

Science, Religion, and the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence

By David Wilkinson

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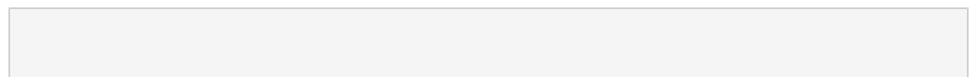
If the discovery of life elsewhere in the universe is just around the corner, what would be the consequences for religion? Would it represent another major conflict between science and religion, even leading to the death of faith? Some would suggest that the discovery of any suggestion of extraterrestrial life would have a greater impact than even the Copernican and Darwinian revolutions.

It is now over 50 years since the first modern scientific papers were published on the search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI). Yet the religious implications of this search and possible discovery have never been systematically addressed in the scientific or theological arena. SETI is now entering its most important era of scientific development. New observation techniques are leading to the discovery of extra-solar planets daily, and the Kepler mission has already collected over 1000

planetary candidates. This deluge of data is transforming the scientific and popular view of the existence of extraterrestrial intelligence. Earth-like planets outside of our solar system can now be identified and searched for signs of life.

Now is a crucial time to assess the scientific and theological questions behind this search. This book sets out the scientific arguments undergirding SETI, with particular attention to the uncertainties in arguments and the strength of the data already assembled. It assesses not only the discovery of planets but other areas such as the Fermi paradox, the origin and evolution of intelligent life, and current SETI strategies. In all of this it reflects on how these questions are shaped by history

and pop culture and their relationship with religion, especially Christian theology. It is argued that theologians need to take seriously SETI and to examine some central doctrines such as creation, incarnation, revelation, and salvation in the light of the possibility of extraterrestrial life.



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Science, Religion, and the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence By David Wilkinson Bibliography

- Rank: #2292616 in eBooks
- Published on: 2013-08-01
- Released on: 2013-08-01
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

Review

"A brilliant analysis of the possibility that there may be other intelligent beings not easily recognised by us, for which one day evidence may be found through SETI. David Wilkinson has read widely and thought deeply about what the implications would be for belief in God. This is the science-religion dialogue as it should be." - Andrew Briggs, Professor of Nanomaterials at the University of Oxford

"The church is fortunate to have someone of David Wilkinson's wide knowledge of both Science and Theology, and soundly based judgement to act as a guide." - Sir Arnold Wolfendale, FRS, 14th Astronomer Royal

"A very readable and scientifically informed account of SETI and the intriguing issues it raises for theology. A superb example of the ways in which theology and contemporary science can interact in a positive way." - Professor Keith Ward

"The question of whether there is intelligent extraterrestrial life is both intriguing and challenging. David Wilkinson's book provides a detailed and comprehensive discussion of the issues involved, physical, biological and theological, which many will find very illuminating." - Rev Dr John Polkinghorne, KBE, FRS

"Imagine we woke up one day to news that there is intelligent life beyond Earth. What would this do to our view of our own selves and of our place in the cosmos? What would it mean for our belief in God and our relationship with Him? David Wilkinson draws on his training in Physics and Theology to grapple with these fascinating questions in a thoughtful, informed and highly lucid manner." - Carlos Frenk FRS, Ogden Professor of Fundamental Physics, Durham University

"David Wilkinson's Science, Religion, and the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence is therefore a very welcome and timely addition to this public discussion. It provides a broad introduction to the history before giving a helpful discussion of some of the perceived theological difficulties raised by the existence of life in the wider universe." - Marginalia Review of Books

About the Author

David Wilkinson, *Professor and Principal, St John's College, Durham University*

David Wilkinson is Principal of St John's College, Durham University. He is also Professor in the Department of Theology and Religion.

His background is research in theoretical astrophysics, where he gained a PhD in the study of star formation,

the chemical evolution of galaxies and terrestrial mass extinctions. He is a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society. After this research he trained for the Methodist ministry, serving in a variety of appointments. His current work at Durham University involves the relationship of the Christian faith to contemporary culture, from science to pop-culture. He also holds a PhD in Systematic Theology where he explored the future of the physical universe.

His most recent book is *Christian Eschatology and the Physical Universe* (T&T Clark, 2010) and he also co-edited *Reading Genesis After Darwin* (OUP, 2009).

He is well known as a broadcaster and lecturer. He is regular contributor to BBC Radio 4's *Thought for the Day*.

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