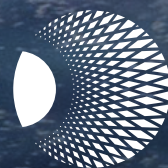


NHI, UAP, and the Catholic Faith

How Will the Church Respond?

Paul Thigpen

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“Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind: ...
‘Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? ...
Do you know the ordinances of the heavens?’ ” **Job 38:1, 38:4, 38:33**

Executive Summary

Are we on Earth alone with God and the angels in this vast universe? Do we humans share the cosmos with any other intelligent forms of life created by God? The Catholic Church has made no formal, authoritative pronouncements on the existence, or even the possibility, of extraterrestrial life.

Even so, today speculation about the existence of extraterrestrial intelligence (ETI) and other forms of nonhuman intelligence (NHI) is livelier than ever in the United States and throughout the world. The topic is the focus of countless science fiction novels and films, as well as social media sources. Scientists look for evidence of life beyond Earth through multiple technological means.

Civil and military authorities in the United States and other nations have established formal agencies to examine continuing reports of unidentified anomalous phenomena (UAP) that cannot be explained by conventional, or even cutting-edge, technology. Elected officials are demanding more government transparency about these matters, with concerns about national security. Navy pilots and former officials of the Department of Defense and the Intelligence Community have testified in the halls of Congress and in numerous media appearances about the reality of UAP, with reports of encounters with anomalous craft and even claims that nonhuman technology and nonhuman bodies have been recovered from crashed vehicles.

Meanwhile, stories of alien abductions or other close encounters have multiplied. New ETI-based religious traditions have emerged, while some have concluded that ancient pagan myths about the gods, and even biblical accounts of angelic beings, actually refer to creatures who visited Earth from other planets. Others now look for alien saviors to come down from the heavens. Many non-Christians insist that any public revelations of ETI would disprove the Christian faith.

All these developments challenge the Catholic Church to offer a clear, reasoned, and transparent response in the light of Catholic faith.

For the Church to develop an appropriate response to the current situation, we must recognize first that contemporary discussions of ETI, other NHI, and UAP are only the most recent phase of a debate in Western thought that stretches back at least twenty-six centuries. Fathers and Doctors of the Church, Catholic and other Christian philosophers and theologians, popes and bishops, friars and priests, scientists and political leaders, literary figures and saints have all taken part in the conversation.

This paper begins with a brief historical survey of that conversation. Such a survey is not intended to suggest that the possibility of NHI of various sorts has been officially affirmed by the Church, nor that such a possibility has never been challenged by Catholic and other Christian thinkers. It does demonstrate, however, that the Catholic intellectual tradition has in many ways made room for such a possibility since ancient times. Considering that history,

the Church in the twenty-first century should not hesitate to take up the matter in a more comprehensive and straightforward way. The Church has left the door open wide for Catholic scientists, theologians, philosophers, and others to explore the topic.

The topic of ETI and other forms of NHI has become much more pressing today in light of the worldwide multiplication of credible reports regarding UAP. This development has earned more focused attention from scientists, government officials, theologians, and other scholars, as well as voices in social and other media. As a result, the NHI discussion has grown rapidly in significance, breadth, complexity, and gravity in the United States and beyond.

For many of those engaged in this conversation, the primary question has shifted from the theoretical “Are they out there somewhere?” to the more unsettling “Are they right here, right now, with us?” Both questions obviously have serious implications for our understanding of the cosmos and our place in it, particularly for Catholic faith and life. Therefore, they must be explored carefully, considering the Church’s Tradition and the relevant scientific and testimonial evidence.

Adherents of other religious traditions will no doubt be wrestling with these far-reaching implications as well, to one degree or another. The Catholic Church is uniquely situated to make a meaningful contribution to this wider religious conversation: It embraces an estimated 1.39 billion members worldwide. It enjoys a rich historical and lively intellectual tradition. And it possesses a multicultural scope and presence around the globe. For the Church to take a leading role among religious traditions in engagement with this matter could thus be transformative for the spiritual and cultural development of not only Catholics, but also other Christian and non-Christian communities.

