Jesus and the Star Folk

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As science finally eliminates the moon as a living habitat telescopes probe ever further for extraterrestrial vitality. NASA expects, barring terrestrial catastrophes, to probe Mars every two years eventually recovering Martian rocks for laboratory investigation. These, with Martian fragments already found in Antarctica, may soon resolve whether or not life has existed, lives now, or will evolve on that frigid, thin atmosphered planet. The European Space Agency anticipates launching early next century an 'Interferometry Observatory' to seek signals of life from relatively earthlike planets.[1] These explorations from both sides of the Atlantic, with advances in astronomical science, the popularity of space fiction, art, and para-religious phenomena make certain that, for the foreseeable future, people will wonder about extra terrestrial life, its possibilities, its traces, its evolutionary potential, and its unnoticed presence even now.

Humans have wondered about star folk for a surprisingly long time. In the golden age of Greece philosophers debated the possibilities of a plurality of worlds including planets with intelligent life. In the 5th century BC Pythagoras thought the moon, visible from earth then as now, was inhabited. So did Epicurus and famously somewhat later the prolific essayist and biographer Plutarch. Parmenides, Plato and Aristotle dismissed pluralism. But some early church Fathers, including Clement of Rome, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Jerome, were open to possibilities of stellar life. Aquinas, like Augustine, thought this earth alone was habitable but resolutely affirmed Divine omnipotence. Three years after Thomas' death the Bishop of Paris (Etienne Tempier) in 1277 fuelled speculation about extraterrestrials by condemning the proposition 'that the First Cause cannot make many worlds'.[2]

Since Tempier's high profiled intervention—although not necessarily *because of* it—the planetary debate has quickened. Theology, philosophy, astronomy, the physical and life sciences, literature and art have contributed, collaborated and sometimes clashed. Extraterrestrial hypotheses have included vegetative, microbial, sensate,

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and intelligent life. Possibilities of future evolution have been proposed—and denied. Some thinkers, not all of them believers, have dismissed the very possibility of life beyond planet earth. Churchmen have feared and some still fear—that a plurality of worlds with intelligent life would compromise the uniqueness of God's revelation and redemption in Jesus. Philip Melanchthon wrote, 'It must not be imagined that there are many worlds, because it must not be imagined that Christ died and was resurrected more often, nor must it be thought that in any other world without the knowledge of the Son of God, that men would be restored to eternal life.'[3] In the seventeenth century Blaise Pascal seemed to fear that humans were alone in the eternal silence of infinite space. 'Let him regard himself as lost, and from this little dungeon, in which he finds himself lodged, I mean the universe, let him learn to take the earth, its realms, its cities, its houses and himself at their proper value. What is a man in the infinite?'[4] Pascal's contemporary, the friar Marin Mersenne, as if to underline the plurality of views taken by believers, affirmed the possibility of extraterrestrials to be compatible with.

Christian faith. The silence of scripture, Mersenne argued, does not mean earth's uniqueness is an article of faith. 'It seems to me that this truth must be concluded: that the statement that asserts that there are not many worlds, or what is the same, that this world of ours whose parts we see, is unique, is not concluded from the Faith.'[5] Galileo and Descartes, unlike Melanchthon and Pascal, were cautiously receptive of extraterrestrial hypotheses.[6] Agreement—and disagreement—about extraterrestrials makes strange roommates. Michael Crowe observes, 'Allies in a dozen conflicts, authors agreeing on a hundred issues, disagreed on extraterrestrial life. Anglicans argued against Anglicans, Catholics against Catholics, materialists against materialists.'[7]

Luminaries who favoured pluralist hypotheses included Leonardo de Vinci, Giordano Bruno, Nicholas de Cusa, Edmund Spenser, John Donne, Thomas Paine, Alexander Pope, William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Daniel Brewster, Baden Powell, Joseph Smith, John Wilkins, John Ray, Richard Bentley, Immanuel Kant, Pierre Simon de La Place, Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, Gottfried Leibniz, Richard Simpson, and Mark Twain. The American transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau illustrates a sharply different attitude towards populations in outer space than that of Pascal, 'How far apart, think you, dwell the two most distant inhabitants of yonder star? Why should I feel lonely? Is not our planet in the Milky Way?'[8] The Vatican left the extraterrestrial life question open. Indeed Pius IX's Director of the Roman College Observatory, Angelo Secchi,

