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Would the discovery of alien life prove theologically embarrassing? A response to Paul Davies

Rob Cook

Dr. Rob Cook is Head of Theology at Redcliffe College, Gloucester.

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No planet knows that this
Our wayside planet, carrying land and wave,
Love and life multiplied, and pain and bliss,
Bears, as chief treasure, one forsaken grave.¹

At first sight Davies seems something of an enigma having produced books like *God and the New Physics*² and *The Mind of God*³ in which he demonstrated a deep fascination with theology and its interface with science, culminating in his receipt of the prestigious Templeton prize for ‘entrepreneurs of the spirit’ in 1995. Indeed he is not just fascinated by the subject but seems to enjoy a religious faith of sorts. McGrath writes, ‘While Davies does not approach his subject from what might be called a “conventional theistic perspective”, it is clear that he is sympathetic to a religious understanding of the universe.’⁴ However, one would never deduce this from his recent book *The Eerie Silence: Are We Alone in the Universe?*⁵ which is a follow-up from his earlier, *Are we Alone?*⁶ In this more recent work he not only seems to discount the theological perspective with sentences like, ‘above all, [life] got going without the use of an intelligent designer’⁷ but also includes a section on the impact of the discovery of alien life on religion in which he argues that the Christian faith is in turmoil over the matter and would be deeply embarrassed if such life were ever to be discovered. This article will seek to clarify Davies’ theological position and to evaluate it from a Christian perspective and then proceed to provide a Christian response to his sometimes rather dismissive remarks on the Christian stance regarding extra-terrestrial life.

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- 1 From ‘Christ in the Universe’ by Alice Meynell in *The New Oxford Book of English Verse*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 791. I would like to dedicate this paper to my daughter, Imogen with whom I have had many interesting discussions about science and the stars and we have enjoyed watching the movie ‘Contact’ many times together!
 - 2 P. Davies, *God and the New Physics* (London: Dent, 1983).
 - 3 P. Davies, *The Mind of God* (London: Simon & Shuster Ltd., 1992).
 - 4 A.E. McGrath, *Science and Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 179.
 - 5 P. Davies, *The Eerie Silence* (London: Allen Lane, 2010).
 - 6 P. Davies, *Are We Alone?* (London: Penguin, 1995).

Paul Davies' position on religion

The best place to start is to examine the substance of his Templeton prize acceptance speech. Apparently that which distances him from his atheist colleagues is the metaphysical implications of the strong evidence in favour of the anthropic principle:

To me, the true miracle of nature is to be found in the ingenious and unswerving lawfulness of the cosmos, a lawfulness that permits complex order to emerge from chaos, life to emerge from inanimate matter, and consciousness to emerge from life, without the need for the occasional supernatural prod; a lawfulness that produces beings who not only ask great questions of existence, but who, through science and other methods of enquiry, are even beginning to find answers.⁸

Being convinced both that the laws of nature are clearly contingent, that they could have been otherwise, and also that the multiverse attempt to avoid the conclusion that they have been randomly contrived is unacceptable, he concludes that the evidence 'points forcefully to a deeper underlying meaning to existence. Some call it purpose, some design.'⁹

So why is he reluctant simply to call himself a theist? Surely purpose entails a purposer and design a designer. Well, we have already clearly seen that he is unhappy with an interventionist God, one who providentially influences his creation, one who prods at it. More of that later. At best we seem to be left with a kind of deism. But he is also unhappy with a being who creates and winds up the cosmic watch, or in modern parlance lights up the big-bang. In a conversation with Adams he says, 'I reject the notion of a being who floats there for all eternity, then presses a button, so that – bang! – the universe appears, and then sits back to watch the action, or maybe interferes with it from time to time.'¹⁰

He has another problem with the notion of a God, however. 'If you are using God to explain the universe you get into the problem of who created God.'¹¹ Now he knows very well that the way out for the philosopher of religion is to avoid such a regress by affirming that, although the universe is clearly contingent in that it is neither self-explanatory since it could have been otherwise, nor is it apparently uncaused in that the big-bang cries out for an explanation (the currently fashionable idea that this resulted from a spontaneous, uncaused quantum fluctuation still needs to explain the source of the quantum world itself), then the source of this cosmos must be a necessary being. This necessary being would be uncaused and its nature is such that it could not have been otherwise than it is. Davies knows this manoeuvre and rejects it. How can a timeless being with a fixed nature make choices which could have been otherwise, he asks,

7 P. Davies, *The Eerie Silence*, 36.

8 http://cosmos.asu.edu/prize_address.htm

9 Ibid.

10 <http://www.abc.net.au/science/bigquestions/s460742.htm>

11 Ibid.

and how could such choices be other than arbitrary? He puts it this way, 'But if God's nature is fixed by his necessity, could he have chosen to create a different universe? Only if his choice was not rational at all, but whimsical, the theistic equivalent of tossing a coin. But in that case existence is arbitrary, and we might as well be content with an arbitrary universe and leave it at that.'¹²

It is certainly true that the relationship between a wholly timeless and necessary being with its temporal contingent creation has long been a problem for classical theism but, since Hegel, there is a growing consensus that the way through the dilemma is to postulate a form of di-polar theism whereby God is timeless and immutable in some respects and 'timeful' and interactive in others. This was the conceptual project behind Process Theology. This too is what Ward was trying to explain to the followers of Dawkins, 'God is necessary in existence and knowing all possible states, and in having the ability to actualize any possible state. But God is contingent in the choice of which states to actualize, and in any subsequent divine interactions with these states.'¹³ He goes on to suppose that this divine freedom could, indeed, be an aspect of God's necessary nature.

