

Could an Extraterrestrial be a Christian? Theology, film, and the evolution of spiritual consciousness



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Religious Themes in Science Fiction

George Lukas' *Star Wars* series

C.S. Lewis's *Perelandra* trilogy

Arthur C. Clarke, *Nine Billion Names of God*

Isaac Asimov, *The Last Question*

Dr. Who, "The Impossible Planet" episode

Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*

Numerous others



Planet
Naboo

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Religious Themes in Science Fiction

God or Gods

Creation stories

Morality, sin

Original sin

Forgiveness, retribution

Eschatology, heaven, hell

Jesus, saviors

Science vs. myth

Messianism

Logos, Incarnation

Demons, Devil

Evangelisation

Reincarnation

Theocracy

Universe's ultimate fate

Working assumptions

- The universe has 300 billion galaxies, averaging 100 billion stars, or 3×10^{22} star systems
- The universe is physically and chemically similar throughout (?)
- Only a small percentage of stars may harbor life-capable planets
- But life – intelligent life – did arise on earth
- Therefore, life may arise or have arisen elsewhere
- “Life” may be recognizable as such to us, or it may be based on a biochemistry so profoundly different we would not recognize it as “life.”

Working assumptions

- We may never find out about other instances of life due to distance and time differences
- It is not theologically pointless to consider the implications of E.T. for Christian theology
- In fact, recognizing that the universe does not revolve around the archaic assumptions of one tribe of *Homo sapiens* may be essential to the continuing relevance of religious belief – and of Christian belief in particular – into the third millennium

The Drake Equation

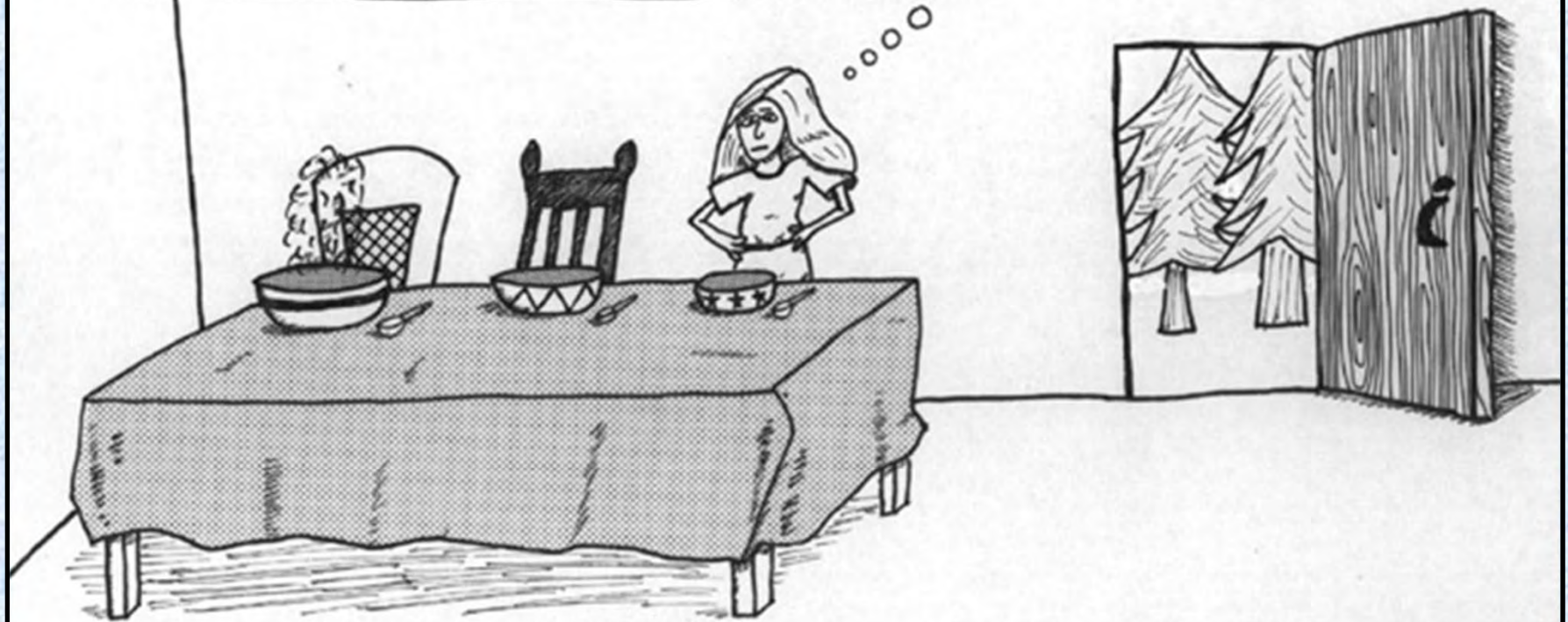
Frank Drake, 1961

$$N = R^* \times f_p \times n_e \times f_l \times f_i \times f_c \times L$$

N = Number of sun-like stars \times number of those with planets \times that are habitable \times actually life-bearing \times those carrying intelligent life \times those which are detectable \times how long a civilization might last = between 127 and 245 in our galaxy.

