

# Article



## Special Issue: Author Meets Critic (AMC)

# The Gracious God In, With, and Under Cosmic History: A Critical Response to Ted Peters

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**Abstract** | Reading *God in Cosmic History* was like quenching a dry, parched throat with a long cool drink of water. Indeed, Peters claims that humans have an “ontological thirst” for the ultimate and this book attempts to satisfy the thirst or at least provide the water to drink. In a world where fragmentation, brutality, and chaos mark the lives of so many, it is no wonder that people long for wholeness, healing, transformation, and an encounter with the ultimate. Ted Peters’ new book locates the vocation of humankind within their cosmic home, brings together the disciplines (humanities, social sciences, natural sciences) into a holistic integration of knowledge, places the quest and the question of God within the historical narrative of the natural and cultural history of the entire cosmos, and offers a vision of hope and action to create a sustainable and wholesome view for the future.

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**Citation** | Pederson, A.M. (2017). The Gracious god in, with, and under cosmic history: A critical response to Ted Peters. *Science, Religion and Culture*, 4(1): 6-11.

**DOI** | <https://dx.doi.org/10.17582/journal.src/2017/4.1.6.11>

## Introduction

Reading *God in Cosmic History* was like quenching a dry, parched throat with a long cool drink of water. Indeed, Peters claims that humans have an “ontological thirst” for the ultimate and this book attempts to satisfy the thirst or at least provide the water to drink. In a world where fragmentation, brutality, and chaos mark the lives of so many, it is no wonder that people long for wholeness, healing, transformation, and an encounter with the ultimate. Ted Peters’ new book locates the vocation of humankind within their cosmic home, brings together the disciplines (humanities, social sciences, natural sciences) into a holistic integration of knowledge, places the quest and the question of God within the narrative of the natural and cultural history of the entire cosmos, and offers a vision of hope and action to create a sustainable and wholesome view for the future. The book is a landmark text in the career of Ted

Peters from his work as a Lutheran theologian to his significant leadership as a speaker, teacher, and writer in the religion and science dialogue.

The prominent themes of his theological work are displayed in a culmination of research and integration in this work, *God in Cosmic History*. Those of us who are familiar with the extensive works of Peters can’t help but appreciate and see how this project is a thoroughgoing extension of his Lutheran theological work. But this doesn’t limit the scope of his investigation about God in cosmic history. It simply locates it within his life project and extends the fruitfulness of his research.

God’s gracious relationship with the world is the underlying *cantus firmus* of Peters’ project. To feel at home in the world we must be able to trust the Creator and the Creator’s intentions from beginning to end, from creation to eschaton. The question and

quest about ultimacy is spiritual, but grounded in the physical, embodied lives of humankind. Peters writes: “The human thirst for transcendent being becomes nuanced when a person wishes that ultimate reality be gracious, when a person asks for love, compassion, forgiveness, renewal, transformation. Any logical argument for God’s existence or conventional spiritual practice will not be good enough unless it is grounded in ultimate reality. The best we can do is pray, asking the God of grace to hear our prayers.” (Peters, 2017, 336) Whether we seek God through rational argument or ritual practice, it will be futile unless it is literally grounded in a gracious relationship with ultimate reality. So, it makes sense that Peters launches the cosmic history about the origin of all things, told from both scientific and religious narratives. Peters more than suggests that he believes the world to be a co-authored process between God and the cosmos. “This book will look at both the story and the storyteller.” (11)

Peters’ use of *futurum* and *adventus* reflects his eschatological perspective that are present in his other theological work. The concept of *futurum* shapes the present reality as an extension of the efficacy of the past. Humans resist the weight of the past when it binds them to an untenable life in the present. Another view of the future offers a different vision of hope and release from the power of the present and repetition of the past. *Adventus* “transforms the present reality” and promises “redemption, healing, renewal.” (18-19) Here is where Peters’ Christian theological commitments shape his understanding of the purpose or *telos* of the cosmos. The purpose of cosmic history cannot be limited to human perception but must be grounded in God’s character. In his analysis of the Genesis creation in Genesis 1, Peters comments: “Today’s generation finds itself in the middle of this story, looking back at the beginning and forward to its future climax. The story of Genesis 1:1-2:4a will not become an archonic myth until the story is complete, until the creation has been called into God’s promised new creation.” (116). This quote reminds me of the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who writes in *Creation and Fall*: “The church of Christ witnesses to the end of all things. It lives from the end, it thinks from the end, it acts from the end, it proclaims its message from the end.” (Green 2013, 211)

Endings shape our beginnings and the way we live in between. “The context of remembering the past and

anticipating a future conditioned by eternity gives our historical life meaning, ultimate meaning.” (19). For Peters, this ultimate meaning roots itself in God’s providential grace. The way we begin is the way we will end, linked to the promises of God’s renewal for all creation.

