



## The Incarnation as a Theanthropic Principle

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### I. COSMOLOGICAL ANTHROPIC PRINCIPLES

The idea that there are important relationships between intelligent life in the universe and the physical properties, or even the very existence, of the universe, has been the subject of recent debate among scientists. The claim that intelligent life plays a crucial cosmic role has been formalized as “the anthropic principle,” though in view of the different ways in which this claim can be stated it would be more accurate to speak of “anthropic principles” (AP). Barrow and Tipler have presented detailed arguments for these principles in a book which has provoked considerable discussion.<sup>1</sup>

The case for AP begins with the observation, in itself not particularly controversial, that parameters which characterize our physical universe, such as the strengths of basic interactions or even the dimensionality of space, have values which make possible the development of intelligent life *and* that slight changes in these values would make development of life as we know it impossible. (Of course

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<sup>1</sup>John D. Barrow and Frank J. Tipler, *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986). Some relevant discussions are: W. Jim Neidhardt, “The Anthropic Principle: A Religious Response,” *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 36 (1984) 201-207; Heinz R. Pagels, “A Cozy Cosmology,” *The Sciences* 25/2 (1985) 34-38; Richard H. Bube’s review of Barrow and Tipler’s book in *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 40 (1988) 110-111; John Leslie, *Universes* (London: Routledge, 1989).

we would not be here to observe the universe if it did not allow life.) Barrow and Tipler formalize this as their Weak Anthropic Principle (WAP):<sup>2</sup>

The observed values of all physical and cosmological quantities are not equally probable but they take on values restricted by the requirement that there exist sites where carbon-based life can evolve and by the requirement that the Universe be old enough for it to have already done so.

A more speculative argument that the universe *must* allow the evolution of life is the Strong Anthropic Principle (SAP):

The Universe must have those properties which allow life to develop within it at some stage of its history.

It is possible even to argue that, because of relationships between an observer and an observed system that are required by quantum theory, intelligent observers are necessary in order to make the cosmos real. This yields Wheeler's Participatory Anthropic Principle (PAP):

Observers are necessary to bring the Universe into being.

The most extreme claims of this sort are expressed in the still more controversial Final Anthropic Principle (FAP):

Intelligent information-processing must come into existence in the Universe, and, once it comes into existence, it will never die out.

It is not surprising that such cosmic claims have received theological attention. Some people see the apparent fine-tuning of physical parameters as a vindication of traditional design arguments for a divine creator, while others have criticized AP as an attempt to provide a nontranscendental religion.<sup>3</sup>

Discussions of the possible theological significance of AP have usually dealt with design arguments for the existence of God, perhaps with some reference to traditional ideas of creation and providence. I will not go into those issues here, and simply point out that the use of design arguments as part of a natural theology independent of specifically Christian theology is open to serious theological challenge, as I have argued previously.<sup>4</sup>

It is unfortunate that Christian theologians who have discussed anthropic principles generally have not had much to say about Christ. (Pannenberg is one important exception.<sup>5</sup>) This is surprising in view of the fact that Christianity believes Christ to be not only the divine agent of creation, but also to be the human, the *anthropos*, for whom the universe was created and in whom it is brought to the

<sup>2</sup>The following versions of AP are from Barrow and Tipler, *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle*, 16-23.

<sup>3</sup>See, respectively, Hugh Ross, *The Fingerprint of God* (Orange, CA: Promise, 1989), and Bube's review (note 1).

<sup>4</sup>E.g., George L. Murphy, "Chiasmic Cosmology: An Approach to the Science-Theology Dialogue," *Trinity Seminary Review* 13 (1991) 83-92.

<sup>5</sup>Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Theological Appropriation of Scientific Understandings: Response to Hefner, Wicken, Eaves, and Tipler," *Zygon* 24 (1989) 255-271.

completion of God's purpose, as set out in Col 1:15-20. Barth stated this very clearly:

The world came into being, it was created and sustained by the little child that was born at Bethlehem, by the man who died on the cross of Golgotha, and the third day rose again. *That* is the word of creation, by which all things were brought into being. That is where the *meaning* of creation comes from, and that is why it says at the beginning of the Bible: "In the beginning God made heaven and earth and God said, Let there be..."<sup>6</sup>

The incarnation of the creative word of God shows that the meaning, purpose, and goal of

creation is not humanity by itself, but humanity indwelt by the word. The doctrine of the incarnation can thus be called a *theanthropic* principle for the Christian understanding of the universe.<sup>7</sup>

