

Article



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God in Cosmic History: A Critical Response to Ted Peters

Nancy R. Howell

Saint Paul School of Theology (Professor of Theology and Philosophy of Religion and Oubri A. Poppele Professor of Health and Welfare Ministries)

Abstract | In his new book, *God in Cosmic History*, Ted Peters carries Big History beyond the scientific horizon to reflect on the God of creation and redemption. In critique, I ask two questions: (1) What does Peters' Cosmic History contribute to addressing the issue of particularity? (2) In what ways does Peters lead us to deeper thinking about the nature of God? Surely, reflection on these two questions will show that Peters has generated a fruitful method for and approach to Cosmic History.

Editor | Gregg D. Caruso, Corning Community College, SUNY (USA).

Correspondence | Nancy R. Howell, Saint Paul School of Theology; **Email:** howellnr@spst.edu

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Introduction

The scope of Ted Peters' book, *God in Cosmic History: Where Science and History Meet Religion* (Peters, 2017), is remarkable. But, with such a title, what reader would expect anything less than cosmic scope? The range of sciences informing Peters' argument extends from big bang cosmology and evolution to paleoanthropology, bacteriology, biology, physics, cellular biology, ecology, anthropology, climate science, genetics, astrobiology, and sociobiology. The argument is inclusive of major religions including Daoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as Peters traces the rise of religions in China, India, Greece, and Israel during the Axial Age. The philosophical topics wrestle with scientism, critical realism, deconstructionism, rationalism, postmodernism, perennialism, and materialism among other issues. The historical scope is sweeping in its movement from the big bang and evolution to human hunting, foraging, and farming and extends to consideration of war.

The encyclopedic character of *God in Cosmic History* is accompanied by theological breadth, especially in

the exploration of the question of God, but the book also inherits the span of Peters' theological corpus. For example, his analysis of war and treatment of Genesis remind the reader of Peters' theological treatment of the doctrine of sin (Peters, 1994; 2015b). More pervasive in the current book is Peters' eschatology, which is more than a doctrine in his theology. Eschatology is arguably a methodological orientation in Peters' theology (Peters, 2015a), and his future-directed perspective is formative of the argument in *God in Cosmic History*.

The range and scope of the book's content is not gratuitous because Peter's Cosmic History entertains dialogue with Big History in addition to building an encompassing Cosmic History. Both Big History and Cosmic History break the boundaries of human history, as understood conventionally, and redefine history comprehensively to include the contingent events and development of all the natural world and cosmos. Even *prehistory* (as a term) is obsolete in these grander, more inclusive conceptions of history.

Big History and Cosmic History overlap in significant ways. First, the interaction of humans and the natural

world is an historical relationship (Peters, 2017, 18), which acknowledges how nature shapes human history (283). Second, the cosmic beginning (the big bang) is part of history, which suggests the sweeping extension of history (18). Third, nature entails contingent events alongside what we study in World History, which means that the big bang and evolution are substantive contexts for history (283). Fourth, science contributes to perspective on the past and present and should be respected (283). Consequently, Peters visualizes the relationship of World History, Big History, and Cosmic History as Russian nested dolls. World History fits inside Big History, and Cosmic History encompasses both and adds new dimensions to the historical saga (17).

Cosmic History is distinctive because the theologian's expertise introduces questions that move beyond historical and scientific methods and observations. Few thinkers are able to offer what Ted Peters brings to Cosmic History because of his careful work as Lutheran theologian and science-religion scholar. Peters distinguishes his Cosmic History from Big History in three ways. First, Cosmic History queries "human meaning through remembering the past and expecting the future" (18). That history is connected with the past is nothing new, but the classic Peters' perspective refers to the future. Peters' future-oriented trajectory finds its way into *God in Cosmic History* as a unique angle adding new scope to the history enterprise. Peters reminds readers that *futurum* "projects a future as an extension of the past" (18), and *adventus* "promises redemption, healing, renewal" (19). Peters injects eternity as the unrealized, but anticipated direction of history.

Second, Cosmic History examines the "differentiation of human consciousness" (18), which refers to the rise of spiritual and religious sensibilities over time. Neither Big History nor World History carefully considers early religious leanings of human ancestors (81). Such patterns of spiritual and religious sensibilities generate an important focus in Peters' argument (see especially Part Two of *God in Cosmic History*), which explores the hypothesis that an axial leap or *axial insight* (to use Karl Jaspers' term) occurred in China, India, and the Mesopotamian-Mediterranean regions (184). Differentiation of human consciousness and the axial leap are critical to reflection on God's role in Cosmic History.

