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*Book Review*

**God in Cosmic History: Where Science and History Meet Religion**

by Ted Peters

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a convincing case that queer theologies must be concerned with more than apologetics for the compatibility of LGBT identity and Christianity, and offers both parameters and provocations toward a way forward.

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**God in Cosmic History:**  
*Where Science & History Meet Religion*  
By: **Ted Peters**

*Publisher: Anselm Academic (Winona, Minnesota, USA)*

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*When I consider your heavens,  
the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars,  
which you have set in place,  
what is mankind that you are mindful of them,  
human beings that you care for them?<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 8:3-4 (NIV)

The opening lines of Psalm 8 find David in deep contemplation. One imagines the king perched alone after twilight gazing heavenward at the work of the Lord: the poet watches the sky in awe of God, and also derives meaning from the pattern of astronomical bodies (“which you have set in place”). The convergence is subtle: at the opening of Psalm 8, one finds science, history, and religion. Likewise, Ted Peters’s *God in Cosmic History* brings together these branches of human thought and inquiry in a formative text that pushes back against conventional pedagogy. Budding academics harboring dissatisfaction with extant scholarship methods will be emboldened in their desire to shift norms; meanwhile, established scholars should find themselves challenged, particularly since *God in Cosmic History* does not hold back about asking its central question: among the findings made by science and history, where is God? For Peters, the inclusion of God in three constituent yet disparate disciplines is not an attempt to shoehorn an agenda into the academy; rather, he argues that siloing the disciplines is a procedural error that produces incomplete scholarship. There is, in fact, a bigger picture, and the scholar should approach God less as a deity to be worshipped and more as a pedagogical lacuna requiring attention:

Why did Zoroaster in ancient Persia dream of paradise?  
Why did Chinese Buddhists look forward to the Pure Land?  
Why did disciples of Plato appeal to an eternal standard of justice and an ideal republic? Why did the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 11) envision a “peaceable kingdom” where a lion will lie down with a lamb and a human baby can walk among wild animals without fear? Why does the New Testament promise an everlasting kingdom of God?<sup>2</sup>

Peters is a systematic theologian, and so it is especially appropriate that the project of *God in Cosmic History* is informed by Wolfhart Pannenberg. In his apprehension of Christology, Pannenberg articulates a preferential option for history: the divinity of Jesus cannot be encountered without an understanding of the humanity of Jesus. While such a pastoral

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<sup>2</sup> Ted Peters, *God in Cosmic History: Where Science & History Meet Religion* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2017), 18.

accounting of Pannenberg's systematic theology contrasts with his otherwise empirical reputation, he is clear that for Pannenberg Jesus' "work in inaugurating the kingdom of God among us is seen as an expression of his human particularity."<sup>3</sup> In other words, the historical Jesus – how Jesus lived on Earth, his deeds, the people with whom he connected and impacted – is of no lesser import than the divine Jesus. In a different tradition, Gerald James Larson points out that early Hindu sources contain "rich pluralism of tales, myths, legends, and speculations" in which "God... plays a crucial role in what might be called 'enabling' the world to unfold and take shape".<sup>4</sup> But as Larson also observes, western thought minimized this "unique understanding of the nature of the universe (*jagat, bhuvana, loka*), the nature of human behavior and becoming (*karman* and *samsara*), and the nature of divinity or God (*Ishvara*)"<sup>5</sup> – effectively dismantling the partnership between science, history, and religion. Further, in Judeo-Christian tradition, Isaiah advises, "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past,"<sup>6</sup> while Paul extolls to the Corinthians, "The old is gone, the new is here!" (2 Cor 5:17). In the context of *God in Cosmic History*, Peters is not rebuking the old ways – rather, his project is a commentary that calls out methodological entrenchment so seemingly immutable that it precludes the notion that pedagogy could go another way. For Peters, it can.

Because his project disrupts science and history as they have been conventionally taught, there is opportunity for critical readers to excoriate Peters as a liberal thinker. However, proposing the convergence of science, history, and religion is not entirely novel. Karen Armstrong's *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* similarly utilizes God as a unifying factor in the dialectical study of distinct structures; Peters' theological work is much broader in scope and considers theological histories well beyond the commitments of the Abrahamic religions. In fact, cosmic history is already unfolding as a discipline: the

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<sup>3</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 306.

<sup>4</sup> Gerald James Larson, "Hindu Cosmogony/Cosmology," in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Science*, eds. James W. Haag, Gregory R. Peterson, and Michael L. Spezio (London: Routledge, 2012), 113–123.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. In addition, Larson singles out Hegel for criticism.

<sup>6</sup> Isa. 43:18 NIV.

groundwork has been laid by the likes of Harvard sociobiologist E.O. Wilson and historian Ken Gilbert.<sup>7</sup> Their work already points toward the bridging of science, history, and religion into the discipline of cosmic history. Having established Wilson and Gilbert as his guides, Peters makes the case for the discipline of cosmic history as more expansive than what is conveyed by the current pedagogy.

In order to understand the expansive history that Peters is proposing, it is critical to grasp his terminology. Deployed with an accessible writing style, *God in Cosmic History* introduces the reader to essential terminology by first defining natural history as the history of both the earth and the environment apart from *Homo sapiens*, our species which branches off into its own discipline of human history. Peters employs an analogy that, repeated through his book, becomes something of a motif: that of Russian nesting dolls. One's personal history comprises the innermost doll, which then expands outward to include family history, followed by country, religion, and finally world history. But in Peters' model of expansion, world history requires "a nest... that is yet bigger."<sup>8</sup> Here, Peters connects to so-called "big history," formulated originally by the International Big History Association, of which Ken Gilbert is a member. Big history is an integration of all the parts of history that fit into the Russian nesting dolls – one's personal history, naturally, is connected to world history – and beyond: for Peters, *cosmic* history raises "the question of human meaning through remembering the past and expecting the future."<sup>9</sup> In effect, big history is an account of what has happened and is, possibly, an indicator of the future, and Peters raises his central question incisively: "Why is the question of God missing in the Big History curriculum?"<sup>10</sup>

The expansive nature and academic context of his subject matter leads Peters to arrange his text in such a manner that each chapter seems especially suited to become excerpted and incorporated into comprehensive, semester-long classes about cosmic history. Each chapter is carefully structured and concludes with recommended discussion

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<sup>7</sup> Peters, *God in Cosmic History*, 17.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

questions and a listing of additional resources for further inquiry. Much like the Russian nesting dolls that Peters references, each chapter is self-contained and stands independently, but also builds upon its predecessor. Ultimately, Peters' project is not necessarily to organize science, history, and religion in order to extract an overarching meaning or even to locate God; like the nature of belief itself, meaning and God remain a mystery. The project, rather, is to allow room to ask about belief, to inquire about God – an area in which conventional systems of science and history have fallen short. The project of *God in Cosmic History* is to refine what is already being taught, not to upend or abolish that which is extant. For this reason, *God in Cosmic History* should appeal to readers with a general interest in the disciplines that Peters seeks to bring together, as well as those scholarly readers with a specialized interest in their areas of methodological overlap. All are welcome in *God in Cosmic History*.

*Joseph Ramelo is pursuing his Master of Arts in Theology and Ethics at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. His proposed thesis will investigate the nature of human relationships in the context of outer space exploration.*

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