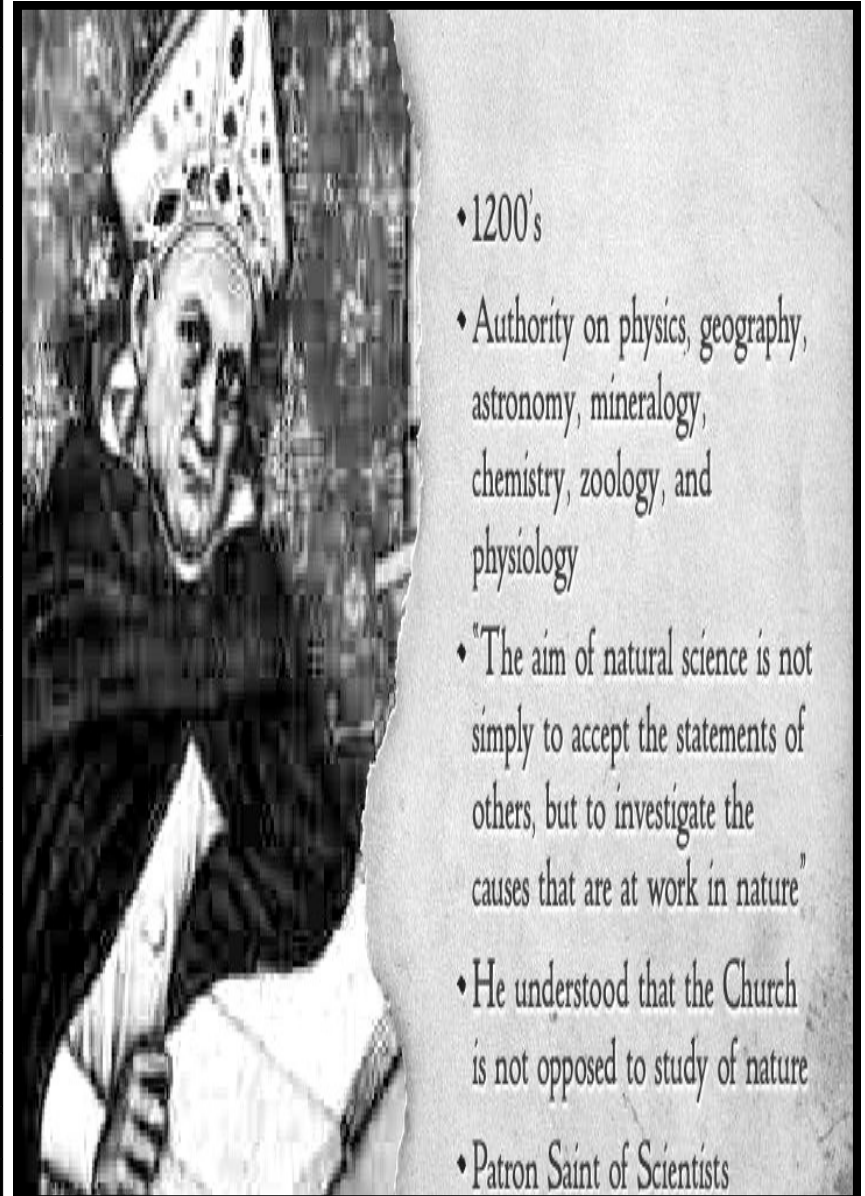




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*Catholic Physics - Reflections of a
Catholic Scientist - Part 10
In His image: Would Yoda have a soul?*



- ♦ 1200's
- ♦ Authority on physics, geography, astronomy, mineralogy, chemistry, zoology, and physiology
- ♦ "The aim of natural science is not simply to accept the statements of others, but to investigate the causes that are at work in nature"
- ♦ He understood that the Church is not opposed to study of nature
- ♦ Patron Saint of Scientists

Catholic Physics - Reflections of a Catholic Scientist - Part 10

In His image: Would Yoda have a soul?

What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?

For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour.

Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet: All sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field;

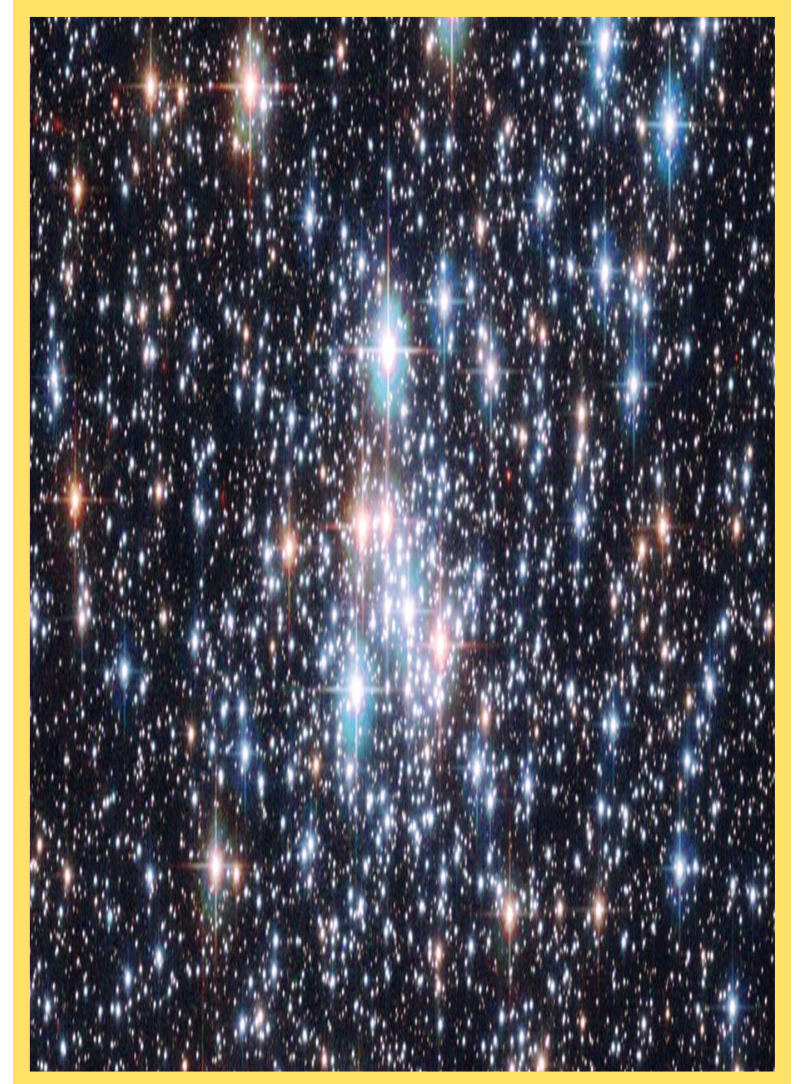
The fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas. Psalm 8, v4-8.



Is there intelligent life on other worlds? A question invariably asked when I was catechizing minimum security prisoners and adult pupils at “Science and the Church” classes, And if there is, do such beings have souls?

As far as Yoda goes, most people who have seen the Star Wars epics would probably answer “Yes, of course!” ... given that Yoda is a hero, cute, and knows how to manipulate THE FORCE to good ends... but then those considerations do not really take into account what the Church has to say about souls:

“The human person, created in the image of God, is a being at once corporeal and spiritual....Man, whole and entire is therefore willed by God...soul refers to the innermost aspect of man, that by which he is most specially in God’s image: ‘soul’





signifies the spiritual principle in man...it is because of the spiritual soul that the body made of matter becomes a living, human body; spirit and body in man are not two natures united but rather their union forms a single nature." Catechism of the Catholic Church, excerpted from paragraphs 362, 363, 365.

Now that is a complete statement, but it doesn't make the properties of a soul explicit. What do these properties entail—belief in a deity? a moral/ethical code? wonder about the meaning of it all? There is another quote, wrongly attributed to C.S. Lewis, but actually from the science-fiction author, Walter M. Miller, Jr. (author of a "Canticle for Leibowitz") that to me is a satisfactory statement (with properties still left undefined), in agreement with the Catechism:

"You don't have a soul. You are a soul. You have a body."

And as Brother Guy Consolmagno, a Vatican astronomer, put it when discussing alien life:

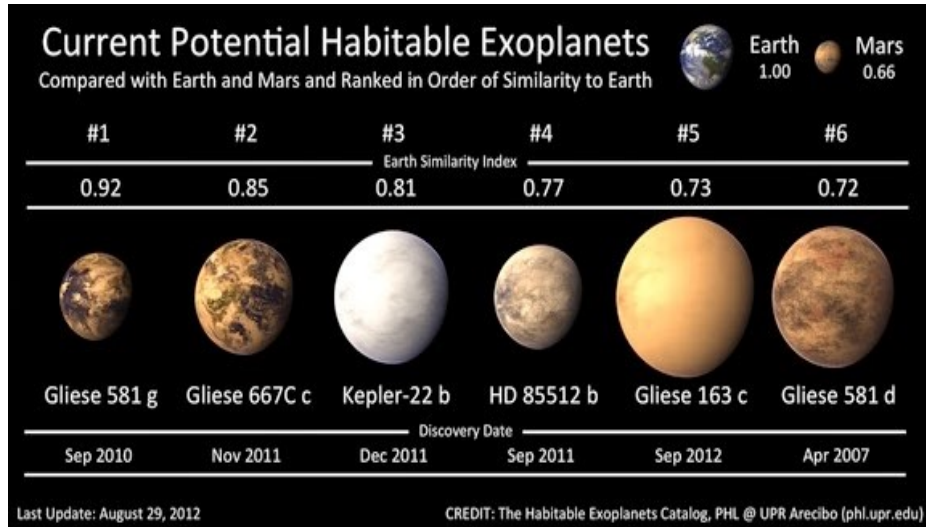
"Going back to the Middle Ages, the definition of a soul is to have intelligence, free will, freedom to love or not to love, freedom to make decisions..."