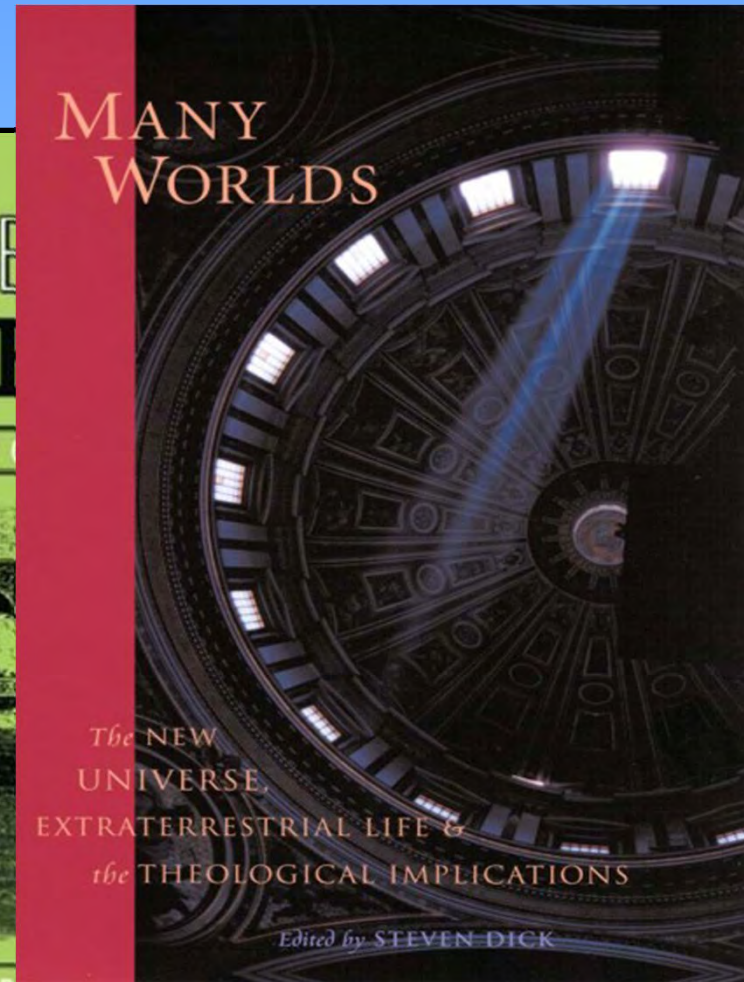
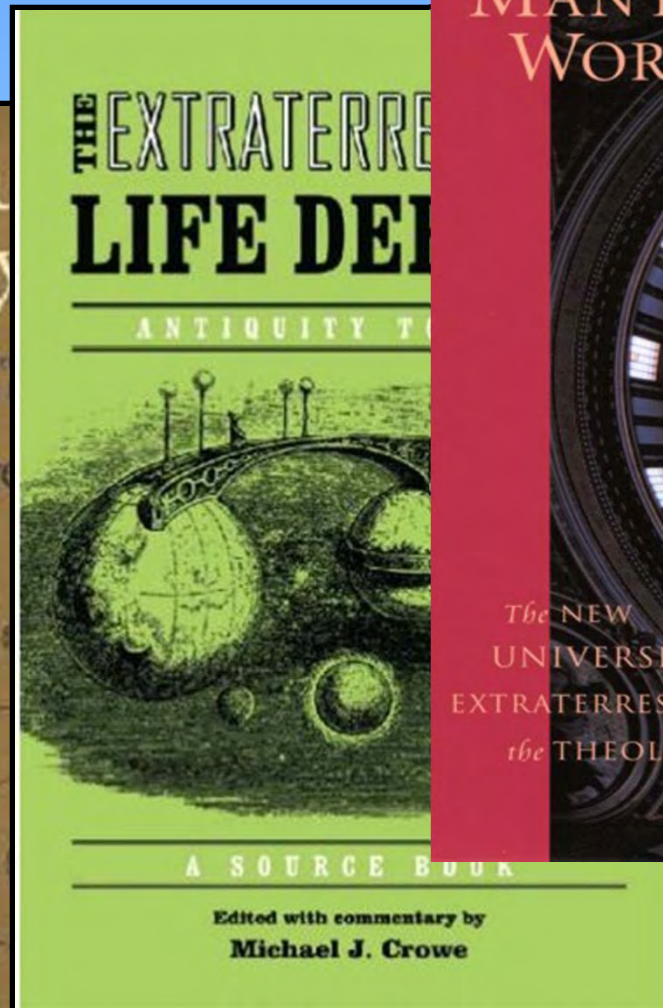
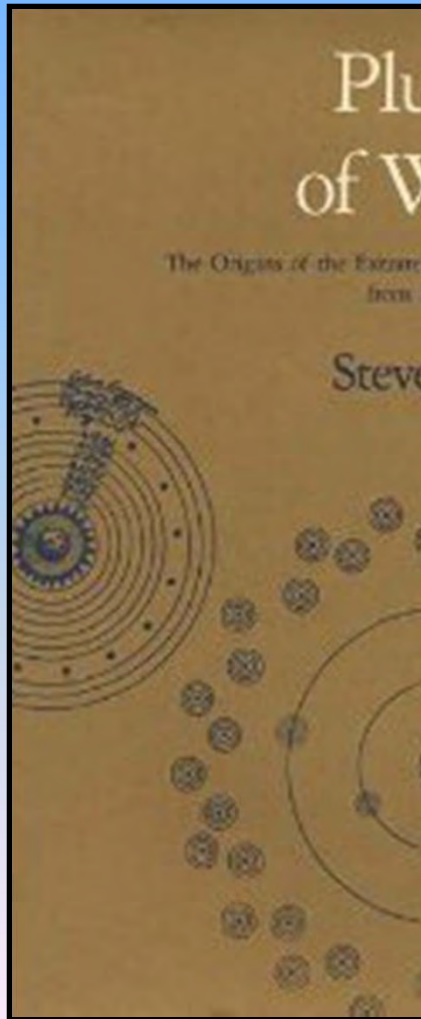
Physics in the Goldilocks Universe

BIG BOWL: TOO HOT. MEDIUM BOWL: TOO COLD. SMALL BOWL: JUST RIGHT. THIS GOES AGAINST ALL OF THE THERMODYNAMICS I EVER LEARNED!



ET in Western Religious Tradition

Lively debate for
2,000 years:



ET in Western Religious Tradition: Lively debate for 2,000 years

Antiquity to Middle Ages:

- Atomists – Democritus, Epicurus, Lucretius: plurality of worlds (infinite atoms, infinite space, and “uniformity of nature”)
- Aristotle: only one world is possible (concept of the “natural place” of elements within the sphere of fixed stars)
- Thomas Aquinas maintained Aristotle’s denial of ET based on “natural place”

ET in Western Religious Tradition:
Lively debate for 2,000 years

Medieval Developments

Condemnations of 1277:

- **Bishop Stephen Tempier** of Paris limits the authority of “Aristotelizing” arts masters of the University of Paris.
- Proposition 27A: *“One may not hold that the first cause cannot make more than one world.”*
- Effect of condemnation: limitation on Aristotle permitted theoretical consideration of plurality of worlds, leading ultimately to the modern debate.

ET in Western Religious Tradition: Lively debate for 2,000 years

Medieval Developments

“It is one of the great ironies of the history of ideas that while the passionate Atomist *espousal* of the idea of plurality of worlds fell on deaf ears with the rest of the Atomist system until the end of the sixteenth century, the *rejection* of the idea by the dominant Aristotelian worldview inspired critical discussion of plurality of worlds as early as the thirteenth century in the Latin West.”

Steven J. Dick, *Plurality of Worlds* (1982), 23.

ET in Western Religious Tradition: Lively debate for 2,000 years

Late Medieval:

Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464)

- God ‘may be compared to a sphere whose center is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere.’
- “It may be conjectured that in the area of the sun there exist solar beings, bright and enlightened intellectual denizens, and by nature more spiritual than such as may inhabit the moon – who are possibly lunatics – whilst those on earth are more gross and material.”

ET in Western Religious Tradition: Lively debate for 2,000 years

Renaissance to Modernity:

Galileo Galilei (1401-1464)

“If there were many universes, earth would move only to the center of its own universe.”

Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519)

“It is a manifest sign that the moon is surrounded by its own elements: that is to say, water, air, and fire, and thus is suspended in that part of space, just as is our earth.”

ET in Western Religious Tradition: Lively debate for 2,000 years



Nehemiah Grew
(1641-1712)

“The moon and the planets are earths, and every fixed star is a sun surrounded by planets, which we assume to be inhabited in order for their respective suns to serve some purpose.”

