

The Catholic Faith, Scripture, and the Question of the Existence of Intelligent Extra-terrestrial Life

Marie I. George

The vastness and beauty of the heavens evoke feelings of awe and wonder, and have led people throughout the ages to ask: Are we alone in the universe? This question has enjoyed increased popularity in recent times. Aside from the many writers of fiction who earn their living by populating the skies, a fair number of contemporary scientists have been engaging in speculations about extra-terrestrial life, some even searching for it. The positions advocated by scientists in turn have stimulated the thought of theologians and philosophers of science. A wide variety of positions has been adopted, one of which I intend to examine here. It has to do with a question which arises if one concedes that intelligent ET life may exist, namely, if intelligent ET life exists, does that mean that Christianity which proclaims that the Son of God became a human being to save us from our sins is merely an anthropocentric story? A common response to this question is that the discovery of ET life¹ poses no threat to Christianity—it would simply be the case that the universe turned out to be bigger than the Scriptures led us to believe. What is often not made clear is exactly why someone might think that the existence of ETs would relegate Christianity to the realm of mythology. Correspondingly, the grounds for the claim that there is no incompatibility between the beliefs are often more hinted at than explicated.

The purpose of this paper is to clarify what if any incompatibility there is between Catholic Christian beliefs and the existence of ETs. I am not going to examine the scientific investigations which bear upon the likelihood of ET

¹ Hereafter ET life is to be understood to refer to intelligent ET life.

life, partly because many others are more knowledgeable than myself in this area, and partly because these discussions have little direct bearing on my main purpose. If there are grounds for maintaining that there is or is not a conflict between Christian belief and the existence of extra-terrestrial life, these grounds are not going to disappear because of what science says one way or the other about the likelihood of extra-terrestrial life.

The existence of extra-terrestrial life could conflict with the Catholic faith in three ways. First, it could directly conflict with official Church teaching.² Second, it could conflict with Scriptural passages. Sometimes the latter conflict coincides with the former, but this is not always the case since Catholicism is not a "religion of the book," and not all passages of Scripture have an official interpretation. Finally, belief in ET life could also conflict with traditional beliefs which the faithful are not bound to adhere to (beliefs such as limbo). The latter two forms of conflict are less acute; such Scriptural passages are subject to reinterpretation, and such traditional beliefs sometimes go out of vogue. I will limit myself here to considering official Church teachings, and the most relevant and most problematic of the passages of Scripture which do not have an official interpretation.

The Good News is that the Second Person of the Trinity became a human being in order to save human beings from sin,³ both original sin and personal sin. Christ realized our salvation by his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead. Since Christ's sacrifice does not save us without cooperation on our part, a substantial amount of Christian doctrine concerns what we must do in order to obtain eternal life. The supposed conflict with Christian belief and belief in ETs is not with the teachings about Christian behavior, but with those concerning the Incarnation and Redemption.

One kind of argument regarding the existence of ETs is based on the failure of Scripture to mention them. From this omission people have argued to opposite conclusions. Those who are convinced of the reliability of Scripture conclude that ETs do not exist. Whereas those who lack this prior conviction, and who are inclined to admit the existence of ETs, conclude that Scripture is unreliable.

Both of these arguments base themselves either on a faulty supposition as to the purpose of Scripture or as to its completeness, or on an unjustified assumption about the relation of ETs to humans, and sometimes on more than

² "[T]he Christian faith is not a 'religion of the book'" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [Bloomington, Ohio: Apostolate for Family Consecration, 1994], no. 108). (Hereafter cited as CCC.)

³ See CCC, no. 457.

one of these. The purpose of Scripture is not to instruct us about the constitution of the cosmos, but to teach us things that we need to know to save our souls. Thus, when Scripture does not speak of something, the probable conclusion to be drawn is that knowledge of that thing does not pertain to our salvation. I say "probable conclusion" because not every article of the faith is found in Scripture, the Immaculate Conception being a case in point. What is found in Scripture is written for our salvation; what is not found in Scripture may or may not pertain to our salvation. Thus those who reason that Scripture says nothing about the existence of ETs and therefore they do not exist, first assume that knowledge of ET existence pertains to our salvation, and second that everything that pertains to our salvation is necessarily in Scripture. Those who reason that Scripture is unreliable because it does not speak of ETs, either mistakenly think that the purpose of Scripture is to give a course in cosmology, or while acknowledging its purpose regards our salvation, assume, as their opponents do, that knowledge of ET existence pertains to our salvation, and that everything pertaining thereto is spoken about in Scripture.

