

Extraterrestrial Soteriology

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Abstract. One scientific objection to religion is that the discovery of extraterrestrial life would show that our religions are not veridical, with Christianity being the most common target. I will first look at a parallel issue, the ancient and medieval controversy over antipodes. This raises two problematic Christian doctrines that would apply equally to extraterrestrials: the transmission of original sin and the cosmic fall. These issues raise questions about their spiritual status, but I conclude that not having such answers does not amount to an objection to Christianity's credibility.

Keywords: extraterrestrials, incarnation, atonement, original sin, fall of humanity, antipodes.

Introduction

Many people think that if we ever discover extraterrestrials it would sound the death knell for religion, particularly the Abrahamic religions. These have strong historical components that, supposedly, make them unsuitable for creatures with no connection to those histories. This holds especially for Christianity with its claims of God being incarnated as a human being and dying for the sins of humanity. How could this be plausible if we live in a cosmos populated by numerous rational species (George 2005,

1–3)? I will argue that the issues extraterrestrials would raise are not new to Christianity and only pose questions rather than objections.

1. What's not the problem

First, we have to ask whether it matters if whatever life we may discover is simple or advanced. The Rare Earth Hypothesis is the idea that simple life may be common in the universe, since it is more robust. On Earth we have even discovered extremophiles, simple organisms that thrive in (and require) conditions that are antithetical to the other life forms we know. These may even be how life originated on Earth or they may have a distinct origin from other forms of life on Earth (Carré, et al. 2022). But the conditions that must be met for advanced life to exist are so particular and uncommon that, according to the hypothesis, it's unlikely it will arise anywhere else in the universe (Ward and Brownlee 2000).

The discovery of simple life elsewhere in the universe would not pose a problem for religion in general or Christianity in particular, any more than the discovery of extremophiles on Earth does. The issue is about the possibility of extraterrestrial *intelligence* (ETI) elsewhere in the universe. After all, we may discover the remains of simple life on Mars just because several million tons of our planet has been dumped on that planet over the last billion years or so, through meteor strikes propelling earth material out into the solar system. The odds that it had no biological material at all is remote in the extreme. Solar radiation would break it down over time, but some of the remains may still be present, at least on a microscopic level. In fact, biological material from Earth will have settled on other bodies in our solar system, such as the moons of the outer planets. Additionally, simple organisms in the upper atmosphere, which can survive for extended periods in vacuum, are pushed further out by solar wind (Shklovskii and Sagan 1966, 207–11; Hoyle and Wickramasinghe 1981, 39–61).

Some people think once simple life is established, it's bound to evolve into complex life (Chela-Flores 1998). But the whole point of the Rare Earth Hypothesis is that the conditions allowing such evolutionary processes are so numerous, specific, and uncommon that they're unlikely

to reoccur. Thus, the presence of simple life elsewhere in the universe wouldn't entail that it would evolve into rational, intelligent life, and so wouldn't pose a problem for religion, per se.

2. What's still not the problem

Another claim is that if we discover ETIs they'd have their own religions, implying that our religions are not true. How vain are we to think that our worldviews should be accepted by creatures who may be much more advanced and have a much broader (or different) stockpile of information on which to base a worldview? But this assumes that religions are entirely – and so *merely* – products of biological and cultural issues rather than revelations from a supernatural reality. But this is not given. If a religion is based on actual experiences of God, then to dismiss it as a mere cultural phenomenon is a significant misstep. Since religions claim to reflect supernatural realities, to treat them as mere natural phenomena presupposes that their claims are false which blatantly begs the question against them.

Additionally, claiming the discovery of ETIs with different religions should have some relevance as to whether Christianity is true is just the problem of Christian particularism: whether it's appropriate to uniquely affirm one religion when there are others out there. *This is already an issue.* And what makes it an issue is the *fact* of other religions, not their quantity or the diversity of their contents. The addition of extraterrestrial religions doesn't add anything to the equation. They would certainly be fascinating, but they would not pose a new problem for Christianity. I don't mean to dismiss it, but the treatment of this issue is the same regardless of whether we take potential ETI religions into account.

3. The Problem

3.1. Superficial parallels

The concept of a plurality of worlds goes back to the presocratic atomists and was treated (and even accepted) by some in the ancient and medie-

val Church. However, it did not receive widespread attention until geocentrism went by the wayside. In Aristotelian and Ptolemaic cosmology the spherical Earth was at the center of a spherical universe because the heavier elements fell down – where “down” means “centerward.” Asking if there could be more than one earth made as much sense as asking if a sphere could have more than one center.

