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ETs: Is Astronomy Refashioning The Images Of God?

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Stig

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Is astronomy refashioning the images of God?

By Karen R. Long
c. 1999 Religion News Service

WASHINGTON -- The hope that humanity is not alone in the universe heated up earlier this month with news of the first solar system outside our own.

Astronomers meeting with theologians at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History rushed to update their slides and reword their presentations, admitting that their e-mail had been buzzing with speculation for weeks. After 11 years of painstaking observations, researchers announced April 15 they had detected a trio of extrasolar planets orbiting Upsilon Andromedae, a star similar to our own sun about 44 light-years from Earth.

"You can expect the announcement of dozens of new planets over the next several years, gaseous as well as rocky planets," declared Harvard University astrophysicist David Latham, who is running his own search at the Keck Observatory in Hawaii.

"When I got here Tuesday we had 17 (planets outside our system); now we have 19," said Jill Tarter, director of SETI, the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence project, and the model for Jodie Foster's character in the movie "Contact."

"I really do have the best job in the world," said Tarter, beaming at an eclectic audience gathered at the Smithsonian to ask if the new boom in cosmology was beginning to answer the oldest questions about God and the universe. "Every morning I get up and strive to solve some technical challenge and each day I learn something new, often from the diverse disciplines engaged by this question: Are we alone in the cosmos?"

The 400 assembled included Noble laureates and Montessori teachers, Mormon scientists from Salt Lake City and brown-robed monks from St. Anselm's Abbey, a retired Dallas couple who learned of the conference on the Internet and Nate Ewert-Krocker, a 14-year-old boy from Concord Township in Lake County, Ohio whose parents thought he might be interested.

Into this mix waded a few theologians, who are starting to work on how the discovery of extraterrestrial life might recast notions of God. What might happen to the three Abrahamic religions -- Islam, Judaism and Christianity -- with their concepts of "the chosen," and "the special elect, if God turns out to have other children?

"Any encounter would be a chance to broaden our understanding of the divine," said John F. Haught, a theology professor at Georgetown University. "The fact that we have SETI illustrates our cosmic impulse at socialization. It would not be so surprising that other civilizations are centralized and reaching out toward us."

Owen Gingerich, a Harvard University professor of astronomy and a conference organizer, said, "From a perspective of religious humility, we are not in a position to limit God's creativity to us."

Some scientists, such as Harvard University anthropologist Irven DeVore, don't care how many planets the astronomers manage to count. "I personally cannot discern a shred of evidence for a benign, cosmic presence," he said. "I look at evolution and I see indifference and capriciousness. What kind of God works with a 99.9 percent extinction rate?"

Researchers are eager to find out. Kenneth Nealson, NASA's top astrobiologist, is leading a quartet of Mars missions over the next decade designed to retrieve rocks from the surface and scour them for hints of microbial life.

"From my point of view, as a microbiologist, we need to figure out how to broaden the search, broaden our horizons," he said. "My guess is we'll have a boost of knowledge about our solar system equivalent to the Apollo coming back from the moon and putting samples into our hands."

Although SETI rents radio telescopes and systematically listens to portions of the night sky for signals that might indicate war, transportation, energy-making or communication of an advanced technological society, Nealson suspects the majority of life in the universe would be of a more humble sort.

"From the point of view of SETI, Earth would have scored as negative until we developed radio waves about 70 years ago, despite the pyramids and everything else here," Nealson said.

As the lead project scientist on the NASA Mars robotic missions, Nealson is very conservative about the likelihood of lucking onto extrasolar life in a few scoops of debris from Mars. When pinned down, he thinks Callisto, a moon of Jupiter, might be the best candidate for nonterrestrial life in this solar system. But current technology precludes any effort to go there: Propulsion systems are not powerful enough to break the gravity of Jupiter to bring samples back.

Nevertheless, NASA and its partner agency in France are committing close to \$1 billion on the four Mars robotic missions. Astronomer Gingerich said this was similar to the King of Denmark supplying a ton of gold to support Tycho Brahe's 16th-century observatory. The drive to answer such questions goes very deep.

"Finding a second Genesis in our solar system would greatly strengthen the argument for plentiful life in the universe," Tarter said. She also thinks it might mean a lot to humanity.

"For me, I always have this Pollyanna hat I wear," she said, "that given independent evolution of life somewhere else, we would have to recognize the differences between ourselves and any others would be vast, and this would trivialize any differences among humans, the tribal differences with which we now have so many difficulties."

But Haught, the Georgetown theologian, was more interested in what advanced extraterrestrial life might have in common with humanity.

"ET would share our cosmological limits, the constraints of physical laws and entropy," Haught said. "If alive and intelligent, ET could share our capacity for religion. Would ET know about fate, suffering, death or guilt? Would there be a possibility of sharing our mutual creation stories?"

Haught said some believers might take news of extraterrestrial intelligence as opportunity to evangelize, as Cleveland author Mary Doria Russell explored in her fictional book, "The Sparrow," about Jesuit missionaries jumping the gun into space.

But Seth Shostak, a SETI scientist, warned the religionists against becoming too cozy with the idea they can rejigger their theology to make room for extraterrestrial intelligence. He pointed to the 18th-century reaction of the people on the South Sea Islands when Capt. James Cook sailed into their harbors.

"They took one look at his ship, his guns, his wheels and assumed his religion must be more advanced," Shostak said, "and they threw off their religion for his."

Some of those least inclined at the three-day Smithsonian conference to sit still for such speculation were the evolutionary biologists.

"I've been waffling on my own opinion," said professor Sara Via, a University of Maryland expert in ecological genetics. "It's not at all obvious to me that the evolution of intelligent life is inevitable."

It took an asteroid to clear the decks of dinosaurs so mammals might evolve, an asteroid that would have missed striking Earth altogether if it had been 20 minutes earlier or later. It took blue-green algae 1.4 billion years of photosynthesis to alter the atmosphere permanently so oxygen-breathers could emerge. And it took surviving a very close call when monkeys nearly wiped out apes because apes, from which humans descend, cannot eat unripe fruit.

"Natural selection is ongoing and blind, a zig-zagging opportunistic course," Harvard's DeVore said. "If you remember only one thing, remember that 99.9 percent of all species have gone extinct. With perhaps 50 billion species over the history of the planet, only one achieved the ability to send radio signals."

Tarter and Shostak wager that the universe is so big there must be more, because there are more stars than grains of sands on all the beaches of Earth. At SETI headquarters in Mountain View, Calif., the team keeps a bottle of chilled champagne on ice.

"Even if the evolution of biological intelligence is very rare," Shostak said, "it can't be zero probability, because we are here."

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