A probable case, however, can be made that if ETs exist, the reason why Scripture omits any reference to them is because such knowledge is unimportant for our salvation. A reference to Catholic belief concerning another type of intelligent being is helpful here. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that "Angels are a truth of the faith."⁴ Angels played and still play a role in regard to our salvation, and are repeatedly mentioned in Scripture: our first mother sinned at the instigation of a fallen angel; the new Eve at the announcement of an angel became the Mother of God; Christ speaks about children having angels, etc. If ETs had a similar impact on our salvation it is reasonable to expect to hear about them in Scripture just as we hear about angels, with oral tradition remaining an alternate means of our knowing about them. Factually no extra-terrestrial has had any known effect on any human individual whatsoever. Moreover, salvation has already been effected through Christ's death and resurrection. Whence: "The Christian economy, therefore, since it is the new and definitive Covenant, will never pass away; and no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ."⁵

The discovery of ETs would not be reason to revise God's saving plan for humanity, nor would ETs bring us some new revelation. Any future interactions we might have with them would not be radically different than those with our fellow humans, and thus how we should treat them and how we

⁴ CCC, no. 328.

⁵ *Dei Verbum* 4, quoted in CCC, no. 66.

should expect them to treat us is already known to us through the Ten Commandments and the other moral teachings of the New Testament. ETs as rational material beings would have the same rights as we do to life, property, good name, etc.⁶ And they would have a similar potential to impact on our lives as others humans do, by exhorting us to do good, by giving good example, etc. or by the opposite, leading us astray, giving us bad example, granted they may perhaps be more helpful or pernicious than our fellow humans if they are more intelligent than they.

It is noteworthy that Augustine and Aquinas seriously entertained the possibility that there exist intelligent beings in the universe in addition to humans and angels, namely, animated celestial bodies. These theologians did not immediately reject this possibility because Scripture makes no mention of such beings.⁷ This is reasonably ascribed not only to their conviction that Scripture did not teach everything there could be known about the cosmos, but also to their confidence that there could be no conflict between faith and reason. God could certainly create other intelligent beings if he wanted to, and if they were discovered their existence was not going to conflict with God's teaching about himself which comes to us through the Christian Faith. But let us return to making plain what the purported points of conflict are.

Some thinkers do not see a problem in Scripture's lack of mention of ETs, but instead discern a conflict between the teachings of the faith and certain consequences of ET existence. Among these are Abbé Joseph Émile Filachou who sees accepting ET life as incompatible with Christian belief on three counts: "the importance presupposed [in Scripture] of the role of man on earth, the supreme dignity attributed to the Divine founder of the Christian Church, and finally the grandeur attributed to the Church itself."⁸

The first point can be answered by saying that the existence of ETs does not as such prejudice the role of humans on earth as having dominion over

⁶ Note that a question arises as to whether they should be baptized.

⁷ "Whether, however, some incorporeal substances are united to the celestial bodies as forms, Augustine leaves in doubt and so does Origen. Which nevertheless seems to be rejected by many moderns for the reason that since the number of the blessed according to divine Scripture is made up from human beings and angels alone, those spiritual substances cannot be counted among human souls nor among Angels who are incorporeal. But nevertheless Augustine even leaves this in doubt. . . ." (Thomas Aquinas, *De Quaestiones Disputatae de Potentia in Quaestiones Disputatae*, ed. P. Bazzi et al. [Turin: Marietti, 1965], vol. 2, q. 6, art. 6, resp.).

⁸ *De la pluralité des mondes*, p. 100, quoted by Michael J. Crowe in *The ET Life Debate 1750–1900: The Idea of a Plurality of Worlds from Kant to Lowell* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 411. (Hereafter cited as *The ET Life Debate 1750–1900*.)

the earth. Even if ETs were superior to us in intelligence, we as rational creatures would not be their slaves any more than one human is the slave of another human who is significantly more intelligent; nor would ETs have any right to our property from the simple fact they are more intelligent. ET immigration would raise the same sorts of problems human immigration raises, e.g., perhaps we would be obligated to share the earth with them.

Filachou's other two questions regarding the relation such beings would have to Christ and to his Church, however, are not so easily resolved. As to their relation to Christ a wide variety of scenarios has been proposed, and evaluated in the light of Christian teaching.⁹

One possibility is that these beings never sinned, and thus are not in need of a redeemer.¹⁰ That such occur does not seem excluded by any Catholic teaching. Christ would be the head of these beings, as he is head of the angels, and knowledge about Christ would be of interest to them in the same way it is of interest to the angels.¹¹

Another possibility is that the ETs did not sin, are not in need of a redeemer, and yet the Word becomes incarnate as one of them for reasons other than redemption. Although human redemption is the chief reason given for the Incarnation of Christ as a human being, other reasons for his Incarnation are given as well. If God so chose he could certainly become incarnate as another human-type being for reasons other than redeeming that people. (I say "human-type" being because the ETs are supposed not to be pure spirits, but

⁹ See C. S. Lewis, "Religion and Rocketry," in *Fern-Seed and Elephants and Other Essays on Christianity*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Fontana, 1975).