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favoured the pluralist hypothesis, as do the Jesuit Directors of the Vatican Advanced Technology Telescope at Tucson today.[9]

Especially since the seventeenth century the divergence of *methodologies* between science and theology has surfaced. Theologians occasionally, and unwisely, most famously in the Galileo debacle, have trespassed on scientific ground. More often, and no less unwisely, scientists in a 'scientific age' have transgressed the limits of their own expertise exposing themselves as virtual aliens in theological terrain. Unbelievers who imagine that discoveries of other biosystems would confound Christian faith share the same fundamentalistic misunderstanding of biblical literary forms as do fundamentalist believers. In an 1867 paper attacking miracles the fiery John Tyndale, then superintendent of the Royal Institute, argued that the possibility of extraterrestrials compromised Judeo-Christian revelation. Not only did Tyndale wade beyond his exegetical depth, his conjectural 'countless worlds' freighted with life, despite centuries of investigation, remain as yet undiscovered. Pace Tyndale the search continues with believers among the explorers.

> Transferring our thoughts from this little sand-grain of an earth to the immeasurable heavens, where countless worlds with freights of life probably revolve unseen .... and bringing these reflections face to face with the idea of the Builder and sustainer of it all showing Himself in a burning bush, exhibiting His hinder parts, or behaving in other familiar ways ascribed to Him in Jewish Scripture, the Incongruity must appear.[10]

Among pluralists there is often a tendency to assume that when conditions necessary for life are present life will evolve. Hence our generation's fascination with listening for murmurs from distant atmospheres. But necessary conditions for life are not necessarily *sufficient* conditions. Nor does the possibility of billions of galaxies make *life* even on one star provable. Nor is the 'assumption of mediocrity'—that conditions in stellar ecosystems would be pretty much like our own—a demonstrable assumption. In this at least Pascal was precociously brilliant in his loneliness. The theory of evolution is not necessarily predictive. Loren Eisley observes,

> Nowhere in all space or on a thousand worlds will there be men to share our loneliness. There may be wisdom; there may be power; somewhere across space great instruments, handled by strange, manipulative organs, may stare vainly at our floating cloud wrack, their owners yearning as we yearn. Nevertheless, in the nature of life and in the principles of evolution we have had our answer. Of men elsewhere, and beyond, there will be none forever.[11]

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Some environmentalists who (understandably but mistakenly, I believe) write off the world religions, while still collaborating with believers who care about God's earth, seek salvation not in God but in extraterrestrials. Carl Sagan thought the detection of a star beat would offer 'an invaluable piece of knowledge: that it is possible to avoid the dangers of the period through which we are passing. ... It is possible that among the first contents of such a message may be detailed prescriptions for the avoidance of technological disaster.'[12]

Jesus and the Stars

Are Melanchton and Pascal, Tyndale and Sagan right that Jesus does not impinge on stellar life? Are terrestrial believers alone (with God) in the universe? Are unbelievers prospective beneficiaries of salvation through extraterrestrial signals? Such questions continue to circulate. We owe it to our contemporaries and to tomorrow—and, I would add, to the earth—to reflect upon them trying to respond as humbly and faithfully as we are able.