## Location and Vocation within Cosmic History

I hope to use this book in the classes that I teach at Augustana University, a comprehensive university of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. This self-identification is important to my review because it shapes not only how I see the project as a whole, but also how I think it can be used in a fruitful and efficacious way. The students whom I teach ask lots of questions: What will I do with my life? How do I know if my life will have meaning and purpose? Instead of simply suggesting a student get a job as a response to these questions, Lutherans have long emphasized that people discern their vocation; that is, they should listen to where God is calling them.

One of the mottos at Augustana University summarizes this Lutheran understanding of vocation: “Enter to learn, leave to serve.” From my perspective as a professor and mentor to students, I believe that Peters’ work could be one way for students to learn about their vocation as a creature and citizen of planet Earth. I find that students are riddled with letdown and frustration in their post-truth world; they long to find connections and wholeness. To them, I offer words of advice about vocation given in two separate addresses at Augustana University. The following words were part of the opening convocation of the 1999 academic year at Augustana University given by Dr. Arlen Viste, Professor of Chemistry and the Stanley L. Olson Chair of Moral Values:

“Just how large is your home? This morning I invite you to join me on a journey of imagination. In the process, I hope that we can stretch the envelope a bit, and move toward a large and active view of home. . . As part of the notion of homesteading in the cosmos, I encourage you to develop for yourself a large view of home, through imagination and coupled with integrity. As homesteaders we need to have a pretty good idea of where we are, and how we fit into our surroundings and environment. . . I hope that

as you pursue your education, enjoy your life, and live out your vocation, you will be rooted and grounded in a large view of home and of your place and time in the cosmos. Be rooted also in simple gratefulness for the blessings and challenges of God, family, and companions in your life journey and in your vocation.” (Viste 1999)

Viste encourages students to not only understand where they are locally but also to see their home on earth within a cosmic perspective. In his commencement address in 2001 at Augustana University, Philip Hefner, Lutheran theologian and leader in the science and religion dialogue, told students that God (the ultimate) is found within the connections: “Connecting different pieces of our world today, so that they add up to something we can live with, so that they make up a world that we can live in wholesomely, live to the full. If you, like me, also happen to be looking for God in this medley of disparate worlds and experiences, it will surely be in the connections—and nowhere else.” (Hefner 2001) The way we view our place in the cosmos shapes the way we live in that place as home.

Creating connections and expanding our view of home within the cosmos give meaning and purpose to young scholars and seekers within the framework of their undergraduate education.

Interpreting their historical location and is part of their spiritual vocation. In a post-truth and fragmented, untrustworthy world, this book by Ted Peters calls us to use rational, plausible arguments for the explanation and interpretation of the world and for its Creator.

In a recent opinion section in the *New York Times*, Molly Worthen looks at the Christian evangelical roots of our post-truth culture. She begins with an anecdote about Rachel Held-Evans, a popular Christian author who appeals to many different Christian perspectives, including those in the 18-30 age bracket. Worthen writes this about Held-Evans: “She was taught to distrust information coming from the scientific or media elite because these sources did not hold a ‘biblical worldview.’ It was presented as a cohesive worldview that you could maintain if you studied the Bible,” she told me. “Part of that was that climate change isn’t real, that evolution is a myth

made up by scientists who hate God, and capitalism is God’s ideal for society.” (Worthen 2017) While many in the academy may not doubt the truths that science bring to our world, in the trenches of teaching undergraduates I encounter many students who come from homes that deny the methods and findings of modern science as well as any notion that their own worldview might not be the only one that is reliable. This is where Peters’ methodology of critical thinking could counter these tendencies. Rationality and the preponderance of evidence from the sciences and humanities counter the post-truth reality of merely understanding reality as a construction of one’s own opinion. Big history is storytelling but it is not simply one more opinion about the world. Peters offers a framework that joins the narratives of science and religion to help us interpret the meaning of our lives within a cosmic history.