Davies' argument that radical freedom must result in whimsical, irrational choices is surely equally unconvincing. I can have genuine free choice between, say, holiday destinations, all of which would prove rejuvenating, yet if questioned once the choice was made, I could still give cogent reasons why I finally came to that decision. As Ward again explains, so also with God, 'such creative choice is not without a cause. The cause is a choosing mind. And it is not without a reason. The reason is to bring new sorts of good things or states into being.'¹⁴

But let us return to Davies' disdain of the floating God who eventually decides to press the button. This is reminiscent of Dawkins' conception of the Christian God which Eagleton calls 'the yeti theory of God' – a putative object somewhere out there for which there is no solid evidence. Consciously following in Aquinas' footsteps Eagleton helpfully explains:

For Judeo-Christianity, God is not a person in the sense that Al Gore arguably is. Nor is he a principle, an entity, or "existent": in one sense of that word it would be perfectly coherent for religious types to claim that God does not in fact exist. He is, rather, the condition of possibility of any entity whatsoever, including ourselves. He is the answer to why there is something rather than nothing. God and the universe do not add up to two, any more than my envy and my left foot constitute a pair of objects.¹⁵

The difference between the atheist and the theist is not, therefore, that they both believe in the same universe except that the theist believes in one extra item. God is not a being but that which lets-be as Macquarrie avers, 'God is the *incomparable* that *lets-be* and is *present-and-manifest*.'¹⁶ Nor does this mysterious

12 P. Davies, *The Mind of God*, 179-80.

13 K. Ward, *Why There Almost Certainly is a God* (Oxford: Lion, 2008), 86.

14 *Ibid.*, 87.

15 <http://www.Irb.co.uk/v28/n20/terry-eagleton/lunging-flailingmispun.ching>

16 J. Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (London: SCM, 1977), 115.

reality float about which is a spatio-temporal notion. As Davies himself loves to allude, Augustine explained that God does not create in time but with time.

Davies rehearses his theistic misgivings in *The Goldilocks Enigma*¹⁷ where he also wonders why the creator should be the traditional deity for ‘the “designing agency” can be a committee of gods, for example.’¹⁸ However, almost certainly a sophisticated theology would not be polytheistic. Logically there can only be one perfect being who is omnipotent and omnipresent; the gods would necessarily be penultimate realities. There would also be the problem of how their domains would be divided up. The uniformity of nature suggests one supreme mind behind it all. Ward is surely correct when he writes, ‘the search for unity and generality in one of the main sources of the scientific enterprise, and it is also characteristic of religion. Thus the religious believer seeks to unify the various attitudes which he encounters which the transcendent has called forth by relating them to one all-inclusive intentional object.’¹⁹

This is as far as our natural theology in the light of science can take us but, of course, Christianity takes us much further and postulates on the basis of divine revelation that the ground of our being also welcomes us into intimate relationship, for God is love. Davies cannot go along with this. In his conversation with Adams, he confesses that ‘whilst I’d love to believe in a guardian-angel, personal god, I find it very difficult as a scientist to do so.’²⁰ Leaving aside the observation that he is, unfortunately again, using rather demeaning language, it should be noted that he does not explain why. Only scientism, the worldview that what science cannot detect and measure cannot exist (but mind? freedom? beauty? the moral imperative?) and therefore concludes, *ipso facto* any kind of God must be merely imaginary. But, as we have seen, Davies is not one of these devotees. He has already granted that the universe seems to suggest purpose and design, and we have already noted that this would seem to entail a designer, but surely that which is capable of creative design must be a form of consciousness. It does not seem unreasonable that such consciousness might choose to reveal itself to its conscious creatures and share the project. Christians claim s/he has done so and that it has been revealed that the whole project is a sharing of creative love.

Christianity and alien life

Before evaluating the charges in Davies’ latest book we need to explore a couple of extra ones that are found in his earlier *Are We Alone?*

Alien life would disprove the Christian belief that life is a miracle

Davies is not a fan of any miraculous claims, much less one that involves the

17 P. Davies, *The Goldilocks Enigma* (London: Penguin, 2007).

18 *Ibid.*, 300.