Since the plurality of worlds debate evolved into the contemporary ETI debate, the former may seem like the natural historical parallel to the latter. There are others, however. One is the potential existence of so-called “monstrous races.” These are creatures alleged to have one eye (cyclopes), one giant foot (monopods), no head and their faces in their chests (blemmyes), etc. Obviously these ideas did not originate within Christianity, but their potential existence raised questions about their spiritual status: are they created in God’s image? Are they fallen? Does Christ’s atonement apply to them? Augustine argued that “we are not bound to believe all we hear” about such creatures, but he did try to answer the status question. Basically, he wrote that if it is “a rational, mortal animal,” then it is human and so has the same spiritual status as human beings, “no matter what unusual appearance he presents in color, movement, sound, nor how peculiar he is in some power, part, or quality of his nature” (Augustine, *City of God*, bk 16, chap. 8). However, he also took this to mean they were descended from Adam and Eve: the idea of rational, mortal animals with distinct origins from humanity was alien to him.

3.2. The far side of the world

To find a closer parallel to extraterrestrials in Christian history we would have to find an example of creatures potentially created in God’s image who could not have been descended from Adam and Eve. This we find in the issue of antipodes and antipodeans (Goldie 2010, 15–70). This refers to the possibility of lands and creatures on the opposite side of the world. The controversy was whether such creatures existed. Many denied it because they thought there was no way to get from one side to the other: either the oceans were too wide to cross or the equatorial zone was too hot to pass through (Russell 1991, 20). Since they thought it impossible to

get to the southern hemisphere from the northern hemisphere, any antipodeans would be a separate creation of God, not descended from the first human beings. And once this issue was raised, it prompted precisely the same questions that the potential of ETIs does. If they are “rational, mortal animals” that do not share the same origin as humanity, are they created in the image of God? If so, are they fallen? How could they be? It would not be by virtue of the fall of humankind since the antipodeans would be unrelated to us. Or are they fallen by virtue of the sin of their own ancestors? And would Jesus’ atonement apply to them, or has God provided some distinct method of salvation for them; perhaps with the same incarnation and atonement pattern, perhaps by something we would not even recognize? We have no way to answer these questions without further revelation.

Yet, despite these issues, “there never was a doctrine of the Christian Church condemning the idea that there might be inhabitants of the southern temperate zone or of a presumed fourth continent” (Stevens 1980, 274). It was just easier to deny the existence of antipodeans than to speculate about them. Sometimes this denial was made angrily and forcefully, but the closest anyone ever came to getting in trouble for affirming their existence was when St. Vergilius of Salzburg got on the bad side of St. Boniface. They had previously disputed about the exact wording of the sacrament of baptism: a priest had administered it incorrectly, but Vergilius thought it was still efficacious. Boniface disagreed and brought the issue before Pope Zachary, who agreed with Vergilius. After this, Vergilius apparently argued in favor of antipodes. Boniface again brought the issue before Zachary, arguing that the existence of antipodes was contrary to Scripture. The sympathetic pope said if Boniface could prove that he would expel Vergilius from the priesthood and the Catholic church. Since Vergilius later became the bishop of Salzburg, and was eventually canonized as a saint, we can safely assume he was exonerated (Turner 1912).

As they could not answer the questions about the spiritual status of antipodeans, the most common response was to dismiss it as a possibility and affirm the fundamental unity of the human race, that we all share the same origin and so have equal value, worth, and status before God. But,

as is the case with the potential discovery of ETIs, their inability to answer such questions was a *problem* not an *objection*. Not being able to answer questions about their spiritual status did not make Christianity less plausible, any more than does Christians' inability to ascertain the fate of those who have never heard of Jesus. It was just easier to deny the existence of antipodeans rather than speculate about their salvation or need thereof in the absence of any assurance or guidance – or, for that matter, motive. The lesson from this, perhaps, is to have a “cross that bridge when we come to it” approach. For the remainder of this essay, I will ignore this lesson.

3.3. Imago Dei

While I do not think the discovery of ETIs can be made into an argument against Christianity or religion or theism, I think it does pose the same problems that antipodeans did. Thus, what follows would apply equally to ETIs and to premodern concerns about antipodeans. The first is whether Jews and Christians should think that extraterrestrials are created in God's image as human beings are. One thing to say in response is that, since they are *ex hypothesi* rational, intelligent creatures they would be displaying one of the primary elements of what being created in God's image has traditionally meant. Aquinas even says that the intellect, the conduit for rationality, is the primary way in which human beings are created in God's image (*Summa Theologica* 1.93.4, 1.93.6). If someone objects that they may only appear rational without actually being rational, this would just boil down to the problem of other minds (Avramides 2020). Granted, it may pose a bigger problem when the other minds in question do not resemble us in other ways, since I suspect the intuition would not be felt as strongly. But some people talk to their plants or their cars as if they were people, so I don't think this is insurmountable. Regardless, as with the problem of Christian particularism, this is already an issue so applying it to ETIs does not add anything to it.

