

## *Houston, Do We Have a Problem?*

### Extraterrestrial Intelligent Life and Christian Belief

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ABSTRACT: Would the existence of extraterrestrial intelligent life (ETI) conflict in any way with Christian belief? We identify six areas of potential conflict. If there be no conflict in any of these areas—and we argue ultimately there is not—we are confident in declaring that there is no conflict, period. This conclusion underwrites the integrity of theological explorations into the existence of ETI, which has become a topic of increasing interest among theologians in recent years.

Our galaxy is extremely vast. It takes approximately 100,000 years for light to cross from one side to the other. Yet there are billions of other galaxies besides our own. That's right—*billions*. And so far, some 4,000 exoplanets (planets that orbit a star outside of our own solar system) have been discovered in them, and there are likely far more. As Jennifer Wiseman points out, since on average every star has a planet, we should expect billions of more planets to exist—again, *billions*.<sup>1</sup> As the number of potentially habitable exoplanets discovered increases, so too does the likelihood that one or more plays host to extraterrestrial intelligent life (ETI). Aside from such likelihood estimates based on the size and scale of the universe,<sup>2</sup> there are a number of

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1. Jennifer Wiseman, "Exoplanets and the Search for Life Beyond Earth," in *Astrotheology: Science and Theology Meet Extraterrestrial Life*, ed. Ted Peters, et al. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018), chap. 7.

2. I (McIntosh) don't find the "sheer numbers" argument very compelling for several reasons. First, the numbers themselves can be questioned. Physics and astronomy professor Larry Molnar tells me that the definition of "habitable planet" is often broadened in ways that inflate their number. More sober estimates imply Earth is rare, but probably not unique. Second, as John Barrow and Frank Tipler note, astrophysicists and astronomers are much more optimistic about the existence of ETI than are evolutionary biologists. After surveying the various physiological prerequisites for the evolution of intelligent species like ourselves, they report "for the above reasons, and many others which we omit for reasons of space, there has developed a general consensus among evolutionists that the evolution of intelligent life, comparable in information-processing ability to that of *Homo sapiens*, is so improbable that it is unlikely to have occurred on any other planet in the entire visible universe" (John D. Barrow and Frank F. Tipler, *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 133). Barrow and Tipler themselves go on to argue in similar fashion against the existence of ETI based on the improbability of the requisite evolutionary steps taking place elsewhere before an extinction event occurs (561–70), in addition to other considerations based on the thought that if ETI did exist,

arguments, old and new, for the conclusion that theism actually *increases* the likelihood of there being ETI.<sup>3</sup> We mention such arguments *en passant*, but will not assess them here. Rather, we will assume for the sake of argument that ETI exist.

Would the existence of ETI conflict in any way with Christian belief? Before we attempt an answer to this question, we must first say a bit about what we mean by “Christian belief,” and, for that matter, “conflict.” By the former we mean the broad intersection of beliefs that, traditionally, Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant believers alike would be happy to raise their glass to: that there is one God who is three persons, perfect in knowledge, power, and goodness, responsible for creating and sustaining the universe, and whose character is specially revealed in the Bible, in particular, the New Testament, the central message of which is that while we are estranged from God by sin, God, in His grace and mercy, extended to us an offer of forgiveness and reconciliation through the sacrificial death and triumphant resurrection of Jesus Christ, the incarnate second person of the Trinity, and all those who accept that offer will enter eternal communion with God, readied in this life by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity.

Like Christian belief, we mean something broad and ecumenical by “conflict.” There are varieties of conflict: logical inconsistency, incompatibility with known truths or one’s beliefs, probabilistic disconfirmation, unnatural or clunky fit with a dataset, and more. Indeed, as we will argue, there may well be a kind of conflict between Christian belief and the existence of ETI, what we call narrative tension. We shall come to that in due course. The present point is that we are interested in *any* sort of conflict between Christian belief, as outlined above, and the existence of ETI. We therefore work through, in systematic fashion, six areas of potential conflict that cover the high points of Christian belief: incompatibility with theism, the Christian scriptures, central Christian doctrines, and Christian tradition; conflict to the extent that ETI exacerbates the problem of evil, and conflict with the Christian narrative. Beyond these, we know of no other area of potential conflict. If there be no conflict in any of these areas—and we argue ultimately there is not—we are confident in declaring that there is no conflict, period, or at least that the onus is on those who allege conflict to demonstrate as much. This conclusion, we hope, will help Christians intellectually prepare for the possibility of there being ETI, and underwrites the integrity of theological explorations into it.

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they probably would have made their existence known by now (576ff.). Thus, in the end, I think the best reasons for thinking there are ETI are, ironically, theological.

3. Most of these arguments are based on certain alleged axiological implications of theism. For a historical sampling of such arguments, see David A. Weintraub, *Religions and Extraterrestrial Life: How Will We Deal with It?* (New York: Springer, 2014), chap. 2. For a contemporary defense, see the relevant essays in Klaas Kraay, *God and the Multiverse: Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2015), especially Robin Collins’s essay, “Extraterrestrial Intelligence and Incarnation,” 211–26.

## 1. Conflict with Theism

Quite clearly, if the existence of ETI implied that God does not exist, ETI would pose a problem for Christian belief. So is there any reason to think the existence of ETI is incompatible with theism generally, the view that there is a God—a necessarily existent personal being who is perfect in knowledge, power, and goodness? If so, we aren't aware of any. That is, we aren't aware of any valid, nonenthymematic arguments that have as a premise

(1) ETI exists.

and conclude

(C) God does not exist.

On the contrary, we are aware of dozens of valid, nonenthymematic arguments that take as premises perfectly general metaphysical propositions which conclude with the complement of (C), propositions which in no way seem to conflict with (1).

But perhaps we are wrong. Perhaps there are propositions entailed by (1) that should make us suspicious of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, or renders it dubious that

$$(\forall x)[\diamond \square (\exists x) \supset \square (\exists x)].$$

Logical space is a big place—much bigger than physical space, even. Yet it seems to us that *ex nihilo nihil fit* would be just as true on Kepler-186f as it is here on Earth. Should we encounter a naïvely secular lot of ETIs on Kepler-186f, we see nothing that would bar us from appealing to these and other principles to help enlighten them. Alternatively, it is quite conceivable that there be some impressively cerebral ETIs that pity us for the primitive state of our natural theology, having developed much flashier proofs of God's existence than we have. Such proofs would be exciting, if only comprehensible by the Alexander Prusses among us.

The existence of ETI might force us to revise some arguments for theism, however. We have in mind a particular version of the design argument popularized by the book, and accompanying film, *The Privileged Planet*.<sup>4</sup> According to this argument, the Earth is an exceedingly rare planet—a so-called Goldilocks planet—satisfying numerous highly unlikely conditions that make it uniquely suited for a species like ourselves. For example, a Goldilocks planet can't be too far away from a star, nor can it be too close. Similarly, the planet must have ideal quantities of oxygen and water, and not be too big or too small. If our planet really is the only Goldilocks planet, it would be special indeed—so special, in fact, as to be highly suggestive of design. But if there is a lot of ETI out there, then presumably there are also a lot of Goldilocks planets making the odds of their existence not so impressive. Thus, whatever

4. Guillermo Gonzalez and Jay W. Richards, *The Privileged Planet: How Our Place in the Cosmos Is Designed for Discovery* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2020).

other virtues the Privileged Planet argument may have,<sup>5</sup> perhaps large numbers of Goldilocks planets would weaken a design inference based just on the sheer improbability of their existence.<sup>6</sup>

So be it. Not every theistic argument has to be a good one. That said, it should be pointed out that the existence of a plenitude of Goldilocks planets in no way discredits fine-tuning arguments (FTAs) for the existence of God. There is little room for adjustments with respect to the conditions that need to be in place for the universe as a whole to be suitable for intelligent life. For example, if the mass of the fundamental particles that make up our universe were different, the universe wouldn't be able to form complex molecules on which intelligent life depends.<sup>7</sup> Even if we kept the mass of these particles the same, but slightly adjusted the laws that govern them, intelligent life in the universe would still be physically impossible.<sup>8</sup> Again, we can imagine those impressively cerebral ETIs pointing to these same features of the universe in FTAs of their own, perhaps alongside other, even more exquisite instances of fine-tuning discovered by their technologically advanced instruments.