19 K. Ward, *The Concept of God* (London: Fount, 1977), 103.

20 http://cosmos.asu.edu/prize_address.htm

origin of life. Again, in conversation with Adams he says, 'As a scientist, I find the notion of miracles utterly repugnant. I wouldn't think much of a being who creates a flawed universe, and then meddles with it fitfully.'²¹ He is convinced that the hypothesis that life began on earth by an act of divine intervention would be dealt a serious blow if life were to be discovered elsewhere. Davies writes, 'the knowledge that intelligent alien beings exist would make it extremely hard to sustain the miraculous hypothesis.'²² Before going on to describe his reasoning, a few observations are in order. Firstly, note the repetition of the unhelpful 'as a scientist' phrase. Science is a very effective tool for describing and understanding physical regularities in the world; it is not a worldview. It cannot *qua* science proscribe the possibility of miracle. Secondly, note the emotive 'flawed', 'meddles' and 'fitfully'. Picasso may well have used paint brushes produced by factory machines. Machines have their value and their limitations. That the paint brush cannot paint a masterpiece does not mean that it is 'flawed', nor is Picasso 'meddling' with it, nor is his activity 'fitful' rather than fully purposeful. Similarly it is logically possible that God produced a remarkable world of self-organization which was however, perhaps necessarily, unable to take the step into life so that it required God to take up the material world and create something new for a second time. More on this later, but what of Davies' argument based on alien life? Surely the Christian who believes life originated miraculously on earth can simply say that obviously God could perform similar miracles elsewhere. Davies tries to cut off this route by an appeal to theology for 'the essence of a miracle is that it is a special, singular and significant event.'²³ Well, admittedly the series of miracles in question would certainly be 'special' and 'significant' but they would not be 'singular'. But why should they be? Jesus, for instance, is recorded as having miraculously raised more than one person from the dead, why in principle then should God not so raise more than one planet from its inert state?

The argument is manifestly weak but I wish to look into this antipathy towards life as a miracle a little further. Clearly one would expect it among atheist scientists but it is also found amongst Christian scientists. Alexander, for example, takes the naturalist view since the postulation of miracle inhibits the scientific quest for explanation.²⁴ But, as a Christian, one could equally argue that the postulation that life is not a miracle inhibits the theological quest for evidences of God's special providence in the cosmos. The fact is that any one who takes the Bible at all seriously must leave a place for the God-of-the-gaps. Scripture is full of God's 'mighty acts' in history from the exodus of the Hebrews to the resurrection of Christ. Orthodox theology has always held that God's providence is both general (the rain falls on the just and the unjust) and also special (for example, intercessory prayer presupposes that God can step in and make things

21 Ibid.

22 P. Davies, *Are We Alone?* 28.

23 Ibid., 18.

24 D. Alexander, *Creation or Evolution – Do We Have to Choose?* (Oxford: Monarch, 2008), ch.16.

happen in response to our petitions). But there is a real danger that some Christian scientists eradicate special providence from their theological lexicon with their God-of-the-gaps phobia. Yet, interestingly, there is another area of theology which entails the concept and that is the origin of the universe itself. Davies is enticed by some recent theories that the cosmos could be self-caused. He explains, 'there are even models involving causal loops or backwards in time causation, where the universe creates itself.'²⁵ Now if such counter-intuitive notions are at all intelligible, and evidently some theoretical physicists think they are, then Christians must descent from them, contending that there is indeed a causal gap at the inception of the Big Bang itself and that God must be invoked as that cause; surely the ultimate example of the God-of-the-gaps argument!

The fact is, regarding the origin of life the jury is out. Alexander admits that 'this is a real gap in our scientific knowledge, make no mistake.'²⁶ Davies agrees. How did chemicals become information bearing? It is as if hardware spontaneously, albeit gradually, emerged into software. In 1999 he wrote, 'It is like trying to explain how a kite can evolve into a radio-controlled aircraft. Can the laws of nature as we presently comprehend them account for such a transition? I do not believe they can.'²⁷ The last decade has not changed Davies' mind for in his latest book he points out that in his *magnum opus* Darwin omitted any account of the origin of life. "One might as well speculate about the origin of matter", he quipped. Two centuries later we are still largely in the dark about how life started.'²⁸

Surely, in the light of this there is a *prima facie* argument for the existence and activity of God. The atheist philosopher Flew thought so and it recently converted him to a kind of remote, impersonal theism not so different from Davies'. Flew concluded, 'The only satisfactory explanation for the origin of such "end-directed, self-replicating" life as we see on earth is an infinite intelligent mind.'²⁹ The mathematician J. Lennox agrees, arguing that a special miracle is required to initiate life.³⁰

Now I want to make it clear that I am not recommending this position. For all I know, one day a natural mechanism may be discovered and clearly there are interesting leads that biologists are following up, but I do want to warn against the insistent and over-dogmatic voice coming from many scientists, including Christian ones, that, to quote Davies again, 'above all, [life] got going without the use of an intelligent designer.'³¹ Or, to give one final example, de Duve stridently rejects the miracle hypothesis because 'this theory, in the light of compelling evidence, now appears gratuitous and heuristically sterile. The naturalist expla-