*Cosmologia
Sacra* (1701)



Room for non-terrestrial beings in
some monotheistic traditions:

Demons, Angels



ET as Monstrous or Demonic



Arthropodic Sarris, "Galaxy Quest"



Alien from "Independence Day" (1996)



Xindi Reptilian, "Galaxy Quest (1999)

ET as Monstrous or Demonic

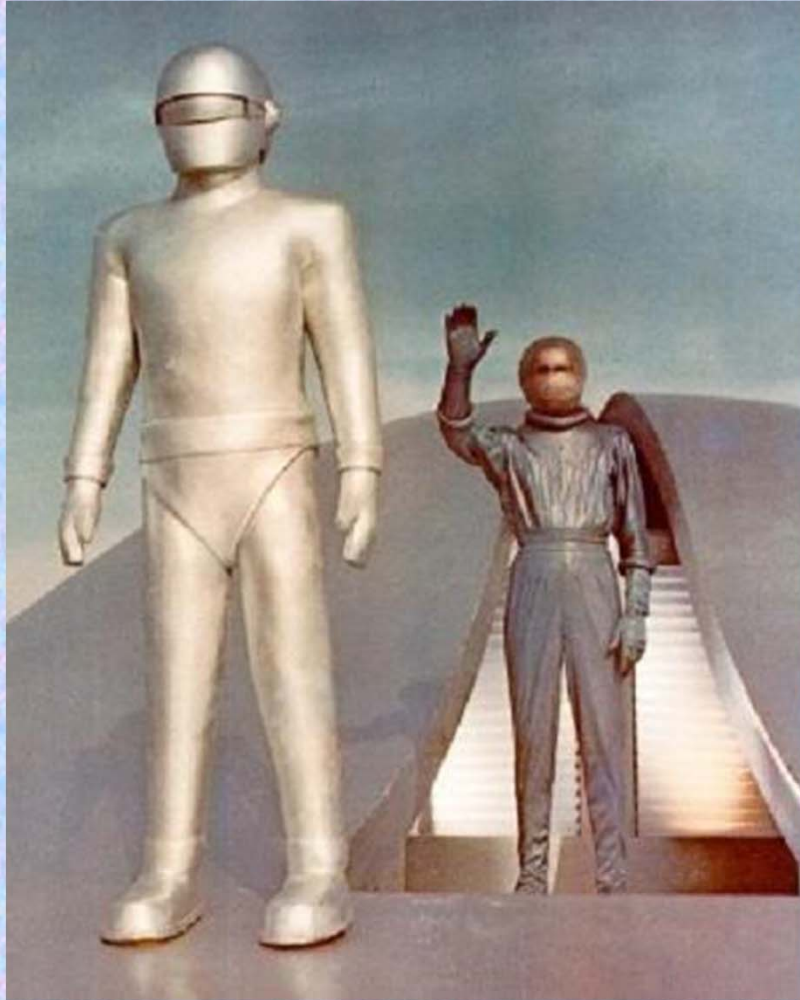


Chestburster from
"Alien" (Columbia)



“B

ET as Benign or Morally Superior



Klaatu, “The Day the Earth Stood Still” (1951)



E.T., savior figure from the eponymous film, (1982)

ET as Benign or Morally Superior



Benign alien,
Starman (1984)



Yoda, wise alien
Star Wars (1977-1983)

ET as Benign or Morally Superior



Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977)



Jeriba Shigan the Drac,
Enemy Mine (1985)

ET as Morally Ambiguous



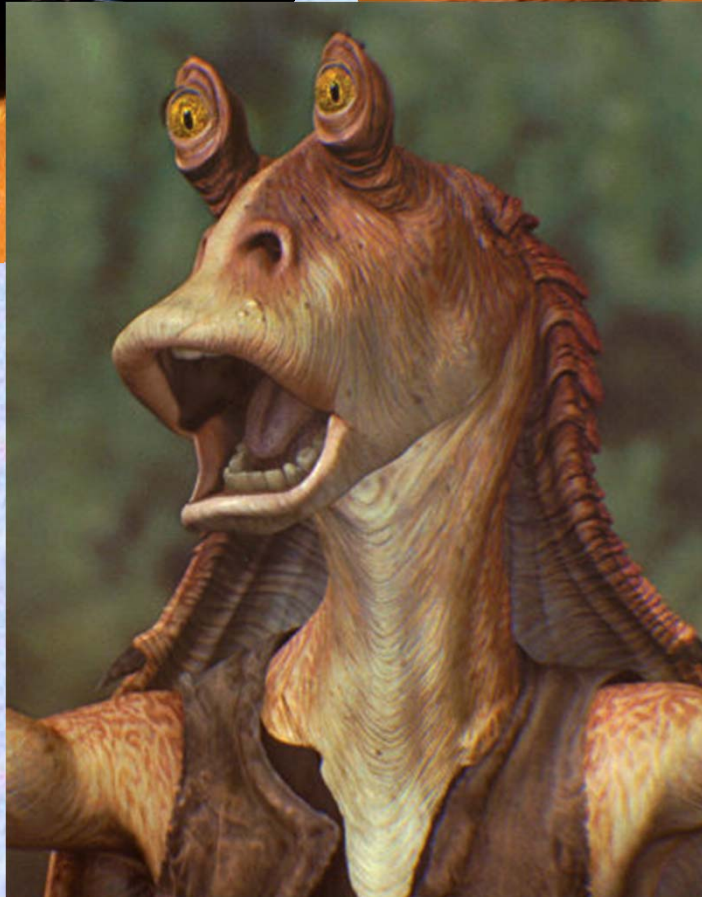
“Paul” (2011)

ET as Morally Ambiguous



Klingon Mr. Worf,
“Star Wars”

Jar Jar Binks,
“Star Wars”



Quark, a Ferengi,
“Star Wars” and
“Deep Space
Nine”

ET as Morally Ambiguous

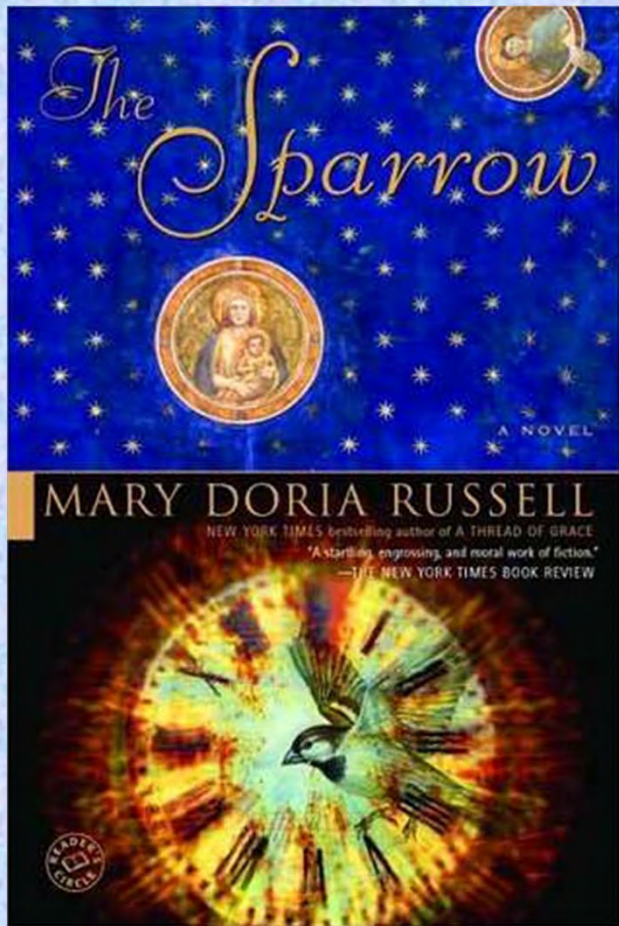


Avatar (2009)



Alien "Prawn" from
"District 9" (2009)

ET as Morally Ambiguous



Mary Doria Russell's fine but darkly disturbing novel *The Sparrow* (Villard, 1996) recounts the story of the Jesuit mission to the fourth planet in the Rakhat system.