Third is attention to God and the history project.

Peters posits in an exploratory way how theological analysis—adding reflection on the God question—creates historical texture that "illuminates dimensions of reality missed by other historians" (18).

Is Science Enough for Big History?

Peters marshals a broad assortment of information in conversation with the familiar World History and newer Big History, but asks the reader to join in a process of inquiry with him. His thesis is exploratory rather than explanatory, involving some key questions. Peters' inquiry begins with a fundamental question: "Does a strictly scientific account of natural history and human history require that we raise the question of God" (11)? His restatement of the question suggests how Cosmic History explores dimensions of reality missed in other historical accounts: "Would Big History and World History be more coherent if a divine creator and redeemer belonged to the chronicle" (247)? Peters book, then, probes critically the value of asking about the existence of God, particularly God as Creator. His method is an unflinching quest to discover the intrusion of ultimacy into the mundane chronologies and explanations offered by history and science (247).

The unfolding of Peters' argument shows how both science and the axial emergence of religions, in their distinctive ways, find their limits and possibilities in the face of questions that transcend ordinary, amazing cosmic phenomena. Peters' critical thinking is guided by key questions: "Is God the author of cosmic history? Does history author itself? Might there be a co-authorship" (11, 163)? Part One of *God in Cosmic History* pursues a specific question about whether and how the question of God arises in scientific treatments of natural history and human history (11), while Part Two contends that the axial awareness of transcendence is essential to encounter with the question of God and ultimacy (163), which has consequences for human history and the ways humans approach nature and the cosmos (including constructing meanings and ethics in deliberations about science/scientism, evolution, extra-terrestrial life, and the Anthropocene).

With such a comprehensive and worthy project, Peters' argument demands a response much better than simple quibbles about what evidence should have been included, omitted, or replaced.

A Critical Review of Peters' Idea of Cosmic History

My critical review, then, will partner with Peters in an exploratory approach, asking what conversations his constructive work to integrate God into the cosmic story instigates. The first question to be addressed is, What does Peters' Cosmic History contribute to addressing the issue of particularity? The second is, In what ways does Peters lead us to deeper thinking about the nature of God? Surely, reflection on these two questions will show that Peters has generated a fruitful method for and approach to Cosmic History.

The context for my question about particularity is the criticism of Big History, which is sometimes condemned because the big picture as metanarrative overshadows particularity and any accompanying interpretation of complex human dynamics within nature. Peters is also developing a metanarrative, but *God in Cosmic History* should be credited for what may be important advances over the Big History approach. First, Peters foregrounds interpretation of the contextual ways that differentiation of human consciousness occurred in diverse geographical settings that gave rise to axial insights birthing major world religions. As Peters avers, God is missing from Big History (164), but Cosmic History realizes that the diverse answers to the God question are historically significant and “could affect the very nature of history itself” (165). Peters' analysis posits simultaneous, but different, responses to the axial breakthrough and refuses to harmonize the responses of regional spiritual sensibilities—for example, “the question of God in axial China was not God” (195), but ultimacy and transcendence inspired concepts of peace and justice (195-96).

Second, both Cosmic History and Big History imply a shift in thinking about humans in relation to nature and the cosmos. Symbolically, something important is signaled by immersing human history with cosmic history from the big bang to evolution and beyond. The cosmic origins narrative is expansive and inclusive. Humans are not separate from nature, but are embedded in nature in Cosmic History. While human history is not diminished, natural history is acknowledged and elevated in importance. Of course, the tendency to focus on the history of matter or the history of human scientific endeavor is tempting, but the principle that nature has a history, a legacy, and

a future marks a dramatic change and introduces possibilities to revise how humans see nonhuman nature and themselves.

The question about particularity arises because of an opening created by Cosmic History, which I interpret as an invitation to re-interpret the relationship of humans and nature. Peters' chapter on the Anthropocene confronts the ecological crisis with a “criterion for prophetic judgment against the injustices within history” (313), which is derived from “axial awareness of a transcendent order of justice” (313). He proposes an ethic that is proleptic in character because of its anticipation of the future and assertion of human moral responsibility for a “just, sustainable, participatory, and planetary society” (312, 320ff).

