

What if it's not All About Us?

In my previous column I proposed that intelligent life may exist elsewhere in the universe. This calls for re-thinking Christian theology. No longer can we assume that we are the pinnacle of God's creation, or that the Christian story is the final chapter of what God is doing in the world. We must reject anthropocentric theological notions that assume "it's all about us." God may have much greater things in mind, or already accomplished, in other regions of the cosmos.

I also noted that many Christians still struggle to come to terms with the knowledge of evolutionary biology, or reject it outright. The conflict is generally understood, too simply, to be one between evolutionary science and creationism. In fact, many Christians accept evolution in general, yet maintain an exceptional view regarding the creation of humankind. Evolution becomes seriously problematic for them only when it undermines the view of human beings as uniquely created beings. That seems to be the real sticking point.

In evolutionary perspective, human beings are animals who share a common ancestry with other creatures. But most Western thought, including Christianity, has long regarded human beings as singularly rational and morally responsible, in short, radically distinct from the rest of the animal world. As scientists find more and more ways in which we are like other creatures, especially the great apes, dolphins, elephants, and whales, all of whom evidence remarkable capacities for feeling and thought in some form or other, it becomes increasingly difficult to define when human beings became human and why we can claim a unique and exclusive role in God's plan.

Most Christian theology is still framed in terms of redeeming humankind from its willful moral failures: God created us, we sinned, God sent Jesus to die to save us from our sin. We are worth saving, presumably, because of who we are. Little else seems ultimately to matter.

Such theology, focused primarily on the salvation of individual humans or the human species, leaves me cold. I don't believe God created all the rest just for us, or just for amusement.

Jesus proclaimed a God who notes even a sparrow's fall, One who evidently cares for and cherishes not only all people but all creation. Jesus was executed because he and his message challenged the authority of those who embodied the prevailing ideologies of importance and power. He wouldn't last long in today's world either.

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