The moral world of Emilio Sandoz, S.J., crumbles when he learns that two species on this planet – locked in a predator-prey relationship – have evolved into rationality.

Predation





ET: Morally Ambiguous like Us?

It is more likely that extraterrestrial life that has evolved (like *Homo sapiens*) within an ecological web of predator-prey relationships will reflect an evolutionary morality, moral ambiguity within a widening circle of ethical inclusion.

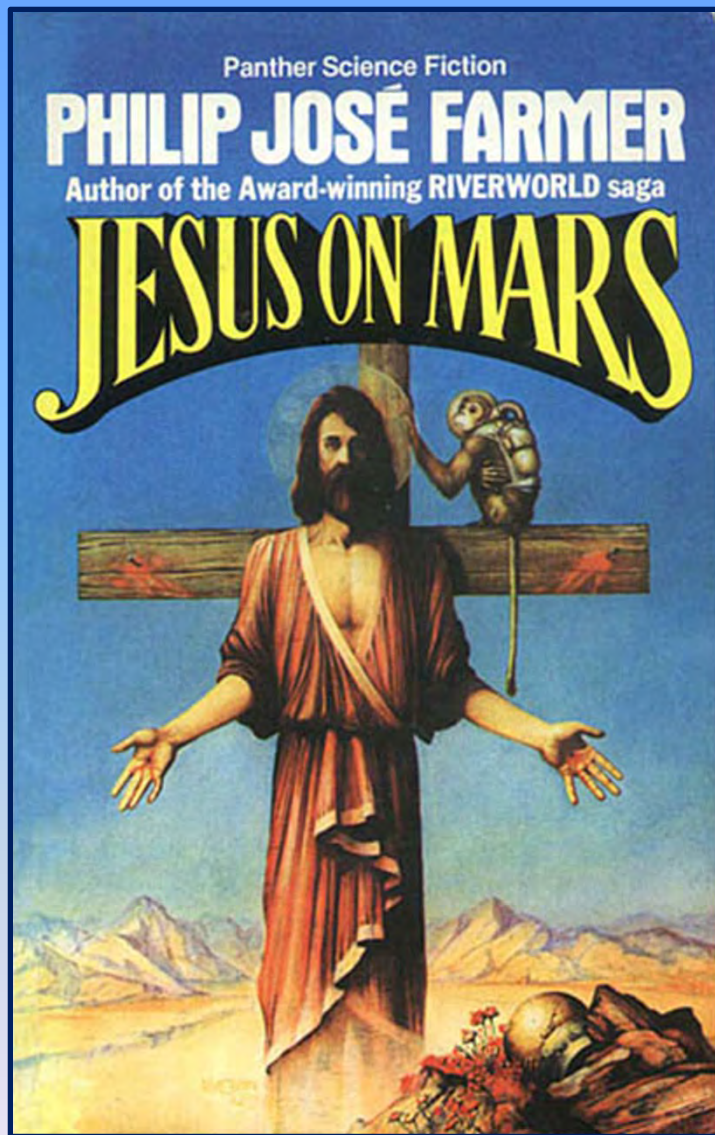
Theologically such a species would likely be like us – in Luther’s phrase “*simul iustus et peccator*” (Robert Russell) – at the same time justified and sinners.

An Evolutionary Hermeneutic

Daniel Dennett has asserted that the theory of evolution by natural selection is a universal acid that “eats through just about every traditional concept, and leaves in its wake a revolutionized world-view, with most of the old landmarks still recognizable, but transformed in fundamental ways.

Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996, 63.

This is old news to theologians!



1979 science fiction novel by Philip José Farmer set on Mars.

Expedition sent to mars to explore the half-buried wreck of a an alien spaceship belonging to the Krsh. Mixed Krsh / Human population.

Frank Herbert's *Dune* — moreso than much of science fiction — does include religion as an important or even a central element of the story. Religion is treated syncretistically, and not in a particularly evolutionary way.



But *Dune's* religions are mostly human:

- Zenshiism: a hybrid of the religious principles of Zen Buddhism and Shia Islam
- Mahayana Christianity — Jesus Christ is interpreted as a Buddha
- Judaism preserved over 25,000 years
- Navachristianity — a blend of Navajo and Christian spirituality
- Zensufism — a hybrid of Zen and Sufi Islamic mysticism
- Numerous others, mostly terrestrial



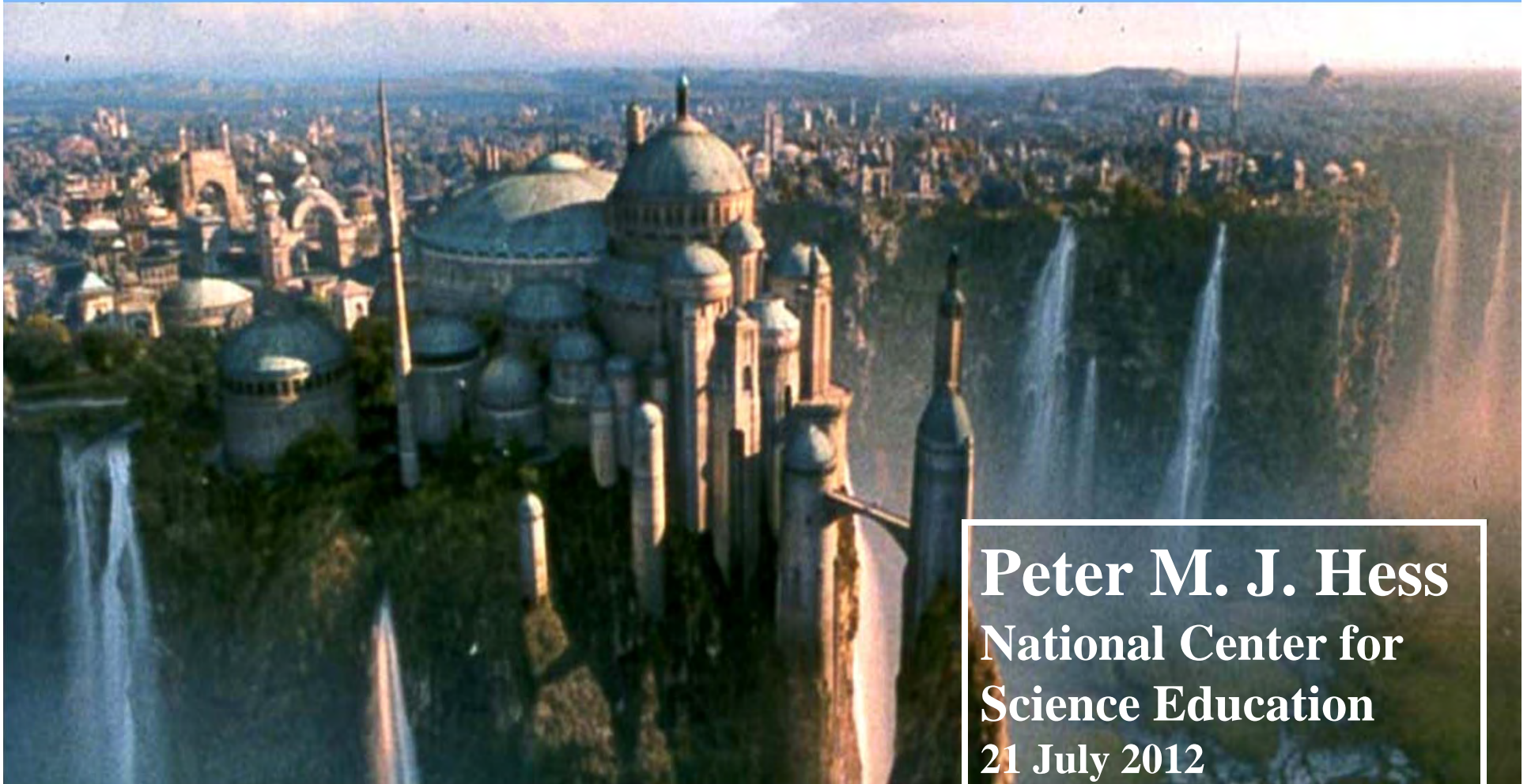
Types of Religious Question raised by SciFi