Finally, here's what C.S. Lewis has to say:

"By this (rational souls) 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'." (from Religion and Rocketry in The World's Last Night)

Given that this issue is settled (???), let's move on to the next question: do intelligent extraterrestrial beings exist? Are we alone in the universe? The Church as an institution is also interested: in 2009 the Vatican held a week-long conference on the existence of extra-terrestrial life. A number of scientific and religious issues were considered, but no consensus was reached. We think that alien life would be based on carbon-based biochemistry like that on Earth, but that assumption might not hold. If it does hold, then to make an estimate we'd need to know how many earth-like planets there are, and then make some estimates of how many of these would develop life, and the probability that such life would become intelligent. The Drake Equation gives such an estimate for the number of planets in our galaxy, the Milky Way, as between a thousand and hundred million (that's quite a big error limit!). Many new discoveries of "earth-like" planets are reported: a recent estimate of such in our galaxy is a hundred billion, and a hundred sextillion in the universe. So then the critical links are the probability of life originating on an earth-like planet (or even non-earth

like) and the probability of such life developing intelligence. Shown below are pictures (drawings, not scientific images) of the five most earthlike planets. We want to emphasize that the properties of these planets are inferred from astronomical data; no astronomical images of planets this small have been observed.



And then we have to consider the Fermi Paradox, “where is everybody?”, if such life exists. Why is there no evidence of communication—radio, satellites, whatever—that science-fiction portrays in much detail? Or would intelligent life take other paths than technological? (I ignore flying saucer reports—those are legend and myth.)

Well, let’s brush the Fermi Paradox under the rug, and assume that somewhere over the rainbow, outside our solar system, intelligent life exists. Would such life necessarily have souls? And what is the attitude of the Church toward such beings? Would the Church have a mission to save them, as it did in the Americas and Asia? According to one of the Vatican Observatory astronomers, Brother Guy Consolmagno, the answer is “Yes” : “Any entity - no matter how many tentacles it has - has a soul.”

The situation is complex and not to be explained simply by examining the properties of souls listed above. The most trenchant exposition has been given by C.S. Lewis in his essay, Religion and Rocketry. Here are the issues to be considered:

Do these aliens have a rational soul? Computers, no matter what their degree of artificial intelligence would not. (I’m reminded of an anecdote, probably apocryphal, about a world famous computer expert who was giving a seminar on artificial intelligence at an academic institution where I was teaching. Someone in the audience asked him ‘would you want your daughter to marry a computer?’ and another voice shouted out immediately “Why not—his wife did.”)

If these aliens have rational souls, are they fallen, or are they like Adam and Eve before the Fall, in a state of innocence and grace? If they are not fallen, would it be appropriate to send missionaries to them?

“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.” (quote from Rocketry and Religion.) In the first book of his wonderful speculative fiction trilogy, “Out of the Silent Planet” Lewis considers such alien intelligent beings that have not fallen, innocent and without Original Sin.

Lewis considers whether missionary activity to fallen species would be corrupting or salvational, whether Christ could have appeared to other fallen species, or whether God might have given other forms of Redemption—read the essay from the link for a fuller exposition.

Have we answered the original question? NO!, but another quote from Religion and Rocketry is apposite:

“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.”

Finally, I’ll put my own position down—it’s exemplified in a fine science-fiction story (science-fiction is my fourth best theological resource, following Holy Scripture, St. Augustine, and St. Thomas Aquinas). A scientific couple embark on a search through the galaxy for life, any life. The search proves fruitless, the wife dies, but finally the husband realizes as he is about to die that he is not really alone; in a final epiphany he realizes the truth of Scripture, that the universe has been created by God, and man as the image of God, as in Psalm 8.

From a series of articles written by: Bob Kurland - a Catholic Scientist