

EXTRATERRESTRIAL
INTELLIGENCE
and the
CATHOLIC FAITH

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*Are We Alone in the Universe
with God and the Angels?*

PAUL THIGPEN

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*For my dear friend and esteemed colleague
Conor Gallagher,
who in so many ways
has made this book possible,
and in memory of
John Moorehouse,
beloved editor and friend.*

He, who thro' vast immensity can pierce,
See worlds on worlds compose one universe,
Observe how system into system runs,
What other planets circle other suns,
What vary'd Being peoples ev'ry star,
May tell why Heaven has made us as we are.

ALEXANDER POPE, *An Essay on Man*

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“Do You Know the Ordinances of the Heavens?”

An Introduction to the Conversation

“Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: . . . ‘Where were you . . . when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy? . . . Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades or loose the cords of Orion? . . . Can you guide the Bear with its children? Do you know the ordinances of the heavens?’”

—Job 38:1, 7, 31, 33

MY MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS once farmed the humble red clay in a remote part of rural central Georgia. When I was young, they would host me for a weeklong visit from the city each summer. I still remember vividly, now more than half a century later, one moonless, wildly starry night when I walked outside the farmhouse to lie alone on the ground. There were no street lights, few artificial lights of any kind, allowing a spectacular view of the heavens rarely found these days.

For what seemed like hours, the twinkling of countless stars, the steady radiance of the planets, the immense shining path of the Milky Way, all captivated me and sparked my curiosity. I knew enough science even then to suppose that

only angels could fly the astronomical distances between me and those heavenly bodies. And yet I dreamed . . .

What if I could travel to those shining worlds? What would I find there? Whom might I find there?

Suddenly the questions took an unsettling direction. *What if they could travel to my world? Right here? Right now?*

I ran back into the farmhouse and jumped in bed, eyes wide open all night.

An Ancient Debate

Of course, I was not at all alone in pondering such things. As we'll see in the chapters to come, the possibility of intelligent life beyond earth has been debated since ancient times, both in Christian and in non-Christian cultures. (We will use a common shorthand term to refer to such life: the abbreviation "ETI," for "ExtraTerrestrial Intelligence.")

I was warned that certain segments of our contemporary society, particularly the academic world, might label me eccentric for writing about this topic. Yet those who hand out such labels must not be aware that in the light of history, such a dismissive attitude is itself revealed to be eccentric, an aberration, an anomaly. In fact, some of the best minds of the last twenty-five centuries in Western civilization—philosophers, theologians, scientists, literary figures—have energetically and sincerely engaged this subject.

To those who would award me a tinfoil hat, I simply reply that you will need many more such hats: for Democritus, Plato, and Aristotle; Origen, Athanasius, and Augustine; Albert, Aquinas, and Bonaventure; Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler; Descartes and Pascal, Voltaire and Leibniz and

Kant; Milton, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Dostoevsky; Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams; and countless more.

Humility: Key to Wisdom

From the very outset of my study, I have been convinced that in this endeavor as in every endeavor, *humility* is the key to wisdom.

We need humility in making claims about what is scientifically possible. The history of science is one long story of surprising discoveries that reveal the limited vision of our assumptions about what can or cannot exist with regard to both natural phenomena and technology.

We need humility in making theological and philosophical claims about what is “probable” or “fitting” or other admittedly subjective designations, especially with regard to what God has done or might have done. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Is 55:8–9).

We need humility in considering our place in this vast universe that God has created. “Then Job answered the LORD: ‘Behold, I am of small account’” (Job 40:3–4). And for Catholics, if the Church’s Magisterium (teaching office) should make a definitive pronouncement about the subject of ETI, we need humility to accept what the Church will teach us.

God’s rebuke to Job so long ago rings down through the centuries to our own time: “*Do you know the ordinances of the heavens?*” (Job 38:33, emphasis added). Given the meaning of the Hebrew word translated here as “ordinances,” God is

challenging us as he did Job: Do we know all the bounds, the laws, the measures, the decrees He Himself has appointed for the universe?

Quite simply, we do not. The Creator of the cosmos holds in His hands more mysteries than we can ever fathom.

What Difference Would It Make?

Some might ask, “What difference would it make for Christians if we knew for sure that ETI exists?” First, as the history of the ETI conversation demonstrates, Christians would hear the misguided claim from two types of ideological adversaries that extraterrestrial intelligence disproves their faith.

On the one hand would be those with a general skepticism toward religion, who would insist that the Christian (and especially the biblical) account of the universe cannot account for or accommodate the existence of nonhuman intelligent beings (other than angels). As we shall see, this is an unfounded claim that we have heard for centuries now.

On the other hand would be those religious (or, as they might prefer to say it, “spiritual”) souls who have rejected traditional Christian faith but still seek transcendent ideas and mystical experiences in various New Age or other occult spiritual traditions. Some such traditions have already incorporated messianic notions of ETI into their mythology, looking to our superior, more advanced “space brothers” (they go by many names) as the source of enlightenment and salvation for humankind. Such believers would welcome any disclosure of ETI existence as vindication of their beliefs—and proof that the Christian faith is false. Again,

ETI proponents of this sort have been around for centuries, though they may be more numerous today.

The present work should put to rest the claims of both these groups that the public discovery or disclosure of ETI somehow disproves the Christian faith. Catholics and other Christians need not be disturbed by the possibility that intelligent extraterrestrial races could exist. As we shall see, though a public encounter with ETI would raise many questions to be answered about their spiritual and moral status, the Catholic faith could accommodate their existence as it has so many scientific discoveries over the centuries.

A second important consequence following a public, officially announced discovery or disclosure of the existence of extraterrestrial intelligence would be this: Some Catholics and other Christians, adopting for themselves the misguided notion that their faith is incompatible with the idea of extraterrestrial intelligence, would not deny their faith. Instead, they would deny the reality of ETI. To clarify, they would not deny that nonhuman intelligences exist and interact with humans; rather, they would conclude that all ETI experiences are actually deceptions perpetrated by demons.

As we will see, some claims of alien abduction or other interaction do seem to manifest the classical traits of demonic activity and deception. But it would be implausible to attribute (for example) retrieved alien spacecraft to demons who have no need of physical transport. In addition, there are countless reports of UFOs that seem to lack any demonic characteristics. The truth, Our Lord declared, will set us free (see Jn 8:32), so a false belief that any evidence of ETI is a