- If intelligent life evolves, would it evolve morality, religion, spirituality, theologies?
- Is belief in God an artifact of the evolution of consciousness?
- Could the Logos or “Christ principle” become incarnate elsewhere in the universe than Earth, perhaps multiple times?
- Would multiple crucifixions or salvific deaths be necessary?
- If “the Christ” became incarnate a million years ago on Planet X, would the members of an expedition from that planet recognize Jesus of Nazareth as God incarnate?
- Is God necessarily triune, or is that an artifact of our own religious experience in a mono-solar cosmology? How might God be conceived of in a binary star system?

Types of Religious Question raised by SciFi

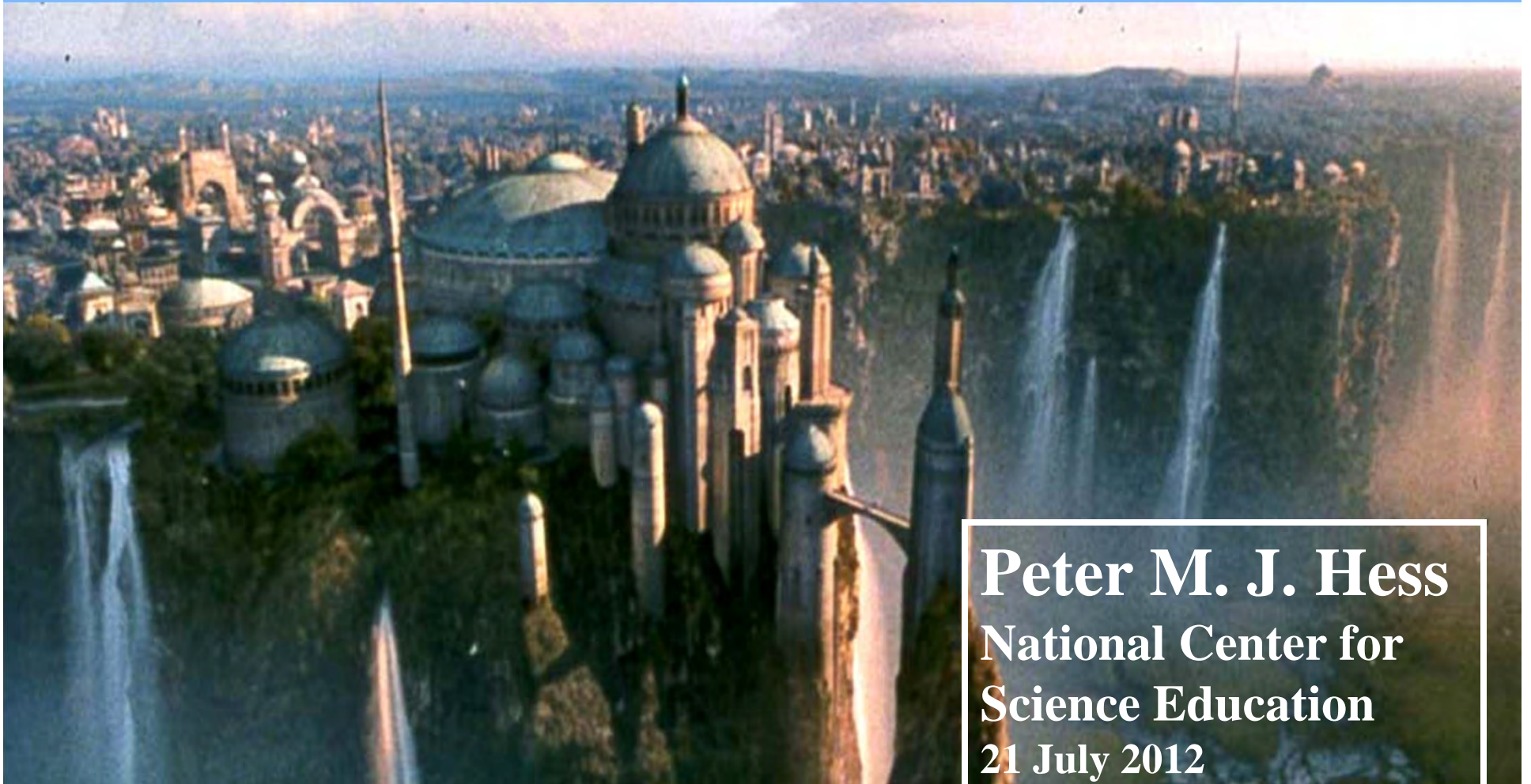
- Would the Catholic argument that the priest as an icon of Christ must be male be undermined by a biology of female-dominant intelligent species?
- Would belief continue to play a role in the lives of a technologically sophisticated space-faring people
- Does religion carry sufficient survival value to evolve on another planet?
- What is the relationship between the survival value of religious belief and the claimed truth values of religious doctrine?
- What might the interface be between an established ET theological doctrine and an imported human system?

**Three questions:
Evolution of Moral & Religious Consciousness
Sacramentality and the Universe
Incarnation and Salvation**



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Evolution of Moral & Religious Consciousness



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- Planets have finite energy resources.
- Evolving life must compete for these finite resources.
- As life expands into every biological niche, predation between species and competition within species will inevitably arise.
- Prior to the evolution of self-consciousness, competition and predation are not moral issues.
- With self-consciousness comes moral awareness: recognition of the possibility of doing otherwise.
- Evolution of an understanding of “sin” entails the evolution of morality.

