

Article



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The Cosmos in Light of the Cross: A Critical Response to Ted Peters

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Abstract | Ted Peters' idea of *Cosmic History* includes the scientific account of *Natural History* right along with the story of humanity according to *World History*. Cosmic History adds meaning to the scientific account of natural history. But, in my critique, I contend that it is God that provides this meaning, not we human beings. Instead of just an *anthropic* principle, I appeal to a *theanthropic* one. It is God who created the cosmos so that flesh would evolve for the Word to become flesh, and to unite all things in that incarnate Word.

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Introduction

“Is God the author of cosmic history? Does history author itself? Might there be co-authorship?” With those brief questions in his first paragraph Ted Peters orients this book, *God in Cosmic History* (Peters, 2017), for his readers.

The way the word “history” was commonly used seemed unsatisfactory to me as a student. I enjoyed history, the study of what humans of the past had done, but my primary interest, the physical sciences, wasn't part of it. And when I came to theology, I found that often only the drama of human history in relation to God was considered important. Everything else was just stage setting.

With *God in Cosmic History* we're dealing with very different thinking. History is not only the story of one biological species but of the entire universe and a putative God who is involved with everything. The concept of transcendence means that there is more to reality than what can meet our senses. Maybe God is not just “involved” but the author of this history, though Peters does not rush to affirm that. The

universe might be self-existent. Or there could be co-authorship.

The scope of this book is immense, far broader than a description of past events and religious interpretation of them. What it means to talk about history, science, myth, religion, consciousness, and transcendence are all well, though not exhaustively, treated.

For whom is the book intended? It should interest specialists, but may be particularly useful as a text for colleges and seminaries. While it does not address some topics needed in a science-religion course, it would provide a good background. The posing of questions and bibliographies at the end of each chapter point in that direction. A glossary of important terms would also help.

Should God be Included in History?

“World History” is human history, which is included within the larger story of the universe, “Big History”. “Cosmic History” includes Big History but also human meaning related to both past and future, the differentiation of human consciousness, and

possible roles of God in history. The word “history” can have four different senses - the events of the past, their academic study, their effect on us now, and an indication of finitude.

Peters gives a couple of reasons why God should be included as a topic in Cosmic History. Religions have played important roles in human history, and the universe does not explain its own existence. But a valuable criterion for such inclusion is also given - “Would Big History and World History be more coherent if a divine creator and redeemer belonged to the chronicle [of past events]?” (247)

Though humanity forms only a minute part of the cosmos, it cannot be neglected in the history of the whole. We are the only part of the universe we know of that can think and speak about history, so human consciousness is a crucial aspect of World History. The development of that consciousness, with emphasis on the concept of an “Axial Period” in which differentiated consciousness and sense of transcendent reality came into being in areas extending westward from China, will play an important role in considerations here.

The History of the Universe

The introductory chapter is followed by four chapters sketching the development of Cosmic History from the Big Bang through formation of the earth and biological evolution and concluding with the stone age and agricultural revolution. This treatment of natural history is generally good but one error should be addressed because it is widespread in non-technical discussions of cosmology.

The “singularity” with which the cosmic story begins is not a space-time event, let alone an object. It is as though an event were ripped out of space-time - “There is no there there”. Classical general relativity, on which our model universe is based, breaks down. Proposals to avoid this and perhaps get back “before the Big Bang” have not yet gotten observational support.

Biology also has a problem with its “Big Bang”, the origin of life, which has not been explained scientifically. But does that, together with the fact that “life scientists ... say that all life must come from prior life” really make as serious a “dilemma” as Peters, following Terrence Deacon, suggests? If abiogenesis

were a proven impossibility, serious scientists wouldn't continue to work on it.

Insistence that science *must* be able to solve this problem is a manifestation of the scientism that Peters will criticize, noting that that can properly be considered a religious view. But one can hope that science will be able to explain life's origin without adopting such a belief. That hope can appeal to the first chapter of Genesis, where God creates living things from previously created materials.

History is more than a record of past events. It is also effective history that “contributes to our self-understanding” (75). Not just physical development but emergence of consciousness and language are crucial aspects of our evolution, that eventually single out our species among those that have evolved.

Myth, Religion and History

Attention now turns to religion and spirituality, which emerge during evolution. Two chapters are devoted to a rich variety of religious symbols, spiritual sensibilities and origin myths. They are described as developments among cultures of foragers, farmers and early city dwellers, and involve forms of spirituality and religious belief whose scope is within the cosmos. Earth and sky deities, commitment to special parts of the earth, shamanism and belief in influence of the stars are common expressions.

The word “myth” should be used carefully, because of both its variety of meanings and its frequent pejorative use. Our author distinguishes three senses. Sense 1 is a “false story or mistaken belief”, while sense 2 is “a narrative about how the gods created the world in the beginning - *in illo tempore*”, and thus explains how things are today. Sense 3 is more abstract and multifaceted - “a conceptual set, a worldview, a persistent framework for interpreting new experiences.” (p. 94)

In the first sense we might speak, e.g., of myths of racial superiority. To illustrate the second, Peters expounds the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, where the primordial battle between Marduk and Tiamat and its consequences establish the pattern for life and experience in ancient Mesopotamia. It is especially with the third sense that problems arise. Today's science deserves a great deal of credit for its success

in describing the development of the earth, living things, and the entire universe. But claims that science provides the only truly reliable knowledge are the myth of scientism. Science can become a religion - and believers can in turn try to make their religion into science. The most notorious example is construction of "creation science" from the accounts of creation and sin in Genesis. Those accounts are the subject of our next two chapters.

