



Christianity, Space and Aliens

Peter S. Williams

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The ongoing scientific quest to explore space - 'the final frontier' - is intimately bound up with the search for 'strange new worlds and new civilizations'¹, and with issues of an undeniably spiritual character. As a 1999 NASA report on the 'Societal Implications of Astrobiology' affirmed:

'the search for extraterrestrial life . . . offers a meeting ground not only for physical, biological and social scientists, but also for artists, philosophers, [and] theologians . . . The effort encourages people from very different intellectual traditions to talk to one another, and may set the stage for . . . the unification of knowledge.'²

In other words, SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) is all about trying to understand our place in the scheme of things - not merely scientifically, but metaphysically, in terms that inform our worldview. Hence it is no surprise to find professor of psychology Albert A Harrison writing that 'the knowledge that we are not alone in the universe . . . will affect our philosophy, our science, our religion . . .'³ Of course, Christians have never exactly thought that we were 'alone in the universe.' God, while transcendent, is also immanent: God is with us. And then there are the angels.⁴ Only an atheist would phrase the question of extraterrestrial intelligence (ETI) in quite this way.

However, some Christians have believed (and do believe) that humans are the only embodied creatures in creation to be made in God's image.

And some atheists love to suggest (it is rarely argued) that 'if and when one ever detects evidence of an extraterrestrial intelligence . . . that evidence will be inconsistent with the existence of God or at least organized religion.'⁵ One suspects that some SETI enthusiasts look forward to the discovery of extraterrestrial life for just this reason, and that their faith in this actually functions as a bulwark against religion. Of course, unless SETI actually 'delivers the goods' this piece of atheological self-justification will remain another example of what John Polkinghorne calls 'promissory naturalism'.

On the other hand, the possibility that both God and ET might exist is something assumed by M Night Shyamalan's latest film thriller, Signs. The story is about a Catholic priest who regains his faith in divine providence (a faith which was lost after his wife died in an accident) amid the climactic events of his struggle to protect his children from alien invaders navigating by crop circles.⁶

A related piece of atheological rhetoric suggests that 'SETI's emphasis on the enormity of our cosmos attests to the tiny, and perhaps insignificant place we occupy in the cosmic scheme . . . The quaint little stories of our conventional religious teachings seem but musings of children at play.'⁷ However, it seems that our growing appreciation for the size of creation at least cuts both ways, for 'when one stares upward into a clear and dark night sky and out across the vast star fields of our galaxy, a sense of mystical astonishment is inevitable. When one thinks of how small our galaxy is in the larger scheme of things, even greater wonder is inspired.'⁸ This sense of cosmic wonder might motivate reflection upon the contingency, beauty and design of the heavens that has led many to conclude that there is a Designer behind the cosmos.⁹ 'What could be more clear or obvious when we look up to the sky and contemplate the heavens, than that there is some divinity of superior intelligence?' So wrote Cicero, and the majority of humanity has echoed this insight.

Popular belief in the existence of aliens has died down from a peak in the late 70s when 51% of Americans believed that 'there are people somewhere like ourselves living on other planets'. But a significant minority of people continue to

believe in the existence of extraterrestrial intelligence - in 1990 46% of Americans believed in ETI. Moreover, there has been a 'recent legitimization of the search for extraterrestrial life within the scientific community' that calls for 'a rediscovery of the significance of this question within the theological community.'¹⁰

The Heavens Declare . . . What?

According to an aside in the opening chapter of Genesis - a passage about God's creation 'in the beginning' of 'the heavens and the earth' (Genesis 1:1) - 'he also made the stars' (Genesis 1:16). Later on, God promises Abraham to make his descendants 'as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore' (Genesis 22:17). We now know that there are around 100 billion stars in our galaxy, the Milky Way, and that there are around 100 billion galaxies in the known universe.¹¹ We live on just one planet, orbiting just one star, in just one galaxy (something beautifully illustrated by the opening shot of the film *Contact*).

I wonder what thoughts and feelings go through you as you consider such statistics, or look at images, like those taken by the Hubble Space telescope? Perhaps you find yourself naturally echoing King David's psalm:

'O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.' (Psalm 8:1 NIV)

Or maybe you sympathize with Oxford chemist Peter Atkins who says:

'I've always thought that I was insignificant. Getting to know the size of the Universe, I see just how insignificant I really am! And I think the rest of the human race ought to realize just how insignificant it is. I mean, we're just a bit of slime on a planet belonging to one sun.'¹²

David even sounds a little bit like Atkins in verse 4: 'what are mere mortals that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?' However, while Peter Atkins, who is an atheist, looks at the universe and concludes that there is no God and that man has no significance, David concludes that the universe is God's handiwork and that humanity is crowned 'with glory and

honour'. This isn't just a difference in emotional response, it's a difference between two mutually exclusive worldviews. The theist sees the same heavens as the atheist, but interprets them quite differently:

'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.' (Psalm 19:1-4 NIV)

This interpretation is either right, or wrong. Let's examine the issues of space and aliens in order.