Evolution of Moral Awareness

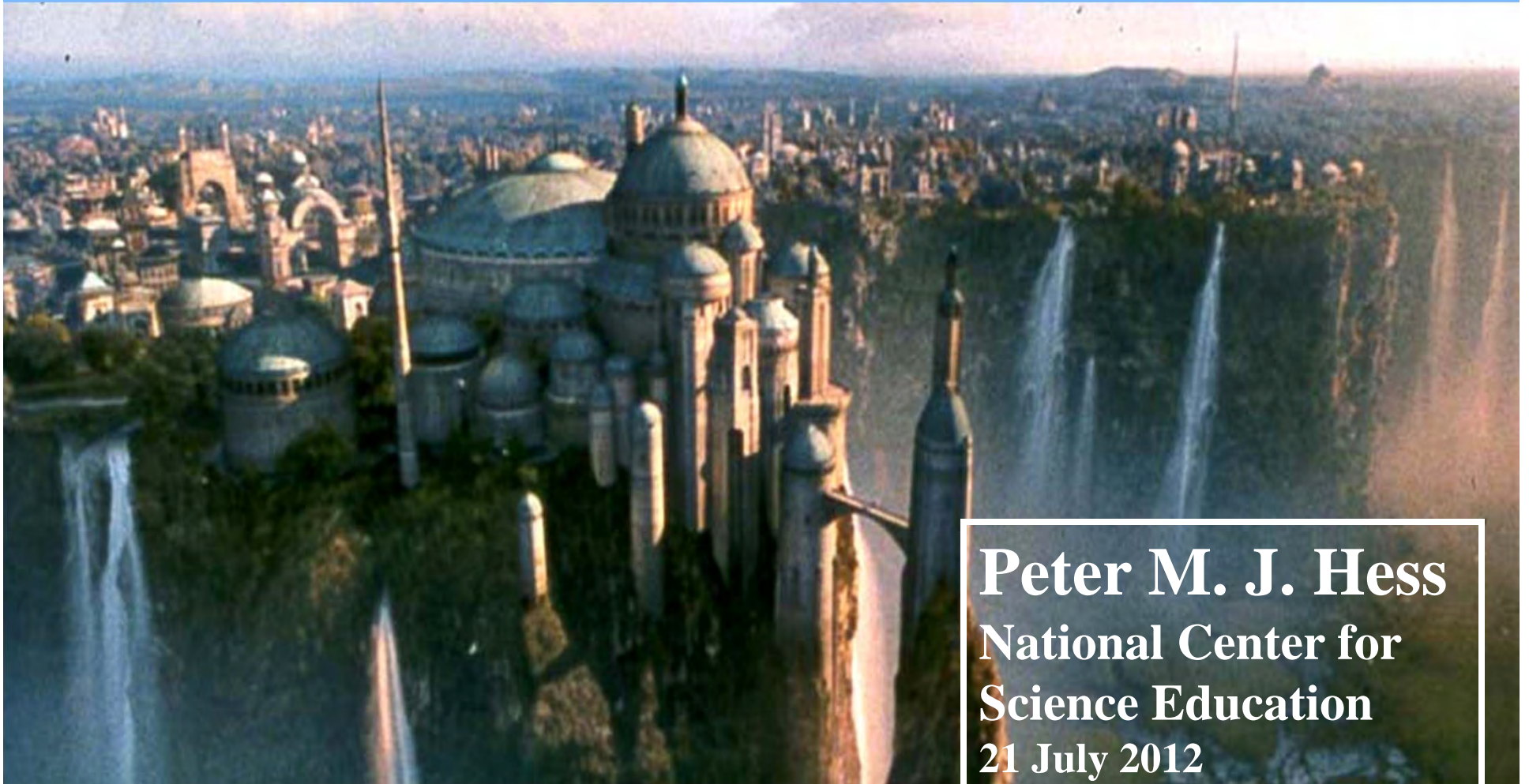
- Evolution of an understanding of “sin” entails the evolution of morality.
- Robert Russell: if and when we meet alien intelligent life, it will be neither angelic nor demonic, but in theological terms *simul iustus et peccator* – at “once justified (redeemed) and a sinner.”
- In other words, evolutionary differences, E.T. will be in important respects like us: predatory and cooperative, egoistic and altruistic, capable of evil and capable of good.
- Will we recognize the same actions as being “good” or “evil”? (e.g., Emilio Sandoz in *The Sparrow*)

Evolution of Religion and Spiritual Awareness

- Prior to the dawn of self-consciousness animals seem not to have exhibited spirituality.*
- Self-consciousness entails intuition of transcendence, that there may be something more.
- Early humans
 - ✓ Practiced rituals (birth, puberty, marriage, death)
 - ✓ Recognized transcendence (God(s), spirit)
 - ✓ Searched for cosmogonic explanations (myth)
- Theologies and the “Axial Age” (800 to 200 BCE)

**Pace* numerous ongoing studies.

Sacramentality and the Universe



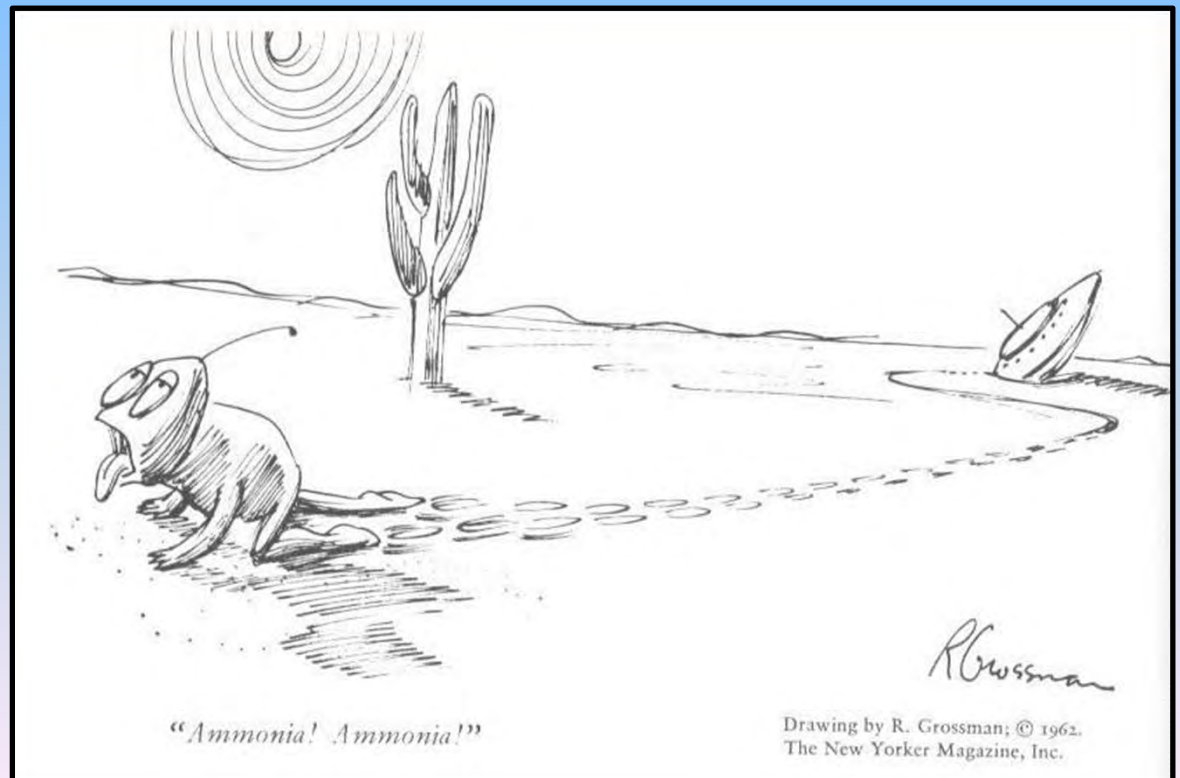
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- If Christianity is specific to a species, then an alien could not be a Christian. But...
- Mt. 28:19 – “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”
- Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth, Part Two*
- “The universality of Jesus’ mission is made visible; it concerns not just a limited circle of chosen ones - its scope is the whole of creation, the world in its entirety. Through the disciples and their mission, the world as a whole is to be torn free from its alienation, it is to rediscover unity with God.”