¹⁰ Another possibility proposed by some is that ETs were created for a purely natural happiness and were never offered grace so as to be able to live a supernatural life. In this case, at the end of time there would be upright intelligent beings existing in separation from the Church triumphant. This accords poorly, if at all with Eph. 1:8–10 which says that "He has let us know the mystery of his purpose, the hidden plan he so kindly made in Christ from the beginning to act upon when the times had run their course to the end: that he would bring everything together under Christ, as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth." The possibility that the first ET parents did not sin, but some of their offspring did does not demand separate analysis.

¹¹ "[James] Beattie's . . . final reply posits extended effects from the redemption. He states that extraterrestrials 'will not suffer for our guilt, nor be rewarded for our obedience. But it is not absurd to imagine, that our fall and recovery may be useful to them as an example; and that the divine grace manifested in our redemption may raise their adoration and gratitude into higher raptures and quicken their ardour to inquire . . . into the dispensations of infinite wisdom.' Moreover, he suggests that this view is 'not mere conjecture [but] derives plausibility from many analogies in nature; as well as from holy writ, which represents the mystery of our redemption as an object of curiosity to superior beings, and our repentance as an occasion of their joy'" (Crowe, *The ET Life Debate 1750–1900*, p. 102).

to have a body as well.)¹² However, a complication arises with the possibility that Christ become incarnate more than one time, namely, passages from Scripture indicate that there is one Lord, Jesus Christ:

And even if there were things called gods, either in the sky or on earth—where there certainly seem to be “gods” and “lords” in plenty—still for us there is one God, the Father, from whom all things come and for whom we exist; and there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things come and through whom we exist (1 Cor. 8:5–6).

His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God, but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are; and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross. But God raised him high and gave him the name which is above all other names, so that all beings in the heavens, on the earth and in the underworld, should bend at the name of Jesus and that every tongue should acclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:6–11).

If the Second Person became incarnate on another planet as an ET, there would appear to be a Lord other than Jesus Christ, true God and true man, since what would be true of the Second Person as having an ET nature would not be true of the Second Person as having a human nature. One solution proposed is that “one Lord” applies to Christ in his divine nature alone.¹³ Thus, the Second Person incarnate as an ET would not be a Lord other than our Lord Jesus Christ. However, this interpretation does not accord well with the passage just cited from Philipians, which implies that it is the Word incarnate (as man) who is given the name “Lord.”¹⁴ The Word

¹² Scripture excludes the possibility that there existed on earth other races of human beings that were not descended from Adam. “If it is certain that death reigned over everyone as the consequence of one man’s fall, it is even more certain that one man, Jesus Christ, will cause everyone to reign in life who receives the free gift that he does not deserve, of being made righteous.” (Rom. 5:17) See also Pope Pius XII, *Humani Generis* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, ca. 1950), no. 37.

¹³ “At another point [Terrasson] counters the claim that Scripture explicitly states that there is but one Lord by interpreting it as applying only to the divine part of Christ’s nature. Admitting that Christ’s terrestrial incarnation and redemption have sufficient merit for the entire universe, he nonetheless suggests that because Christ has a role both as savior and as teacher, his incarnation as teacher on sinless planets is fully appropriate” (Crowe, *The ET Life Debate 1750–1900*, p. 135).

¹⁴ Note that the manner in which the Father gave this name to a man is through the grace of union, by which Christ would be at the same time God and man. The incarnation was not a reward for Christ’s passion, but preceded it. However, sometimes in Scripture something is said to happen, when it becomes known. Christ’s divinity was much more manifest after the resurrection. Therefore, the Father does not give Christ the name “Lord” as if Christ did not have it from the time of his incarnation, but he is said to give it when Christ comes to be commonly venerated as Lord. See Thomas Aquinas, *Super Epistolas S. Pauli*, ed. P. Raphaelis Cai, O.P. (Rome: Marietti, 1953), vol. 2, nos. 70–71.

in his divine nature is eternally Lord as begotten by the Father. Although perhaps it is ultimately correct that a supposed Lord of the ETs would not be a lord other than Our Lord Jesus Christ because of the unity of the person assuming those two natures, still in light of the natures assumed being two, it is at very least counter-intuitive to say that there would not be two Lords.