What might the stages of that process of engagement look like? For what fundamental questions would we need to seek answers in each stage? What are some of the specific topics to be considered within each stage?

First, the Church could engage in a season of exploration and clarification regarding both NHI and UAP. In considering NHI, it would need to rediscover and explore thoroughly the relevant elements of its own tradition: theological, scriptural, philosophical, historical, and social. In considering UAP, it would need to examine not only the scientific evidence, but also the lived experience of Catholics and others who testify to personal UAP encounters. Such a broad and thoroughgoing investigation could lead to a more accurate discernment of how a traditional Catholic understanding of the cosmos might both accommodate and be expanded and enriched by evidence of UAP realities.

In this first stage, two fundamental questions would need to be addressed: Is the possibility of NHI (beyond the angelic) excluded by the Catholic faith—or is there room within the essential contours of that faith for a more complex, nuanced, and mysterious cosmic reality than we have commonly imagined? And if there is indeed room, what fitting place might that reality find in Catholic faith and life? Topics to be considered in this stage would include the many possibilities for the origins, spiritual status, corporeal status, capabilities, moral status, redemption, and final destiny of various forms of NHI.

The second stage of engagement (confirmation and assimilation) would begin if the world should have a compelling public confirmation by scientists, government officials, or even religious authorities of the existence of NHI. Perhaps even a public, undeniable encounter with that reality might take place to provide an indisputable confirmation.

At that time, Catholics and other Christians would need to assimilate the new empirical information through careful study, reflection, and prayer. Just as their spiritual ancestors had to grapple with the theological implications of the Copernican Revolution, as well as the encounter with previously unknown peoples of the Western Hemisphere, believers would have much to ponder that requires a response of “faith seeking understanding” (as St. Anselm once posited).¹ Catholic leaders, both clergy and laity, would play an essential role in helping them meet that challenge.

In this stage, the pressing question would be how to provide relevant faith formation and effective pastoral care in such an unsettled, unsettling time. Relevant topics would include assessing and attending to the spiritual, psychological, social, and other impacts on both the parishioners and the clergy who are ministering to them.

A third stage of the engagement process (dialogue, discernment, and cooperation) could begin if—in an even more stunning development—open contact with NHI visitors should make some form of communication with them possible. At that time, the Church would need to engage in a carefully considered dialogue with our new interlocutors.

The essential question of this stage would be what could we learn from them, and what could we teach them. Such an ongoing conversation would present an opportunity for attempts to understand them (if possible) with regard to a number of topics: their understanding of God (if any), the cosmos, themselves, their ethics, and their intentions for engagement with us. We would also have the opportunity to tell them about ourselves.

How would we go about building an ethics of interaction with NHI? If their intentions in making contact seem to be benevolent, how might we prudently find common ground for a relationship of mutual benefit and goodwill? If their intentions are not benevolent, how would we attempt to persuade them otherwise? Failing that, how would we prepare for resisting the threat they represent?

The questions and topics proposed in this paper are offered as possible paths to understanding NHI and UAP. Such understanding could lead, then, to wise action by the Church at every level, from the Vatican to the local parish. The consequences of a public NHI confirmation would touch Catholics at each of these levels, of every theological orientation, in every walk of life, in every nation. Other Christians, adherents of other religions, and people of no faith would all be affected. The Church’s prudent and effective response could bring the light of faith to bear on the countless challenges such a development would pose.

A serious and sustained engagement with the subject of NHI, given the growing concern worldwide with UAP, will require prompt and multifaceted action by the Catholic Church. Proposed here are a number of concrete actions that could be taken by the Vatican; the

bishops, along with their episcopal conferences and diocesan leaders; the parish clergy and lay leaders; religious orders and hospitals; Catholic schools; the Catholic academic community; Catholic publishers and other media; and the Catholic people in the pew.