Sacraments: outward signs of inward grace

- Christians believe that Jesus instituted the sacraments of the new law.
- These were codified into seven by the Catholic Church in the 12th and 13th centuries; most Protestants recognize two.
- The (seven) sacraments touch all the stages and all the important moments of Christian life: they give birth and growth, healing and mission to the Christian's life of faith.
- The material elements of sacraments (water, oil, bread, wine, physical touch) represent the divine presence in the cosmos.

- Would this resemblance between the stages of natural life and the stages of the spiritual life be mirrored in alien theological culture?
- How different might the matter be – e.g., ammonia rather than water – for baptism to remain a sacrament?





Could ET the Healer...



... be ordained ET
the Priest?

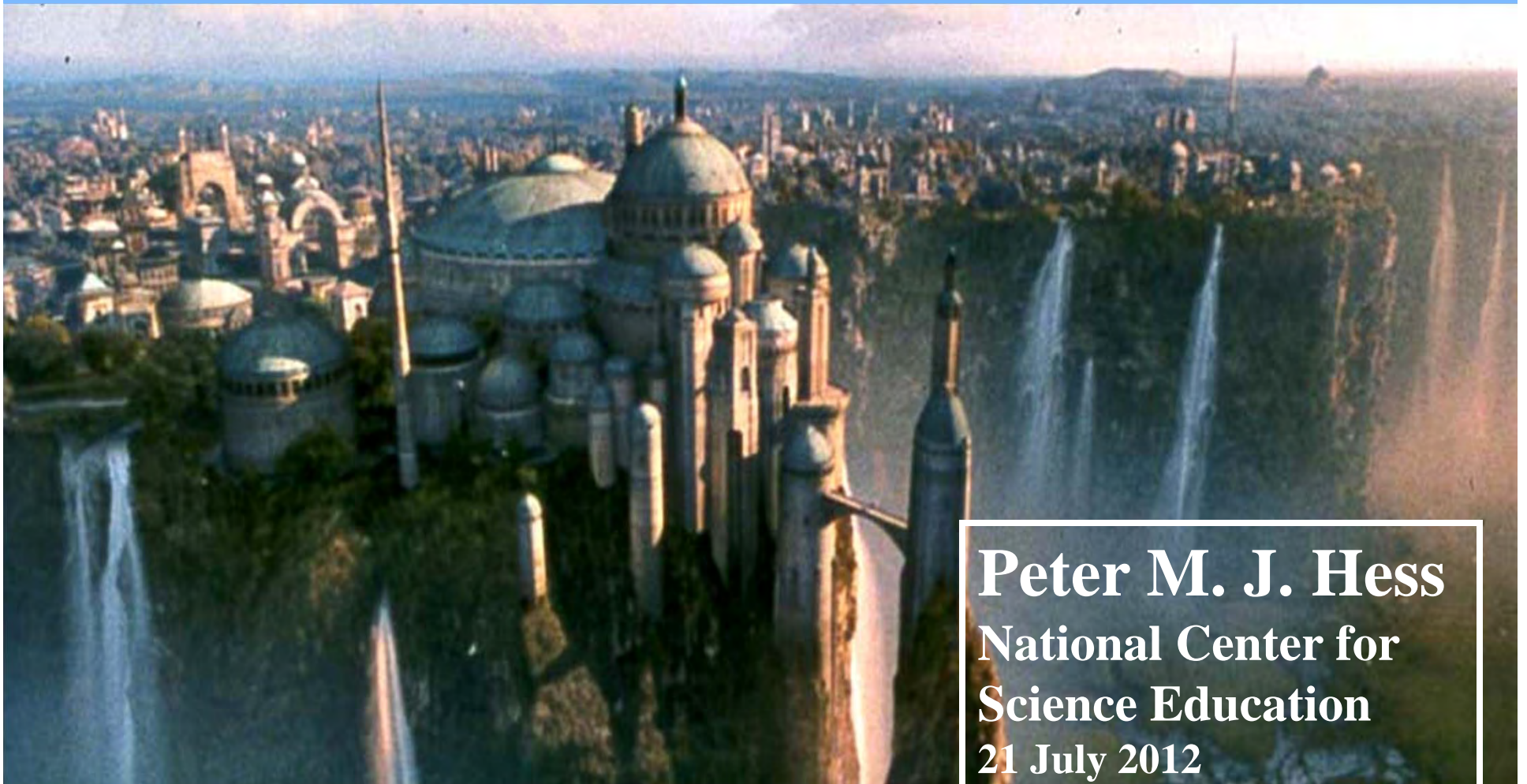
Gender, Species, and a Non-human Priesthood?

- If the priest is to be an icon of Christ, what are the parameters of this?
- If a Catholic priest must be a male, must he also be a male member of species *Homo sapiens*?
- What if the pattern of sexual dimorphism and of gender dominance has evolved differently in a different extraterrestrial rational species?
- What if females were the ordained priests among non-humans?

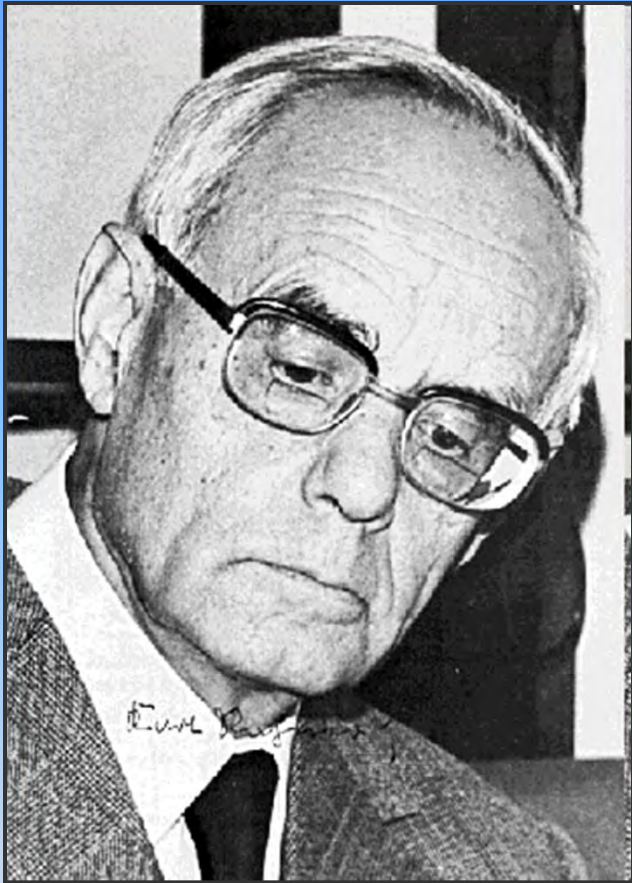
What would
Extraterrestrial
religious
imagery look
like?