We conclude that the existence of ETI poses no special problem for theism generally, although we may have to revise or abandon a theistic argument or two. Some, however, think that the discovery of ETI would undermine the world's religions: Jill Tarter, former director of the Center for SETI, for instance, thinks that were ETI to make their existence known to us, we would abandon our religious beliefs and adopt whatever they believe, since they

5. Being hospitable to life is just one (albeit crucial) feature suggestive of design. There might other features suggestive of design as well, such as aesthetic features.

6. We say "perhaps" because we think the success of the Privileged Planet argument has less to do with the relative scarcity of Goldilocks planets as it does the relevant background information for weighing the design hypothesis against its competitors. To illustrate, suppose you've just moved to a windy area where lots of things frequently get blown onto people's doorsteps—leaves, branches, dandelions, trash, etc. One day you find a rose on your doorstep. You entertain three possible hypotheses to explain its being there, not knowing how common roses are in the area: the rose was placed there by an admirer (call this *A*), roses are common and it blew there by chance (*C&C*), and roses are uncommon and it blew there by chance (*U&C*). These are roughly analogous to the three hypotheses proffered to explain life on Earth: divine design (*D*), naturalism and it wasn't improbable (*N&P*), and naturalism and it was exceedingly improbable (*N&I*). In the rose example, we can vary two things: the number of roses on your doorstep and the number of roses on other doorsteps. If we add more roses to *your* doorstep, that confirms *A* over *C&C* and *U&C*—a dozen roses isn't much less likely on *A*, but a lot less likely on *C&C* or *U&C*. On the other hand, if you discover that there are roses on *other* doorsteps, then that confirms *C&C* over *A* and *U&C*. It suggests there are lots of roses being blown about by the wind, making the one on your doorstep not so surprising. In the same way, there being lots of Goldilocks planets with ETI would confirm both *D* and *N&P* over *N&I*. Whether it confirms *D simpliciter* will depend on the initial probabilities of these alternatives, and how probable they make ETI. We thank a referee for encouraging us to think more about this, and Nevin Climenhaga for discussion on how the Privileged Planet argument is best understood probabilistically.

7. Geraint F. Lewis and Luke A. Barnes, *A Fortunate Universe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 63.

8. *Ibid.*, 93.

would likely be the intellectually and technologically superior species.<sup>9</sup> Physicist Paul Davies thinks the existence of ETI “would have a profound impact on religion, shattering completely the traditional perspective of God’s special relationship with man.”<sup>10</sup> Insofar as Tarter and Davies are simply conjecturing on the psychological impact that discovering ETI would have on religious believers, we do not necessarily disagree. In our experience of talking with fellow believing friends and family, many find the prospect of there being ETI disturbing, if not a challenge to their faith. In fact, one 2005 survey found that religious devotion is correlated with skepticism about the existence of ETI: the more devoted, the more skeptical.<sup>11</sup> What interests us, however, is not whether discovering ETI would have a psychological impact inimical to religious belief generally, but whether such an impact would be philosophically and theologically *justified* for Christians. We argue not.

## 2. Conflict with Scripture

If Christianity’s sacred scriptures taught that there is no ETI, and there is in fact ETI, there would be conflict between Christian belief and the existence of ETI to the extent that one’s view of scriptural inspiration doesn’t allow for such a discrepancy.<sup>12</sup> But, it hardly needs to be said that scripture teaches no such thing, so entertaining this counterfactual is of little interest to us. With due caution reserved, and ignorance confessed, over the meaning of those mysterious passages referring to otherworldly beasts and creatures, we regard any interpretation of scripture that purports to be a direct pronouncement on the existence of ETI as hokey, frankly. We cringe at the thought of what desperate biblical eisegesis would follow confirmation of ETI. The reality is that the Christian scriptures are chiefly about God’s relationship to man. At the risk of taking a popular analogy too far, it would be odd, to say the least, for a man to mention that there have been others in a love letter to his wife. That is a conversation for a different time and forum. Scripture’s silence on the matter should therefore be expected. If there is no direct conflict in letter between the Christian scriptures and the existence of ETI, might there be

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9. J. Tarter, “SETI and the Religions of the Universe,” in *Many Worlds: The New Universe, Extraterrestrial Life and the Theological Implications*, ed. Steven Dick (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation, 2000).

10. See quotations in Peters, *Astrotheology*, 184–5. If Tarter is right that we’d follow ETI in what they believe, imagine the boon for faith there would be if they turned out to be theists!

11. *Ibid.*, 185.

12. We acknowledge a plethora of viable models for understanding scriptural inspiration, but those which allow for errors in what is intended to be taught are not among them. That said, even if such an error were discovered, we’d be forced to revise our understanding of inspiration, or perhaps what texts are genuinely inspired, not whether God exists, or whether Jesus vouchsafed his promise of salvation by rising from the dead.

indirect conflict with the spirit of the Christian scriptures as embodied in Christian doctrines?

### 3. Conflict with Doctrine

The existence of ETI, and what implications that might have for Christian doctrine, has been a topic of increased interest among theologians.<sup>13</sup> Particular focus has been on the interconnected doctrines of the Fall, Incarnation, and atonement, those being the central events of the Gospel. Few, however, seem to think there would be any conflict between the existence of ETI and these doctrines, and much fewer still attempt to articulate what a conflict might look like. This is what we shall do, with some help from Thomas Paine.

According to Paine, those who don't see a conflict between these doctrines and the existence of ETI simply haven't thought enough about the matter. He writes:

To believe that God created a plurality of worlds, at least as numerous as what we call stars, renders the Christian system of faith at once little and ridiculous and scatters it in the mind like feathers in the air. The two beliefs cannot be held together in the same mind, and he who thinks that he believes both, has thought but little of either . . . believe that God created a plurality of worlds. From whence, then, could arise the solitary and strange conceit that the Almighty, who had millions of worlds equally dependent on his protection, should quit the care of all the rest, and come to die in our world, because, they say, one man and one woman had eaten an apple? And, on the other hand, are we to suppose that every world in the boundless creation had an Eve, an apple, a serpent, and a redeemer? In this case, the person who is irreverently called the Son of God, and sometimes God himself, would have nothing else to do than to travel from world to world, in an endless succession of deaths, with scarcely a momentary interval of life.<sup>14</sup>

The main argument here, once extracted from Paine's characteristically colorful prose, actually pinpoints several potential areas of conflict between the existence of ETI and the doctrines of the Fall, Incarnation, and atonement. As we see it, the argument takes the form of a *reductio* against the conjunc-

13. For recent treatments by theologians, see Thomas O'Meara, *Vast Universe: Extraterrestrials and Christian Revelation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2012); Olli-Pekka Vainio, *Cosmology in Theological Perspective: Understanding Our Place in the Universe* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2018); and the collection of essays in Peters, *Astrotheology*.

14. Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason: The Definitive Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Michigan Legal Publishing, 2014), 42, 49. According to Richard Gale, the twentieth-century astrophysicist E. A. Milne similarly wondered whether ETI would render Christ and his crucifixion "a traveling tent show, playing one-night stands from one world to the next." Gale must have been referring to Milne's 1950 Cadbury Lectures, published as *Modern Cosmology and the Christian Idea of God*. Sadly, this title is out of print; the cheapest copy on Amazon is currently going for a modest \$902.81 plus \$3.99 for shipping.

tion of Christianity (comprised of these doctrines) and the existence of ETI, proceeding via a dilemma where either horn encounters an absurdity. So understood, the argument can be outlined as follows:

- (1) If Christianity is true and there is ETI, then either only humanity falls, or all intelligent life falls.
- (2) But it's absurd to think that either only humanity falls, or that all intelligent life falls.
- (3) Therefore, it's false that Christianity is true and there is ETI.

The first horn is absurd because, Paine tells us, it would require God to abandon all other intelligent life in the universe to come rescue humanity via the Incarnation and the atonement. The second horn runs into an absurdity at the other extreme, requiring God to undertake incarnation and atonement events everywhere there is intelligent life, which he thinks would be "at least as numerous as what we call stars." What are we to make of this argument?

It should first be pointed out that the conclusion only follows on the assumption that the relevant notion of absurdity means either "impossible," "false," or "implied to be false by Christian doctrine." Otherwise, all Paine can conclude from (1) and (2) is that the antecedent of (1) entails an absurdity that is entirely consistent with what Christianity supposes is true. Were that Paine's conclusion, the Christian can invite comparison with similar epistemic situations that we nonetheless accept. He might, for instance, reflect on the absurdity of being younger than one's own daughter, a possible consequence of general relativity dramatized to great effect in Christopher Nolan's film *Interstellar*.

Second, Paine seems to assume that the Incarnation is incompatible with omnipresence. The absurdity of the first horn, where only humanity falls, recall, would force God to "quit the care" of the rest of His creatures to rescue humanity via incarnation and atonement events. Paine therefore seems to think that prior to becoming incarnate on Earth, God could be omnipresent at all worlds containing intelligent life, providing the providential care they need. But this changes after the Incarnation. Why? Perhaps the idea is that by taking on a body, God thereby takes on the spatiotemporal limitations of having a body, such as not being able to occupy more than one spatiotemporal location at once. That this is Paine's idea is supported by his reasoning against the second horn, where he imagines Jesus absurdly traveling from one fallen world to the next.

In response, we simply fail to see the problem here. We agree with Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q.8, a.3) and others that omnipresence can be understood in terms of God's omniscience and omnipotence, where *S* is omnipresent, let's say, just in case *S* is immediately aware of and can causally act

at any point in space.<sup>15</sup> So understood, having perfect knowledge of and the ability to control a particular human body would be a rather small subset of God's total knowledge and power. We thus see no reason at all to think that by virtue of becoming incarnate in one world, God's knowledge and power would no longer extend to other worlds, including those containing intelligent life. Perhaps Paine has more general philosophical objections to the Incarnation, such as how it's possible to be truly divine (omniscient, omnipotent) and truly human (ignorant, impotent). We welcome and are prepared for those objections, but the existence of ETI becomes a vestigial part of the argument in that case.

Beyond these points, the rest of what we will say about Paine's argument generalizes to other arguments from these Christian doctrines for a conclusion like (3). In particular, Paine makes three key assumptions, one or more of which we think will be made in *any* argument for the conclusion that the existence of ETI is incompatible with the Christian doctrines of the Fall, Incarnation, and atonement.<sup>16</sup> The assumptions are:

- A1. All intelligent life would be fallen and need to be saved.
- A2. All fallen intelligent life is saved only via incarnation.
- A3. There cannot be multiple incarnations.

We will now consider whether these three assumptions are ones Christians need accept, or whether they can be reasonably denied. If the latter, arguments for a conclusion like (3) that appeal to them will be unsuccessful. Beginning with the first, then:

- A1. All intelligent life would fall and need to be saved.

We think most Christians would be inclined to accept A1. The Fall, as it is commonly thought of, is a single event—whether initiated by humans or by insubordinate angels some time immemorial—whose effect rippled throughout the entire cosmos. A plain reading of scripture certainly suggests as much, such as when the apostle Paul says “the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time” (Rom. 8:20–22).

But we must be careful here. Even if it is true that the Fall is a unique, singular event of cosmic consequence, that does not entail that all ETI has fallen, that is, rebelled against God and need to be saved. Why cannot there

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15. For explication and defense of this understanding of omnipresence, see Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), chap. 7.

16. Paine assumes more than just the three key assumptions we highlight, such as that if ETI exist, they exist in great number, but we don't think the other assumptions are relevant to other, stronger arguments for (3).



be unfallen alien creatures living in a fallen creation? Such is the scenario imagined by C. S. Lewis in his *The Cosmic Trilogy*. In the first volume, *Out of the Silent Planet*, there exist several intelligent alien races on Mars, all living in harmony, showing no indication of being fallen. They recite poetry, learn languages, demonstrate altruism, and are unconditionally devoted to Maleldil—their name for God. In the second volume, *Perelandra*, Lewis imagines an unfallen Adam and Eve-like pair on Venus in direct communion with Maleldil. In both cases, it is *humans* who disrupt these Edenic worlds, having come from the only planet where Maleldil was rejected as its ruler. So even if we think of the Fall as a singular event of cosmic scope—which we grant for the sake of argument—that need not imply, as A1 has it, that all ETI is alienated from God as we are, requiring salvation.

A1 would follow, however, from a suitably tweaked version of the Reformed doctrine of total depravity. Suppose instead we take our inspiration from an appropriated version of Alvin Plantinga's notion of transworld depravity.<sup>17</sup> In his celebrated Free Will Defense, Plantinga entertains the possibility that there be some creatures who freely perform at least one morally reprehensible action in any possible world in which they exist. Taking this sad state of affairs to heart, a Plantingian defender of A1 might entertain the possibility of *transplanet* depravity, where there is at least one bad apple in every alien bunch, as it were, so that eventually a fall would occur on every planet where ETI exists.

We can imagine both possibilities. In the first, where ETI is unfallen but living in a fallen world, the assumption that ETI need redemption is false, cutting short any argument for (3) which depends on it. The Incarnation and atonement become terrestrial events that need have no implications for ETI. In the second possibility, where transplanet depravity is true, A1 is true. If A1 is true, a natural next question is how God redeems ETI, and whether those methods are incompatible with received Christian doctrine. So we proceed to A2 and A3 to see if an argument for (3) can be made with them.

#### A2. All fallen intelligent life is saved only via incarnation.

It is true that there are Christian theologians who have argued that the Incarnation was necessary. Most famously, Anselm in his *Cur Deus Homo* argued that only a human can atone for human sin. But only God can give a satisfactory payment. Therefore, it was necessary that there be a "God-Man," that is, that God take on human nature to redeem humanity. That which is not assumed is not saved, the idea goes. If there is other ETI that is fallen, to save them God will need to assume their nature in like fashion. We will return to this thought below.

But not all Christian theologians agree with Anselm. Augustine, Aquinas, and Bonaventure all thought that while the Incarnation was a particu-

17. See Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 184ff.

larly fitting means of salvation for mankind, it was not necessary.<sup>18</sup> In His omnipotent power, God “could have restored human nature in many other ways,” says Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae*, III, q.1, a.2). Thus, while we do think that A2 is on firm theological ground, it is by no means undeniable for Christians. Conflict, therefore, is not inescapable. But supposing we accept A1 and A2, going one step further and accepting A3 will, we think, cause conflict. So let us turn to A3.