25 P. Davies, *The Goldilocks Enigma*, 301.

26 D. Alexander, *Creation or Evolution – Do We Have to Choose?*, 335.

27 P. Davies, *The Fifth Miracle* (London: Penguin, 1999), 95.

28 P. Davies, *The Eerie Silence*, 26.

29 A. Flew, *There is a God* (New York: Harper One, 2008), 132.

30 J. Lennox, *God's Undertaker – Has Science Buried God*, (Oxford: Lion, 2007), ch.9-11.

31 P. Davies, *The Eerie Silence*, 36.

nation is consistent with the explainability [*sic.*] of life itself and is supported by all available data.³² But that which intimates a creator God would hardly be 'heuristically sterile' and 'all available data' emphatically does not point to a naturalistic explanation for which there is zero 'compelling evidence'! Long ago the philosopher John Locke warned against the logical fallacy of *argumentum ad verecundiam* (literally 'argument towards modesty/shyness') which refers to the tendency to defer, for example, to those with the title 'Dr.' and who wear white coats even when they are legislating beyond their expertise (cf. celebrity endorsements!). We do well to keep this fallacy in mind when we listen, for instance, to scientists (or indeed philosophers and theologians) speculating dogmatically beyond the evidence. Christians should encourage their brother/sister scientists in their search for a scientific explanation for the origin of life and if they eventually find one we can all rejoice over the ingenuity of the Creator but Christian scientists should also countenance the possibility that this just could be where special providence intervened.

The religious views of vastly advanced alien civilizations would render ours untenable

In his earlier *Are We Alone?* Davies argues that we will either discover that such an alien civilization has discarded religion in which case it will be very difficult for us not to follow suit, or their religion will be so far advanced of ours that we again will have to drastically alter our beliefs. But as Wilkinson argues, the most important point to make to Davies is that the Christian worldview is not evolutionary but revelatory.³³ It is not just the product of natural theology based on God's creation but on God personally sharing the deep purposes of Godself. God has revealed decisively and definitively through the incarnation of Jesus what s/he is like and what s/he requires of spiritual beings. To be sure, Christian theology will be constantly refined in the light of ongoing discoveries of all the intellectual disciplines but its core message will remain the same. The insights of alien beings will enrich and enhance Christian theology but they will not change its fundamental insights into the nature of God.

Let us now turn to Davies' latest book and assess his other challenges.

Being parochial, geocentric and anthropocentric, religion is deeply confused about the alien question

Admittedly the average pew goer may be all of the above. Many of them may have attitudes 'based on a view of the cosmos that belongs to a bygone age.'³⁴ But then so do many average cinema going secularists for whom hundred year old relativity theory and quantum mechanics are terribly *avant garde!* But to be fair one must compare like with like and the kind of religious thinkers listed

32 C. De Duve, 'Lessons of Life' in S. Dick, (ed.) *Many Worlds* (London: Templeton Foundation Press, 2000), 5.

33 D. Wilkinson, *Alone in the Universe* (Crowborough: Monarch, 1997), 127.

34 P. Davies, *The Eerie Silence*, 188.

amongst this journal's editors are as keen as Davies to think cosmically. Great scientist-theologians like de Chardin have taken up Yahweh's challenge in the closing chapters of the book of Job to decentre the human race in the face of God's vast creation.

The truth is Christians are no more confused than scientists about alien life. Davies has spent the whole book explaining that scientists have no idea as to whether there will be alien life out there; no idea, if there is, whether there will be any intelligent life out there; and no idea if there is intelligent life whether there will be any technological civilizations out there. Regarding the spiritual state of any aliens there might be, surely Christians are wise to remain agnostic and counsel a wait-and-see policy. This is not confusion, just good sense. The scientific enterprise is at an advantage in hoping to discover deep structured laws which will drive their conclusions, for instance the probability of alien life evolving intelligence, but theologians must wait patiently to find out what God in his freedom has arranged, for example, for the salvation of any non-human spiritual beings; such matters are, in principle, unpredictable.

*Christian soteriology is anthropocentric rendering alien
salvation problematic*

Davies notes that, for Christians, God incarnated as a human and came to earth to save humans. He also surmises that there may well be vastly more advanced civilizations in the universe which are likely to be more ethically advanced also. In fact they may have used genetic engineering to eliminate immoral behaviour. 'By our standards they would be truly saintly. And herein lies the real crisis for Christianity. If we miserable humans get to be saved, surely the saintly aliens deserve a chance too?'³⁵ Now we need to challenge some of Davies' assumptions before we explore this issue. To begin with, from our experience, moral advancement is not necessarily commensurate with technological progress. Our moral aspirations may have become more noble, for example world-wide condemnation of slavery and child labour, but our human heart remains sadly unchanged with wars, torture, and indeed slavery and child labour still rife on the planet. But Davies thinks these evil tendencies can be bred out to produce saints. There are two questionable assumptions here. Firstly that human evil is genetic, ignoring both the nurture-produced element and also the important factor of free-will responsibility. Following on from this, the second problem is that Davies' hypothetical genetic thoroughbreds who can only do good would not qualify for the status of sainthood since this quality is, by definition, an achievement of human will in co-operation with divine grace; it cannot be ready-made.

