

## Ted Peters, "Extraterrestrial Intelligence," RPP 4:779-780.

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**Extraterrestrial Intelligence.** To date, there has been no empirical proof for the existence of intelligent extraterrestrial life. However, if one star in ten has planets like the earth, as our sun does, and if the Milky Way galaxy consists of half a trillion stars, then some 50 billion stars in our galaxy alone could produce life. And astronomers estimate that there could be as many as 100 billion galaxies. The scientific question is still open: are we on earth alone and unique, or do we have cosmic company?

The theological question is: would the discovery of intelligent extraterrestrial life shatter the Christian view of the world? The philosophers of Classical Antiquity and the theologians of the MA debated whether there could be many worlds in the heavens with many different kinds of living beings. → Democritus, → Epicurus and → Lucretius supported this idea while Aristotle denied it, arguing that there was a "natural centrism" that orders all of nature: there can exist but one center, and so, there can be only one world, ours (Arist. *Cael.* VIII 9). → Thomas Aquinas followed Aristotle by stating that "it must be that all things should belong to one world" (*Summa Theologiae* I 1, q.47, a.3): his key premise was that perfection depended on unity; one world, which included everything that existed, would be perfect. Therefore it would be more appropriate to say that God created a single perfect world than to say that he created a larger number of necessarily imperfect worlds. J. → Buridan contradicted Aquinas by arguing that just as God had created this world, he could also have created several others. Nicole Oresme (c. 1320–1382), bishop of Lisieux, expanded upon this approach.

Contemporary theologians have tended to minimize discussion about extraterrestrial life, and where they have not, they have regarded it in terms of multiple worlds. This has been the case with Roman Catholics (Karl Rahner, Hans Küng), conservative Protestants (Billy Graham), liberal Protestants (Krister Stendahl) and Jews (Hayim Perelmuter, Daniel Matt). One of the issues discussed by both Protestant and Catholic theologians has been: if there were intelligent beings living on other planets without contact with the earth, would God's work of redemption in the incarnate Christ also apply to them? Or would God have to effect their redemption through repeated incarnations? P. → Tillich argued that in each case incarnation would be unique to the special group for which it was accomplished. The incarnation of Christ was not unique in such a way as to rule out other incarnations in other unique worlds. K. → Rahner's position was similar to that of Tillich. Pannenberg holds to the view that the significance of Jesus Christ extended to the furthest extremities of the universe, for God has promised that, through Christ, all of space and time will be gathered together into one all-embracing unity.

P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. II 1975 ♦ S.J. Dick, *Plurality of the Worlds*, 1982 ♦ K. Rahner, "Naturwissenschaft und vernünftiger Glaube," in: *Schriften zur Theologie*, 15, 1983, 24–62, bes. 58f.; ET: *Encyclopedia of Theology*, 1992 ♦ W. Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie*, vol. II, 1991, 95f.; ET: *Systematic Theology*, vol. II ♦ T. Peters, "Exo-Theology," in: J.R. Lewis, ed., *The Gods Have Landed*, 1965, 187–206 ♦ Y.J. Pendleton & J.D. Farmer, "Life Beyond Earth," *Sky and Telescope* 93, 1997, 42–47.

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