

“Religion and Rocketry” by C.S. Lewis

In my time I have heard two quite different arguments against my religion put forward in the name of science. When I was a youngster, people used to say that the universe was not only not friendly to life but positively hostile to it. Life had appeared on this planet by a millionth chance, as if at one point there had been a breakdown of the elaborate defenses generally enforced against it. We should be rash to assume that such a leak had occurred more than once. Probably life was a purely terrestrial abnormality. We were alone in an infinite desert. Which just showed the absurdity of the Christian idea that there was a Creator who was interested in living creatures.

But then came Professor F. B. Hoyle, the Cambridge cosmologist, and in a fortnight or so everyone I met seemed to have decided that the universe was probably quite well provided with inhabitable globes and with livestock to inhabit them. Which just showed (equally well) the absurdity of Christianity with its parochial idea that Man could be important to God.

This is a warning to what we may expect if we ever do discover animal life (vegetable does not matter) on another planet. Each new discovery, even every new theory, is held at first to have the most wide-reaching theological and philosophical consequences. It is seized by unbelievers as the basis for a new attack on Christianity; it is often, and more embarrassingly, seized by injudicious believers as the basis for a new defense.

But usually, when the popular hubbub has subsided and the novelty has been chewed over by real theologians, real scientists and real philosophers, both sides find themselves pretty much where they were before. So it was with Copernican astronomy, with Darwinism, with Biblical Criticism, with the new psychology. So, I cannot help expecting, it will be with the discovery of 'life on other planets' if that discovery is ever made.

The supposed threat is clearly directed against the doctrine of the Incarnation, the belief that God of God "for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was . . . made man." Why for us men more than for others? If we find ourselves to be but one among a million races, scattered through a million spheres, how can we, without absurd arrogance, believe ourselves to have been uniquely favored? I admit that the question could become formidable. In fact, it will become formidable when, if ever, we know the answer to five other questions.

1. Are there animals anywhere except on earth? We do not know. We do not know whether we ever shall know.
2. Supposing there were, have any of these animals what we call "rational souls"? By this I include not merely the faculty to abstract and calculate, but the apprehension of values, the power to mean by "good" something more than "good for me" or even "good for my species". If instead of asking, "Have they rational souls?" you prefer to ask, "Are they spiritual animals?" I think we shall both mean pretty much the same. If the answer to either question should be No, then of course it would not be at all strange that our species should be treated differently from theirs.

There would be no sense in offering to a creature, however clever or amiable, a gift which that creature was by its nature incapable either of desiring or of receiving. We teach our sons to read but not our dogs. The dogs prefer bones. And of course, since we do not yet know whether there are extra-terrestrial animals at all, we are a long way from knowing that they are rational (or "spiritual").

Even if we met them we might not find it so easy to decide. It seems to me possible to suppose creatures so clever that they could talk, though they were, from the theological point of view, really only animals, capable of pursuing or enjoying only natural ends. One meets humans the machine-minded and materialistic urban type who look as if they were just that. As Christians we must believe the appearance

to be false; somewhere under that glib surface there lurks, however atrophied, a human soul. But in other worlds there might be things that really are what these seem to be. Conversely, there might be creatures genuinely spiritual, whose powers of manufacture and abstract thought were so humble that we should mistake them for mere animals. God shield them from us!

3. If there are species, and rational species, other than man, are any or all of them, like us, fallen? This is the point non-Christians always seem to forget. They seem to think that the Incarnation implies some particular merit or excellence in humanity. But of course it implies just the reverse: a particular demerit and depravity. No creature that deserved Redemption would need to be redeemed. They that are whole need not the physician. Christ died for men precisely because men are not worth dying for; to make them worth it. Notice what waves of utterly unwarranted hypothesis these critics of Christianity want us to swim through. We are now supposing the fall of hypothetically rational creatures whose mere existence is hypothetical.

4. If all of them (and surely all is a long shot) or any of them have fallen have they been denied Redemption by the Incarnation and Passion of Christ? For of course it is no very new idea that the eternal Son may, for all we know, have been incarnate in other worlds than earth and so saved other races than ours. As Alice Meynell wrote in "Christ in the Universe":

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

I wouldn't go as far as "doubtless" myself. Perhaps of all races we only fell. Perhaps Man is the only lost sheep; the one, therefore, whom the Shepherd came to seek. Or perhaps but this brings us to the next wave of assumption. It is the biggest yet and will knock us head over heels, but I am fond of a tumble in the surf.

5. If we knew (which we don't) the answers to 1, 2, and 3 and, further, if we knew that Redemption by an Incarnation and Passion had been denied to creatures in need of it is it certain that this is the only mode of Redemption that is possible? Here of course we ask for what is not merely unknown but, unless God should reveal it, wholly unknowable. It may be that the further we were permitted to see into His councils, the more clearly we should understand that thus and not otherwise by the birth at Bethlehem, the cross on Calvary and the empty tomb a fallen race could be rescued. There may be a necessity for this, insurmountable, rooted in the very nature of God and the very nature of sin. But we don't know. At any rate, I don't know. Spiritual as well as physical conditions might differ widely in different worlds. There might be different sorts and different degrees of fallenness. We must surely believe that the divine charity is as fertile in resource as it is measureless in condescension. To different diseases, or even to different patients sick with the same disease, the great Physician may have applied different remedies; remedies which we should probably not recognize as such even if we ever heard of them.