To deal with the theological possibilities regarding alien salvation I will employ the resources of the burgeoning discipline of the Christian theology of religions which explores what the attitude of Yahweh might be towards other religious traditions on earth. There is a clear analogy here with extra-terrestrial

35 Ibid., 189.

spiritualities. Davies offers two possibilities: saviours provided for each planet with intelligent life or one earthly saviour requiring cosmic evangelism, but in fact there are many more.

However, the first question to ask is: would these advanced beings have souls to save? Lewis is helpful here. He prefers the term 'rational souls' for beings capable of spiritual awareness. He explains, 'By this I include not merely the faculty to abstract and calculate, but the apprehension of values, the power to mean by "good" something more than "good for me" or even "good for my species".'³⁶ In other words, creatures who have heard God's call to forego the evolutionary imperative of the survival of the fittest in favour of community, cooperation, worship and service. Lewis conjectures that there could be some beings that might appear very intelligent and be able to talk but we would eventually discover that they are only 'capable of pursuing or enjoying only natural ends.'³⁷ Indeed, he observes, there are some human beings who have managed so to suppress their souls that they behave like this on earth. Alternatively, saintly aliens might appear to us to be simpletons with no technology. With the track record of our colonial past, this thought evinces a prayer from Lewis, 'God help them!' He concludes wryly, 'I have wondered before now whether the vast astronomical distances may not be God's quarantine precautions.'³⁸

The advent of consciousness in the universe is mysterious enough – no one has any idea how awareness emerges from neural networks and so it is no surprise that the genesis of a creature's spiritual awareness is equally baffling. Is spirituality, including an awareness of the divine and the moral imperative to fight against one's instincts a 'natural' evolutionary step, another emergent quality, which one can expect to be ubiquitous in the cosmos, or is it something super-added by God and therefore, might be very rare, or even exclusively human? Turl argues the latter dualist case based on biblical passages which suggest that the soul can outlive the brain (e.g. 2 Cor.5.3)³⁹ but others would disagree, contending either that God recreates psycho-somatic beings *ex nihilo* at the eschaton, or that consciousness begins as an emergent quality of the brain but is subsequently able to disengage, rather like ball-lightning plasma floating away from a lightning bolt.

The second question is: if they are spiritual beings, would they be a fallen race like ours or like the Perelandrans of Lewis' novel. The probability of fallenness seems to be high, however. Since all self-aware creatures are weak and vulnerable facing the inevitable prospect of death, they are naturally afraid and insecure and therefore prone to ruthless competition so as to promote a bogus security. They also have their animal ancestry to contend with which has bequeathed them strong instincts for sex, territory and survival. If, at an advanced evolutionary stage, they begin to feel the challenge of God towards a new way

36 C.S. Lewis, *Fern-Seed and Elephant*, (Glasgow: Fount, 1977), 88.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., 93.

39 J. Turl, 'All Things New', *Science and Christian Belief*, 19, 2 (2007), 155.

of life marked by worship and selfless cooperation it would prove extremely difficult to forsake their tried and trusted lustful and competitive practises.

Cosmic theologies: the options

It is time to note the various strategies suggested by theologians regarding salvation for non-Christians on earth and then test them as possible ways forward for extra-terrestrial salvation.

Reincarnation

This exotic view is seriously suggested by the eminent theologian and philosopher, Hick. In brief, it is driven by his attempt to promote a kind of purgatory doctrine whereby the imperfectly learned virtues of all human beings are further developed *post-mortem*. For virtues like courage to be inculcated the next environment needs to be dangerous with the possibility of mortal harm and so the evolution of the soul may continue to a third place. He is open to the possibility that these environments may be located elsewhere in the universe.

This is not the place to critique this unusual position, indeed I have done so elsewhere⁴⁰ but suffice it to say in this context, that he tends to the view that this earthly existence is the soul's first one since we have no recollection of past lives which would be needed if we are to be in a position to be able to learn from them. He concludes, we are like runners in a relay race, 'carrying the torch for a short time during which we bear a unique responsibility.'⁴¹ What is relevant to remark here is to observe that the idea that this is the first staging post for cosmic souls seems very problematic when, as Davies informs us, our species has existed for only one hundred thousandth of the age of the cosmos and therefore, if there is life elsewhere it will probably be much older than on earth.