The possibility of extraterrestrial life, in our own or in distant solar systems, is a possibility with many variables. Somewhere there may exist other beings more complex, more intelligent, wiser and more able than we. There may be some more prone to sin, more defiant, more ecologically abusive. Or they may be more virtuous, more caring of other beings, even immaculate. Our cosmic companions may or may not need redemption. Some may long ago have lived within the warmth of their suns and now be extinct. They may not yet exist. They may be in process. One fact seems clear: if there ever were or are, or will be intelligences elsewhere in the universe they will be different than are we. God may have revealed and may yet reveal His love to other beings in unique ways. But only we, *homo sapiens*, have evolved here, on our small planet, possibly from one African mother. God's Word became incarnate in our flesh only here, in Judea, in our planet. What Pope Leo I stated in his famous tome to Patriarch Flavian (13 June 449) happened *here*. 'Fecundity was given to the Virgin by the Holy Spirit, but the reality of the body was taken from her body; and with Wisdom building a dwelling for herself (Prov. 9:1), the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us (John 1:14); that is, in the flesh which he took from a human being and which he animated with the breath of rational life' (PL54, 762-3). Despite the possibly terminal damage our species is doing to the earth, we may be, under God, the most complex creatures to have evolved in the universe. As C.F.D. Moule observes, 'Despite its microscopic bulk, it is conceivable that in terms of the quality of relationship, the human race represents the apex of God's creation.'[13]

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When we reflect upon the time and stellar conditioned primitive preaching we note that when the first Christians proclaimed what God did and does in Jesus, their literal sense—what they intended and conveyed to their hearers in their preaching—was influenced by their own contemporary cosmologies. The primitive preaching does not address a possible plurality of worlds with extraterrestrial life. The first Christians understood 'all things' created and redeemed in Christ within the context of their own cosmologies. The 'principalities, dominions, and powers' above, however, are more inclusive than the first Christians explicitly imagined or proclaimed. Jesus, the Image of God's goodness, is Lord even of possible worlds which may or may not need evangelization and redemption. Jesus is truly, in Dante's final words, 'the love that moves the sun and the other stars.' Here on earth Jesus, risen from the dead, became in his humanity what He always is in His divinity, the very centre of the universe.[14] Other planets may have good news to tell *us* about what God did for *their* communities. We will be able to tell them that *here*, in the midst of our community, God became a Man. In Alice Meynell's words,

> But in the eternities
> Doubtless we shall compare together, hear
> A million alien gospels, in what guise
> He trod the Pleiades, the Lyre, the Bear.
>
> Oh be prepared, my soul,
> To read the inconceivable, to scan
> The infinite forms of God those stars unroll
> When, in our turn, we show to them a Man.[15]

Loving the Lonely Planet

The possibility of discovering other planetary ecosystems should help us to love the earth community more. Our very listening for stellar echoes can help people restrain the anthroposolism (ourselves alone) which prompts people blasphemously to deface this planet where Jesus lived, died and was buried. Our listening for extraterrestrials in other ecosystems enables us to appreciate earth's biodiversity more, not less. We earthlings are beings in relationships, yes; but relationships which include other creatures. Our relationships extend beyond God and people to all that God has made and saved. John Muir wrote, 'If we lose contact with God we lose touch with the source of our life and the beauty of transcendent justice and compassion. If we lose contact with nature we lose touch with much of the joy of life and an important part of our human calling. In either case the human personality is

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incomplete, and human life is impoverished.'[16]

Earth is the planet which includes the cross on Calvary, the grave in a garden, and the risen cosmic Christ who transcends and fills all things (1 Cor. 1:21; Eph. 4:4). Our moment of life in this planet is the one moment in which we personally can share and let flourish life's fecund beauty, in which we are privileged 'to administer justice with an upright heart' (Wisd. 9:3). Every momentary lifetime is an opportunity to fall upon our knees in wonder at the fragile beauty of earth's ecosystem, as the dying playwright Dennis Potter wondered at the plum tree beneath his window. I was moved to hear him say in a final interview.

> It *is*, and it is *now* ... and that nowness has become so vivid to me that ... I'm almost serene. I can celebrate life. Below my window ... the blossom is out in full. It's a plum tree; and instead of saying, 'Oh, that's nice blossom', looking at it through the window it is the whitest, frothiest, blossomest blossom there ever could be. And I can see it; and things are both more trivial than they ever were and more important than they ever were, and the difference between the trivial and the important doesn't seem to matter, but the nowness of everything is absolutely wondrous.