The reason rationality is included in the imago Dei is because it is an expression of God's nature. Thus, by being rational we are participating in the divine nature, and so are created in God's image (the same goes for

morality). There is certainly *more* to the image of God than this, but not less. This is true whether we take the *imago Dei* in a structural, functional, or relational sense (Vainio 2018, 143–55).

3.4. Original sin and salvation

If we accept that ETIs are created in the image of God by virtue of being rational (and moral) agents, we have to ask further questions, just as premodern Christians did regarding antipodeans, and these we could not answer, absent further revelation. Foremost of these is the question of whether they are fallen as humanity is, whether they have the stain of original sin. This doctrine claims that we are born with an innate tendency to sin as a consequence of our distant ancestors sinning against God. So if we encounter ETIs and assume from their rationality that they are created in God's image, how would we be able to determine whether they are fallen? Not meeting our present culture's mores would not be much of a clue; it may even be a mark in their favor.

However, this makes two Christian concepts problematic. The first – and to my mind, more significant – is that since original sin only affects human beings, it is transmitted biologically (*City of God*, bk. 16, chap. 9). Although the Bible does not explicitly make this point, it explains why God was incarnated as a human being, viz., to atone for the sins of human beings (Rom. 5:18–19).

So if we discover ETIs, the fall of humankind would not entail that they are fallen as well. They could be unfallen. Or perhaps *their* ancient ancestors sinned against God as well, and they are fallen because of that. But then did their fall have the same or a similar effect as ours? And if it did, would Christ's atonement apply to them? Or was Christ incarnated among them too? Or do they have a completely distinct path to salvation? After all, different diseases require different cures; even the *same* disease can require different cures among different people (Lewis 1960a, 87). We may not even recognize a cure as a cure. It seems there are several possibilities.

- 1) Jesus' atonement on Earth applies to them. He atoned for all creatures created in his image, not just human beings.

- 2) Jesus was incarnated among them too and atoned for their sins independently (Vainio 2018, 159–65).
- 3) They are atoned for by some other method that does not involve incarnation and death on behalf of others.
- 4) God has not atoned for them *yet*. This could collapse into option 1, since perhaps God puts them in contact with us to provide the atonement Jesus offers to all rational creatures. On the other hand, it could just mean that God has not provided them with the atonement particular to them *yet*.¹
- 5) They are unfallen and need no atonement.

All of these options have theological weaknesses, some severe, as well as strengths (Peters 2018). Some may object that if, according to option 1, God was only ever incarnated as a human being, it would imply that extraterrestrials are not as important as us. But this would not actually suggest an elevated status for us, but a particular demerit. “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick” (Mark 2:17). We are the vilest of the vile, so that is where God starts his cosmic atonement process. And we could combine them: perhaps some ETIs are unfallen, some are saved by Jesus’ atonement on Earth, some are saved by Jesus being incarnated among them, and some are saved by some alternative method. It is difficult to even begin answering these questions since Christians do not even agree on the nature of the incarnation. One theological debate throughout Christian history is whether Jesus would have been incarnated if we never fell into sin (Peters 2018, 286–300).

Regardless, the real problem is that we would have no way of knowing which option above is the case. And without knowing which option is true, Christians would not know what the appropriate response to ETIs should be. If God provided them with their own method of atonement (options 2 and 3), then it could be a sin for Christians to try to convert them to Christianity, since it would take them away from the atonement that God has provided for them. On the other hand, if Jesus’ atonement

¹ Another possibility is that they are fallen but God has no intention of atoning for them. However, since the Bible says that God wants everyone to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9), this option would only be available if we presuppose that Christianity is false, so we cannot use it to *argue* that Christianity is false.

applies to them (options 1 and possibly 4), then it could be a sin for Christians to *not* try to convert them to Christianity. This is a significant problem, but again, it's not a problem that makes Christianity less plausible. It just means that the revelation received thus far does not provide us with the information needed to answer these questions.