*Restrictive-access exclusivism*⁴²

This is the view that unless one has heard and responded to the gospel of Jesus Christ damnation must follow. This position has been common in evangelical circles and driven many a sensitive soul onto the mission field. It is a hard saying indeed and the destruction rate must be extremely high. Punt calculates, 'It is conservatively estimated that throughout all of history 75% of those who have lived and died have never heard the gospel. Reasonable estimates range as high as 90%.⁴³ One would, of course, need to add on to this figure all fallen

40 R. Cook, 'Can Christianity Accommodate Reincarnation?', *Dharma Deepika* 32.14.2 (2010) 38-49.

41 J. Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2006), 200. For a more detailed treatment see his *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan, 1966).

42 I am grateful to Gavin D'Costa for this taxonomy. See his *Christianity and World Religions* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 6-7.

43 N. Punt., *What's Good about the Good News?* (Chicago: Northland, 1988), 79.

souls throughout the cosmos. Calvinists with their strong view of predestination and election seem to have no problem with this approach however. For example, Strange writes, 'As the ordinary means is traditionally thought to be *fides ex auditu* [faith through hearing] through the human messenger, then those who never hear must lie outside God's salvific will and Christ's atoning provisions.'⁴⁴ The problem of the unevangelised? What problem?! Some, however, will find this approach impossible to square with God's infinite love and will prefer the faith of Lewis: 'We must surely believe that the divine charity is as fertile in resource as it is measureless in condescension.'⁴⁵

The evangelisation imperative remains high for people of this view and would include any fallen aliens that may be discovered. Davies writes, 'Humans thus assume the responsibility for a sort of cosmic crusade, presumably at first by radio, raising the amusing prospect that if we ever make contact with ET, Christians may present themselves as the aliens' route to salvation rather than vice versa!'⁴⁶ Here Davies is falling into the trap of imagining that a technologically more advanced civilization would necessarily be spiritually more advanced. The Christian evangelist does not claim spiritual superiority anyway. Rather she humbly claims that she is privileged to be a custodian of divine revelation aware, as the Israelites were made to be aware (Deut.7:6-8), that this is the result purely of divine grace.

But such radio evangelism would face another obstacle (not to mention the time lapse problem). To use a piece of sociological jargon, the message would probably be completely outside the aliens' 'plausibility structure', or to use a phrase of William James, for them it might well be a 'dead option'. Drees enables us to grasp this problem by imaginatively reversing the process. He asks rhetorically, 'would we ourselves be inspired by information about a six-legged blue person on some planet X many light years away?'⁴⁷

Universal-access exclusivism

This is the view that salvation is only available through faith in Jesus Christ but this opportunity will be given to the unevangelised at or beyond death. Christ's descent into the land of the dead to proclaim his victory is usually cited in defence of this approach (*vide* 1 Pet.3:18-9; 4:6). This form of exclusivism could easily be extended to include alien life.

Many will find the idea of the sacrifice of one man on a remote planet long ago having such cosmic import rather implausible but this incredulity is not new. The 18th Century German critic, Lessing wrote of the 'ugly broad ditch' which separates this offensively contingent claim from what is universally ac-

44 D. Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation among the Unevangelised* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), 284.

45 C. S. Lewis, *Fern-Seed and Elephant*, 90.

46 P. Davies, *The Eerie Silence*, 189.

47 W. B. Drees, 'Bethlehem: Center of the Universe?' in R. Stannard (ed.), *God for the Twenty First Century* (London: SPCK, 2000), 67.

cessible through reason. Indeed Paul himself admitted that the gospel message of salvation through a Roman crucifixion was ‘a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles’ and yet he confidently asserted that ‘the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength’ (1 Cor.1:23,25).

Structural inclusivism

This position contends that although it was Jesus who achieved atonement (atonement) with God, people may avail themselves of this salvation through the resources of their own religions rather analogous to the way the Israelites in the Old Testament were able to commune with the God of Jesus Christ. Perhaps like them, the aliens would have had their prophets and inspired texts that intimate a cosmic event beyond their horizon.

In a detailed exegesis of Colossians 1:15-20 regarding Christ as cosmic redeemer, Davis concludes that, ‘the human nature of *Homo sapiens* could be designated by God to represent the nature of all sentient, embodied beings. God is free in his sovereignty to impute the merits of the death of Christ not only to elect humans but to any ‘elect’ beings whatsoever.’⁴⁸

Restrictivist inclusivism

This is similar to the previous position except that other religions are not viewed as salvifically helpful; unevangelised seekers may be saved through Christ in spite of their religion, perhaps through a sincere quest for God. This could be extended to both terrestrial and extra-terrestrial questors.

Unitary pluralism

This view, unacceptable to evangelicalism, contends that all religions are equally efficacious in bringing their adherents to salvation and communion with the one ultimate Reality. It works by a revisionist approach to the cross of Christ which emphatically rejects penal substitution along with any other view that maintains that the cross changed God in any way. Rather the suffering of the God-man demonstrates God’s eternal nature of self-giving love. The cross is thus, to adopt the theological jargon, illustrative rather than constitutive. Some thinkers, like Hick who is the best known advocate of unitary pluralism, go a step further and reject the incarnation too, thus putting all religions on an even footing.