### **Brings Together the Disciplines (Humanities, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences) into a Kind of Triumvirate Integration of Knowledge**

Peters’ book utilizes a helpful historical methodology that crosses all disciplines, opens up a bigger and transformative view of the world, teaches critical thinking skills, and addresses both the problems and possibilities of the postmodern era on which we are on the cusp. I find that students, like many of us in our culture, suffer from a kind of cultural and historical amnesia as well as from an inability to think amongst or within different disciplinary agendas. To introduce historical consciousness that is not limited to human history alone is a welcome endeavor. Peters book helps us understand the world through the narrative of big history or as he calls it: cosmic history. I could well imagine that this text might be used in an interdisciplinary course in which someone from the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences would teach together to create an integrated experience for undergraduates. Peters creates layers of history that nestle within each other like Russian dolls, revealing the meaning in each layer.

When we understand or see the bigger picture we are offered new lenses for seeing the world beyond our own myopic point of view. Changing perspectives is a form of conversion. Peters book can help students learn to look differently at the world in which they live, and interpret human history within a much bigger, deeper history than they are used to doing. The

power of this book is to get at the universal, cosmic questions that relate to the bigness of God and the world. In comments related to the big history project, Eric Chaisson writes: "This interdisciplinary scenario has the potential to unite the triumvirate of modern learning--humanities, natural science, and social studies--thereby creating for people of all cultures at the start of the new millennium a consistent, objective, and comprehensive worldview of material reality." (Chaisson 2014, 86) The power of the big and cosmic challenges the myopia of the constrained and literal. Every act of seeing is an act of interpretation.

While many of us are critical of the way modernity has subjugated other worldviews and peoples, I don't want to lose the values of modernity in my rejection of some of its other travesties. Higher education prides itself on teaching critical thinking, a skill that emerges from the modern era. Peters: "At the heart of this critical consciousness is the ability to hold two contradictory thoughts together while bracketing out preference or commitment. This is important: critical consciousness includes the capacity to hold together two opposing thoughts and consider their relative merits before making a judgment. Modern people are particularly good at this. This entire book is an exercise in critical thinking." (22) While most academics would hardly challenge the virtues of teaching critical thinking, some students often find it difficult and painful "to hold two opposing thoughts and consider their relatives merits before making a judgment." (22). This is particularly true when it comes to the "truths" of religious commitments. In many cases, I find that students come with one truth about God and their world and any challenge to is not just an exercise in critical thinking but a threat to their way of being. This is just one more reason why I think the timing of this book is important and that its somewhat modest commitments about critical thinking might be more radical for some than others.

Peters states that the Western world is balanced between the modern and postmodern eras. We feel the tension of living *in medias res*. The postmodern agenda, according to Peters, is threefold: "(1) seeking for re-integrated wholeness, (2) discerning the import of the rediscovery in quantum physics and (3) deconstructing the modern mind by expanding the role of contextual relativity. Of these three postmodern quests, only quantum contingency is discussed in this text." (22-23) By concentrating on

the theme of quantum indeterminacy in the cosmic history, I believe that Peters doesn't give sufficient attention to the details and messiness wound into the relationships between power and narrative. The main theme of postmodernism that he addresses is quantum indeterminacy. By limiting his work to quantum indeterminacy and the scope of the cosmos, he neglects other voices whose perspective is both counter to and affirming of his quest. I realize that he cannot accomplish everything in this massive work, but it needs to be balanced with the particularities of other perspectives that are more local. Let me offer an example.

Nestled in the Black Hills in Lead, South Dakota, is a research lab of cosmic proportions, the Sanford Underground Research Laboratory, hereby noted as SURF. The story that the website tells coincides with the narratives of the big and cosmic history agendas: "The Sanford Underground Research Facility in Lead, South Dakota, advances our understanding of the universe by providing laboratory space deep underground, where sensitive physics experiments can be shielded from cosmic radiation. Researchers at the Sanford Lab explore some of the most challenging questions facing 21st century physics, such as the origin of matter, the nature of dark matter and the properties of neutrinos." (SURF website 2017) situated in the former Homestake Gold Mine that ceased operations in 2003, has recently built a visitor's center that acknowledges the local history of the area: the days of the discovery of gold and the explosion of boom towns like Lead and the simultaneous genocide and displacement of Native Americans. This cultural dissonance between the Sanford Lab and local tribes is expressed here in a scientific article:

"Deep in South Dakota's Black Hills, engineers are halfway through pumping water from a 2.6 km deep mineshaft where the town of Lead. By 2015, US researchers hope, this watery hole will have dried out and become home to one of the country's biggest science infrastructure projects: the deep underground science and engineering laboratory. . . . Physicists visited local powwows to stamp out rumors about Homestake being turned into a nuclear waste. The struggle to meet goals to work with local Native Americans, whose cooperation is vital to keeping the project on track . . . The local Native American tribes are wary. Long ill treated by the federal government,



who seized the land for its gold more than a century ago and then polluted it with mine runoff, they're cautious about the new influx of government scientists. Passion and bitterness still runs strong, even among the Native American students." (Dalton 2009)

So many of the problems that Native Americans face are invisible on the surface to most people in South Dakota. People like me need to discover that living merely at surface level will not help us to face the disparities, prejudices, and problems on the reservations. The exciting revelation about this local story of cosmic proportions is that leaders from local Native American nations were invited to SURF, and after a lengthy visit underground they emerged with a wonderful connection between their Native origins story and the narrative of the physicists. These are the words of President Yellow Bird Steele (of the Oglala Nation): "It is our belief that our ancestors came into this world through an opening of what is now known as the wind cave of our sacred Black Hills. After my experience of going underground, I feel as if I have just been reborn." (Lakota Times, 2012) This brief example of how these two narratives from modern physics and Lakota cosmology come together highlight how the insights of the local and global coincide in one spiritual, cosmic truth.

The embedded nature of our social location must be connected to our cosmic location. While deconstructive philosophies are hardly going away, the fragmentation of knowledge in a post-truth world needs a new vision to construct how we see the world. Now it might be necessary to combine the virtues of defining our social location within our natural and cosmic location. How can big history help local history? The danger of focusing only on the local is that it excludes the broader scope of cosmic history. The historical realities of the bigness of history must coincide with the particularities of the local world in order to gain a critical perspective about our world. This might extend Peters' notion of critical thinking: to hold two pictures of the world together simultaneously--local and cosmic, particular and universal.

### **Places the Quest and the Question of God within the Narrative of the Natural and Cultural History of the Entire Cosmos**

Peters uses big bang cosmology and big history to

"crack open" the question of God. Then he compares and contrasts different concepts of the divine and ultimate. By asking the God question it shapes a different reading of the story of the universe than the majority of thinkers within the big history movement who have left out the God question. If God's only role is to fill the gaps that science can't explain then God becomes redundant. "In order to ask the question of God, therefore, one must supplement what big historians and world historians presuppose. This book will pose supra-cosmic questions that most big historians and world historians refrain from asking. Posing supra-cosmic questions makes the cosmos itself look different, even more magnificent and more awe-inspiring." (25) By reflecting on the experience of the cosmos, people can have spiritual and religious insights. "The magnificence, unfathomability, and beauty of the cosmos give rise to the question of God as creator." (44) These experiences lead to transcendence, to something or someone who is more than they are.

This experience of transcendence is the relationship with God who is the creator and who gives our cosmic history order and purpose. The scientific narrative doesn't contradict this claim because the job of science is not to give meaning to its claims. Peters: "What about the question of meaning? What does the big bang story mean? As a scientific story, it has no meaning. Scientific stories are always meaningless because the methods of science exclude meaningfulness at the outset. Even so, the story of the big bang cannot help but inspire in us a sense of wonder, awe, and appreciation." (35) This is where religion meets science in its offering of something more.

### **Offers a Vision of Hope and Action to Create a Sustainable and Wholesome View for the Future**

I began the review with a view of the human place within the cosmos and its history. This is where I end the review, with humankind's embeddedness in the natural and cosmic history of planet Earth. Bringing the project as a whole to bear in this final chapter, Peters offers the insights from the axial vision of transcendence as one response to the environmental crisis that we are facing in our earthly home. These insights are a "transcendent standard of justice and peace" to which we can appeal beyond our contingent and fallen efforts and standards to create a sustainable

and just world community. Peters joins many other prominent voices who call for an ecological framework that links our epistemological and ethical bearings on taking care of our home in the cosmos. Finally, Peters offers some “middle axioms” to help move the vision for a peaceful and just future into a plan of action. In the closing chapters of the book, Peters brings the reader around to his theological framework implicit in the whole project: that the future of the cosmos is bound to the action of a gracious God. Our hope for the world rests in the grace of God.

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