Space

According to *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*:

'Space . . . is big. Really big. You just won't believe how vastly hugely mindbogglingly big it is. I mean you may think it's a long way down the road to the chemist, but that's just peanuts to space.'¹³

Could such little things as us really mean that much to an infinite God? (Only to such a being could we mean infinitely much!)

The size of the universe is the sort of fact that atheists love to dangle in front of Christians as if it obviously undermined the rationality of belief in human significance, and hence the whole gospel story. For example, Gregory Stock writes: 'the special significance of humanity seemed clear to Western thinkers in the Middle Ages; Earth was at the centre of the universe . . .'¹⁴ However, says Stock, 'The Copernican revolution shattered that notion, wrenching humanity from its exalted station and leaving it stranded on a peripheral planet circling one of many stars'.¹⁵ Likewise, Richard Dawkins says: 'we should not think there's anything special about us. We used to think we were the centre of the Universe and now we know we're not.'¹⁶

Frankly, this is nothing but the poorest sort of atheistic rhetoric in scientific clothing. The importance of a thing has nothing to do with its spatial position (is someone in the centre of the

room somehow more important than someone in the corner?), or size (is a man worth less than a tree?). Scientific descriptions of the universe are in principle incapable of ruling out notions of design, significance, or purpose. The water in the kettle may be boiling because of the vibration of molecules, but the water is boiling because I want a cup of tea. The universe may have started with a Big Bang, but the universe began because God wanted a universe.

Besides, as C S Lewis pointed out, although our scientific model of creation may have changed, 'the insignificance (by cosmic standards) of the Earth became as much a common-place to the medieval, as to the modern, thinker; it was part of the moralists' stock-in-trade, used, as Cicero uses it, to mortify human ambition.'¹⁷

Perhaps the wittiest reply to the doubt that God could be interested in 'little-old us' came from the quill of the French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal, who wrote that, 'If you want to say that man is too feeble to deserve communication with God, you have to be very elevated to be the judge of that.'¹⁸

The belief that humans are significant because God made us His own image is often thought by non-believers to be a piece of egoism on the part of Christians. But I wonder, who is the more egoistic: someone who says that God made them in his own image, or the person who says that people made God in their own image? The Christian claim that God has revealed himself to humanity, especially in Jesus, does not involve any egoism. As C S Lewis wrote, it would be a mistake to think 'that the Incarnation implies some particular merit or excellence in humanity . . . it implies just the reverse: a particular demerit and depravity. No creature that deserved redemption would need to be redeemed. They that are whole need not the physician. Christ died for men precisely because men are not worth dying for; to make them worth it.'¹⁹ There is, said Lewis, 'no reason why the minute earth and the yet smaller human creatures upon it should not be the most important things in a universe that contains the spiral nebulae.' No reason, that is, if God exists.

Indeed, our modern scientific understanding of cosmic 'fine tuning' shows that carbon based life forms couldn't exist in a universe that was any

smaller or younger than ours:

'We currently believe that the universe is around 15 billion years old, give or take a few thousand million years. That length of time is needed for an initial generation of stars to be formed and die . . . and in that process make some of the heavier elements, of which we are composed, by nuclear fusion.'²⁰

The realisation that the universe is finely tuned, that even a slight deviation from the physical givens of the cosmos would produce a universe incapable of sustaining life, has been called the 'anthropic principle' (from the Greek for people: 'anthropos'). People can only exist in a certain very unlikely kind of universe, and that's the very kind of universe that exists.

The fact that we wouldn't be here if the universe were different doesn't explain why such an unlikely universe should exist in the first place. Suppose you were up for execution by firing squad. The soldiers fire, but they all miss. Would your surprise be alleviated if I pointed out that you wouldn't be alive to feel surprised if any of the soldiers had been on target?! You might suggest that you were simply the beneficiary of dumb luck, but isn't a more likely explanation that the soldiers missed on purpose? Likewise with the universe. The cosmic fine-tuning could be dumb luck, but it seems more rational to say that it was set up that way on purpose.²¹ In which case the vastness of space shouldn't be discouraging to our self-worth; rather the opposite. It would seem that God went to a lot of 'effort' to put us here.