Growing up in northwest Detroit I learned from older people about the passenger pigeons which once whistled in their millions through Michigan skies. Gentle, trusting, white breasted, audible, they were easy to snare, easy to shoot. Men shot them, like the dwarf caribou and the buffalo, for fun. 'Every gun is pointed at a pigeon', wrote John Muir from his boyhood farm in Wisconsin. Entrepreneurs killed them in their thousands and shipped them east for a penny each. Some were sent alive for target practice in amusement arcades. Soon they flourished only in wooded Michigan. The last wild one was spotted near my grandfather's farm in 1889. The last one of all died in 1914 in the Cincinnati zoo. Her name was Martha. There still lived memories of the gentle pigeons when I grew up. Now even the living memories of the pigeons—like memories of life in the Flanders' trenches—are gone with the pigeons. God will never again communicate with men through a passenger pigeon. Further west on the Pacific coast there used to be 100,000 Spring run Chinook salmon in Californian rivers. The salmon are commercially extinct now, battered and polluted not just by cruelty and greed, but by a lack of love and wonder by millions of guilty bystanders who would never spear a salmon or shoot a pigeon.

For every person who cares about plums and pigeons and salmon there are others like those described in William Blake's famous line, 'The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only

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a green thing which stands in the way.' There are Americans who talk about colonizing planets and 'terraforming' Mars, with atomic explosions if necessary, and then moving on to other Jamestowns. Why worry about this disposable planet when there is always a new one parked just outside?[17] With all respect to Kansas 'can do', it seems rather rash even with American technology, to expect NASA to transport six billion people into outer space. And even *if* there are Gaias out there, their presence or possibility is no reason to despoil the plums and birds and sea creatures of this small planet. An American statesman wiser and more appreciative of the prairies than many succeeding Republicans, is more helpful to us than they. 'With public sentiment nothing can fail, without it nothing can succeed', Abraham Lincoln said. We the baptized are 'the public', God's people baptized into Jesus, God's Creating and sustaining Wisdom. We the baptized people include but extend beyond our clergy who represent and reflect us from whom they come. Whether or not we love and heal our planet depends upon ourselves and not just our clergy.[18] If we, God's people, do not value God's image within ourselves, if we do not cherish ourselves and all pre-natal and terminal human life, we will hardly love the flame in each and every creature God has made. Our fellow earth creatures are, each in their own distinctiveness, bearers of the Divine flame. As priestly sovereigns in this frail planet and not on any other, it is our responsibility to empower each being in the locality where we live to be what he or she or it is. Our ministry is to enable them to say—to us and to God—what they are. In Gerard Manley Hopkins' words,

> Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
> Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
> Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
> Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*[19]

To empower plums and pigeons and salmon, to enable them to be what they are, is to accompany them to eternity. Our mission in life, as God's image, as priestly sovereigns, is, in brief, to 'liturgize the cosmos.'[20] To appreciate God's image in ourselves—and therefore in the earth—leading earth creatures to eternity, demands that sacrifice which is inherent to being, in Christ, God's people. Sacrifice, more than 'giving up', means making holy, giving thanks, and transfiguring the earth community into a eucharistic community of praise. As a Carthusian ascetic wrote, 'Our thanksgiving is always made through Jesus Christ who made the whole creation eucharistic in assuming our humanity and giving its praise a human voice.'[21]

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Conclusion

Beyond our history and our earth there may exist a plurality of worlds, some with lives of unsuspected shapes and forms and complexities. The possibilities of aliens, of strangers to us, should be for us not a source of anxiety but of wonder at what God has done for ourselves and our earth in Jesus. David Toolan, SJ, of *Spiritearth* writes, 'The holy one, Lord of 50 billion galaxies—and for all we know, of worlds of life beyond our ken—is first of all concerned with the whole of creation.'[22] Jesus, God's Wisdom incarnate, fills all possible 'worlds of life'. Our mission is to transfigure the galaxies and to lead the universe in praise and thanksgiving, by healing, restoring, and cherishing our own small planet in the neighbourhoods where we live.

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