### A3. There cannot be multiple incarnations.

The one horn of the dilemma in Paine’s argument ran into the supposed absurdity of God abandoning ETI by becoming incarnate just on Earth. But if God is not to abandon ETI, we are gouged by the other horn, where the absurdity is of God becoming incarnate on every planet with ETI. Both horns therefore assume there cannot be multiple incarnations, either simultaneously on more than one planet or successively from one planet to the next. This seems to be the central problem, really, and so we’d expect to find A3 in most arguments for a conflict between Christian doctrine and the existence of ETI. But is this a safe assumption? We think not. In fact, it is the most dubious of the three key assumptions. Much has been written about this elsewhere, so we confine ourselves to just a few points in response.

First, there is a legitimate and strong argument from authority against A3. Aquinas saw no difficulty with there being multiple incarnations (*Summa Theologiae*, III, q.4, a.1). The same is true of contemporary philosophers who have articulated the most philosophically sophisticated models of the orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation. In his landmark book *The Logic of God Incarnate*, Thomas Morris argues that “the picture of the Incarnation I have been developing will perfectly well allow the possibility of multiple divine incarnations.”<sup>19</sup> In *God Incarnate: Explorations in Christology*, Oliver Crisp argues similarly that “there is no metaphysical obstacle to God becoming incarnate on more than one occasion.”<sup>20</sup> And in his recent *In Defense of Extended Conciliar Christology*, Timothy Pawl argues the point most extensively. After defending “an extremely strong view of the possibility of multiple incarnations,” that is, Aquinas’s view that God could assume multiple concrete rational natures simultaneously, Pawl goes on to argue that all extant

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18. For an application of this point to our current topic by a theologian, see Andrew Davison, “Christian Systematic Theology and Life Elsewhere in the Universe: A Study in Suitability,” *Theology and Science* 16 (2018): 447–67. On necessitarian and nonnecessitarian theories of the atonement, see W. L. Craig, *Atonement and the Death of Christ: An Exegetical, Historical, and Philosophical Exploration* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020), 121ff.

19. Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), 181.

20. See Oliver Crisp, *God Incarnate: Explorations in Christology* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 155. Although for other reasons, Crisp thinks Christ’s terrestrial incarnation is singular and unique (see 170ff.). More on this below.

objections to the coherence or consistency of that view fail.<sup>21</sup> In the present context, we can scarcely add to what these philosophers have already labored to show.

Beyond these appeals to authority, we think it is quite easy to see how there can be multiple incarnations. What we have in Jesus of Nazareth is the divine mind of the second person of the Trinity eclipsed by the assumption of humanity, allowing expression only of beliefs and experiences appropriate thereto. How Christ could consequently be of two minds, one human and one divine, is sometimes illustrated by appeal to phenomena described in depth psychology and cases of multiple personality disorder (MPD).<sup>22</sup> Some clinicians maintain that a person with MPD can have multiple highly functional “alters”—robustly distinct alternate personalities which may or may not overlap. Alters have been said to have their own thoughts, sense of humor, beliefs, feelings, skills, memories, mannerisms, fears, voice quality, visual acuity, and even their own tolerance to medication and allergic responses.<sup>23</sup> We find MPD just as serviceable, if not more, in illuminating how Christ could be of *more* than two minds, one divine and indefinitely many other nondivine, in the case of multiple incarnations. Of course, we hasten to highlight the obvious point of disanalogy, namely, that such a “condition” would not be for the omniscient creator a disorder, but wholly consistent with cognitive perfection. We thus agree with Robin Collins that “God’s overall consciousness would not in any way be diminished even if God took on an infinite number of finite mental systems, from an infinite number of fallen races; in fact, if anything, it would enhance God’s consciousness.”<sup>24</sup>

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21. Timothy Pawl, *In Defense of Extended Conciliar Christology: A Philosophical Essay* (New York: Oxford University Press), 54. Morris, Crisp, and Pawl all interact with Brian Hebblethwaite’s arguments to the contrary, among others’. Pawl also cites Marilyn McCord Adams, Richard Cross, Thomas Flint, Alfred Freddoso, and Gerald O’Collins, et al., as defending the possibility of multiple incarnations. That so many philosophers and theologians have maintained there is no problem with multiple incarnations makes Hebblethwaite’s and others’ objections to the contrary seem rather idiosyncratic. For Hebblethwaite’s argument, see “The Impossibility of Multiple Incarnations,” *Theology* 104 (2001): 323–34.

22. Or DID (Dissociative Identity Disorder), as it is now called. We stick with “MPD,” as the condition is more commonly known. We should also note that we need not assume MPD is real, given that there is debate in the psychiatric community over its actual reality. We appeal to it, as others have, as a conceptually coherent illustration of how one person could be of more than one mind.

23. See discussion and references in Stephen E. Braude, *First Person Plural: Multiple Personality and the Philosophy of Mind* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995), chap. 2.

24. Collins, “Extraterrestrial Intelligence and the Incarnation,” 218–19. Collins argues it is very likely that there is ETI in great number, since that would increase the value of reality in various respects. Collins’s article is also noteworthy for the fact that he considers how even a kenotic view of the Incarnation is compatible with multiple incarnations (220–4). We do not consider that view here because it is not the traditional Christian view, but if Collins is right, that means there is no extant model of the Incarnation incompatible with there being multiple incarnations, which is an impressive conclusion.

Might it also enhance the world? Alvin Plantinga has argued that possible worlds featuring the events of the Fall, Incarnation, and atonement are better than worlds that don't. The Gospel story, that is, the story of God becoming incarnate, dying a brutal death, and resurrecting triumphantly for the eternal salvation of mankind "is not merely the greatest story ever told; it is the greatest story that *could* be told."<sup>25</sup> Therefore all the best possible worlds, Plantinga thinks, will contain Gospel events. If the actual world contains Gospel events multiple times over on other planets, it would be a very good world, indeed. If this is the case, then there would be a *a priori* reason to think God has become or is at least in the process of becoming multiply incarnate. The evidence then for thinking that A3 is false is the existence of the actual world. If there is evidence to suggest that the actual world possesses or will possess multiple Gospel events, then surely it is possible for God to have multiple incarnations.

Let's say, however, that one isn't inclined to advance Plantinga's line of reasoning in this way, thinking instead that worlds containing just one suite of Gospel events are superior to, or at least equally as good as, worlds containing a multitude of them. On this view, one could hold the Gospel events to be universally effectual, sufficient to redeem all fallen rational species that exist. This is, in fact, Oliver Crisp and Jonathan Rutledge's position. They are convinced that the Christian scriptures teach that the work of Jesus of Nazareth on Earth has cosmic scope, and so would be sufficient to also atone for any fallen ETI. How is that possible if, as we thought earlier, that which is not assumed is not saved? Would not Christ need to assume each alien nature to save each alien species? Crisp and Rutledge think not. Following Aristotle, they think what it means to be human is to be a rational animal. ETI, then, would be no less human than us just in virtue of being rational animals, even if there be stark differences in physical features.<sup>26</sup> So even if it's true that for God to save a species He must assume the nature of that species, if all rational animals are ipso facto human, God need only become incarnate once to redeem us and any ETI.<sup>27</sup> Thus even if we grant A3 along with A1 and A2, giving away the whole store, (3) would still not follow.

25. Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 59. For a fuller treatment of this argument, see also Alvin Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa,'" in *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil*, ed. Peter van Inwagen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 1–25.

