

Theological Responses to the Presence of Extra-terrestrial Intelligent Life

Scripture - Romans 8:19-23

(to be considered at the end of this study)

¹⁹For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; ²¹because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of ^[a]corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. ²²For we know that the whole creation groans and labours with birth pangs together until now. ²³Not only that, but we also who have the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.

Historical Background

Metrodoros of Chios, Democritus and Epicurus – thought that other worlds were extremely likely. As the Epicurean poet Lucretius put it, the possibility that our world was the only one with life was as unlikely "if a single ear of wheat grew on a vast plain". The empiricist Aristotle dismissed the idea because he maintained that it was unknowable from the data of experience, a view that prevailed for centuries.

In the late medieval west, Nicholas of Cusa was highly influential and positive.

"Life, as it exists on Earth in the form of men, animals and plants, is to be found, let us suppose in a high form in the solar and stellar regions. Rather than think that so many stars and parts of the heavens are uninhabited and that this earth of ours alone is peopled - and that with beings perhaps of an inferior type - we will suppose that in every region there are inhabitants, differing in nature by rank and all owing their origin to God, who is the centre and circumference of all stellar regions.

Of the inhabitants then of worlds other than our own we can know still less having no standards by which to appraise them. It may be conjectured that in the area of the sun there exist solar beings, bright and enlightened denizens, and by nature more spiritual than such as may inhabit the moon whilst those on earth are more gross and material."(Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, 1439)

Soon the theological implications were being explored. This from the French theologian William Vorilong (d. 1463) who gave a few reflections on the matter:

"If it be inquired if men exist on that world and whether they have sinned as Adam sinned, I answer no, for they would not exist in sin and did not spring from Adam As to the question whether Christ dying on this earth could redeem the inhabitants of another world, I would answer that he is able to do this even if the worlds were infinite. But it would not be fitting for him to go unto another world that he must die again."

The development of astronomy in the 20th century, solar system robotic exploration and the discovery of thousands of exoplanets in the 21st century has brought the old question of intelligent extra-terrestrial life back into play. Our galaxy alone has 200 billion stars and there are at least 100 billion galaxies. The ubiquity of life on earth in hugely diverse ecological niches demands a scalable hypothesis concerning life, and perhaps more rarely, intelligent life elsewhere in the Universe. For believers, and Christians specifically, our theology may have to change and adapt overnight if this hypothesis is proven one day soon. Work on this had better start now!

Possible Scenarios

ONE and TWO are paired together, as are THREE and FOUR.

1. Christ's death and resurrection on earth applies to all beings on all worlds and at all times.

PRO: No further theological reflection is necessary, any more than the gospel has remained relevant to all cultures and all times here on earth albeit not homogenously.

CON: Unsupported assumption that every extra terrestrial creature is in a position to need exactly the same remedy as that of humanity.

2. The Word incarnates with the dominant intelligent species on each world and there then follows a similar process of life, death, and resurrection on innumerable planets

to save innumerable beings and creatures. This is based on the belief that something equivalent to the Fall has happened on all worlds.

PRO: Respects the distinctiveness of each species while maintaining that the Fall and its remedy works out much the same everywhere. The experience of a distancing from God and God's compassion in resolving that alienation is a convergent and universal phenomenon.

CON: Unsupported assumption that every extra-terrestrial creature is in a position to need exactly the same remedy as that of humanity.

3. The Word saves other creatures on other worlds but with different outcomes and by very different means, each appropriate to every single situation.

PRO: The Word (Logos) is active everywhere to save but we cannot even speculate how this is achieved without First Contact and dialogue.

CON: The Gospel of the Word's activity on earth may be strictly limited in scope to this planet. That is difficult if not impossible to reconcile with Christian revelation.

4. Other worlds with other creatures are not necessarily implicated in human fallenness, so they would not need a Saviour, BUT multiple incarnations may or may not take place.

PRO: The Word (Logos) is active everywhere but we cannot even speculate how this is the case without First Contact and dialogue.

CON: There is little or no convergence between what has happened on earth and what has happened elsewhere.