Centuries ago, visionary Catholic thinkers were far ahead of their time in thinking deeply about NHI and other cosmic matters. Today, the Church has the opportunity again to demonstrate global leadership in searching for more of the truth about the greatness of God's creation, and learning to live in accordance with whatever discoveries we may make. Will we take up that challenge? If so, we will need to proceed with a sense of wonder—an attitude of humility in the face of mystery.²

Introduction: Are We Alone in the Universe with God and the Angels?

The beginning of the space age in the mid-twentieth century saw a brief surge of interest in extraterrestrial intelligence among Catholic theologians.³ Apparently, at least one American bishop shared their interest.

In June 1959, the Vatican commission that was preparing the agenda for the Second Vatican Council sent correspondence to all the world's bishops asking what should be discussed when they gathered. Archbishop Patrick J. O'Boyle (1896–1987) of Washington, DC, later made a cardinal, proposed that the Council should make an authoritative pronouncement, “in light of the doctrines of creation and redemption,” about “the possibility of intelligent life on other planets.”⁴

As it turned out, of course, the Council Fathers made no such pronouncement. Perhaps the bishops considered the subject frivolous, irrelevant to their purpose, or less important than other more pressing, terrestrial matters. Perhaps they took the matter seriously but believed that God has not revealed to the Church his mind on this subject, and that science could offer no firm conclusions. In any case, to this day, the Catholic Church has made no formal, authoritative pronouncements on the existence, or even the possibility, of extraterrestrial life.⁵

Even so, the question mystifies and intrigues: Are we on Earth the lone intelligent inhabitants of this vast universe? Catholic Tradition teaches that angels, both fallen and unfallen, act on it without physical bodies in the fulfillment of their assigned missions, whether heavenly or infernal. But do we humans share the cosmos with any other intelligent forms of life created by God?

Today, speculation about the existence of extraterrestrial intelligence (ETI) and other forms of nonhuman intelligence (NHI) is livelier than ever in the United States and throughout the world. A growing number of science fiction novels and films about alien life continue to find a wide and enthusiastic audience. Scientists look for evidence of life beyond Earth through multiple means: engaging in interplanetary explorations;⁶ studying unidentified anomalous phenomena (UAP, aka UFOs) and searching the skies and the ocean for evidence of extraterrestrial technological artifacts;⁷ monitoring electromagnetic radiation from the heavens for potential signs of transmissions from extraterrestrial civilizations;⁸ and transmitting interstellar messages in an attempt to contact such civilizations.⁹

More telling is the establishment of official agencies by civil and military authorities in the United States and other nations to examine continuing reports of UAP that cannot be explained by conventional, or even cutting-edge, technology. For example, in December 2020,

legislation was passed by the US Congress instructing the Director of National Intelligence to help produce an unclassified report on everything government agencies know about UAP. The House Intelligence Committee met with US Navy and FBI officials on June 16, 2021, for a highly classified briefing on the full report in a “sensitive compartmented information facility.” A much shorter, unclassified version was made public on June 25.¹⁰

That limited report, which analyzed only 143 UAP reports from government sources since 2004, declared that none of the 142 unexplained cases were related to secret American aircraft, and that they exhibited extraordinary maneuvering capabilities: hypersonic speeds (up to five times the speed of sound); no observable means of propulsion; and extremely rapid acceleration and abrupt change of direction—all beyond the known capabilities of terrestrial aircraft. In most of these cases, “UAP were registered across multiple sensors, to include radar, infrared, electro-optical, weapon seekers, and visual observation.” In some of the cases, radio frequency energy was detected in association with the UAP. A few even indicated the capability of performing “signature management”—that is, efforts to avoid detection by radar or other electronic systems, suggesting intelligent control.¹¹