This approach could be applied to the alien issue by insisting that there is no need for incarnation or atonement to be enacted on any planet whatsoever. A more dramatic pluralist alternative would be to postulate multiple contextual incarnations and atonements for each needy planet. Meynell reaches towards this in a later stanza of the poem which formed the epigraph to this article:

48 J. J. Davis, ‘Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence and the Christian Doctrine of Redemption’ in *Science and Christian Belief*, 9 (1997) 34.

But in the eternities,
Doubtless we shall compare together, hear
A million alien Gospels, in what guise
He trod the Pleiades, the Lyre, the Bear.⁴⁹

There was a minor altercation on this issue in the 1950s when Milne strongly reacted against the notion of a plurality of atoning acts: 'The Christian would recoil in horror from such a conclusion. We cannot imagine the Son of God suffering vicariously on each of a myriad of planets.'⁵⁰ Mascall responded by reminding Milne that the horror was not God's last word since that torture was 'changed into victory and glory, why cannot the change happen again elsewhere?'⁵¹ he asks. We might add that the Jew and the Muslim recoil in horror from the notion of the incarnate God dying on the cross and yet orthodox Christians insist that it happened.

Pluriform pluralism

This is similar to the previous position except there is equivocation on the nature of the Ultimate which, it is contended, is neither one nor many but may be apprehended as such (cf. the light-wave paradox). Panikkar, one of the leading advocates of this position writes, 'almost all theologians, as Ibn 'Arabi so pointedly stressed with his theory of *coincidentia oppositorum*, are forced to use antinomic language and paradoxes when referring to the Divine... Truth cannot have a unique and univocal expression.'⁵²

Heim is another exemplar of this pluriform approach and he argues that the three ways that the early Christians encountered God (transcendental Father, Jesus, and the indwelling Spirit) which resulted in the formal doctrine of Trinity suggests a rich plurality in God which leaves open the possibility that other religions could encounter Godself in yet different modes.⁵³ This approach could be exploited by those inspired by the Meynell position.

Ethical pluralism

This view disregards dogma and focuses on praxis. It is the way humans live that determines how close they are to God. In the words of the heavenly host, 'Peace to men of good will' (Lk.2.14). Its main advocate is Knitter who emphasises the Spirit over the Son, and this Spirit of God promotes Kingdom values amongst all religions.⁵⁴ It would be a small step to extend this approach to spiritually aware aliens.

49 'Christ in the Universe' by Alice Meynell.

50 E. A. Milne, *Modern Cosmology and the Christian Idea of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 153.

51 E.L. Mascall, *Christian Theology and Natural Science* (London: Longmans, 1956), 39.

52 R. Panikkar, 'The Pluralism of Truth', <http://www.dhdi.free.fr/recherches/horizons interculturals/articles/panikkarpluralism.pdf>

53 S. M. Heim. His thesis of plural salvations is worked through in *Salvations* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995).

54 P. F. Knitter. His thesis is worked out in *Jesus and the Other Names* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996).

Theological strategies are therefore in place if and when we are contacted by aliens. Most Christians will not view them all as viable, indeed, as I have intimated, I find the restrictive-access exclusivist position deeply unsavoury as I do some of the others. But this is no embarrassment for Christians, scientists too have their opinions, for example as we have seen Davies has little time for the multiverse theory. The truth is we simply cannot predict what we will find out about the religious life of aliens if we ever do contact them. Again we need to stress that God's ways are higher than our ways and we would be foolish to second-guess the revelations of Godself. Long ago, Aquinas contended that although the incarnation is fitting, there are no grounds for assuming God required it of necessity.⁵⁵ *A fortiori* we would be foolish to insist what God must do throughout the universe. This is wisdom and humility so that it is incorrect for Davies to conclude, 'Christian theology is in a frightful muddle' and a SETI contact 'would immediately open up a horrible can of worms.'⁵⁶

A final proposal: the cosmic Logos

In the generation after the apostles, Christianity was fruitfully interacting with Hellenistic thought which was familiar with the notion of the Logos through, for example, the writings of Heraclitus and the Stoics. In his prologue, the author of the Fourth Gospel exploits this concept and applies it to the incarnate Christ. The apologist Justin Martyr then sought to relate this Christian teaching to those outside the Christian faith for this Logos is 'the true light that gives light to every man' (Jn.1:9). Justin Martyr concluded that saintly pagans, like Socrates, partook of this Logos; a seed of the Logos (*logos spermatikos*) germinating healthily within them.

