

Catholicism & Extraterrestrial Life

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We tend to consider speculation about extraterrestrials to be a recent phenomenon, a task forced on us by the scientific knowledge we have gained during the last century. Actually the debate about whether there is extraterrestrial life stretches back just shy of two and a half millennia. While Catholics have been participants in this debate the Church has never issued any formal pronouncement on it.

Unfortunately, as with the more recent debate on evolution, the speculative and scientific question has always been muddied by those who have sought to use the issue to promote a strictly materialistic concept of the universe. This was true from the beginning with the Greek atomists (Democritus, but especially Epicurus and Lucretius), whose desire it was to eliminate religious belief. Epicurus and his disciples claimed there was no divine creator of nature, instead everything in the universe, including man, came into being as a result of the chance jostling of brute matter (a.k.a., atoms). Lucretius, in his treatise *On the Nature of the Universe*, declared that because the number of atoms in a limitless universe is infinite, the random motion of the atoms must have produced a "plurality of worlds."

Early Christians did not appear to believe in a plurality of worlds or at least did not write about it. This is likely because they held the then more prevalent geocentric view of the universe. As patristics scholar Rev. Joseph Lienhard points out, in the world of the early Christians "anything 'extra terram' (that is, apart from earth and water) had to live in the air; hence, they would be spirits of some sort." According to Lienhard, the closest thing we find among the early Christians is the belief of some that "the seven planets or wanderers (the sun, moon, and five visible planets) were indwelt by rational [spiritual] beings or minds" because their circular motion "had to have a rational origin."

Such rude cosmology may strike us as irrelevant, but the early Christians probably also had theological reasons for their position. First, in direct contrast to the Epicureans, the Book of Genesis makes it clear that God (not chance) created the universe and, consequently, that human beings were intentionally (not accidentally) created by God. Second, the only other created rational beings mentioned in Scripture were the angels, who were understood as non-corporeal beings. But most important of all, as was later realized, the doctrine of the Incarnation and that of Christ's redemption seemed to suffer serious difficulties if

one speculated the existence of other worlds with intelligent beings living on them. Could these other beings suffer their own fall into sin and need a redeemer? Would Christ's death on the cross effect them? If not how could the Son of God become Incarnate in another form without either contradicting or forfeiting His human nature?

Three things caused the debate about extraterrestrials to resurface in the West: the theological anti-Aristotelianism of the late 13th century, the rediscovery of ancient atomism in the 15th century, and the invention of the telescope in the early 17th century.

Beginning about 1100, text after text of the great Greek philosopher Aristotle reached the West, and Christians were suddenly confronted with a unified, well-constructed account of the universe, an account written by a pagan. Aristotle denied that there could be a plurality of worlds. Of course, if there could not be a plurality of worlds, then the question of extraterrestrials was moot.

There were three reactions to Aristotle's purely natural, non-Christian philosophical account: vehement rejection (the radical Augustinians), careful embrace (St. Thomas Aquinas), and passionate embrace (the radical Aristotelians). Around 1265 a conflict between the two radical wings began to heat up, resulting in 1277 in the famous 219 Propositions, issued by the bishop of Paris, Etienne Tempier. Proposition 27 condemns all who hold the Aristotelian position "that the First Cause cannot make more than one world." The aim of this condemnation was not to affirm a plurality of worlds (which they had no way of knowing) but to affirm God's omnipotence against any account of nature that seemed to restrict His powers. Aristotle's insistence that there could only be one world accorded nicely with the Genesis account of creation, but it appeared to the radical Augustinians to make God the servant of natural necessity rather than its master. The remedy was to assert that theoretically the First Cause could indeed create a plurality of worlds if He so wished. No claim was being made however that He had actually done so.

While it is a theological truism that God is omnipotent and therefore can create anything that is possible, including other possible worlds, it does not logically follow, however, that since it is within His power to create anything that is possible that He must actually do so. God could create a plurality of inhabited worlds but, in itself, this is not evidence of their actuality.

Yet speculation would begin anew about the possibility of a plurality of worlds.

And by the beginning of the 15th century one Catholic thinker would affirm the existence of intelligent extraterrestrial life. In his *On Learned Ignorance* (1440), Nicholas of Cusa (later bishop) argued that “life, as it exists here on earth in the form of men, animals and plants, is to be found, let us suppose, in a higher form in the solar and stellar region.” Nicholas then began to speculate on different forms of beings: On the sun might live solarians, bright beings more enlightened and spiritual than ourselves, and on the moon lunatics. Thus began excursions of the imagination into this fantastic realm. At the same time the long-buried texts of Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius were rediscovered. During the next two centuries, the ideas of these ancient atomists spread all over Europe, becoming the philosophical foundation for a modern materialistic worldview.

The plurality-of-worlds theory became much more plausible when the newly invented telescope was trained on the heavens in the early 17th century. The universe was found to be far deeper and more populated with stars than anyone could ever have imagined. Were these not the suns illuminating the infinite worlds promised by Epicurus and Lucretius? And with the Copernican revolution Aristotelian and Ptolemaic cosmology, which put the earth at the center of the universe, was permanently displaced making other worlds seem increasingly likely.