. . . and Aliens?

I recently overheard the following conversation, between a counter clerk and a customer, in my local Oxfam bookshop:

Clerk: 'I reckon it's the most important book since the Bible; he's talking about back-engineering alien technology from the Roswell crash.'

Customer: 'Surely that's more important than the Bible, if it's true.'

Clerk: 'Yeah. Well, if the Bible's true, being about the creator and all, then that would be more important wouldn't it?'

Customer: 'Well, both books can't be true at least.'

Clerk: 'Oh, No.'

Customer: 'Although, God could have made the aliens . . .'

In other words, the existence of aliens wouldn't disprove the Bible.

Physicist Paul Davies, on the other hand, thinks that the discovery of extraterrestrial life would have profound and even catastrophic results for religious belief. The general assumption here is that Christianity says that humanity is the sole end and pinnacle of creation, and the only object of God's love:

'It's inevitable that if we discover life elsewhere in the Universe, it will change for ever our perspective of our own species and our own planet . . . Those people who cling to the idea that humanity is the pinnacle of creation, or that somehow we were made in the image of God, would I think receive a rude shock.'²²

Philosopher Theodore Schick agrees:

'For all their differences, Christians and humanists agree on at least one thing: that humans are the most valuable form of life on the planet. Whether divinely crafted or naturally evolved, both groups consider humans to be the crown of earthly creation . . . since humanists believe that life is a natural rather than a supernatural phenomenon, they have no trouble admitting that self-conscious, intelligent beings may exist elsewhere in the universe.

'Such an admission is not so easy for Christians, however. The Bible does not mention the existence of other planets, let alone intelligent creatures that inhabit them . . . So, if intelligent aliens were discovered, Christian theologians would have a lot of explaining to do.'²³

Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. For one thing, Schick presents a logically false dilemma between viewing life as 'natural' [ie evolved] rather than 'a supernatural' [ie created] phenomena. Logically speaking, life could be

created by God through evolution (a position accepted by 'theistic evolutionists'). Alternatively, even if life is (as I suspect), in some more robust sense of the term, a 'supernatural phenomena', the discovery of extraterrestrial intelligence would simply reveal that God has created life more than once. Either way, theists have no trouble admitting that self-conscious, intelligent beings may exist elsewhere in the universe. Moreover, Davies and Schick are attacking a 'straw man', an unfairly weak characterization of their target: 'The Bible does not explicitly confirm or deny the existence of intelligent life from other planets.'²⁴ As Mark Wm Worthing says: 'Christian theology has no biblical or theological basis upon which to reject out of hand the possibility of extraterrestrial life.'²⁵

There are a lot of things the Bible doesn't mention. For example, the Bible doesn't mention the existence of the telephone, but no one looks at their telephone and concludes on those grounds that the Bible has been proved false! Why should things be any different with alien life?

The idea that there is only one world goes back to Aristotle (in his treatise *De Caelo*), not to the Bible. The biblical phrase 'the heavens and the earth' (Genesis 1:1) simply means 'the whole of creation'. For another thing, Psalm 8 recognizes the humbleness of human beings: 'what are mere mortals that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?' It affirms that, although humanity is not God's top creation (as Paul Davies assumes) - 'you made them a little lower than the angels' - we are nevertheless 'crowned . . . with glory and honour' by God. As Hebrews 2:9 (quoting Psalm 8) says, it was for our sake that Christ himself was made 'a little lower than the angels.' C S Lewis puts this paradox in context:

'It is, of course, the essence of Christianity that God loves man and for his sake became man and died. But that does not prove that man is the sole end of Nature. In the parable, it was the one lost sheep that the shepherd went in search of: it was not the only sheep in the flock, and we are not told that it was the most valuable - save in so far as the most desperately in need has, while the need lasts, a peculiar value in the eyes of Love.'²⁶

After all, in John 10:16 Jesus says: 'I have sheep

the signal. This sequence represents the prime numbers from 2 to 101 (where a given prime number is represented by the corresponding number of beats, and the individual prime numbers are separated by pauses). The scientists in *Contact* took this signal as decisive confirmation of extraterrestrial intelligence. Why? Mathematician and philosopher William A Dembski explains:

'Whenever we infer design, we must establish two things — complexity and specification. Complexity ensures that the object in question is not so simple that it can readily be explained by chance. Specification ensures that this object exhibits the type of pattern that is the trademark of intelligence.'³¹