Incarnation and Salvation



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Karl Rahner, S.J.
1904-1984

“In our context it is especially worthy of note that the point at which God in a final self-communication irrevocably and definitively lays hold on the totality of the reality created by him is characterized not as spirit but as flesh. It is this which authorizes the Christian to integrate the history of salvation into the history of the cosmos, even when myriad questions remain unanswered.”

— *Hominization* (1958)

God and Incarnation, and Salvation



Ilia Delio, OSF

“However we conceive of the Incarnate Word as the integrating and personalizing center of all life in the universe (or universes), there remains only one Spirit and one Christ to the Glory of God the Father.”

— *Christ in Evolution* (2008)

Christ as Extraterrestrial?



Some theologians portray Jesus Christ's death and resurrection as unique and universally valid for the entire universe. Is that theology too parochial?

- Ilia Delio, *The Emergent Christ* (2011)
- George Murphy, *The Cosmos in Light of the Cross* (2003)

For all the profound aspects of these and other books, I find the soteriology, or theology of salvation, to be too anthropocentric, too terracentric, too carbonocentric. The Christian claim is that the death of one member of *Homo sapiens* on one planet of one of 100 billion stars in one of 300 billion galaxies has uniquely and indelibly affected the universe.

How can we rethink our theology of salvation, to be universal rather than anthropocentric, terracentric, or carbonocentric?

How can we rethink Christology and soteriology so that it relevantly includes an alien culture that was extinguished 100 million years ago?

Can we rethink it for a culture in which God has not yet become incarnate?

“The Fall,” Sin, and Biology

- From exactly what are we being said to have evolved?
- From our basic biology, which sprang from evolutionary strategies for survival in an ecosystem with limited resources on a finite planet?
- Or from our evolved sinful human nature?
- Was there a historical fall from Eden as described in Genesis 3:6?
- How might we reinterpret the story of the Fall in light of evolutionary biology?



Christ in the Universe

But in the eternities,
Doubtless we shall compare together, hear
A million alien Gospels, in what guise
He trod the Pleiades, the Lyre, the Bear.

O, be prepared, my soul!
To read the inconceivable, to scan
The myriad forms of God those stars unroll
When, in our turn, we show to them a Man.



Alice Meynell
English Catholic
Poet
1847-1922

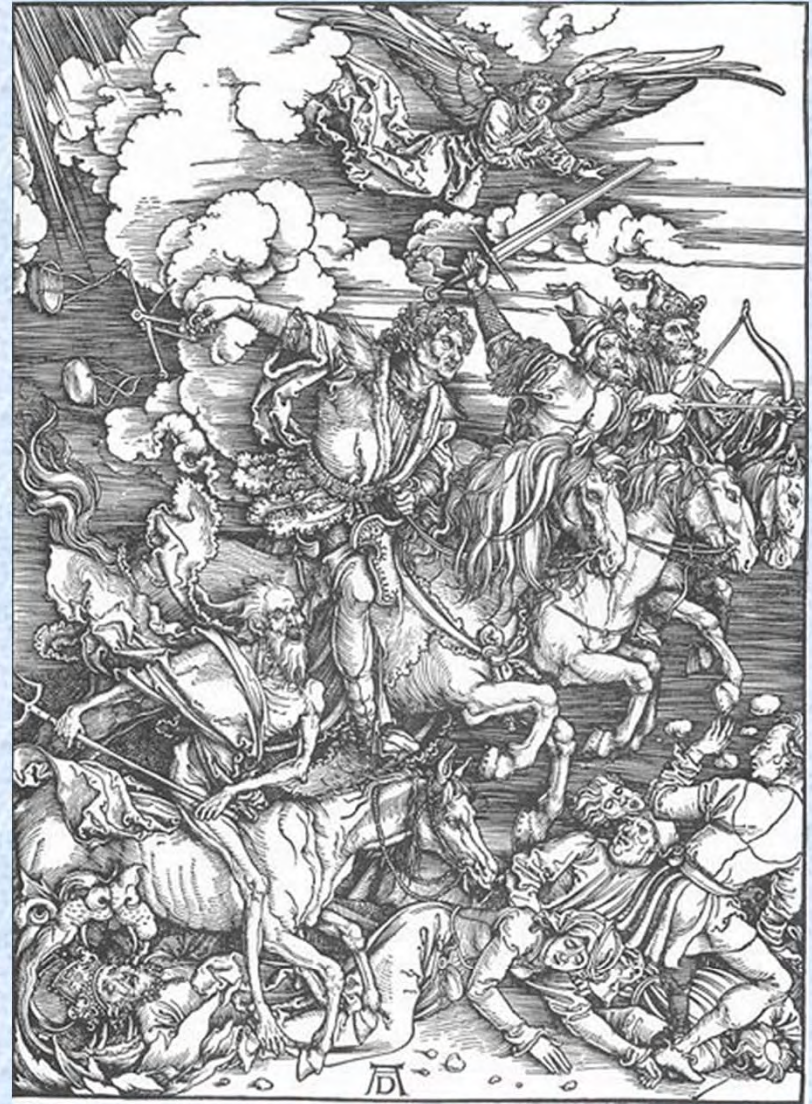


Eschatology and the far future
of the universe:

Homo sapiens, Extraterrestrial
Life, and ineffable hope

Theologies have spoken variously about the end of the world:

- Armageddon and physical destruction of the Earth
- Destruction of Universe
- The Last Judgment
- Hell, Purgatory, Heaven
- The “New Jerusalem”
- The “Heavenly banquet”
- The “Peaceable Kingdom”
- The “Beatific Vision”



Albrecht Dürer, “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” (Germany, 1498)

Conclusions I

We may or may not be alone as rational, moral, spiritually responsive beings in the universe.

The universe may have given rise to other moral, spiritually responsive beings, in greater or lesser profusion.

We may one day receive evidence of a rational civilization, or we may not.

Conclusions II

The answer would be significant either way: (1) we are alone and the universe revolves around us, or (2) we share the bounty of God's creation with others.

(A) Is reflective of the experience of revelation expressed in the idiom of a nomadic people 3,500 years ago.

(B) Is reflective of the interpretation of revelation through our cosmological understanding of a ancient, dynamic, and evolving universe of 3×10^{22} stars.

Conclusions III

There is no reason to believe E.T would be incapable of moral life or of spiritual response.

An intelligent extraterrestrial life form could indeed become a Christian. Whether water or ammonia would be the symbol for baptism is an open question.

E.T. might be post-religious (in the sense that many members of AAR are), or might be religious in a sense that we cannot yet fathom, toward which *Homo sapiens* ourselves are trending.

- Has the “science and religion” dialogue so compromised traditional doctrine that Christian belief is dying the death of a thousand qualifications?
- As a Christian who has committed his life to exploring and articulating theology, I certainly hope that the move to post-religion is not an inevitable evolutionary stage.
- Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery* – a method for dealing with the mysteries of existence that is rigorous but not reductive.
- I am left apophatic.

An intelligent extraterrestrial life form could become a Christian, but
(a) He/She/It might not see the point in doing so, and
(b) Might not feel the need to become Christian to obtain salvation.
And it might not even matter.



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