A number of other passages from Scripture pose a similar sort of problem.¹⁵ They refer to Christ as the head of all things:

Such is the richness of the grace which he has showered on us in all wisdom and insight. He has let us know the mystery of his purpose, the hidden plan he so kindly made in Christ from the beginning to act upon when the times had run their course to the end: that he would bring *everything together under Christ, as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth* (Eph. 1:8–10). [Emphasis mine]

A question pertinent for our purposes is whether Christ is the head of the angels in his humanity or only in his divinity. Aquinas maintains that:

The head causes an influx of sensation and motion to all members of the body. . . . [S]omeone can understand “to flow into” (“influer”) in two ways according to the spiritual sense and mode. One mode as principal agent: And thus it belongs to God alone to provide an influx of grace in the members of the Church. In another mode instrumentally: And thus even the humanity of Christ is a cause of the said influx; because as Damascene says . . . as iron burns on account of the fire conjoined to it, so were the actions of the humanity of Christ on account of the united divinity, of which the humanity itself was an instrument. Christ, nevertheless, according to the two last conditions of head [governance, influence] is able to be called head of the angels according to human nature, and head of both according to divine nature; not, however, according to the first condition [namely, sameness in nature], unless one takes what is common according to the nature of the genus, according as man and angel agree in rational nature, and further what is common according to analogy, according as it is common to the Son along with all creatures to receive from the Father, as Basil says, by reason of which he is said to be the first-born of all creatures, Col. 1:15.¹⁶

Aquinas maintains, then, that it is the union of the human nature to the divine nature in the person of Christ which makes that human nature an

¹⁵ To be “lord” and to be “head” are closely related, but not exactly the same thing. One is called “Lord” in virtue of one’s power, whereas one is denominated “head” by likeness to certain features of a bodily head. These features include perfection (the head being the seat of all five senses), sublimity (the head is the highest member), influence (in a certain manner sensation and motion flow to the other parts of the body from the head), and conformity of nature with the other members. See Thomas Aquinas, *Super Epistolas S. Pauli*, ed. P. Raphaelis Cai, O.P., vol. I (Rome: Marietti, 1953), 1 Cor., no. 587.

¹⁶ *Quaestiones Disputatae de Veritate*, in *Quaestiones Disputatae*, ed. Raymundi M. Spiazzi, O.P. (Turin: Marietti, 1964), vol. 1, q. 29, art. 4, resp. The question addressed is: “Whether to be the head of grace belongs to Christ according to his human nature.”

As he is the Beginning, he was first to be born from the dead, so that he should be first in every way; because God wanted all perfection to be found in him and all things to be reconciled through him and for him, everything in heaven and everything on earth when he made peace by his death on the cross.²¹

This passage says Christ reconciled all through his death on the cross. Thus fallen ETs, if they are redeemed, are not redeemed by any one other than Christ.

An alternate position that does not conflict with Scripture in the said way is that Christ's sacrifice on the cross on earth makes satisfaction for the fallen ETs as well as for us. Although Scripture says that it is befitting that Christ belong by blood to the race he came to save,²² it remains the case that Christ did not have to become man, nor having done so did he have to die in order to redeem us, but rather the human race could have been saved in many other ways. Similarly, there are many different ways that God could have saved fallen ETs. However, Scripture indicates that in fact all who are saved are saved by the death of Christ. It is possible that ET salvation was accomplished by means of the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross, since it is a sacrifice which is infinite in its saving power.²³ As Beilby Porteus puts it:

[I]f the Redemption wrought by Christ extended to other worlds, perhaps many beside our own; if its virtues penetrate even into heaven itself; if it gather together all things in Christ; who will then say, that the dignity of the agent was disproportioned to the magnitude of the work . . . ?²⁴

²¹ This also rules out the possibilities that another person of the Trinity became incarnate to save ETs or that God saved them in some way apart from the death of Christ.

²² "As it was his purpose to bring a great many of his sons into glory, it was appropriate that God, for whom everything exists and through whom everything exists, should make perfect, through suffering, the leader who would take them to their salvation. For the one who sanctifies, and the ones who are sanctified, are of the same stock. . . ." (Heb. 2:10-17).

²³ See also Thomas Paine's views cited by Crowe, *The ET Life Debate 1750-1900*, p. 163. Thomas Paine rejects Christianity in favor of many inhabited worlds on the grounds that if there were a large number of human-like civilizations, Christ would thus be very busy traveling from world to world in an endless succession of deaths. This straw-man argument is based on the gratuitous assumption that Christ would have to die over and over. Paine fails to consider the alternative that Christ's death on Calvary was applied to all intelligent beings in need of redemption. (A question would remain as to how Christ may have bestowed knowledge of his redeeming act and of his Church to ETs.)