26. See Crisp, *God Incarnate*, and Jonathan Curtis Rutledge, "Tempering the Cosmic Scope Problem in Christian Soteriology: Hylemorphic Animalism and Gregory of Nazianzus," *Religious Studies* (2021): 266–86. Crisp and Rutledge disagree about how to understand the philosophical anthropology; Crisp prefers a Cartesian view whereas Rutledge prefers what he calls "hylemorphic animalism." Crisp and Rutledge's view also has the virtue of showing how the existence of ETI can be compatible with the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, supposing what it means to bear the image of God is to be a rational, free, moral creature.

27. In "Incarnation and the Multiverse" in *God and the Multiverse: Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2017), Timothy O'Connor and Philip Woodward object to such a view on the grounds that it "suggests that we humans won an incarnational

We have argued there is no conflict between the existence of ETI and theism generally, the Christian scriptures, and now the central Christian doctrines of the Fall, Incarnation, and atonement.<sup>28</sup> But has the church pronounced on the matter, and should Christians be troubled by a potential conflict between the existence of ETI and Christian tradition?

#### 4. Conflict with Tradition

The short answer is, simply, no. Pre-rockets, pre-Hubble, indeed, pre-Copernicus there was little reason to wonder whether we are alone in the universe, although some did. One of the earliest known examples is the fifteenth-century Catholic cardinal Nicholas of Cusa, who, in his treatise *Docta Ignorantia*, entertains with no theological difficulty the idea that in every “stellar region” among the uncountably many stars there are “inhabitants, different in nature by rank and all owing their origin to God.”<sup>29</sup> Others, in the spirit of the medieval dictum *bonum est diffusivum sui*, argued that God’s goodness implies that He create an infinite number of worlds with creatures in them.<sup>30</sup>

We therefore find in the Christian tradition a remarkable openness, and in some cases outright enthusiasm, about the possibility that there be ETI.<sup>31</sup>

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lottery—that we alone, for no apparent reason—were chosen as the recipients of God’s incarnational act” (231). Furthermore, they argue, the view raises the thorny question of how ETI would become aware, and so avail themselves of, Christ’s redeeming work. These objections, however, do not seem insuperable. First, if someone must win the incarnational lottery, why not us? The objection implies that the inhabitants of any world in which God becomes incarnate would be unjustified in thinking they won the incarnational lottery, which is absurd. Lottery winners are justified in believing they won when they hold the winning ticket in their hand! Second, God might have many reasons for selecting us. Perhaps we were the first to fall, or for other reasons “the fullness of time had come” for us before others. As for the second objection, see the various ways Christ’s work might apply to ETI sketched by Crisp in *God Incarnate*.

28. Might there be conflict with other Christian doctrines? We don’t see any, but we also don’t know just how many Christian doctrines there are, exactly. Limiting consideration to only those which are *central* to Christian belief as outlined in the introduction, we think, is therefore most judicious. Of those, we haven’t considered how ETI would fit into the Christian eschaton, the subject of Mark Twain’s satire *Extract from Captain Stormfield’s Visit to Heaven* (we thank Paul Wells for this reference). But again, we don’t see any potential conflict here. On the contrary, we find it fun to think about. Would heaven resemble a Star Wars– or Star Trek–like universe full of all different manner of intelligent species, or would each species occupy their own realm, rather like how Lewis imagines our relationship to Narnia? Would ETI receive their own type of resurrected bodies? If so, would Christ be incarnate in each body type simultaneously?

29. See the full quotation in Weintraub, *Religions and Extraterrestrial Life*, 16. We commend Weintraub for his thorough documentation of the various theological perspectives on this throughout history. See also chaps. 6 and 7 in O’Meara’s *Vast Universe*.

30. See Weintraub, *Religions and Extraterrestrial Life*, chap. 2. See also the references in footnote 3.

31. As one reviewer has brought to our attention, it is sometimes claimed that Giordano Bruno was condemned and executed for his belief in many inhabited worlds. This is, however, just another example of hackneyed historical revisionism characteristic of popular-level tracts

The present is no exception. Billy Graham, for instance, is on record as saying, "I firmly believe there are intelligent beings like us far away in space who worship God. But we would have nothing to fear from these people. Like us, they are God's creation." And when asked about what he'd do if an expedition of Martians visited Earth, Pope Francis said he'd baptize them if they were willing. "Who are we to close doors?" he asked in return. We speculate that this stance would be surprising only to those who have an unduly and often dogmatically narrow conception of Christianity, especially the relationship between faith and science. Nothing in the Christian tradition enjoins us to believe ETI doesn't exist.

## 5. ETI and the Problem of Evil

If there are extraterrestrial intelligent species, then presumably they would also be like us in those respects which mean they can suffer: they have bodies, they are self-conscious, and can experience physical and emotional pain. So if ETI exists in great number, then presumably there is a lot more suffering in our universe than we have imagined. Insofar as suffering conflicts with Christian belief, ETI would therefore exacerbate that conflict. We consider two ways this conflict might be advanced in argument.

### 5.1. *ETI and Evidential Arguments from Evil*

Sam Ruhmkorff has recently argued that the existence of ETI strengthens evidential arguments from evil against theism, since the existence of ETI implies a greater distribution of good and evil in the universe, including, importantly, evils more severe than we have experienced on Earth. He outlines the argument with admirable mathematical precision, but the main idea is simply grasped. If a small tribe believed they were the only people on the

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on the alleged conflict between science and religion. Jole Shackelford, "Myth 7. That Giordano Bruno Was the First Martyr of Modern Science," in *Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths about Science and Religion*, ed. Ronald L. Numbers (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 59–67, is a good source here, but even he seems to exaggerate the extent to which Bruno's belief in ETI may have factored into his condemnation, seeing as others (such as Nicholas of Cusa) before him believed the same, yet nary a one got so much as singled. Better is John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991) whose findings are much closer to the Catholic Church's own account, which states that "Bruno was not condemned for his defense of the Copernican system of astronomy, nor his doctrine of the plurality of inhabited worlds, but for his theological errors, among which were the following: that Christ was not God but merely an unusually skilled magician, that the Holy Ghost is the soul of the world, that the Devil will be saved, etc." See William Turner "Giordano Bruno," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia: An International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church*, vol. 3, ed. Charles Herbermann (New York: Robert Appleton Co., 1908), 17.

planet, they should think the tallest person in their tribe is the tallest person on the planet. But if they learn that there are many other tribes on the planet, they should infer instead that there's probably someone taller elsewhere. By the same reasoning, if there is a lot of ETI, it is "very likely that there are evils in the universe significantly worse than the worst evils on Earth, as well as goods significantly better than the best goods on Earth."<sup>32</sup> Ruhmkorff therefore concludes that "the more intelligent creation there is, the less likely a perfect God."<sup>33</sup>

Much of what we have already said is relevant by way of response. But before going any further, we cannot but remark on how astonishingly modest Ruhmkorff's thesis is, contrary to what his conclusion suggests. As he makes clear, his thesis is conditional: the existence of ETI strengthens certain arguments from evil, "if these arguments are cogent in the first place."<sup>34</sup> That is, if you already think the balance of good and evil renders God's existence unlikely, then you should think so all the more if ETI exists. Suffice it to say, we do not accept the antecedent of this conditional (nor, we suspect, would most theists), making Ruhmkorff's argument irrelevant to us.