The first account shows connections with the Babylonian creation story but in important ways demythologizes it. God creates by speaking, with no struggle involved. Though the point is debated, this account points to what would become the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*; Marduk made the world from the body of the slain Tiamat, but in Genesis 1 the creator needs no pre-existing material. And God's command to "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" is a dynamic element that contrasts with the idea of a fixed plan for a basically static world.

The second account focuses on the origin of humanity, describing it in a down to earth way. This is followed by humans' temptation and sin, a failure to obey God's command about the tree of knowledge. This story functions as myth in our second sense, a story about the beginning that explains things now. In a real way we are Eve or Adam, knowing what we should do but choosing to do something else. In spite of this, the Book of Revelation's image of the tree of life in the New Jerusalem suggests that sin does not have the last word.

Critical Thinking and the Rise of Science

Chapter 10 is critical in several ways, including definition of terms such as critical thinking and critical realism. Critical thinking is "the ability to hold two or more thoughts in mind at the same time," (p.128) Its emergence, associated with critical (differentiated) consciousness marks the key transition in history known as the axial period. Critical (as opposed to naive) realism means holding knowledge of empirical facts about the world together with a theoretical picture of it. "Imagination is more important than knowledge," Einstein said. Observational data cannot be ignored, but science is more than collection of data.

The development of our picture of the world is divided into four stages correlated with predominant types of

consciousness. In the earliest period the world was seen as "enchanted," populated by spiritual forces and supernatural beings. Development of a dualistic world view corresponded to the rise of differentiated consciousness. Body and soul, material and spiritual, physical and divine realms, were sharply distinguished. Deities no longer inhabited our world but a divine one. This view gave rise to the higher religions during the axial period and is the basis of the perennial philosophy.

The mechanistic view of nature is associated with Newton's work in the seventeenth century. The thoroughness with which the new science could explain phenomena gradually removed apparent need for God to be involved with physical phenomena. The world could be pictured as a clock, and God the clockmaker who wound it up in the beginning. Complete determination of future events by initial conditions is characteristic of this view.

One thing missing in this book is attention to the role of mathematics. Newton's development of calculus made possible the successes of his work and of science during the following centuries. The later discovery of non-Euclidean geometries showed that the mathematical patterns describing physical phenomena are contingent and not discernible by pure thought, and was essential for general relativity.

The mechanistic worldview would not survive discoveries leading to relativity, quantum mechanics, and what Peters calls a contingent view of nature. That refers to the fact that in quantum theory the development of a physical system is not determined by the system's initial conditions. I would include relativity theory as a factor in the transition from the mechanistic worldview. The field concept of Faraday and Maxwell was in tension with the mechanistic picture and eventually required special relativity. Relativity, more than quantum theory, took hold of the thinking of non-scientists in the first part of the twentieth century.

A proper understanding of relativity also helps in evaluating the "relativism" of post-modern deconstructionism. Contrary to popular belief, relativity theory does not say that "everything is relative." It relativized some common sense absolutes of the mechanistic worldview but introduced new and more abstract absolutes, like magnitudes of space-time

intervals. This should make us wary of corresponding claims that everything is relative in other areas.

A chapter on fine tuning and anthropic principles concludes the book's first half. The "anthropic coincidences" - values of physical constants and conditions of the universe that make possible the emergence of life - convince some that the universe must have been designed for life. Design implies a designer - maybe God. But our universe could be just one of a vast number in a multiverse, one in which conditions are just right for life. The multiverse has been used to support atheism, but there are religious scientists who view it favorably.

The Axial Hypothesis and the Future

The book's second part begins with a short section titled "The Axial Question of God and the Future of Life on Earth." It seems surprising that the first chapter is "War", but that makes some sense in view of characteristics of the axial age to be described. Peters gives a good critique of such concepts as sociobiology and selfish gene theory, which can suggest that propensity for war is hardwired into us. But he is realistic about the difficulty of eliminating war entirely in the present age.

The ideas of the axial breakthrough and associated axial concepts are presented at the beginning of a chapter about that breakthrough in China. It will continue in three more chapters about India, Greece, and the Middle East. These ideas originated with philosopher Karl Jaspers, who discerned a breakthrough or leap in human consciousness in these areas between about 800 and 200 BCE. Characteristics of this axial age are a sense of a mysterious, divine, supra-cosmic reality, the idea of a just and peaceful social order that judges the historical order as defective and self-destructive, and immediate access of individuals to this transcendent reality (185).

This hypothetical insight might have emerged from within the cultures under consideration, from without as revelation, or from a combination of the two. Though aware of key advances in understanding that took place in a European culture influenced by Christianity, Jaspers felt that an axis of world history centered on one area or religion would be too parochial, and therefore focused on an earlier and wider range of cultures. Africans or Native Americans may doubt

that parochialism has been avoided.