Not surprisingly, elected officials in the United States and beyond are demanding more government transparency about these matters, citing concerns about national security.¹² Navy pilots and former officials of the Department of Defense and the Intelligence Community have testified in the halls of Congress and in numerous media appearances about the reality of UAP. These reports include encounters with anomalous craft and even claims that nonhuman technology and nonhuman bodies have been recovered from crashed vehicles.¹³

Meanwhile, stories of alien abductions or other close encounters have multiplied. Even new religious traditions have emerged, whose novel mythologies claim to be based on revelations from or about ETI. Some have concluded that ancient pagan myths about the gods, and even biblical accounts of angelic beings, actually refer to creatures who visited Earth from other planets. Others now look for alien saviors to come down from the heavens, enlightening us and rescuing us from the miserable state we have created for ourselves on our planet. Many non-Christians insist that any public revelations of ETI would disprove the Christian faith.

All these developments challenge the Catholic Church to offer a clear, reasoned, and transparent response in the light of Catholic faith.

1. NHI: A Brief History of the Catholic Conversation

For the Church to develop an appropriate response to the current situation, we must recognize first that contemporary discussions of NHI and UAP are only the most recent phase of a debate in Western thought that stretches back at least twenty-six centuries. Fathers and Doctors of the Church, Catholic and other Christian philosophers and theologians, popes and bishops, friars and priests, scientists and political leaders, literary figures and saints have all taken part in the conversation.¹⁴

The Foundations: Ancient Greek Cosmology

The conceptual foundations for the Catholic discussion of ETI were laid in the centuries before Christ among Greek philosophers in the sixth, fifth, and fourth centuries BC. The question of intelligent life beyond Earth was at that time part of a larger discussion about what came to be known as “the plurality of worlds.” This notion originally referred, not so much to multiple heavenly bodies in our universe (the stars, planets, their moons, and other features of the cosmos), but rather to multiple *universes*, all coexisting independently of one another, each cosmos with its own Earth and celestial bodies.¹⁵

Thinkers in the Greek philosophical tradition known as atomism concluded that there is indeed a plurality of such worlds. Plato and Aristotle rejected the idea, though Plato thought the stars had each been given a soul (the stars, he believed, were living creatures).¹⁶ In this way, we might say that Plato conceived of extraterrestrial intelligence in the form of living stars who moved across the sky.

We might also note that Aristotle once speculated about inhabitants of the moon, though this idea contradicted his conception of the lunar region as part of the unchanging portion of the cosmos.¹⁷ In addition, followers of the sixth-century BC Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras believed that the moon is another inhabited world, though not its own cosmos.¹⁸

Early Christian Thought

Some early Christian thinkers were aware of the ancient discussion among pagan philosophers about the plurality of worlds. They continued the conversation, adding their insights derived from the apostolic tradition of the Church. But they were concerned primarily with speculations about multiple universes, which were presumed to be inhabited.

This possibility they largely rejected, following the Platonist and Aristotelian schools. The common Greek cosmology placed Earth at the center of the universe, with the sun, moon, and the stars revolving around it. The planets (literally, “wanderers”) were simply stars that

“wandered” from the path of the other heavenly bodies. This cosmological model thus had no conception of solid or gaseous balls that could provide a home to living creatures.¹⁹

In addition, these schools of thought had concluded, for various philosophical reasons, that the existence of more than one universe would be somehow less “perfect” than a single cosmos. For this reason, the notion of ETI in the sense of inhabited planets or even moons within our universe received little if any attention from most Christian thinkers until the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when these long-held pre-Christian notions came into question.

One possible exception to this position is found in a letter written by Pope St. Clement of Rome (first century). He spoke of “the ocean, impassable to man, and the worlds beyond it,” which are regulated by God’s laws. This statement was made in the context of surveying various ways that the elements of God’s creation are placed in the service of human beings and the other living creatures.