Ruhmkorff himself acknowledges this last point, as theists who think there is evidence for the existence of a good God thereby have "evidence for a constraint on how bad things could get in the universe."<sup>35</sup> Christian theists can appeal to more than God's goodness in the abstract, however. As we have argued, if ETI exists, it's possible that ETI isn't fallen like we are and so would not experience evil and suffering as a consequence thereof. Alternatively, we argued, the value of a world in which the events of the Gospel are

32. Samuel Ruhmkorff, "The Copernican Principle, Intelligent Extraterrestrials, and Arguments from Evil," *Religious Studies* 55 (2019): 300.

33. *Ibid.*, 313.

34. *Ibid.*, 300.

35. *Ibid.*, 312. We relegate to a footnote an even deeper problem with Ruhmkorff's argument. Ruhmkorff appeals to the Copernican principle (i.e., "when we have no information about our position along a given dimension among a group of observers, we should consider ourselves to be randomly located among those observers in respect to that dimension"), roughly illustrated in the tallest tribesman example, to get results about the likely distribution of evil in the universe. He recognizes that positive evidence for theism would render the Copernican principle inapplicable, but we question the applicability of the Copernican principle even in the absence of such evidence. Since the correct theory of cosmic origins causally influences the subsequent distribution of evil throughout the universe, even if we have no positive evidence for theism, the likely distribution of evil still must be evaluated with respect to the intrinsic probability of different versions of theism, naturalism, and any other rival theories of cosmic origins. See Nevin Climenhaga, "The Structure of Epistemic Probabilities," *Philosophical Studies* 177 (2020): 3213–42, on the dependence relations that hold among different probabilities. In accordance with the theorem of total probability, the likely distribution of evil in the universe is a weighted average of the likely distribution of evil conditional on each of these theories, weighted by their intrinsic probabilities. If theism is more intrinsically probable, then evil is more likely distributed in the way theism predicts; while if naturalism is more intrinsically probable, then evil is more likely distributed in the way naturalism predicts. Hence, the Copernican principle just doesn't seem to have the utility Ruhmkorff thinks it does.

true, comprising as it does the greatest story that could be told, will be greater than even the greatest of untold evils. Whether this story as played out on Earth applies to other worlds where fallen ETI exists, or whether it plays out on those worlds in unique fashion, evidence for the truth of Christianity is evidence of a universe where good doesn't merely outweigh evil, but overwhelms it.

Be that as it may, we are puzzled about why Ruhmkorff thinks his target audience—those who already find evidential arguments from evil cogent—should buy his argument. Why, if you already think evidential arguments from evil are cogent, should you think they're strengthened if the amount and severity of evil increases in tandem with the amount and "severity" of goods? We just don't see why *evil* accrues more evidential weight than goodness if both are more widely distributed than we thought, so long as they're distributed equally. If the evidential balance remains constant, so should one's epistemic appraisal of it. But Ruhmkorff seems to assume his target audience should have an asymmetric reaction, where they are more horrified by the greater evils than they are appreciative of the greater goods. But why assume they should have an asymmetric reaction at all, and why assume it goes one way and not the other—that is, why not think they'd be more appreciative of the greater goods than they would be horrified of the greater evils, and so take ETI to *weaken* their estimation of arguments from evil?<sup>36</sup> For all its technical flashiness, Ruhmkorff's argument seems trivialized by this rather elementary observation. We conclude that Ruhmkorff's argument that the existence of ETI exacerbates the problem of evil is odd on its own terms and is irrelevant to our project.

## 5.2. ETI and the Soteriological Problem of Evil

If the universe contains more creatures who suffer like us in this life, presumably that means they can also suffer like us in the next—that is, the existence of ETI might mean that hell could be significantly more crowded than we currently think. In this way, it could be argued, the existence of ETI exacerbates what has been called the soteriological problem of evil, a special case of the problem of evil for Christian theism in particular. Since an essen-

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36. In fact, there are reasons to think that, if there is an asymmetric reaction, it would favor greater goods. First, although it is an empirical question for investigation, we suspect that for most people intense experience of great goods has a greater psychological impact than intense experience of great evils, as evidenced by the many people who have found in their experience of God the resources to endure the most horrendous of evils. Second, as Ruhmkorff notes, there's probably a limit to the amount of evil and suffering a person can psychologically endure. We note, however, that the reverse does not seem true: there is no limit to the amount of goodness and bliss a person can psychologically "endure." So it's plausible to us that there are some goods so great that once experienced, no amount of evil subsequently experienced could outweigh them. If so, the greater goods should have more evidential weight than the greater evils.



tial Christian doctrine is that humans are made right with God *only* by way of Christ's redemptive work (John 14:6), what about all the ETI that never hear (supposing they have ears) of Christ and His mission, and so cannot avail themselves of His offer of salvation? If we find the doctrine of hell already hard to swallow, adding countless other rational creatures to its population may well cause us to choke.

We don't find this especially troublesome, however, for four reasons. First, recall our discussion above with respect to the atonement of Christ. It could be such that Christ's sacrifice on Earth is sufficient to save all persons throughout the universe (or multiverse, if there is one). And, while faith in Christ is necessary for salvation, perhaps there are some people who have implicit faith in God's love and forgiveness sufficient for salvation even without being explicitly aware of Christ and His accomplishments. Following Karl Rahner, we can call them anonymous Christians.<sup>37</sup> This is what the Catholic Catechism teaches:

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation.<sup>38</sup>

Second, as we argued, it is also possible that God take on multiple incarnations, making a unique offer of salvation to each alien race, ensuring none who would accept it be lost by accident of cosmic location. Third, again as we've argued, it is also possible that ETI is not even fallen and in need of salvation, and therefore in no danger whatever of hell. Finally, apart from some other reason for thinking a disproportionate number of ETI would be destined to hell, all extant proffered solutions to the problem of hell apply equally to the broader context that includes ETI.<sup>39</sup> The existence of ETI, therefore, does not exacerbate the soteriological problem of evil for Christian theism.

## 6. Narrative Conflict

The existence of ETI, we think, would not conflict with theism or the Christian scriptures, central Christian doctrines, tradition, or exacerbate the problem of evil. But because so many Christians still find something intuitively disturbing about the prospect of there being ETI, we think more

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37. See Karl Rahner, *Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and Interviews, 1965–1982* (New York, Crossroad, 1986).

38. Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Dublin: Dominican, 1975), 222.

39. On which see Jerry Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), and R. Zachary Manis, *Sinners in the Presence of a Loving God: An Essay on the Problem of Hell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

needs to be said. Here we push forward to explore what we think could be the source any remaining sense of conflict.

As mentioned above, Christianity has been called the greatest story ever told. Setting aside the superlative, it is natural to think of Christianity as, in fact, a story of sorts. It is a grand narrative about life, the universe, and everything, one that purports to answer such questions as those elegantly outlined in the Second Vatican Council:

What is man? What is the meaning and purpose of human life? What is upright behavior, and what is sinful? Where does suffering originate, and what end does it serve? How can genuine happiness be found? What happens at death? What is judgment? What reward follows death? And finally, what is the ultimate mystery, beyond human explanation, which embraces our entire existence, from which we take our origin and towards which we tend?<sup>40</sup>

Christianity's answers to these questions are not disparate and inchoately patched together; rather, they form a coherent narrative, complete with a prologue, main characters, a setting, conflict, climax, and resolution. There is little doubt that Christianity is intuitively understood in this way—as a story—and Christians find the very meaning of their lives in being part of it.<sup>41</sup>

And so here, finally, we think we encounter a source of potential conflict between the existence of ETI and Christian belief. It is conceivable to us that ETI disrupts the Christian story, so to speak.<sup>42</sup> It would be quite jarring, for example, if UFOs started appearing in the sky at the denouement of the cinematic masterpiece *The Shawshank Redemption*, although there is nothing in the film up to that point suggesting aliens don't exist. We submit that it is a conflict of this sort—or better, *tension*—that is really the issue when it comes to Christian belief and the existence of ETI. The existence of ETI would come as a major shock to Christians, because heretofore ETI simply didn't enter into the story about life, the universe, and everything that they took to be complete. ETI would, at the very least, entail that that story was radically incomplete. More extreme, the existence of ETI might cause some

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40. Flannery, *Vatican Council II*, 738.