To see why complexity is crucial for inferring design, consider the following sequence: 110111011111 (the first twelve bits in the previous sequence). 'It is a sure bet that no SETI researcher, if confronted with this twelve-bit sequence, is going to contact the science editor at the *New York Times*, hold a press conference, and announce that an extraterrestrial intelligence has been discovered. No headline is going to read, "Aliens Master First Three Prime Numbers!"'³² The problem here is that this sequence is too short (it has too little complexity) to establish that intelligence with knowledge of prime numbers produced it:

'A randomly beating radio source might by chance just happen to put out the sequence '110111011111.' A sequence of 1126 bits representing the prime numbers from 2 to 101, however, is a different story. Here the sequence is sufficiently long (ie has enough complexity) to confirm that an extraterrestrial intelligence could have produced it.'³³

However, complexity in and of itself isn't sufficient to eliminate chance and indicate design. After all, if I flip a coin 1,000 times, I'll participate in a highly complex event, but no one would suggest that this sequence of coin tosses must therefore be the result of intelligence! This is because, 'this sequence won't exhibit a suitable [non ad hoc] pattern. Contrast this with the sequence representing the prime numbers from 2 to 101. Not only is this sequence complex, it also embodies a suitable pattern. The SETI researcher

who in the movie *Contact* discovered this sequence put it this way: 'This isn't noise, this has structure'.³⁴

A long string of random letters drawn from a scrabble bag would be complex without being specified. A short sequence of letters (like 'so', or 'the') is specified without being complex. A sonnet by Shakespeare is both complex and specified. The signal detected by the SETI researchers in *Contact* was both complex and specified, and this is what told them that they had detected signs of extraterrestrial intelligence. This is exactly the sort of pattern SETI is currently seeking to prove the alien hypothesis. And this is exactly the sort of pattern we find at the foundation of biology:

'So there exists a reliable criterion for detecting design strictly from observational features of the world. This criterion belongs to probability and complexity theory, not to metaphysics and theology. And although it cannot achieve logical demonstration, it does achieve a statistical justification so compelling as to demand assent. This criterion is relevant to biology. When applied to the complex, information-rich structures of biology, it detects design.'³⁵

What are the Chances?

But do aliens actually exist? We don't have any direct evidence one way or the other³⁶, but an absence of evidence isn't necessarily evidence of absence. That depends upon how likely it is that we would find evidence of extraterrestrials if they exist.

Whether or not you think aliens exist depends upon what assumptions about the origin of life you bring to the question. The relevant assumptions were organized into an equation by pioneer SETI researcher Frank Drake (as Jill Tarter says, 'An equation is nothing more than a lovely way to organize our ignorance'³⁷). The Drake Equation, as it has become known, suggests that the number of detectable civilizations (N) is determined by multiplying:

the rate of formation of stars suitable for life (R*)
the fraction of those with planets (fp)
the number of those planets that are suitable for life (ne)
the fraction of these planets where life actually

would expect that at least some of them would not only believe in God, but also believe in God. For one thing, to be sentient simply means to be made in God's image (although not necessarily 'male and female'), and to be made in God's image primarily means being capable of entering into a loving relationship with God. As with humans, I would expect the souls of aliens to be restless until they rest in God (to borrow a phrase from Augustine). For another thing, extraterrestrials would have available all the signs and evidence of God's existence available to us from the existence, design and beauty of creation. 'The heavens declare the glory of God . . . There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard' (Psalm 19:1-4 NIV). Not the tongues of angels or of men, nor even the tongues of aliens. I would therefore expect at least some aliens to be theists. Just how similar ET's religion would be to Christianity would depend upon God's economy of revelation and salvation in relation to the specific conditions of alien life, and this is a question for which we have little relevant data. However, if the faith of SETI enthusiasts is ever vindicated, they might find that ET is an evangelist!

Conclusion

In Romans 8:19-22, Paul writes:

'The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself would be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.' (NIV)

Whether or not the only 'children of God' who will join with the angels when the 'new creation' is born out of the old will be human is, I suspect, one of those questions that will not receive a definitive answer this side of the age to come. In the meantime, we should continue to feel secure of our place in God's love, despite our place in the cosmos, remembering that our Heavenly Father loves us - not because we are the pinnacle of His creation, but because to err is human and to forgive is divine.

Footnotes

43. Dr Ray Bohlin, 'Are We Alone in the Universe?' [\[back\]](#)