "God of the gaps" argument, or using God to explain whatever we do not yet understand. For example, Peters refers to an argument on page 156 that goes like this:

1. Whatever begins to exist has a cause.
2. The universe began to exist.
3. Therefore, the universe has a cause.

This cause is God.

Scientists who do not yet know the cause of the big bang usually leave it with that they do not yet know. They don't give what they do not know a name, like mystery. They just say they do not know yet. (Admittedly, some talk about a theory of everything, which is a very long way off and probably always will be). If it is God who caused something in nature, many scientists and big historians would want to know the evidence for this claim beyond asserting that it is so. Why not say that a little green crab caused it? How do we know that the God who transcends nature forms it? Is the question central or even pertinent to what religion can contribute in our time?

## Authoring Reality

The question about if God is the author of Cosmic History does intrigue me. It sees natural development essentially as a narrative. Nature is a story. It is a little bit like the idea in Max Tegmark's book, *Our Mathematical Universe: My Quest for the Ultimate Nature of Reality*. Tegmark finds ultimate reality to be about computing information or equations; Peters' Ultimate Reality is about authoring nature. Is the universe a story or an equation?

Peters' idea may have come from the Genesis story in which God speaks and that brings nature into existence. "God said, "Let there be light," and there was

light." Nature is the embodiment of God's words. It is the spoken word here though, not the written word. To be consistent with Genesis, perhaps the question should be if God is the Speaker of Ultimate Reality. I remember hearing a rabbi saying once that a good reason to study Hebrew is that this was the language God used to bring the universe into existence by speaking.

What strikes me as important about these seemingly fanciful ideas is that whoever first spoke or wrote the Genesis story was impressed by how imagination and expression could then lead to planning and building something new. There were no cities, and then people worked together to carry out plans to build them. Maybe the context for Genesis is that people said, let there be art, architecture, agriculture, and other things – and then they existed. Language is indeed powerful. Words can turn sticks and stones into civilizations.

Still, I do not see a way to find evidence that will support dialogue in our era to answer the question if God is the author or at least co-author of history – or what "ultimate reality" is. We seek our best approximations of reality through analysis of evidence and our best conceptual systems. Claims to full knowledge of ultimate reality have a taste of hubris. In religious terms, we need to beware of the idolatry of unfounded claims. Religion's untestable claims to a total account of ultimate reality – or scientists' claims that they might find a theory of everything – are equally arrogant and unsupportable. One lesson of religion and science is humility; both know at their best that God and reality are always beyond them. The reluctance by some to even name G-d is based on the understanding that to name is an attempt to control, and that G-d is beyond our full understanding or control. Of course in practice, while many in religion and science are often wrong in their claims, they are seldom in doubt.

## Unanswered Questions

Does the value of religion rest on whether or not there is a transcendent person who sets stars in the sky, puts together every molecule, or causes every mutation? What can we learn from our religious traditions that is not inconsistent with what else we now know? What can we draw from them that resonates in our own time? What in them should be left behind as of historical interest but not of current instructive value? How can we avoid the hubris of thinking that only

our own age exhibits brilliance and insight? What can we say that satisfies us as being as true as we can know it now, expecting that it may well change as we learn more? How can we integrate what is both ancient and currently instructive? How can all this lead to us imagining, planning for, and helping to create a future that is sustainable, empathic, caring, inclusive, and good?

Ted Peters adds to a discussion that is taking place along our current pilgrimage, but he would be the first to say that is not the final word about ultimate reality. It does not answer the question about God, or maybe even ask it well enough. But his effort to struggle with these huge issues, and our willingness to listen to him and then try to respond as best as we can, may eventually make our era a great second axial one, if we don't cause our own extinction first.