²⁴ Quoted by Michael J. Crowe, *The ET Life Debate 1750-1900*, p. 103. See also p. 412: "Montignez in his fourth essay develops the thesis that although Christ came only to the earth, he is nonetheless Lord of the universe, and moreover 'the blood which flowed on Calvary has gushed out on the universality of creation . . . has bathed not only our world, but all the worlds which roll in space. . . .'"

One might argue further that in keeping with the dignity of the agent it would be fitting that the redemption extend to more beings than human beings.

Some other thinkers, such as William Whewell, reject the above views for the reason that:

The earth . . . can not, in the eyes of any one who accepts this Christian faith, be regarded as being on a level with any other domiciles. It is the Stage of the great Drama of God's Mercy and Man's Salvation. . . . This being the character which has thus been conferred upon it, how can we assent to the assertion of Astronomers, when they tell us that it is only one among millions of similar habitations . . . ?²⁵

One could, however, concede that there are millions of similar habitations without rejecting the uniqueness of our planet if the dwellers of those other habitations were saved through Christ's sacrifice on earth. And to Whewell's objection that if there are innumerable worlds there is no reason to think that God is more concerned about the earth than about other ones,²⁶ Monseigneur de Montignez responds that:

Because our earth is of insignificant size and contains "probably the most disgraced" creatures in the cosmos, it served as the ideal locale for that "annihilation of the divinity" which is the incarnation. As Christ chose "Bethlehem . . . the least among the cities of Judah" for his birth-place, so also he selected the earth as the location for the founding of his Church and his redemptive actions.²⁷

Montignez offers an argument by fittingness for why the earth would be privileged by God. However, God's good will and pleasure are unfathomable to us, and thus our inability to know with certitude why God condescended to become incarnate on planet earth is not a reason for denying that a special dignity has been conferred on the human race.

We see then that Filachou did not exhaustively examine the scenarios possible on the supposition of ET existence. Both the scenario just outlined as well as that in which ETs are not in need of redemption is consistent with the "supreme dignity attributed to the Divine founder of the Christian Church." Both of them are also consistent with "the grandeur attributed to the Church itself."²⁸ If the ETs are redeemed by Christ's death, they belong to the same Church that humans do. If the ETs did not fall, they would be in a situation

²⁵ William Whewell, quoted by Crowe, *The ET Life Debate 1750–1900*, p. 285.

²⁶ Cf. Crowe, *The ET Life Debate 1750–1900*, p. 283.

²⁷ Monseigneur de Montignez, quoted by Crowe, *The ET Life Debate 1750–1900*, p. 412.

²⁸ From Filachou's *De la pluralité des mondes* cited earlier.

similar to that of the good angels²⁹ who along with human saints are counted as members of the same Church triumphant.³⁰

In conclusion: I have tried to show that there is no necessary incompatibility between the Christian faith and the possible discovery of other intelligent beings. And I have intentionally done so while showing why people take diametrically opposed views on this question in order to bring out oversights on both sides. The extreme views in the ET-Christianity debate are that either the discovery of ETs would spell the end of Christianity, or it would have no more impact on it than the discovery of a new species of butterfly. Though the purpose of Scripture is to teach us things that pertain to our salvation and not to catalogue the beings in the universe, it does make statements about Christ's nature, mission, and relation to creation that lead to conclusions as to how Christ would relate to other material rational beings. (The discovery of a new species of butterfly would raise no question as to the relation of the individuals of this species to the Church of which Christ is the head.) While the existence of ETs as such is not in disaccord with what is said in Scripture, nonetheless further assumptions concerning the status of the supposed beings do in some cases pose difficulties. There are scenarios which would square poorly or not at all with Church teaching and/or Scripture, such as that the Word became incarnate as an ET in order to redeem them. A proper explanation of the Christian view on ET life should not ignore such conflicts, but rather while recognizing them, should show that there are alternate scenarios which do not conflict with Church teaching or Scripture. The most likely of the compatible scenarios are either the ETs are not in need of redemption, or if they are, they are saved through the one sacrifice of Christ on Calvary. One should not forget, however, that possibility is one thing and probability another.

²⁹ "Both angels and humans are ordered to one end, which is the glory of divine fruition. Whence the mystical body of the Church is made up not only of humans, but also of angels" (*Summa Theologiae* III, q. 8, a. 4, resp.).

³⁰ Note that another alternative is that the ETs were made for a purely natural happiness, and so though they successfully resist temptation, they never are rewarded with glory. However, one might question whether the creation of such a rational creature would be in keeping with God's goodness.