If we deny that original sin is passed on biologically, we are left with no explanation of it. That would not be ideal, of course, but just saying we have not figured it out yet is not as devastating as some people seem to think. The Bible does have some interesting ideas where spiritual realities impact the biological, such as the idea that sexual intercourse unites a man and woman into one flesh (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:5; Mark 10:8; Eph. 5:31–32). Perhaps some spiritual reality has some relevance as to how original sin (and salvation) applies to ETIs. “Our loyalty is due not to our species but to God. Those who are, or who can become, His sons, are our real brothers even if they have shells or tusks. It is spiritual, not biological, kinship that counts” (Lewis 1960a, 90–91). But this is speculative. If we discover a reason to reject the idea that original sin is passed on biologically, then we can regroup, but in the absence of any such reason, it is more rational to accept it. In any case, rejecting it would not make the spiritual status of ETIs any less intractable.

3.5. The cosmic fall

The other Christian concept that makes this issue so recalcitrant is that the fall also fundamentally changed the entire earth, possibly the entire universe – we are fallen creatures living in a fallen world. The other elements of creation may not experience original sin, as they lack the capacity to be sinners, but they are still affected by the fall of humankind. Again, this point is not explicitly made in the Bible but it is a good faith attempt to understand it. So if we discover ETIs they may not be fallen by being under the specter of original sin, but they would be elements of a fallen world. This is not a contradiction – it would mean they are fallen in one sense and not fallen in another sense – but if they are rational and moral beings, it would imply they are created in the image of God, may not have sinned against him, yet suffer the consequences of *our* sin.

In an important sense, this is also already a problem: one of the perennial issues with the doctrine of original sin is that it seems to imply that we unjustly suffer the consequences of the sinful acts of others. Saying that original sin is passed on biologically doesn't resolve this, although it does provide an explanation of the phenomenon itself. But ETIs wouldn't even get the partial explanation. It would mean that the fall of one species created in God's image ruined the universe that housed potentially unfallen species created in God's image *who had no connection to them*. So the injustice of this would be felt more strongly than it does with just the standard view of original sin. Having said this, it still only amounts to a problem, not an objection. It just means that we would need further information, further revelation, to resolve it.

Despite the fact that it is the traditional understanding, I think it is easier to challenge the idea of a cosmic fall than that original sin is passed on biologically. The only passages where the consequences of the fall are mentioned limit their context to human beings (Gen. 3:22–24; Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:20–58), not applying them to animals or other forms of life, much less the non-living world. The first of these involves Adam and Eve's banishment from paradise and is generally taken to suggest an alteration of the Earth, if not the universe: "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field." However, this passage is better understood as referring to their banishment from the paradise God had created for them. They were going to have to live in the larger world that did not have the particular accommodations that Eden had. Thorns and thistles would have been created during God's creation week, not after the fall.

Historically, most Christian theologians have also taken the following passage as describing a cosmic fall, although the text does not actually connect it to Genesis 3:

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 will 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 (Rom. 8:20–22).

The biggest problem I see is that it states that the one who subjected creation to futility did so with the intention of eventually freeing it. If we must assume that this has a connection to the fall of humankind in Genesis 3, neither the human beings who sinned nor the one who tempted them to sin did so to “liberate” nature from its “bondage”; they sinned because they wanted to be like God (Gen. 3:5). Besides these, the only other agent involved in the fall of humanity is God. Thus, the one who subjected the universe to futility “in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage” must be God. Thus, I take this passage as an anthropomorphic statement that God created the universe with certain limitations which will eventually be overturned with the creation of the new heavens and earth (Rev. 21:1–5). To tie this verse to the early chapters of Genesis is purely conjectural.

Another point brings the biological transmission of original sin into the mix. The passages that are used to defend this contrast it with the effects of the fall: “For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:17). Christ didn’t die to save frogs and slugs and chinchillas from death, he died to save human beings from death. But if the *atonement* only applies to human beings, the *fall* only applies to human beings. They covary together. And if we were to expand their application beyond humanity, we should expand it to those elements of creation that could potentially sin and potentially be saved; in other words, to those created in God’s image. That would apply to any ETIs there may be out there, but not to chinchillas or slugs.

So I don’t think that Christian theology needs to assert a cosmic fall, despite its being the traditional understanding. At least it leaves plenty of wiggle room. If we affirm both it and that original sin is passed on biologically, though, then it raises the problems about ETIs that we cannot answer without further revelation. But even so, not having answers to

these questions does not constitute an objection to Christianity or create a problem for its plausibility (Pannenberg 1994, 76).

4. More non-problems

There is another false step some take, but it had to wait until the real issue was treated. If we grant the cosmic fall, that the entire universe changed in some way when humanity fell, it imputes an inordinate degree of power to human beings. This, supposedly, is one example (of many) of human beings thinking we are more important than we actually are. If all of the potential extraterrestrials out there were affected by the actions of a few human beings, then we have influence over them, an influence they do not have over us. Granted, in this case, our influence would be negative, but still.