While the anthropic principles of scientific cosmology suggest this terminology and the motivation for thinking of the incarnation in the way that is suggested here, it should be clear that TAP is not based upon, or derived from, observations or theories about the universe. It is not part of a natural theology that attempts to provide information about God and God's relationship with the world from observation and reason. TAP is, on the contrary, a statement about God's own self-revelation culminating in Jesus Christ, the revelation from which all proper understanding of God and God's relationship with the world is to come. It is, then, not a statement of an independent natural theology but part of the basis for a specifically Christian natural theology—i.e., a natural theology which is part of theology based upon the revelation of God in the history of Israel which culminates in Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup>

## II. THE DWELLING OF GOD

The physical universe can be understood by natural science, with no appeal to the idea of God. A Christian understanding of God's *purpose* for the universe, however, is not to be obtained by uncovering a cosmic plan through scientific investigation, but by considering the testimony of Scripture centered upon Christ. A theme which runs through the Bible and finds its focus in Christ is that of the dwelling of God. In the Old Testament, God is not initially a deity tied to a sacred place but the God who has chosen a people. The true God is "the God of the fathers," the One who appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.<sup>9</sup> God frees Israel from slavery and goes with Israel through the wilderness, being present with and for them in a moveable tent rather than at a static sanctuary. When Israel becomes established in Canaan and the idea of a permanent temple occurs to David, the idea is met with some coolness by God's prophet (2 Sam 7:1-17). There is always

<sup>6</sup>Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959) 58.

<sup>7</sup>George L. Murphy, "The Man for Whom the World Was Made," *Touchstone* (Fall 1989) 11-14.

<sup>8</sup>Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1985).

<sup>9</sup>Albrecht Alt, "The God of the Fathers," *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968) 1-100.

some ambiguity about the appropriateness of a fixed "house" for God. Even the words put in Solomon's mouth at the dedication of the temple he has built recognize that God's dwelling cannot really be localized there (1 Kings 8:27), and the prophets can threaten destruction of the temple as a punishment for disobedience (Mic 3:12; Jer 26:1-19). God is ultimately free of any fixed holy place within the world.

Still, the temple is an eschatological theme even in pre-exilic literature (Isa 2:2-4/Mic 4:1-3), and this theme receives greater emphasis after the exile. As significant as any individual passage is the way in which the entire Hebrew canon is arranged. Of course it begins with God's creation of "heaven and earth" and the Spirit moving over the deep in Gen 1:1-2. But the conclusion of the Hebrew canon, at the end of Chronicles, has an intriguing connection with the beginning of Genesis.<sup>10</sup>

Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the LORD his God be with him! Let him go up. (2 Chron 36:23)

The entire work of God which began with the creation of heaven and earth points toward the building of a “house” for “the God of heaven.” And retrospectively, God’s Spirit moving over the deep in the beginning can be understood as the consecration of the universe as God’s dwelling.

But the tabernacle theme, with the remembrance of God going with Israel through the wilderness, continued to be important even after a temple had been built. The Feast of Booths, when Israel’s temporary dwellings during the wilderness wandering were recalled (Lev 23:39-43), looked back toward an ideal past which was not, however, a mythical “Dreamtime” but the historical wilderness wandering (Jer 2:2-3; Hos 2:14-15). *Succoth* also looked forward to the establishment of God’s reign (Zech 14:16-19). We see in John 7 how messianic expectations ran high during this festival in the time of Jesus.

Mary’s conception of the word, by the power of the Spirit who moved over the deep (Luke 1:35), begins God’s full dwelling with humanity. In John 1:14, the verb *eskenosen* (lived) refers to dwelling in a tent, *skene*, so that we could read, “The word became flesh and tented among us.” The Logos moves with humanity in its journey through history, as God moved with Israel through the wilderness. In the next chapter of John, the temple motif is used when Jesus speaks of his body as the new temple (2:21), and John 19:34, in light of Ezek 47:1-12, connects that image with the cross. The New Testament, like the Old, concludes with the “dwelling” theme: The dwelling of God will be with humanity, and the temple of the heavenly city come down to earth will be “the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (Rev 21:3).

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<sup>10</sup>Barry S. Kogan, “Judaism and Scientific Cosmology: Redesigning the Design Argument,” in *Creation and the End of Days*, ed. D. Novak and N. Samuelson (New York: University Press of America, 1986) 98.

This brief survey of Scripture suggests that the universe is intended to be the dwelling of God, and that God’s accomplishment of this purpose is achieved through the incarnation. To say this is to repeat in another way Barth’s claim: The meaning of creation is Jesus Christ. “All things have been created through him and for him” (Col 1:16).

