

An artful contribution to our planetary concerns

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ABSTRACT

Pryor's fresh understanding of the imago Dei as a refraction of the Divine is much needed in an age of science and climate change. Well informed by astrobiological insights, his approach presents what I would call a deep reconceptualization of the imago Dei as a planetary phenomenon. The human planetary phenomenon, however, currently faces its own limitations. This is an ethical reality, which is touched upon by Pryor, but which could have been expressed more clearly and deliberately. The review attempts to develop some of Pryor's thoughts in dialog with Hans Jonas, and with my own thoughts on "planetary sustainability".

Key terms: imago Dei, astrobiology, planetary boundaries, planetary sustainability, Hans Jonas

1 A PRISM NOT A MIRROR

In his recent book, Adam Pryor has presented us with a fresh vision of the symbol of the *imago Dei*: "we are like a prism not a mirror",¹ a refraction, not a reflection, of the divine, "a medium through which the work of the continuing creative power of the divine passes through and is bent",² displaying seemingly invisible features of that power of God, dispersing it, "in all its possibilizing of meaningful existence, in new ways".³

This vision is much informed by how Pryor understands the domain of astrobiology. I had the great pleasure to partake in the same astrobiology fellowship scheme in 2016/17 at the *Center of Theological Inquiry* (Princeton/NJ), and one has to admit that Adam Pryor manages to weave the threads of thought present within that program together into a convincing pattern of high originality. Scientifically very well informed, the reader is guided through very up-to-date astrophysical and biological knowledge, including the question of the existence of extraterrestrial life. Pryor mainly focusses here on our solar system, where only alien microbes could be expected, hence the title: "Living with Tiny Aliens".

Somehow, I would have imagined a prism on the cover of the book, refracting a divine light source into the rings of Saturn, as he suggests with his model not only that "any creature that refracts the creative power of the divine is the *imago Dei*",⁴ but – inspired by the deliberations of astrobiologist David Grinspoon – that the whole planetary living environment which is shaped by such a "refracting agency" represents a kind of image of God. "Human being is not a separate agency technologically acting from outside otherwise biogeochemical cycles", but "woven into existing cycles as a planetary phenomenon".⁵ This leads to the conclusion that "To be the *imago Dei* is to be a planetary system that weathers

catastrophic change without the cycle of mass extinction events".⁶ This is a bold claim, which I will have to doubt a bit. I will come back to this.

2 DEEP ECOLOGICAL THINKING

The insight that we are deeply connected with our respective environment is certainly not an exclusively *astrobiological* one. Pryor's deeply ecological thinking is nevertheless crucial and goes even beyond the idea of a "careful stewardship of intra-action between living-systems and their habitable environments".⁷ In times of climate change, such planetary thinking is certainly of the essence, because the usual anthropocentric "humans first" has become counterproductive and simply does not work anymore, in the face of our *planetary boundaries* – a concept which highlights the limits of our planet in several dimensions without invoking the risk of catastrophic change,⁸ and which Pryor would have done well to add to his account.

Let us recall historian Lynn White's critique of Christianity⁹. There is certainly some historical responsibility of theology in the past and present limitless use and abuse of Earth's resources. I believe that Pryor's systemic approach to a very traditional topic of theological anthropology is much needed in this context. His idea of what I would perhaps call a deep *imago Dei*, rooting humans in their environment (a very Biblical thought, as the Hebrew word for Human, *Adam*, is derived from the word for earth, *Adamah*), reminds me of Niels Henrik Gregersen's prominent idea of deep incarnation, an "incarnation into the very tissue of biological existence, and system of nature."¹⁰ In Pryor's case, the idea is related to a specific living environment, it is a *planetary* phenomenon. As Pryor is, however, also open to acknowledging other living planetary systems as *imago Dei*, his idea indeed comes close to the scope of Gregersen's deep incarnation. "To be the image of God describes not a single species or genus, but a new state in the ordering and meaningful existence of all creation".¹¹

3 GOD FOR THE ANTHROPOCENE

I propose that such a redefinition of theological concepts is greatly needed in an age of science and of climate change. "The image of God for the Anthropocene", the book's subtitle, orientates us in a world which is changing in human hands, and currently not for the better. In this context, Pryor is certainly no ecoromanticist. When it is sustainable *technogeobiological* cycles which the *imago dei* fosters,¹² his concluding discussion of the role of technology in becoming an "artful planet" – as Pryor calls the stage Earth entered through the presence of a refracting agency (that is *us* as an expression of the *imago Dei*¹³) – is very welcome. It could certainly have been advanced further, for instance in dialogue with prominent (though technocritical) ethicist Hans Jonas, who has already gone beyond purely anthropocentric considerations. "[T]he biosphere as a whole and in its parts ... has something of a moral claim on us not only for our ulterior sake but for its own and in its own right."¹⁴ I would view a dialogue with Jonas as a very meaningful extension of Pryor's planetary concerns. One could even claim that Jonas anticipated the idea of the Anthropocene when he proposed that "an object of an entirely new order – no less than the whole biosphere of the planet – has been added to what we must be responsible for because of our power over it".¹⁵