This divine Logos preceded Jesus of Nazareth and transcends him. Even John Calvin argued, against the Lutherans, that the Logos/Son of God existed in and yet also transcended the human Jesus, a doctrine dubbed by Lutherans as *illud extra Calvinisticum* ('that Calvinistic beyond'). Many contemporary theologians have taken up this idea and developed it. Hick, for example believes that the Logos inspired the spiritual leaders of all the world religions so that the Logos 'then becomes in effect a name for the world-wide and history-long presence and impact upon human life of the Divine, the Transcendent, the Ultimate, the Real.'⁵⁷

The notion has also been used by thinkers of other religions. Take for example the Buddhist, Yogi who maintains that every divine revelation is particularised; it is 'treasure-in-vessel'. What is this treasure? 'If one answers that God or the universal Logos of the Ultimate is the treasure in the primary sense, one assumes naturally that there are a number of vessels, for no finite vessel can

55 T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt.1, Qu..1. art.2.

56 P. Davies, *The Eerie Silence*, 192.

57 J. Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths* (London: SCM, 1995), 22-23.

confine the infinite exclusivity to itself.⁵⁸

The author of the book of Hebrews describes this timeless being as the creator of the universe who is still 'sustaining all things by his powerful word' (Heb.1.3). The Catholic theologian and palaeontologist de Chardin developed this theme and claimed that this is the energy which drives evolution towards greater complexity and spiritual awareness. One day transubstantiation will not be restricted to the bread and wine but will encompass the whole universe. De Chardin seems to pray in a state of ecstasy:

Thus, Lord, I understood that it was impossible to live without ever emerging from you, without ever ceasing to be buried in You, the Ocean of Life, that life that penetrates and quickens us. Since first Lord you said, "This is my body", not only the bread of the altar but (to some degree) everything in the universe that nourishes the soul for the life of Spirit and Grace has become yours and has become divine – it is divinized, divinizing and divinizable.⁵⁹

This notion of the Logos and the decentring of the human is very helpful as we ponder God's relation to the alien, and the contemporary Protestant theologian, Moltmann extends this cosmic theme very fruitfully. He argues that Christian mission, whether it was the extension of the Holy Roman Empire, or the competing Roman, Lutheran and Calvinist churches after the Reformation, or again more recently the expansion of the evangelical church flowing from the great missionary thrust of the nineteenth century, all have one thing in common: 'They all start from something which in the present exists only in particular form, and try to globalize it, whether it be the Christian imperium or the Christian church or the Christian experience of conversion.'⁶⁰ They are all expansionist strategies with a colonial ring to them. Moltmann wants to change this paradigm completely. God in Jesus was not in the business of empire building. He came to bring life and to proclaim that the living God invites the cosmos, from the future as it were, to share in this eternal life. This vision looks forward to what de Chardin called the Omega point when, at the end of time God will be 'all in all'. With a little tweaking, we can extend Moltmann's vision to all life throughout the universe. I quote him at length:

If we understand mission as an invitation to God's future, then we begin with the universal future of the nations and the earth [and those living beyond the earth], and give it present force in the gospel of hope and in the service of love. We invite people of other religions and ideologies to work

58 S. Yagi, 'Plurality of the Treasure in Earthen Vessels' in L. Swidler and P. Mojzes, *The Uniqueness of Jesus: A Dialogue with Paul F. Knitter* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), 140.

59 Quoted in D. Cohn-Sherbok, (ed.) *Interfaith Theology* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), 56.

60 J. Moltmann, 'Dialogue or Mission? Christianity and the Religions in an Endangered World' in J. Hick and B. Hebblethwaite (eds.), *Christianity and Other Religions: Selected Readings* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), 183.

together for that future which we try to imagine in the symbols of the kingdom of God, eternal life, and the new creation of heaven and earth. The religions and cultures of other people [throughout the universe] will not thereby be destroyed; they will be interpenetrated by the Spirit of hope, and opened for the future of the world.⁶¹

The human race needs to be decentred, he insists: 'Nor is it just human life that is meant [by the fullness of life], for according to the prophetic message this living power of God will be poured out "on all flesh", which in the language of the Old Testament means everything living. God's sending is biocentrically oriented, not anthropocentrically.'⁶²

Christians believe that the cosmic Logos has expressed Godself definitively on the earth in the life and teaching of Jesus who did not come to start a new religion but to bring life in all its fullness. 'Christ is the divine Yes to life. That Yes leads to the healing of the sick, to the acceptance of the marginalized, to the forgiveness of sins, and to the saving of impaired life from the powers of destruction.'⁶³ Surely it is by these deeply inspiring values that Christians will judge all manifestations of religion throughout the universe, including their own.

Abstract

Beginning by describing and assessing Paul Davies' religious views this paper seeks to contest his claim that the Christian worldview would find it difficult to accommodate the discovery of life elsewhere in the universe. Using the resources of the Christian theology of religions, the various available strategies for deciding how God could bring salvation to ensouled extraterrestrials is discussed to counter Davies' charge of confusion amongst Christians on this matter. Finally, the author's preferred approach based on the notion of the cosmic Logos is advanced.

61 Ibid., 184.

62 Ibid., 184.

63 Ibid., 185.