Peters' ethic demands a change in how humans see themselves as part of nature, but also leaves open the question of how we interpret our neighbors in nature. Here readers of *God in Cosmic History* can join and continue Peters' project by examining the particularity of nature where there occurs another interdisciplinary convergence of science, history, philosophy, and religion. Ecology as a science defers to the particular in nature—for example, monitoring kestrel behavior in ecological context, examining chemical signals between plants and predators, or studying the acoustic interactions between insects and bats. Important generalizations arise from the empirical investigations to be sure, but ecologists are often knee-deep in bogs, caves, and forests looking specifically for someone or something in particular. The invitation to theologians (such as Peters or me) is to allow our theological imaginations to be nosy about the lives of nature's neighbors. The big picture of Gaia is one approach that should be supplemented by the detail work accomplished with sharp eyes like those seen in essayist Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* or scientist Barbara McClintock's “feeling for the organism” (to use Evelyn Fox Keller's language). Then we can write (with critical self-awareness) about what is just for the kestrel, what is participatory in relationship with chimpanzees, and what is sustainable for the bioregion of the Pando aspen grove within the divine creation.

Admittedly, I am unable to write with a “poker face,” so inevitably this critical review reveals my wistful hope that Cosmic History will lead to self-examination of the anthropocentrism and human

exceptionalism so common in all our work. My wish is not a naïve thought that theologians can write from the perspective of apes or dolphins or elms, but if Cosmic History calls readers to anticipate a just and peaceable future, can Peters' argument also lead us to put humans in perspective within the holistic narrative and chronicle of the cosmos? If the axial insight and human story lead us to continue the quest for ultimacy, transcendence, and divinity, then theological interpretations are already best construed to be humble in our encounter with infinity, eternity, and God (at least, in the Christian tradition). Without diminishing human accomplishments, uniqueness, or distinctiveness, Cosmic History evokes a sense of human location and relationship that reminds us of our limitations. Humans are parochially circumscribed within a subset of the cosmos, and as human curiosity abounds in search of cosmic understanding, we should be aware that we know too little to assume superiority. The ecological crisis already witnesses to human presumption that we are wiser about nature than the cosmos itself. If that lesson is not sufficient, then self-awareness in light of divine transcendence and creativity might form the theological framework for greater humility without quashing a sacramental curiosity about the cosmos beyond ourselves.

Peters' writing provides initiative for pursuing human-human relationships alongside human-nature-cosmos relationships, too. The big picture could create an illusion of a generic humanity known by its physical matter, evolutionary development, and religious diversity, but Peters disallows such a distant, dispassionate view of humans:

The world in which people actually live day to day is replete with discrimination, class pride, racial superiority, degrading ideology, and even genocide. Yet axial consciousness prompts awareness that, despite this historical experience, there is but one, single, universal, planetary human race (331).

Genetic evidence effectively makes the case that humans are one species or race. World History and front-page news document how divided humans are. Peters' Cosmic History prompts examination of the ironic pairing of genetic sameness and experiential division among humans. Deciphering human particularity is a methodological quandary for Cosmic History because science alone cannot fully

explain war without literacy about the religions and the transcendental vision of the axial breakthrough (180). Emphasizing genetic kinship cannot erase millennia of dehumanization nor the conceptual habit of justifying the superiority of one people over another. Larger conceptions of history cannot be used to dispose of human injustice and injury. Within a theological framework, human atrocities toward humans (and nature, for that matter) require return to the question of God and God's relationship to the cosmos.

Goading Reflection on God

God in Cosmic History is a goad to more sophisticated reflection on God. Equipped with Peters' interpretation of the historic axial threshold and confronted with the epic of Cosmic History, the question of ultimacy is a fresh one. Perhaps Peters' project invites us to recognize a new theological and spiritual threshold with heightened sensibilities to the sacred and transcendent. How does Peters lead us to deeper thinking about God?

Peters' approach to God is placed in Cosmic History as the locus for "inquiring about God's existence and God's creation of the world" (327). His method should not be simplistically identified as a contemporary attempt to reproduce Thomas Aquinas' cosmological argument. Peters appears as a consummate questioner in *God in Cosmic History*, so his method of interrogation provides the nuance in his case for the comprehensive God question. On one hand, Peters searches for the times, places, and cultures where historical evidence documents constructive attempts to address the question of God. His extended discussion of the religions associated with axial insight and his discussion of conceptual models of God (chapter 17) foreground the diverse ways ultimacy and God surface in historical narratives. On the other hand, he wonders whether God is the ground of history that lends coherence to Big History and World History (247). Peters' reasoning functions, in many places in the book, as an argument for the existence of the God question itself, which sits like an elephant in the room of scientific discovery and theory where scientific method reaches its limits and scientists shy away from posing questions beyond the scope of matter and nature.

