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Review

David Wilkinson, *Science, Religion, and the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence*
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Two missing series of *Dr Who* have recently been unearthed in a Nigerian vault. Now re-mastered and made publicly available, these episodes from the 1960s deliver extraterrestrial intelligence in forms that our childhood viewing never noticed were so dependent on odds and ends of fur, pipes and plastic sheets gathered from the corners of the BBC props department. Today's child and adult sci-fi fans are accustomed to much more aesthetically sophisticated aliens – even if the budgetary constraints of most TV series demand that they are basically humanoid.

Our fascination with the possibility of intelligent (or in fact any form of) life on other planets induces us to be entertained by stories of contact and conflict. The prospect of extraterrestrial intelligence tantalizes and is sufficiently serious to be grappled with by fiction and by

scientific enquiry. David Wilkinson adroitly leads us through the search for extraterrestrial intelligence because he is well aware that science does not stand apart from culture.

Wilkinson, who holds PhDs in both theoretical astrophysics and in systematic theology, is well-equipped to articulate to a lay audience what are, for most of us, mind-bendingly complex notions of the vastness and origins of the universe. He starts with science fiction – a particularly helpful entry point - and quickly moves onto the history of speculation over a plurality of worlds. With the ease that comes from an expert knowledge, Wilkinson presents readers with the diversity of arguments around the evolution of intelligence on planets capable of sustaining some form of life. The esoteric views of von Däniken are given their place in cultural terms although the predominance is, as we would expect, granted to scientific discussions.

This would be interesting in itself but Wilkinson is a Christian theologian aiming to consider the challenges and opportunities for his faith tradition when it encounters the possibility and reality of life forms beyond its immediate ken. Wilkinson helpfully rehearses the past occasions when theologians have had to deal with not only speculation but encounter with, relatively speaking ‘alien’ life forms. Exploration of the New World demanded reframing, if not entirely paradigm shifting, when indigenous peoples were ‘discovered’.

Wilkinson chooses to focus on two central Christian doctrines – creation and redemption – in order to explore the theological implications of extraterrestrial intelligence. Readers familiar only with the headline claims of Christian creationists can be reassured that this is not Wilkinson’s world. His is a subtle doctrine of creation that appreciates it as a claim against the dualism of God and matter/chaos. One consequence is that ‘creation is both to be valued,

rather than to be escaped, and free to be investigated rather than worshipped' (p.133). The outworking of this viewpoint for Wilkinson is not merely a permissive search for extraterrestrial life but an injunction to Christians to be supportive, even enthusiastic for it.

At the same time, Wilkinson does not gloss over the difficulties posed by extraterrestrial life for a Christian theological outlook – particularly one that is deeply anthropocentric. He wants to preserve the notion that God's relationship to humanity is unique whilst denying that this is exclusive. This is made problematic because the doctrines of creation and redemption are not independent. From a Christian perspective, redemption is integrally bound up with the incarnation of God as a human. Here we enter questions of the cosmic significance of Jesus and the possibility, nigh necessity, of other incarnations in non-human intelligent life. Whilst it is obvious that Wilkinson leans towards orthodox doctrinal sensibilities he is judiciously cautious against concluding that God is 'earth-centred' (p.171).

The implications for Christian eschatology are also so significant that this reader would have valued some extended treatment of those themes too. Similarly, the impact upon the hermeneutical aspects of theological and biblical knowing were extraterrestrial intelligent life to be encountered could have been articulated in more depth. This is perhaps a matter for the relationship between science and religion more generally. Giving 70 per cent of the pages to the discussion of the science did leave this reader wishing it had been a more equitable distribution.

Wilkinson leaves open the possibility that life, albeit primitive, may be present on distant planets. He is much less confident regarding intelligent life, largely because of Fermi's paradox: 'if they existed, they would be here'. Exceedingly distant planets, beyond which

Fermi's paradox might not hold, could be home to intelligent life, but Wilkinson is unsure that we could ever obtain evidence that they are there. Overall, Wilkinson finds a spur from Christian theology to the work of those searching for extraterrestrial life and a reminder from those searchers to theologians to be wary of being Earth-centric.

This book will be of interest to those grappling with the relationship between science and Christian theology. It will, I'm sorry to say, disappoint those whose concern is cast more widely. Whilst Wilkinson is very clear about the focus on Christian theology throughout his book the title is misleading. It is not a text that explores science, *religion*, and the search for extraterrestrial intelligence. Readers with interests in Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism will find the first two-thirds, where Wilkinson traces culture, history and science, to be of great value. Others will need to write the chapters on the religious implications as they impact the major religions or philosophical traditions of our world besides Christianity.