It might turn out that the redemption of other species differed from ours by working through ours. There is a hint of something like this in St. Paul (Romans 8:19-23) when he says that the whole creation is longing and waiting to be delivered from some kind of slavery, and that the deliverance will occur only when we, we Christians, fully enter upon our sonship to God and exercise our 'glorious liberty'.

On the conscious level I believe that he was thinking only of our own Earth: of animal, and probably vegetable, life on Earth being "renewed" or glorified at the glorification of man in Christ. But it is perhaps possible it is not necessary to give his words a cosmic meaning. It may be that Redemption, starting with us, is to work from us and through us.

This would no doubt give man a pivotal position. But such a position need not imply any superiority in us or any favouritism in God. The general, deciding where to begin his attack, does not select the prettiest landscape or the most fertile field or the most attractive village. Christ was not born in a stable because a stable is, in itself, the most convenient or distinguished place for a maternity.

Only if we had some such function would a contact between us and such unknown races be other than a calamity. If indeed we were unfallen, it would be another matter.

It sets one dreaming to interchange thoughts with beings whose thinking had an organic background wholly different from ours (other senses, other appetites), to be unenviously humbled by intellects possibly superior to our own yet able for that very reason to descend to our level, to descend lovingly ourselves if we met innocent and childlike creatures who could never be as strong or as clever as we, to exchange with the inhabitants of other worlds that especially keen and rich affection which exists between unlikes; it is a glorious dream. But make no mistake. It is a dream. We are fallen.

We know what our race does to strangers. Man destroys or enslaves every species he can. Civilized man murders, enslaves, cheats, and corrupts savage man. Even inanimate nature he turns into dust bowls and slag-heaps. There are individuals who don't. But they are not the sort who are likely to be our pioneers in space. Our ambassador to new worlds will be the needy and greedy adventurer or the ruthless technical expert. They will do as their kind has always done. What that will be if they meet things weaker than themselves, the black man and the red man can tell. If they meet things stronger, they will be, very properly, destroyed.

It is interesting to wonder how things would go if they met an unfallen race. At first, to be sure, they'd have a grand time jeering at, duping, and exploiting its innocence; but I doubt if our half-animal cunning would long be a match for godlike wisdom, selfless valour, and perfect unanimity.

I therefore fear the practical, not the theoretical, problems which will arise if ever we meet rational creatures which are not human. Against them we shall, if we can, commit all the crimes we have already committed against creatures certainly human but differing from us in features and pigmentation; and the starry heavens will become an object to which good men can look up only with feelings of intolerable guilt, agonized pity, and burning shame.

Of course after the first debauch of exploitation we shall make some belated attempt to do better. We shall perhaps send missionaries. But can even missionaries be trusted? "Gun and gospel" have been horribly combined in the past. The missionary's holy desire to save souls has not always been kept quite distinct from the arrogant desire, the busybody's itch, to (as he calls it) "civilize" the (as he calls them) "natives." Would all our missionaries recognize an unfallen race if they met it? Could they? Would they continue to press upon creatures that did not need to be saved that plan of Salvation which God has appointed for Man? Would they denounce as sins mere differences of behaviour which the spiritual and biological history of these strange creatures fully justified and which God Himself had blessed? Would they try to teach those from whom they had better learn? I do not know. What I do know is that here and now, as our only possible practical preparation for such a meeting, you and I should resolve to stand firm against all exploitation and all theological imperialism. It will not be fun. We shall be called traitors to our own species. We shall be hated of almost all men; even of some religious men. And we must not give back one single inch. We shall probably fail, but let us go down fighting for the right side. Our loyalty is due not to our species but to God. Those who are, or can become, His sons, are our real brothers even if they have shells or tusks. It is spiritual, not biological, kinship that counts.

But let us thank God that we are still very far from travel to other worlds.

I have wondered before now whether the vast astronomical distances may not be God's quarantine

precautions. They prevent the spiritual infection of a fallen species from spreading. And of course we are also very far from the supposed theological problem which contact with other rational species might raise. Such species may not exist. There is not at present a shred of empirical evidence that they do. There is nothing but what the logicians would call arguments from "a priori probability" arguments that begin "It is only natural to suppose," or "All analogy suggests," or "Is it not the height of arrogance to rule out?" They make very good reading. But who except a born gambler ever risks five dollars on such grounds in ordinary life? And, as we have seen, the mere existence of these creatures would not raise a problem. After that, we still need to know that they are fallen; then, that they have not been, or will not be, redeemed in the mode we know; and then, that no other mode is possible. I think a Christian is sitting pretty if his faith never encounters more formidable difficulties than these conjectural phantoms.

If I remember rightly, St. Augustine raised a question about the theological position of satyrs, monopods, and other semi-human creatures. He decided it could wait till we knew there were any. So can this.

"But supposing" you say. "Supposing all these embarrassing suppositions turned out to be true?" I can only record a conviction that they won't; a conviction which has for me become in the course of years irresistible. Christians and their opponents again and again expect that some new discovery will either turn matters of faith into matters of knowledge or else reduce them to patent absurdities. But it has never happened.

What we believe always remains intellectually possible; it never becomes intellectually compulsive. I have an idea that when this ceases to be so, the world will be ending. We have been warned that all but conclusive evidence against Christianity, evidence that would deceive (if it were possible) the very elect, will appear with the Antichrist.

And after that there will be wholly conclusive evidence on the other side.

But not, I fancy, till then on either side.