The key axial figures in China, Laozi and Confucius, were concerned with the relationship between life in the everyday world and a transcendent realm of justice. For Laozi, this all-encompassing reality is nameless but is called the Dao, the way. The empirical realm is only a copy or shadow of an eternal order. The Dao calls us to self-renunciation and an effective quietism. Confucius, on the other hand, was concerned to inculcate virtue - benevolence, love or simply humanity - as a way of conforming oneself and society to the will of heaven.

What is ultimate for these axial figures is the Dao or heaven. "The answer to the question of God in axial China," Peters says, "Was not God." (195)

The Indian situation is more complex. Brahmanism has roots in the mythic texts of the *Rigveda*. In the later Upanishads the idea emerges that all things are one, Brahman, "the underlying reality that makes thinghood possible" (204). Thus it is delusion, *Maya*, to think of oneself as a separate self instead of being fundamentally identical with Brahman. While there is a plethora of deities in Hinduism, they too are one with Brahman. To oversimplify, Brahman corresponds to God for Hindus. However, there are differing views about whether or not Brahman has a personal aspect.

The Buddhist branch of the Brahmanistic tree is more radical. Emptiness rather than fullness is fundamental, and identity of the self with Brahman is replaced by the non-self. Realization of this reality by following the Eightfold Path leads to *nirvana*, the egoless state of perfect stillness. As the God question is answered in Hinduism by Brahman, perfect fullness, it is answered in Buddhism by perfect emptiness.

The chapter on Greece begins by noting that Socrates was condemned because of the charge of atheism, even though he believed in a single God. Socrates' axial insight was elaborated by his student Plato and then by Aristotle. The question of the right ordering of human society was addressed by these thinkers, and transcendent morality and justice was seen as providing a model for, and standing in judgment over, empirical social relationships. All these ideas would be influential for the later developments of the religious traditions to be discussed next.

Finally we come to “The Axial Breakthrough in Israel”, which gave rise to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Peters begins with the story of Moses and the burning bush, and God’s ambiguous answer to Moses’ question about the divine name. It is a name that can be taken to mean “I am who I am,” with the implication that God is *a se*, self-existent. Or it could be “I will be who I will be,” indicating that no one can get control of God by invoking a name. This God *YHWH* is not simply one more intra-cosmic deity.

Such an understanding of God is clearly in this story, whatever one may think of its historicity. God is also revealed here as one who intends to free the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, and thus is concerned with justice. That idea is broadened and deepened by the later prophets of Israel: the God who transcends the world is concerned with justice for all people in the world.

The teaching and ministry of Jesus were within that Mosaic and prophetic tradition. Seen as a threat to religious authority and political power, he was condemned and executed by crucifixion. Followers convinced that he had been raised from death began not only to repeat his teachings but to teach *about* Jesus -- to proclaim that in him a new act of creation had taken place, bringing people to a right relationship with God. In order to make sense of these ideas, Jesus came to be seen as an incarnation of the transcendent God.

The message proclaimed by Muhammed and recorded in the Qur’an claims to be the ultimate revelation of Allah (related to the Hebrew word *El* for God) and at the same time as old as creation. The law of Moses and the Christian gospels are thought by Muslims to be partial (and to some extent corrupted) forms of God’s revelation. Muhammed’s message of one supreme God was influential in the formation of a unified Islamic community.

These specific axial developments are followed by a chapter titled “Models of God”. It sets out nine ways of responding to the God question and consequent beliefs about the relationship of such an ultimate reality to the world -- in particular, whether that reality can be seen as the world’s creator.

Applications of the foregoing discussion follow in four chapters. Relationships between science and

scientism, controversies about evolution, the question of extraterrestrial life, and prospects for an ethically sound planetary society are explored in light of the insights that have been considered. The book concludes with an afterword on the God question.

I feel that it is helpful to consider the question of God and God’s relationship with the cosmos from the standpoint of a hypothetical axial breakthrough which spanned several ancient cultures. At the same time I see the force of criticisms of this idea by Pannenberg and Voegelin which Peters mentions (333). They argue that while Jaspers wanted to replace the axis of history which Christianity had provided with a culturally broader one, that was done by imposing an eclectic version of Christianity on the earlier period to produce a Christianity without Christ.

Conclusion

Whether or not we understand this as a result of an axial breakthrough, people from a wide range of cultures can believe that there is an ultimate reality, God. But who or what that reality is is for God to reveal. The most profound revelation is that God, without ceasing to be God, has become a participant in the world’s history and shared in its travails and suffering. That participation is symbolized by the historical cross of Christ and the resurrection of the crucified one. The relationship between God and the cosmos which science studies can be stated with the title of a book of mine, *The Cosmos in the Light of the Cross* (Murphy, 2003).

This means, to give one example, that the anthropic coincidences point to something deeper than the fact that the universe may be designed. They suggest not just an *anthropic* principle but a *theanthropic* one, that God created the cosmos so that flesh would evolve for the Word to become flesh, and to unite all things in that incarnate Word.

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