

What if We Are Not Alone in the Cosmos?

I remember clearly when it first truly dawned on me that intelligent life might exist elsewhere in the universe. I was a high school junior, at a friend's house, and the assertion was being made by a young woman of particular interest to me. I felt compelled to take her seriously.

Up till then, I suppose, the possibility of intelligent life in other places had not registered with me because it simply did not fit my religiously informed world view. In that view, human beings were the pinnacle of existence, the measure of all things, the end and purpose of all creation. I now realize that, if planet Earth continues to be a life-sustaining habitat, even we human beings are bound to be surpassed as we evolve into "higher" life forms. And, whether or not life is sustained on planet Earth, it's becoming increasingly evident that there are even more planets than stars in the known universe. It's quite reasonable to think that intelligent life has emerged in one or more of them. [Moreover, millions of people believe we've already had visitors from other planets. I'm not prepared here to pass judgment on their claims.]

As best I can tell, most people have barely begun to think seriously about the theological implications of the possibility of extra-terrestrial intelligence. It was difficult enough for Christians to give up their geocentric view of the solar system and the universe. What if we must also give up our anthropocentric views?

What if the Creator has brought other kinds of intelligent life into being? Would we not have to recognize such intelligent beings as fellow "children of God"? Should we not assume that most of them, like most of us, have a sense of justice and a need for love? Might we also suspect that, should we ever have face-to-face encounters with such beings, there would be much apprehension and curiosity, with great potential for constructive and creative exchange but also for suspicion and conflict? How would we need to conduct ourselves to avoid turning such meetings into disaster?

And, given the central role of Jesus in our history, how should we begin to re-think the Christian story. If other intelligent creatures of God exist elsewhere in the cosmos, one must assume that they would have a different understanding of how God's presence is known. Could it be that our God is too small?

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