Consideration of the Question in Christian Culture

C S Lewis “Religion and Rocketry” (essay, 1958) - The Three Big Questions

3 of 5 questions addressed by Lewis to the atheist astronomer Fred Hoyle as detailed by Paul Gold (PG) here:- <http://www.paul-gould.com/2013/11/22/c-s-lewis-religion-rocketry-and-other-worlds/> See also: <https://www.cslewis.com/religion-and-rocketry/>

If there are species, and rational species, other than man, are any or all of them, like us, fallen?

Lewis sees no reason to think that all rational species, if there be any, are necessarily fallen, broken, or alienated from their creator. (PG)

If all of them (and surely all is a long shot) or any of them have fallen have they been denied Redemption by the Incarnation and Passion of Christ?

*For all we know, argues Lewis, the eternal Son may have been incarnated in other worlds than earth and saved other races than ours. Here we see the connection between Lewis’ fictional writing, especially *The Chronicles of Narnia* and his *Space Trilogy*¹, and his theological speculation. Finally, the biggest question (in Lewis’ mind): (PG)*

If we know (which we don’t) that answers to 1, 2, and 3—and, further, if we knew that Redemption by an Incarnation and Passion had been denied to creatures in need of it—is it certain that this is the only mode of Redemption that is possible?

*Lewis thinks this last question moves beyond the merely unknown. It is, rather, unknowable to us unless God should reveal such truth to us. Lewis reasons that (for all we know) spiritual and physical conditions might differ widely in different worlds. There might be different sorts and degrees of fallenness. But, if so, then it is not unreasonable to suppose that different diseases require different remedies. In anticipation of my immediate objection, Lewis raises the issue of Romans 8. According to **Romans 8:19-23**, the whole creation is longing and waiting to be delivered from some kind of slavery, and*

¹ Out of the Silent Planet: Lewis speculates that other intelligent (non-fallen) creatures might have quarantined earth and fallen humanity to protect the rest of the Universe. This remains a popular solution to the so-called Fermi Paradox ... ‘given the ubiquity of life why don’t we see the evidence?’

that deliverance will only occur when Christians, the sons of God, fully enter that sonship and exercise our “glorious freedom.” Lewis wonders, “It may be that Redemption, starting with us, is to work from us and through us.” Perhaps this is what Lewis had in mind when he made the sons of Adam the kings and queens of Narnia and Aslan’s agents of redemption and restoration for Narnia.

Lewis’ overall point is this. If it turns out that there are such creatures and if it turns out that there are other worlds with fallen creatures (I wonder what Lewis would say of the multiverse today?) it represents no insurmountable problem for Christianity. Unless, which he doubts, there are fallen creatures that will not be redeemed in the mode we know, or any other mode. Given the goodness of God, that supposition is unlikely. (PG)

CHRIST IN THE UNIVERSE by: Alice Meynell (1847-1922)

With this ambiguous earth

His dealings have been told us. These abide:

The signal to a maid, the human birth,

The lesson, and the young Man crucified.

But not a star of all

The innumerable host of stars has heard

How He administered this terrestrial ball.

Our race have kept their Lord’s entrusted Word.

Of His earth-visiting feet

None knows the secret, cherished, perilous,

The terrible, shamefast, frightened, whispered, sweet,

Heart-shattering secret of His way with us.

No planet knows that this

Our wayside planet, carrying land and wave,

Love and life multiplied, and pain and bliss,
Bears, as chief treasure, one forsaken grave.

Nor, in our little day,
May His devices with the heavens be guessed,
His pilgrimage to thread the Milky Way
Or His bestowals there be manifest.

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.

O, be prepared, my soul!
To read the inconceivable, to scan
The myriad forms of God those stars unroll
When, in our turn, we show to them a Man.

"Christ in the Universe" is reprinted from The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse. Ed. Nicholson & Lee. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1917.

Romans 8:19-23 ... a Re-Assessment

1. There is a connectedness of humans to the Cosmos (microcosm/macrocosm)
2. The text does not exclude the possibility of other worlds and intelligent life.
3. The redemption of humankind has a key role to play in the New Creation, a new heaven and a new earth. This does not preclude a contribution to that from other creatures elsewhere, joining us as redeemed children of God, (as in Meynell's poem)
4. Salvation everywhere is the work of the Logos / Pantocrator. More we cannot say.