Space and Society
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John Traphagan

# Extraterrestrial Intelligence and Human Imagination

SETI at the Intersection of Science, Religion, and Culture



### **Space and Society**



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ISSN 2199-3882 ISSN 2199-3890 (electronic)
ISBN 978-3-319-10550-5 ISBN 978-3-319-10551-2 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-10551-2
Springer Cham Heidelberg New York Dordrecht London

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014950415

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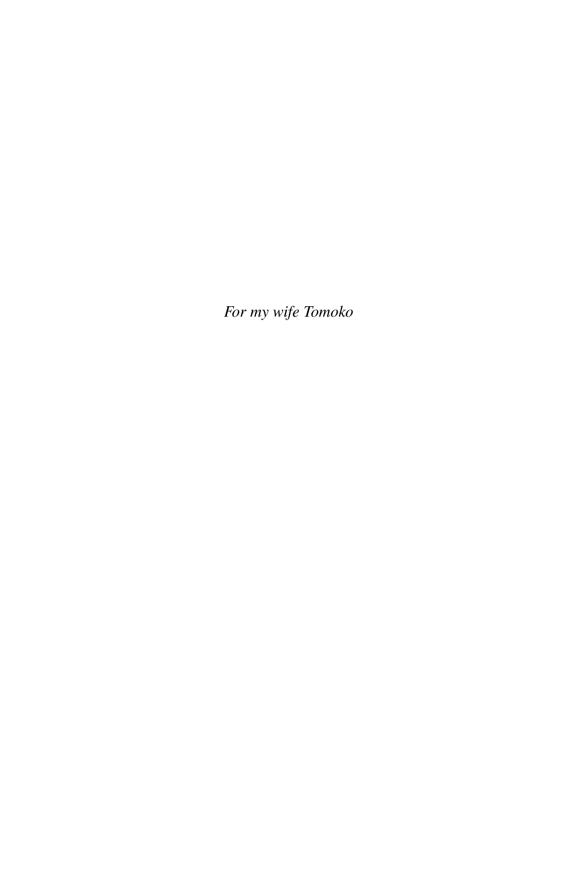
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Printed on acid-free paper

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### Acknowledgments

As always, after writing a book there are a number of people who deserve thanks for their willingness to read chapters, discuss ideas, provide editorial assistance, or give ongoing support. The person I must thank first and foremost is my father, who gave me the idea to write this book while we were chatting on the phone one day. We were talking about the course on religion, science, and the search for extraterrestrial intelligence I was teaching at the University of Texas, and he suggested that the basic content of the course would make a great outline for a book. My son, Julian Traphagan, also provided comments on the book, which I much appreciated given his knowledge of and interest in astronomy. I would also like to thank Doug Vakoch, with whom I have had many interesting conversations and who has been quite supportive of my participation in the world of SETI research over the years. My colleagues in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Texas also deserve my appreciation for the wonderfully collegial environment they create on a daily basis and their patient tolerance for an odd anthropologist with interests in aliens who sits among them. The ongoing help of my research assistant, Katherine Sanchez, has been greatly appreciated. A quick email with a question usually ends up with a flood of articles. Earlier versions of chapters four and five were published in Douglas Vakoch's edited volume Archaeology, Anthropology, and Interstellar Communication, which is part of the NASA History Series (2014). I am grateful for NASA publishing my earlier work and allowing me to reuse the material in significantly altered form for this book. Finally, of course, I must thank my wife Tomoko, son Julian, and daughter Sarah, who are always a source of strength and love.

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## **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

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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,