Origen, a third-century Christian theologian with some plural world speculations of his own,²⁰ suggested two interpretations for Clement’s words. This pope, he explained, might be referring to other parts of Earth that we cannot reach because the ocean prevents such a journey. In this sense, “worlds” would be parallel to the expression used by later, ocean-crossing colonial explorers when they referred to Europe, Asia, and Africa as the “Old World” and the Americas as the “New World.”

The second interpretation suggested by Origen was that St. Clement thought “the whole universe of existing things” contained “other worlds”; he “wished the globe of the sun or moon, and of the other bodies called planets, to each be termed ‘worlds.’” If this is the correct interpretation, then we have here what seems to be the earliest surviving Christian reference to other worlds within our universe, and even to worlds with inhabitants.²¹

Medieval Speculations

Surviving documents from the Early Middle Ages reveal little speculation on the plurality of worlds, though the philosophical and theological debate about it, with its implications for the possible existence of ETI, apparently continued. The rediscovery of Aristotle’s work in the West made an unparalleled contribution to the flourishing of philosophy, theology, and science in the High Middle Ages (ca. 1000–1300). But that philosopher’s fertile influence on medieval thinkers also brought with it certain limitations in philosophical and theological thought. Nowhere is this more evident than in the continuing debate about the plurality of worlds and its implications for the idea of ETI.

Following the claims of Aristotle, the great scholastic philosopher–theologians of this period—most importantly, St. Aquinas (1225–1274)—largely concluded that only one world can exist. Again, the word “world” was taken in the sense of “universe,” not Earth-like planets. As we have seen, Aristotle’s geocentric model of the universe led him to conclude that all things in existence have a single circumference and a single center, and that center is the earth. So, there could be no possibility of another universe with a different circumference and center.

St. Thomas also drew from Plato's thought in claiming that a singular universe resulted from a singular divine Craftsman. Because of the oneness of God, he insisted, it was fitting for Him to create only one world, mirroring his own perfection.²² Nevertheless, following the Greeks, St. Thomas did allow for the possibility that the stars were animated by souls, and thus were living creatures. In this way, he thought that at least one form of extraterrestrial intelligence was possible.²³

We must emphasize here that the ancient and medieval Christian philosophers who objected to the idea of a "plurality of worlds" were primarily doing so not based on Christian revelation. They were "following the science" on this matter. According to them, the cosmological model from the pre-Christian natural philosophy of the ancient Greeks was the closest thing to a science of the cosmos.

God's Power Is Not Limited

The Scholastic theology of St. Thomas and his scholarly allies came to dominate the universities of Europe. But three years after he died, in 1277, Étienne Tempier, the Bishop of Paris (the city where Thomas had taught), publicly condemned 219 beliefs that had become popular at the universities. Étienne considered these beliefs heresies because they seemed to limit the power of God.

Among these condemned notions was the teaching that God "cannot make many worlds." If God is all-powerful, as the Church has always taught, who dares to claim that He finds it impossible to make more than one universe? If He created our universe out of nothing, surely He can create out of nothing just as many other universes as He wishes.

As a result of this public condemnation, many of the university theologians were pressed to reconsider their position on the matter, and the door was open to new speculation about other worlds. Among these, employing significant criticisms of Aristotle's universe, were the Franciscan philosopher William of Ockham (ca. 1280–1347); the cleric Jean Buridan (ca. 1295–1358), rector of the University of Paris; and Nicole Oresme (1325–1382), the Bishop of Paris. Though in the end they all concluded that there is no plurality of worlds (in the sense of entire multiple universes), their critiques helped to identify the weaknesses in the arguments of Aristotle and Aquinas that figured into the continuing conversation in the Renaissance.²⁴

Nicholas of Cusa

A radical departure from Aristotle was taken by Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), a German theologian, philosopher, and astronomer. Cusa turned away decisively from the Scholastic tradition of St. Thomas and others, drawing more from Plato's thought than Aristotle's. In his ideas about the cosmos, he broke fundamentally with both ancient and medieval notions of the world.