We already have the tools to resolve this. First, we could deny the fall had any effect on nature or we could limit its effect to the Earth. Ignoring this, if there are rational extraterrestrials created in God's image, then God would probably have given them the same option he gave to humanity with the same potential consequences, in which case they would have had just as much opportunity to alter the universe. Perhaps they made a better choice and so the universe was not altered. Or perhaps they did fall and their original sins altered the universe too. Maybe we are living in a universe that has experienced multiple falls by multiple species created in God's image. In a recent science-fiction novel, interstellar war involves altering the universe's laws and properties: e.g., slowing down the speed of light (for defense purposes) or removing a spatial dimension (for offense). Then it reveals that this has already been done – multiple times, in fact (Liu 2016).

The only problem with this is that, as far as we can tell, there is no scientific evidence that the laws and properties of the universe have been altered in such a way. But this, again, is already a problem for those who suggest there was a cosmic fall: the addition of more alterations from other cosmic falls does not make it any more difficult than it already is.

Similarly, if God was only ever incarnated as a human being to provide salvation to all rational creatures in the universe, it seems to suggest

something meritorious about us not shared by other creatures. But a consistent biblical theme is that God usually chooses the lowliest things to be the vehicle of his revelation and grace. “Lowliest,” here, can have two meanings. First is worst: the Apostle Paul applied this to himself: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life” (1 Tim. 1:15–16). The second meaning of “lowliest” is the least significant. For example, God chose the Hebrews to be his people despite their utter insignificance on the world stage at that time. Paul applies this same idea to the Christian church (1 Cor. 1:26–29).

The other side of this coin is the suggestion that the presence of multiple species created in God’s image would amount to a demotion for humanity. Just as the discovery of the universe’s vastness mortified vain human pretensions to value and significance – just as the discovery that the Earth is not at the center of universe humiliated us – so the discovery of ETIs would demonstrate that we are nothing special (Sagan 1997, chap. 3; but cf. Slagle 2013 and 2022).

This is a spectacularly bad argument. According to Christianity, whatever value human beings have, we have by virtue of being loved by God and being created in his image. The presence of other creatures that he loves and created in his image does not take away from that. God’s love is unlimited. It is not as if God only has a limited number of love units that he has to distribute among all the creatures he has created in his image. ETIs present no more of a problem in this regard than do other human beings created in God’s image. We live in a world with nearly eight billion other people in it, all of them created in God’s image, but this does not diminish the individual’s value or God’s love for them. How could it?

Conclusions

The Bible says God rejoices in his creation (Ps. 104:31) because it expresses his glory and so points beyond itself to him (Ps. 19; 104:31–34), so if he

exists I would not be surprised if he created other intelligent life in the universe. For that matter, I would not be surprised if he created other *universes*. Really, I would be a little surprised if he did not. But we are not yet at a point where we can say one way or another.

Dennis Danielson (2001) has argued that, contrary to popular opinion, the premodern geocentric cosmology actually indicated a lack of esteem, privilege, and value for those creatures located at or near the center. Earth was at the center of the universe, but hell was at the center of the Earth, and Satan at the center of hell, prompting Arthur Lovejoy (1964, 102) to call the model diabolocentric rather than geocentric. So the refutation of geocentrism was not perceived as dethroning human beings but as elevating them. As Galileo put it, heliocentrism shows that the Earth “is not the dump heap of the filth and dregs of the universe” (1989, 57). Danielson notes that scientists are sometimes resistant to this point, and often ask him in response whether the discovery of ETIs would mortify human beings and if it would have any impact on his theology. His response:

I believe the answer is that it would do the same thing that discovering intelligent life on earth does to my theology. It fills me with awe. It drives me to ask telic questions, questions about the purpose of life. It makes me ask who or what I am in relation to other intelligent beings. It fills me with gratitude that I can live in the same world, and share a moment in time, with other such contingent creatures. It fills me with wonder that there is something rather than nothing (Danielson 2004).

This should not be surprising. Mortification itself is generally taken as pointing to God, regardless of how it does so. It produces an intuition of something vastly more important than ourselves that we should honor. To suggest that this points *away* from religion, that religion is primarily about how important *we* are, is simply ill-informed.

It is a profound mistake to imagine that Christianity ever intended to dissipate the bewilderment and even the terror, the sense of our own nothingness, which come upon us when we think about the nature of things. It comes to intensify them. Without such sensations there is no religion (Lewis 1960b, 55).

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