41. For a very nice statement and defense of this, see Joshua Seachris, "The Meaning of Life and Scripture's Redemptive-Historical Narrative: Illuminating Convergences," in *God and Meaning: New Essays*, ed. Joshua W. Seachris and Stewart Goetz (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 13–34; and Greg Ganssle, *Our Deepest Desires: How the Christian Story Fulfills Human Aspirations* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017).

42. Although above we used Paine's argument as a springboard for considering potential doctrinal conflict, he also seemed to have what we're calling narrative conflict in mind. The beginning of the paragraph we quoted above reads: "Though there is not a direct article of the Christian system, that this world that we inhabit is the whole of the habitable creation, yet it is so worked up therewith, from what is called the Mosaic account of the Creation, the story of Eve and the apple, and the counterpart of that story, the death of the Son of God, that to believe otherwise, that is, to believe that God created a plurality of worlds, at least as numerous as what we call stars . . ." (Paine, *Age of Reason*, 42).

to think we're living in an entirely different story. It would be akin to either a major unforeseen and incongruous plot twist or swapping one book for another one.

The extent to which ETI disrupts the Christian story—and, accordingly, the depth of tension between the two—will depend on whether and how ETI interacts with us humans. We take the following five scenarios to represent increasing levels of tension:

- S1. ETI is so remote or undetectable that any interaction is (nomologically) impossible.
- S2. ETI is so remote as to be physically inaccessible, but communication is possible.
- S3. Physical interaction with ETI is possible; ETI is peaceable.
- S4. Physical interaction with ETI is possible; ETI is hostile but not an existential threat.
- S5. Physical interaction with ETI is possible; ETI is hostile and an existential threat.

The first scenario disrupts the Christian story hardly at all, if at all. In S1, ETI would pose little more than the theological curiosities not unlike those already explored above. The theological curiosities become more tangible in S2 and S3 in tandem with the level of interaction, and some narrative tension begins to emerge: where do ETI fit into the Christian story? Do we have to rethink certain parts of it and our centrality to it? Tangible concern turns to genuine alarm in S4, and in S5 the tension seems intractable. Consideration of hostile Earth invasion scenarios, as depicted in H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* and Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*, or in the films *Independence Day* and *Signs*, are vivid depictions of the tension. Indeed, such scenarios would constitute so radical a plot twist that we'd need reason to believe we're still in the same story. What we'd need is, in effect, a theodicy—a hostile ETI theodicy, let's call it. *Sans* a hostile ETI theodicy, scenarios like S4 and S5 would threaten to turn the greatest story ever told into a cosmic-scale M. Night Shyamalan box-office flop.

### 6.1. Hostile ETI Theodicies

But we must be careful. A successful hostile ETI theodicy is not merely one that adduces possible goods that would counterbalance the suffering that would result from an S5-like event. Not only would extant theodicies (for example, soul-making) still be relevant to that task, it's almost trivially easy to think of new ones more suited to the context. Perhaps the existential threat to humanity posed by ETI would reveal, once and for all, how petty are our own differences which have driven us to visit war upon each other. Or perhaps ETI would bring technology that is the key to solving the world's (al-

leged) energy crisis, or poverty and hunger, leading to unprecedented human flourishing. Perhaps we are apprised of such alien technology just in time to escape the heat death of the sun, securing the future of humanity elsewhere in the universe. These possibilities aside, what we will regard as a successful hostile ETI theodicy is one that also alleviates the narrative tension between the Christian story and the occurrence of an S5-like event. Three examples in fiction come to mind.

1. Mel Gibson's movie *Signs* features a small-town priest struggling with doubt after the unexpected loss of his wife in a tragic car accident, leaving him and his failed baseball player of a brother to care for his young mysophobic daughter and severely asthmatic son. These burdens turn out to be the precise confluence of conditions necessary for the family to survive the alien invasion. Every "burden" finds its reason in God's undeniable providence within a harrowing forty-eight-hour period, foreshadowed by his wife's dying words. After the aliens disappear just as mysteriously as they arrived, the priest re-examines his doubts about the existence of a sovereign, loving God. Here we see the narrative tension between an S5-like event and Christianity alleviated by having the alien invasion itself being situated within an anthropocentric context, where God's meticulous providence, bringing goodness out of suffering, and maintaining faith in the midst of doubt remain central themes.

2. Our second example comes from Orson Scott Card's series of novels about protagonist Ender Wiggin. The story begins with an S5-like event, and the heroic deeds of a few, including Ender, save humanity from extinction. The secret to Ender's success was understanding Earth's enemies deeply enough to love them. Ender goes on to be something of an intergalactic priest, acting as a spiritual liaison between humanity and alien species. Many humans come to believe that alien species, too, are God's creatures and deserve to be loved and respected as such and are no less in need of salvation. In this example, the narrative tension posed by the original S5-like event is resolved by situating what we took to be the whole story about God and creatures into a much larger story, one where the great Christian truths extend beyond the ends of the Earth to the entire cosmos as far as the curse is found.

3. The third and final example comes from Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow*, where humans initiate contact with ETI after discovering a musical signal emanating from a neighboring solar system. A group of Jesuit missionaries resolve to make contact "that they might come to know and love God's other children." All the missionaries but one, Father Sandoz, meet a tragic fate, some at the hands of alien species. Sandoz is eventually rescued by another mission, but lives the rest of his life trying to make sense of it all. Despite having endured immense suffering through the ordeal, he grows closer to God, so close that a fellow Jesuit says he hasn't even the courage to envy him. We see in this tragic tale familiar themes of holding fast in the midst of suffering, trust in the providence of God, and sharing in God's love for all of

creation, including ETI. But unlike the previous examples, there is no special “moral of the story,” except perhaps that the existence of ETI doesn’t change much of anything. It turns out that questions about life, meaning, God, suffering, faith and doubt are the same on Rakhat, the alien planet, as they are here on Earth. But if the questions are the same, so too are the answers—answers which form the Christian narrative.

This last example we find particularly insightful, since it seems most realistic. We already have in our own terrestrial history examples of Christians encountering peoples who, from their perspective, seemed as different from them as we imagine ETI might be from us. In the event of encountering ETI, is the theology all that different from when Spanish explorers ventured to “new worlds” and first encountered South American natives? No doubt they wondered how such peoples fit into the Christian story, yet in retrospect it’s hard to conceive of how it could have been told any other way. Think of your favorite movie or novel or painting. The longer and closer you attend to its details, the more you learn from it, the richer it becomes. But *it* doesn’t change. How much more might we expect that of a work of divine origin, of the greatest story that could be told?

It’s fascinating to us that there are so many works of fiction which explore the relationship between faith and the existence of ETI. In fact, we aren’t aware of a single example where the existence of ETI is presented as incompatible with traditional religious belief. On the contrary, all the works we’re aware of acknowledge their compatibility, either implicitly (for example, scenes of Jewish prayer in *Independence Day*, and Catholic prayer in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*) or explicitly in the form of a hostile ETI theodicy, as seen in the three examples discussed above. We choose these three examples because they represent different forms that a hostile ETI theodicy might take. We see in the first example how the narrative tension between an S5-like event and the Christian story is alleviated by subsuming the former into the latter. In the second example, the latter is expanded in light of the former. And finally in the third we see how the existence of ETI could result in no relevant change to the Christian story at all.