Cusa taught that the universe can have no center, so Earth is not the immovable center, as the Scholastics had taught in following Aristotle. He speculated that there are other planets like Earth; it is only one among others. The heavenly bodies, even the sun, the moon, and the

stars, are all composed of the same basic elements as the Earth. For this reason, our position in the universe is neither unique nor even central. In all these assertions, Cusa anticipated significant later scientific findings regarding the nature of the cosmos.²⁵

The cardinal did not shy away from insisting that celestial bodies could support life, nor from speculating about their inhabitants:

Life, as it exists here on earth in the form of men, animals, and plants, is to be found, let us suppose, in a higher form in the solar and stellar regions. Rather than think that so many of the stars and parts of the heavens are uninhabited and that this earth of ours alone is peopled—and that with beings, perhaps, of an inferior type—we will suppose that in every region there are inhabitants, differing in nature by rank and all owing their origin to God, who is the center and circumference of all stellar regions.²⁶

In this way, Cusa declared the whole universe to be the stage for an abundance of varied life-forms.²⁷

We might have expected Cusa's rather radical break with philosophical tradition to provoke considerable opposition. Yet, his appointment as a cardinal, papal legate, and papal adviser, and his participation in the ecumenical Council of Basel (1431), all suggest that within the Catholic Church, he was respected and embraced by authorities at the highest levels.²⁸

ETI Original Sin, Incarnation, Redemption?

Cusa's contemporary, the French philosopher and theologian William of Vorilong (aka Guillaume de Varouillon, ca. 1392–1463), joined the cardinal in pressing the bounds of this ancient conversation. He allowed not just for a plurality of worlds, but an infinity of worlds, noting that the pre-Christian atomist philosopher Democritus had posited as much. Vorilong concluded that if the atheist Democritus had only understood that these worlds “lie hid in the mind of God,” rather than thinking them the result of random interaction of atoms, “he would have understood rightly.”²⁹

Contrary to the atomists, however, Vorilong suggested that such worlds could be located *within* our universe, and they could be inhabited. (He seemed to think this situation was probable.) Then he moved to boldly go where no Christian theologian had gone before. Vorilong raised a pointed question concerning these otherworldly inhabitants: Would their existence be compatible with traditional Christian teaching about original sin, the incarnation, and redemption in Christ?³⁰ “If it be inquired whether men exist on that world, and whether they have sinned as Adam sinned, I answer no, for they would not exist in sin and did not spring from Adam. ... As to the question whether Christ by dying on this earth could redeem the inhabitants of another world, I answer that he is able to do this even if the worlds were infinite, but it would not be fitting for him to go unto another world that he must die again.”³¹

Vorilong concluded, then, that since ETI would not be descendants of Adam, they would be without the original sin inherited from him. But even if they somehow had fallen as humanity did, Christ's incarnation and redemptive sacrifice on Earth could provide them redemp-

tion. The Son of God would have the ability to be incarnate on other worlds as well, even an infinite number of times.³² But he insisted that the scenario of an infinite series of brutal passions and deaths would not be fitting.

If Vorilong's conclusions are indeed true, we might wonder how we could ever find out about them. Unlike most modern science fiction writers speculating about ETI, Vorilong did not envision visitors from another inhabited world traveling to ours. But he offered another possibility: "By what means are we able to have knowledge of that world? I answer by angelic revelation or by divine means."³³ God could tell us through angels or prophets.

By the end of the fifteenth century, then, we find that the age-old conversation about the plurality of worlds was developing a new focus. Rather than speculating about entire multiple universes, the attention was turning toward multiple worlds within our universe. The notion of these other worlds being inhabited by intelligent creatures now came more to the forefront.

Later Renaissance Developments

Given the remarkable intellectual ferment in Western culture of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a number of scientists, philosophers, and theologians entered the ETI arena of debate. Controversy sharpened as clashing scientific models, philosophies, and theologies raised the volume of the conversation, and positions on the central issues multiplied. What led to such developments?