There are people who would consider humankind a sickness of the planet, not an elevated stage in the order of creation. It would perhaps have made sense to discuss the divergent positions that exist in environmental ethics, ranging from *ratio-centrism* to *sentientism* to *bio-* and *ecocentrism*. In the astrobiological community, the stances held are quite diverse, so this would represent a highly interesting addition. At least, it does so in my imagination. What stance does Pryor's concept endorse? While his account certainly helps us with a less anthropocentric reimagining of the idea of *imago Dei*, its ratiocentric touch stops a little short of demonstrating the problems of a ruling species, although the epilogue starts to develop this theme.

One thing that makes me wonder a little is why Pryor does not touch on the widely acknowledged idea of framing the problems within the well-received stance of human beings as created co-creators. For sure, we are also co-destructors (Daecke) of creation, but in my view it would have made sense to refer to this prominent concept at least briefly. Pryor's conclusion, however, is certainly valid: "We need to start acting like an artful planet."¹⁶ Yes, we do. Here Pryor invokes presence, wonder and play as concepts crucial to developing this artfulness.

4 CONSIDERING OUTER SPACE

One more thing that could have been added, in line with the spirit of Pryor's epilogue *Ad Astra per Aspera*, is to consider outer space itself more diligently. Already NASA has connected our planetary sustainability concerns with the idea of a "multi-planetary society".¹⁷ At least, our planet Earth has a space environment which is increasingly heavily used by technological devices. Human space flight and space mining are on the horizon, our care for our environment, especially an astrobiologically oriented one, should therefore include these aspects. Also, will there really be no mass extinction event in the future? We would need to develop a very advanced planetary defense against incoming asteroids to prevent this. In any case, our time on Earth is limited, as the sun one distant day will become too hot to allow life on Earth. That day is far away, but would that not also represent a mass extinction event – unless we learnt the art of distant space flight and space settling?

5 A THOUGHTFUL PROVOCATION

All these far-reaching deliberations are, however, surely worthy a project of their own.¹⁸ It is a great pleasure expanding on Pryor's insightful considerations, which remain a very thoughtful provocation for theology in an age of science and climate change. A reconceptualization of traditional theological ideas like this – a reclaiming of the symbols, as Pryor calls it, in line with Tillich – is much needed in our days. I want to thank Adam Pryor for his appealing patterns of thought. Although I only touched upon some of them, I feel that I would like to weave several of them into my own deliberations, even if some threads would need to be reconceptualized a little.

Bio: Dr. Andreas Losch is an award-winning theologian, currently associated with the University of Pretoria, specializing in the dialog with the sciences and with philosophy. He was managing editor of the Martin Buber edition coordinating the project "Life beyond our planet?" at the Center for Space and Habitability (CSH) Bern and working as an independent researcher and lecturer affiliated with the Theological Faculty of the University of Bern on the "Ethics of Planetary Sustainability". Losch is a member of the Center of Theological Inquiry (CTI), Princeton, New Jersey, and he serves on the council of the European Society for the Study of Science and Theology (ESSSAT) and on the board of trustees of the Karl Heim Society. He is also editor-in-chief of the theology & science website www.theonat.info.

¹ Adam Pryor, *Living with Tiny Aliens*, New York: Fordham University Press 2020, p. 82.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁸ Cf. Johan Rockström et. al. 2009, Planetary boundaries: exploring the safe operating space for humanity. *Ecology and Society*, 14(2), 32.

⁹ Lynn White 1967, The historical roots of our ecologic crisis, *Science* (New York, N.Y.), 155(3767), 1203–1207.

¹⁰ Niels Henrik Gregersen 2001, p. 205.

¹¹ Pryor, *Living with Tiny Aliens*, p. 141.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 143.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

¹⁴ Hans Jonas 1985, *The imperative of responsibility: In search of an ethics for the technological age*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, p. 8; cf. Andreas Losch forthcoming, Developing our Planetary Plan with an 18th United Nations Sustainable Development Goal: Space Environment, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76(4), a5951. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i4.5951>.

¹⁵ Hans Jonas, *The imperative of responsibility*, p. 7.

¹⁶ Pryor, *Living with Tiny Aliens*, p. 143.

¹⁷ NASA 2014, Our vision for planetary sustainability, viewed 20 August 2020, from <https://www.nasa.gov/content/planetary-sustainability-our-vision/#.WBgtmiTBZsl>.

¹⁸ For a start, see Andreas Losch 2019, The need of an ethics of planetary sustainability, *International Journal of Astrobiology*, 18, 259–266, and the recent collection in the journal *Global Sustainability*, Andreas Losch 2020, Planetary sustainability collection. *Global Sustainability* 3, e13, 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.1017/sus.2020.7>.