From approximately 1600 to 1900 there was first a trickle, then a flood of scientific-philosophical-theological speculation on the nature of extraterrestrial life. Sir William Herschel (1730-1822), the astronomer who discovered Uranus, claimed that he saw near-certain evidence of forests, circular buildings, canals, roads, and pyramids on the moon. He was equally certain that the known planets of our solar system were all populated and insisted the sun was “a most magnificent habitable globe” filled with solarians “whose organs are adapted to the peculiar circumstances of that vast globe.” His son, Sir John Herschel (1792-1871), argued that the luminaries lived on the dark side of the moon since the front side appeared visibly dead. Astronomer and physicist Johann Bode (1747-1826) asked of the solarians, “Who would doubt their existence?” since “the most wise author of the world assigns an insect lodging on a grain of sand and will certainly not permit...the great ball of the sun to be empty of creatures and still less of rational inhabitants who are ready gratefully to praise the author of life.” The same reasoning led him to affirm the existence of extraterrestrials on the moon, Mercury, and Venus. Other astronomers and physicists followed suit and with them some theologians who sought to reconcile such views with Christianity.

Anglican theologian John Wilkins penned *Discovery of a World in the Moone* in which he insisted that the absence in Scripture of any mention of other worlds or extraterrestrials did not preclude the possibility of their existence because "tis besides the scope of the Holy Ghost either in the new Testament or in the old, to reveale any thing unto us concerning the secrets of Philosophy," and further, an inhabited moon would be an expression of God's creative power, unduly restricted by believers, for too long, only to the earth. Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle's *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds* (1686) asserted that the existence of creatures on other planets could not be descendants of Adam and therefore would not be subject to the Incarnation. In 1769 Abbé Jean Terrasson, a Catholic priest, argued that the Incarnation was not peculiar to our planet. If "it is asked...if the eternal Word can unite himself hypostatically to a number of men [i.e. different rational creatures on multiple planets]; one responds without hesitation, yes. The men would all be men-God, men in the plural, God in the singular, because these men-God would in effect be several in number as to human nature, but they would be only one in respect to divine nature." Indeed, adapting the old Franciscan speculation of the Incarnation even without the Fall, Terrasson argued Christ would embody Himself as a member of these other races, for they deserved this honor even more than those who had fallen. In contrast Beilby Porteus (1731-1808) maintained that the same Incarnation and Redemption could apply to all extraterrestrials.

Christians were not the only ones theologically speculating about extraterrestrials. The 18th century was the beginning of the transition for the West from a Christianized culture to a secularized one. Deism, standing midway between Christianity and atheism, was the religion of transition. Deists theorized a distant, uninvolved god who created the material universe and directed it only by the laws of physics. The Incarnation was incompatible and therefore irrelevant to this schema. Deists like Alexander Pope, Voltaire, and Benjamin Franklin all embraced the view of a plurality of inhabited worlds. For deist Thomas Paine, "[T]o believe that God created a plurality of worlds at least as numerous as what we call stars, renders the Christian system of faith at once little and ridiculous and scatters it in the mind like feathers in the air." For those who attempted a reconciliation of such plurality with Christianity, Paine warned that "he who thinks that he believes in both has thought but little of either." John Adams wrote to warn Thomas Jefferson against hiring anyone at the University of Virginia who holds the "awful blasphemy" that the "great Principle which has produced...Newton's universe...came down to this little ball, to be spit upon by the Jews."

In the latter half of the 19th century, many influential thinkers shifted from deism to atheism, or the modern version of Epicurean-Lucretian materialism, called Darwinism. They claimed that chance actions of matter were sufficient to create the universe and evolve life and so a deity was no longer either necessary or desirable. Belief in extraterrestrials was an essential part of the new materialist creed, just as it had been an essential part of the old one.

Only in the 20th century was science advanced enough to move from speculation to the actual search for hard evidence. And hard evidence appeared to make life rarer than earlier believed. By the end of that century, as Steven Dick documents in *Life on Other Worlds: The 20th Century Extraterrestrial Life Debate*, scientists had demonstrated to all but the most intransigent that excepted for Earth our solar system was devoid of intelligent life and most likely devoid of any life. Further, with knowledge of the ever-greater complexity of living organisms and the delicate balance of conditions that make them possible, it became likely that far fewer places in the universe could probably meet the conditions necessary for even rudimentary life forms.

Yet the dismal result of the high-tech search for extraterrestrials has not deterred believers. They have instead called for trust and patience, arguing that “the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.” Yet, empirically speaking, if after a century-long search physical evidence is still lacking for the existence of intelligent extraterrestrial life in our solar system or galaxy, it may indeed indicate that absence of evidence is evidence of absence, or at least that it might remain unfounded speculation.

For those who might argue, is not the same true of God or angels? the answer is simple. God and angels are by definition immaterial beings. What kind of scientific test would one devise to locate a being who, not embodied, has no location? Extraterrestrials, on the other hand, are supposed to be physical organisms; if they exist, we should be able to detect them the same way we detect other physical body. If unable to detect them one must admit either they do not exist or that they presently and maybe forever remain purely speculative. Admission of the possibility of no extraterrestrial life or at least no intelligent life forms, however, is beyond the pale of many atheistic materialists. Their belief stems from a particular metaphysical stance of epicurean origin.

Some contest that Christians would somehow be making God a second-rate deity if we held that He made human beings to be the only intelligent embodied beings in the universe, since that would mean a lot of wasted space. What

frightens us into making such claims is possibly the immensity of space itself. But while the vastness of the universe rightly humbles us, its size means nothing to God, an immaterial intelligence. Since He has no size, it is all the same to Him whether He makes the universe as big as a pin or a pin as big as the universe. Neither, does the materialist's logic of probability, born of Epicurus and Lucretius, demand the Christian accept that other intelligent beings must exist in the universe. Unless we think (with Epicurus) that the universe is governed by pure chance, which would be a reason to give up our Christianity. As for those who object, "But what would you do if extraterrestrials actually show up?" Well, while a remote possibility, in the end, the Church has not pronounced one way or the other. Currently evidence points more to their nonexistence than existence.

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