But how are we to think of the entire universe being made God’s dwelling through the incarnation? One way is to understand the risen and glorified Jesus himself as present throughout the universe. As a result of the sacramental and christological controversies of the reformation period, the Lutheran theological tradition has held that the divine omnipresence is communicated to the human nature assumed in the incarnation. Thus Christ in his humanity can be present to everything in the universe (and, in particular, can be present in the eucharist), though not in a simple-minded sense of being spread thinly through space.<sup>11</sup>

Another approach, which may be seen as complementary to the first, is to emphasize the New Testament pictures of the church as a new humanity that is both the temple of God and the body of Christ. The first image, from passages like 1 Cor 3:16-17 (where the *you*’s are plural), Eph 2:19-22, and 1 Pet 2:4-6, is connected directly with our discussion of the dwelling of God:

that dwelling is ultimately to be not simply Christ as an individual human being but the entire new humanity, all people who are saved through the work of Christ. And the second image, the church as the body of Christ, emphasizes that this living dwelling is a super-personal extension of Christ, who is the head of the body (1 Cor 12:12-31; Col 1:18).

### III. APS AND TAP

The different versions of AP say that intelligent life plays a central role in cosmology and that if we are to seek any purpose for the universe, it must be connected with humanity, the only form of intelligent physical life that is known at present. TAP, on the other hand, says that the meaning and purpose of the universe are to be found in humanity taken into personal union with the word of God. I emphasized earlier that these ideas have quite different starting points and motivations. But it is natural to ask if there may be closer connections between these two lines of thought than simply the borrowing of a new name for the doctrine of the incarnation. Can AP suggest anything about ways in which the purpose for the universe considered in TAP actually may be achieved, and can TAP give us deeper insight into the meaning of features of the universe emphasized by AP?

To begin with, the fact that the universe has properties compatible with the development of intelligent life means that it has properties that are compatible with the incarnation of the Logos. We cannot impose limits on how the incarnation *might* have taken place, but it is difficult to see what could be meant by a direct personal union of the word with a rock or a fish. It is rational organisms which

<sup>11</sup>Martin Chemnitz, *The Two Natures in Christ* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1971).

have received the divine image and can lose it through sin, and who can have that image restored through union with the divine word.<sup>12</sup> Thus WAP is, among other things, a statement of the physical suitability of the universe to be the personal dwelling of God.

Having seen this, we may note that there is an important sense in which other life forms are assumed in the incarnation. This is so because of the evolutionary relationships that other species, alive and extinct, have with the humanity that has been assumed by the word. Thus all terrestrial life, past, present, and future, has hope through the incarnation for the ultimate liberation of which Paul speaks in Rom 8:18-25.<sup>13</sup>

And if the church as the body of Christ is to be the means of God's dwelling throughout the universe, it would seem to be called to a cosmic mission. Christians should therefore welcome space exploration with much more enthusiasm than they have shown in the past. Admittedly the idea of interstellar missionaries will seem strange to many people, but perhaps that is because Christians have, with some notable exceptions, not made very good use of the medium of science fiction. Of course all connections between evangelical mission and military or economic conquest, with which we have had unpleasant terrestrial experience, should be eschewed. The church is called simply to be present as a community gathered around word and sacraments. We are told—certainly with the use of mythical language—that part of God's purpose is "that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (Eph 3:10).

In the other direction, the incarnation gives an intriguing view of Wheeler's PAP. The

idea of that principle is that intelligent entities bring the universe into being not by observing it from the “outside” but by participatory observation. The motive for this suggestion is the critical and still disputed role of observers in quantum theory. It has been argued that God is ultimately the one who observes the universe, and even that quantum theory requires the existence of a God as an ultimate observer.<sup>14</sup> While the doctrine of creation certainly maintains that it is God who ultimately calls the universe into being, it is not clear how one could talk about God “observing” the universe in a sense that has any commonality with quantum-mechanical terminology *unless we can speak of God as a participant in creation as well as its author*. But it is just this upon which the doctrine of the incarnation insists. It allows us to speak not simply of intelligent organisms bringing the universe into being by participatory observation, but of God doing so, and without any pantheistic identification of God with the universe. Of course, a great

<sup>12</sup>Athanasius’ “On the Incarnation of the Word,” in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, vol. IV (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980) 36-67, should be noted here.

<sup>13</sup>George L. Murphy, “A Theological Argument for Evolution,” *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 38 (1986) 19-26.

<sup>14</sup>E.g., F. J. Belinfante, *Measurements and Time Reversal in Objective Quantum Theory* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1975) 98-99.

deal of work would be needed to formulate the doctrine of creation in this way, but that would be an eminently worthwhile task.<sup>15</sup>

These suggestions do not exhaust the possibilities for mutual enrichment between anthropic principles connected with scientific cosmology and the doctrine of the incarnation. Certainly theology should have learned its lesson from a too-strong attachment to Aristotelian science in the middle ages, and should not make an unqualified commitment to any version of AP. Misuses of anthropic principles, either making of them a substitute religion or the basis of an apologetic that ignores fundamental problems with independent natural theologies, should be opposed. But there do seem to be ways in which these concepts can contribute fruitfully to the science-theology dialogue.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 390-397.

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