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Series Editor: Douglas A. Vakoch

John Traphagan

Extraterrestrial Intelligence and Human Imagination

SETI at the Intersection of Science,
Religion, and Culture

 Springer

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Series editor

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For my wife Tomoko

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Contents

1	Thinking About Religion and Science.....	1
1.1	Foundations for Thinking About SETI: Some Ideas and Assumptions	3
1.2	Science and Religion	5
2	A Brief History of Thinking About ETI.....	17
2.1	Narrowing Imagination.....	18
2.2	Expanding Imagination.....	22
2.3	Imagining Aliens	27
2.4	It Came From Outer Space	29
2.5	It Came from Earth, Too	32
3	Are We Alone? The Emergence of SETI	35
3.1	Leaving Earth.....	36
3.2	ETI in the Scientific Imagination: The Drake Equation	40
3.3	Civilization?.....	44
4	Culture, Intelligence, and ETI	53
4.1	What Is Culture?.....	58
4.2	Implications for SETI Research.....	65
4.3	The Star Trek Imaginary.....	68
4.4	Symbols and Meaning	70
5	Knowledge Production in the Encounter with Alien Others.....	73
5.1	Ruth Benedict and the Invention of Japanese Culture	76
5.2	Implications of Anthropology at a Distance for SETI.....	80
5.3	New Imaginaries	84

6 Religion, Science, Culture, and SETI	87
6.1 Science and Religion	94
6.2 Is SETI a Religion?.....	95
6.3 SETI, Religion, Imagination.....	97
6.4 SETI and the Western Worldview.....	99
References	101
Index	107

Chapter 1

Thinking About Religion and Science

One of science's alleged crimes is revealing that our favorite most reassuring stories about our place in the universe and how we came to be are delusional. Instead what science reveals is a universe much older and much vaster than the tidy anthropocentric proscenium of our ancestors.

— Carl Sagan

The search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI) represents one of the most significant crossroads at which the assumptions and methods of scientific inquiry come into direct contact with—and in many cases conflict against—those of religion. Indeed, at the core of SETI is the same question that motivates many interested in religion: What is the place of humanity in the universe? When we look up at the sky and wonder about whether or not we are alone, a set of sub-questions are either tacitly or overtly implicated: Are humans unique in the cosmos? Is life abundant in the universe, or is Earth a special place with a special history? Is humanity significant or insignificant when thought about in relation to the cosmos? Both scientists involved with SETI (and in other areas) and people interested in and dedicated to some types of religions are engaged in contemplating these types of questions, even if their respective approaches and answers differ significantly.

In this book I'm interested in exploring this intersection in order to think about three things: (1) the underlying assumptions, many of which are tacitly based upon cultural values common in American society, that have shaped the ways in which SETI researchers conceptualize the nature of their endeavor and represent ideas about the potential influence contact might have on human civilization, (2) what does contemplation of alien others tell us about ourselves? In what ways does SETI express values that we hold about what makes a group of beings intelligent and civilized and what does that say about how we think about ourselves? And, finally,