Astrobiology, Theology, and Society

Jamie Boulding, PhD Candidate, Corpus Christi College
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“We haven’t actually made direct contact with aliens yet. When we do, I’ll let you know.”

- President Barack Obama, February 12, 2016
“I think we may have been visited already. We don't know for sure.”

- Hillary Clinton, December 2015
“It seems that the more we study Mars, the more we learn how life could be supported and where there are resources to support life in the future.”

- Michael Meyer, head of NASA’s Mars Exploration Program
Historical Perspectives—Nicholas of Cusa

Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464)

- Rejected Aristotelian idea of spatially limited universe
- Argued for a boundless universe whose centre can be found only in God (not Earth)
- Assumed other planets with extraterrestrial life, including higher spiritual beings near the Sun and ‘lunatics’ on the Moon
Historical Perspectives—Giordano Bruno

Giordano Bruno
(1548-1600)

♦ Burned at the stake in 1600 for cosmic pluralism and other heresies

♦ Like Cusa, argued for an infinite universe with other planets inhabited by intelligent beings

♦ His vision of an infinity of worlds foreshadows ‘many worlds’ interpretation of quantum mechanics?
Historical Perspectives—John Wilkins

John Wilkins (1614-1672)

- Bishop of Chester, founder of Royal Society
- Suggested that intelligent beings in other worlds need not be fallen, but even if so, Christ could have died for them too
- Based on apparent similarities between Earth and Moon, speculated that living beings would inhabit the Moon
Theological Implications

◊ Multiple incarnations?
  ◊ Yes: Paul Tillich, John Polkinghorne
  ◊ No: Wolfhart Pannenberg, Arthur Peacocke, Brian Hebblethwaite

◊ Other questions – creation, sin, eschatology?

“If little green men on Mars need saving, then God will take little green flesh.”

- John Polkinghorne, former Cambridge professor of Mathematical Physics and Anglican priest
The Search for Extraterrestrial Life—Three Pathways

- Analysis of our own solar system
  - Mars and other satellites (e.g. Europa, one of Jupiter’s moons)
- Space-based telescopes
  - NASA’s Terrestrial Planet Finder
- SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence)
  - Transmission of signals across interstellar distances
Christian Contributions to SETI and Society (1)

- Christian engagement should be constructive and critical
  - Affirm importance and value of SETI...
  - ...while also examining and challenging its assumptions

“Salvation is the liberating gift, not of benevolent aliens, but of a preexistent, creating and redeeming God.”

- J. A. Herrick
Christian Contributions to SETI and Society (2)

- Christian engagement can help **expand** the perspective of SETI
  - Introduction of wider religious, metaphysical, ethical dimensions

![Illustration of Earth-like planets in a galaxy](image-url)
Christian Contributions to SETI and Society (3)

- Christians can help prepare public for extraterrestrial contact
  - Collaboration and cooperation with other faith traditions and scientists

“We assume that mathematics is universal and that extraterrestrials will understand it. Perhaps theology has a similar endemic truth. It may be that the best way to know is to ask others.”

- Seth Shostak
Questions?