In chapter 17, Peters attempts to name and describe

diverse conceptual models of God. Each model is further evidence of historical musing about the God question. Belief in God is not a pre-requisite for inclusion among the categories because even atheism and agnosticism raise as responses to the God question. Atheism must ask the question of God before disavowing the existence of God, and agnosticism entertains the God question with reservations grounded in doubt and methodological uncertainty. Deism, pantheism, polytheism, henotheism, monotheism, and panentheism comprise the remaining categories in Peters' survey of contextual responses to the God question.

Because I consider my theological position to fit most closely with panentheism, Peters' description of this theistic category requires closer attention from me. Panentheism—especially as Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne, John B. Cobb, Jr., David Griffin, Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, Catherine Keller, and many others have constructed it—poses a different God question than the one shaping Peters' central analysis. Alongside the questions that arise about ultimacy and transcendence, panentheism poses questions about divine immanence. My response to Peters' claim that process theologians as panentheists sacrifice "ontological transcendence" (261) is to say that the criticism is, at best, a half truth. The theological and philosophical efforts of process theologians, whom Peters engages to describe *panentheism* (which is a term also used more widely in Christian circles to evoke God's omnipresence), are not directed toward analysis of divine immanence at the expense of divine transcendence. Instead, process theology refuses to limit God to the transcendent when Christological and incarnational traditions call for a more complex analysis of the divine nature. Process theologians posit that the question is not simply about how God is transcendent or how a conceptual, spiritual encounter with transcendence leads to the God question. The question is, what does it mean to say that the encounter with transcendence not only leads to the God question, but also to the question of how a God whose nature is transcendent also expresses generous immanence in relation to the world or cosmos. Peters himself acknowledges this point when he writes, "But some contemporary Christians want to emphasize divine immanence *along with* divine transcendence" (260, emphasis mine), and he refers to panentheism, open theism, and interactive Trinitarianism as examples of conceptual models proposing ways to

express the presence of God in history.

I have found on many occasions that my panentheism and Peters' theology have much in common, so I admit to feeling puzzled by his quick characterization and criticism. My reading of process theology and my exploration of panentheism seem to me to reinforce precisely what Peters is arguing in *God in Cosmic History*. Peters' claims about God seem highly consistent with process thought, and the two views are compatible in several ways. First, Peters' Cosmic History is compelling because God is drawn into the historical drama of human and nonhuman events, but Peters seems to be picturing God as actor on stage *with* creation. He agrees that "God works in, with, under, and through natural processes" (329).

Second, Peters' language evokes a version of panentheism, when he writes (citing Eric Voegelin's *Order and History* and seemingly agreeing): "Things to not happen in the astro-physical universe; the universe, together with all things founded in it, happen in God." The awareness that the entire cosmos is nested within something still grander, God's grace, becomes itself something the historian should pay heed to" (332). Peters' nesting metaphor returns in his final chapter to imply that all history and all beings are somehow nested in God or God's grace.

Third, Peters' most distinctive and significant theological insight is articulated in the word *adventus*. In discussing Robert John Russell's perspective on divine action, he affirms, "If genuine newness—*adventus*—is possible, then the divine promise for transformation becomes possible" (330). While Peters may criticize those panentheists who emphasize God's continuing creativity in the world rather than creation *ex nihilo*, he joins panentheists in celebrating the constant and faithful work of God to transform the contingent, flawed, wonderful world. I see no evidence that Peters adopts the lure of God or relational power as the mode of divine action, but the providential vision of God is common to Peters' and panentheistic theology.

Fourth, Peters seems to call for a relational worldview that neither divorces humans from nature (312) nor God from the cosmos. Process theology agrees with Peters, and this common perspective is already a transformative proposition in a world plagued by division and injustice. God's creative love and

responsive love (to use John Cobb and David Griffin's language) suggest how God's visionary engagement with humans and nonhumans alike is met with God's empathy for both the celebrated cosmos and the broken world. In process theology, divine grace could be said to be the call forward to a transformative future for humans, but also for every being. Sometimes the call forward feels like judgment when God's responds with hope to violence and injustice in the social and ecological order of the world. The beauty and goodness toward which God leads in a panentheist worldview mirror Peters' affirmation of a "vision of universal human equality" (331), but panentheism adds that God's interaction with nonhuman beings honors their intrinsic value and their future, too. Such a comprehensive view of justice and transformation fits Cosmic History and its ethic.

Conclusion

God in Cosmic History truly invites and demands more questions, conversations, and proposals. While

the book arises from and paves the way for more scholarly engagement, readers should not lose sight of Peters' vision and challenge. The book is a call to action, a disorientation of common assumptions, and a proleptic reorientation of values.

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