Were an S5-like event to actually occur, there’s no telling how it would unfold. But we are confident that however it would, the seeds of a successful hostile ETI theodicy would be it sown in it—that is, the event could be situated within the Christian story (example 1), the Christian story would expand in a way that includes such an event (example 2), or there would be no dramatic change in our understanding of the Christian story at all (example 3). What justifies our confidence in this? Easy: we have independent justification for our belief that Christianity is true.<sup>43</sup>

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43. On arguments for the existence of God, see Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); W. L. Craig and J. P. Moreland, *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Jerry Walls and Trent Dougherty, ed., *Two Dozen (or so) Arguments for God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); and

## 6.2. *Divine Deception?*

Christianity, we've suggested, is a narrative. Narratives have narrators, or authors. The apostle Peter refers to Christ as the author of life (Acts 3:15). However dramatic a plot twist an S5-like event would seem to us to be, we would still regard God as its author. But plot twists trade on surprise, and sometimes outright deception. Would the surprise of an S5-like event make God, the author of life as we understood it up to that point, a deceiver? The God of the Christian scriptures is full of surprises. There are even instances where God acts in deceitful ways, and praises acts of deception.<sup>44</sup> That may sound damning, but a moment's reflection reveals that not all deception is morally wrong. Many jokes rely on deception, as do many sports and, as mentioned, good stories. Assuming for the sake of argument there is deception involved, the question before us, then, is whether an S5-like event would constitute a morally blameworthy act of deception on God's part. And we don't think so.<sup>45</sup>

We acknowledge that the ethics of lying and deception are subtle, and so we hope the reader will pardon our brevity here. But plausibly, for S to be morally blameworthy for deceiving S\*, S must intentionally distort S\*'s understanding of reality in a context where S\* doesn't deserve that. Clearly, putting on a poker face to protect your winning hand is not morally equivalent to putting on a poker face to authorities to protect your stolen goods. The former is innocuous. The latter is blameworthy. Indeed, we find nothing wrong with putting on a poker face to protect stowaway Jews from Gestapo inquiries (cf. the praise James and the author of Hebrews gives Rahab for her actions in Joshua 2).

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C. A. McIntosh, "Nontraditional Arguments for Theism," *Philosophy Compass* 14, no. 5 (2019): 1–14. On arguments for the resurrection of Jesus, see W. L. Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 2002); Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010); and T. McGrew and L. McGrew, "The Argument from Miracles: A Cumulative Case for the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth," in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. W. L. Craig and J. P. Moreland (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 593–662. On how Christian belief can be warranted even apart from arguments, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Tyler D. McNabb, *Religious Epistemology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

44. See, e.g., Exod. 1:15–21; 1 Sam. 16:1–5; Judges 4:17–21; Luke 24:28; 1 Cor. 2:8; 2 Thess. 2:11; and so on.

45. Perhaps rather than being worried about God's goodness and its compatibility with divine deception, you detect a certain epistemic tension: if God can permissibly deceive us, how do we know God isn't deceiving us about Christianity being true? For addressing an epistemic concern relating to divine deception, see Eric Baldwin and Tyler D. McNabb, *Plantingian Religious Epistemology and World Religions* (Washington, DC: Lexington Books, 2019); and Perry Hendricks, "Skeptical Theism Unscathed: Why Skeptical Objections to Skeptical Theism Fail," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 101 (2020): 43–73.

Applied to the present topic, we set aside the questions of whether God owes His creation anything, and whether entertaining counterpossibles is legitimate. The question is, Would the context immediately prior to an S5-like event (which we assume would be like our present context in all relevant respects) be one in which God intentionally distorted our understanding of reality about the possibility of such an event, even though we didn't deserve that? Framed this way, we don't see how God could be guilty of that. As we've argued, there's nothing in Christian scripture, doctrine, or tradition incompatible with the existence of ETI, or the possibility of an S5-like event. And in the preceding section, we argued that hostile ETI theodicies show how such an event is not just compatible but possibly consonant with the Christian story. We therefore conclude that should an S5-like event occur, as surprising as that would be for us, it would not constitute a blameworthy act of deception on God's part.

## Conclusion

We have argued that there is no conflict between the existence of ETI and Christian belief. One question we are still left with, however, is this: if ETI exists, why would God not have specially revealed this to us? We've argued that it's false to think God *should* have, as if we would have been wrongfully deceived otherwise. But we might still wonder why He didn't.<sup>46</sup> Once again, the question becomes more pressing as we go from an S1-like event up to an S5-like event. If ETI is so remote or undetectable that any interaction is impossible, the question of why God didn't reveal their existence to us is a mere theological curiosity. But if ETI shows up tomorrow with their mysterious lights in the sky and unknown intentions, throwing Earth into chaos, the question is downright haunting. Without an answer to serve as a dike against the flood of uncertainty, doubt, and feelings of abandonment that such an event would bring, many Christians, we guess, would be overwhelmed and lose faith.

But we think this emotional reaction, while understandable, would be philosophically and theologically unjustified. After all, would those lights in the sky affect the soundness of arguments for the existence of God, in particular, arguments for the existence of a morally perfect creator? And would they change the reality that our own moral shortcomings create a seemingly unbreachable gulf between ourselves and such a being, and the need for a bridge to span that gulf—one that has us at one end and God at the other? Would they upend the historical evidence that God became for us that bridge in Christ, who conquered the grave as confirmation? Would they undermine

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46. As a reviewer astutely points out, if there is a problem for Christian belief here, ETI plays no unique role. We might with equal concern wonder why God didn't specially reveal the germ theory of disease to us, which would have been nice!

our experience of the divine, or our assurance that the Gospel events are true? Obviously not. But those lights sure would be unsettling, to say the least. The proper response, then, would not be to lose faith, but to “be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the Lord your God who goes with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you” (Deut. 31:6).<sup>47</sup>

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47. In addition to the referees, we thank Nevin Climenhaga and Mark Murphy for their helpful comments, and Doug Waters for his eagle editor’s eye. I (McIntosh) would also like to thank Elizabeth McIntosh, whose encyclopedic knowledge of fiction helped enrich this paper, and my crazy uncle Mark, whose interest in History Channel specials on aliens got me thinking about this topic years ago. We would also like to dedicate this paper to Benjamin Arbour and his wife Meg. Almost half a year later already, the sudden and tragic death of Ben and Meg is still hardly comprehensible. In the last issue of this journal, Greg, David, Brad, and John captured well much of what is so memorable about our dear colleague and friend. We are grateful to the editor for permitting us to add a few words of our own here. One of the last projects occupying Ben’s attention was a book on the nature and integrity of Christian philosophy, a topic especially important to him (and, presumably, readers of this journal). Ben sincerely worried that the integrity of Christian philosophy is under threat by views and values currently popular in secular culture and academia, namely, those central to “social justice” and “critical theory” ideologies. That is a bold statement, but Ben was a man of bold convictions shaped by the highest view of scripture and commitment to Christ. We hope to honor him by seeing that project through. One of the most remarkable things about Ben is how he managed to live such a well-integrated life. No matter which hat he wore—be it philosopher, friend, father, husband, brother, son—he wore it well. That is because he put Christ at the center of everything. May we aspire to do likewise, so that even if our own lives are demanded of us this very day, we too might be greeted with the words “Well done, good and faithful servant.”