First, the science of astronomy was making great strides. The heliocentric ("sun-centered") model of the universe, first proposed by the Greek astronomer Aristarchus of Samos in the third century BC, was given new life by Nicholas Copernicus (1473–1543), a Polish mathematician, astronomer, and Doctor of Canon Law.³⁴ Copernicus's most famous work, *On the Revolution of the Celestial Orbs*, was dedicated to Pope Paul III (1468–1549). In it, the author laid out his arguments with a confidence in "the divine providence of the Creator of all things."³⁵

This new model, though forcefully challenged by scientists, philosophers, and theologians alike, came eventually to replace the long-established geocentric model of Aristotle. It needed important modifications, but led to a more accurate understanding of our planet's place in the solar system.³⁶ It also continued to shift the focus of attention in the "plurality of worlds" debate. Rather than speculations about entire multiple universes, new theories emerged about the "worlds" that could be observed in the sky of *this* universe: the sun, moon, planets, and stars.

Meanwhile, philosophers were challenging more than Aristotle's model of the cosmos, impelled by a revival of ancient ideas from both Plato and the atomists. The driving notion behind certain arguments, drawn ultimately from Plato's thought, was plenitude. Advocates of this principle, in opposition to Aristotle, asserted that the universe contains all possible forms of existence; whatever can be, including multiple inhabited worlds, will be, and it is good that they are.³⁷

At the same time, advances in technology, most notably the telescope (invented in 1608), allowed researchers to discover more details about the heavenly bodies they studied. These developments gave birth to various astronomical theories based on technical reasoning. As the focus of debate shifted to bodies visible in the sky, those who debated now spent considerable time comparing the physical characteristics of such bodies to those of Earth. Conclusions about their comparative composition, physical features, and environmental conditions led to speculation about their possible inhabitants.³⁸

A Variety of Speculations

Not surprisingly, theologians found themselves pressed to respond to both scientific and philosophical developments, some of which seemed to pose a challenge to traditional Christian beliefs. They were concerned with ensuring that theology remained faithful to Sacred Scripture and Tradition. But as the Western Christian tradition was itself shattered by various Protestant movements, theologians of differing convictions debated ETI among themselves. Catholic and other Christian thinkers proposed a variety of speculations about the subject, but the Catholic Church still took no official position (and has not done so to this day).

During this period and the century following, Catholic figures who were open to the idea of ETI included not only Copernicus, but also Tommaso Campanella (1568–1639), a Dominican friar, theologian, and philosopher; the philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650); and the poet Alexander Pope (1688–1744). They were joined by a number of prominent Protestant figures.³⁹

Drawing on his experience dealing with demonic powers, the Italian exorcist Fr. Ludovico Sinistrari (1632?–1701), writing around the year 1700, argued confidently that Christian faith did not rule out ETI. In *Demoniality: or, Incubi and Succubi*, he observed, “Now, that there be another World than the one we live in and that it be peopled by men not born of Adam but made by God, in some other way, as is implied by those who believe the moon to be inhabited, has nothing to do with faith. ... I premise that neither Philosophy nor Theology is repugnant to the possible existence of rational creatures having spirit and body, and distinct from man.”⁴⁰

“The Era of the Extraterrestrial”

By the mid-eighteenth century, the notion of ETI had been promoted by a number of thinkers, including some of the most prominent intellectuals of the day, Catholic and otherwise. With numerous speculations offered by scientists, philosophers, theologians, poets, and others, as one historian of the development has termed it, “the era of the extraterrestrial had begun.”⁴¹ They certainly had their opponents on the issue, but much of public opinion seemed to follow their lead.

One fascinating contribution came from the internationally known Jesuit priest, scientist, philosopher, and poet Roger Joseph Boscovich (1711–1787), who taught at the Collegium Romanum and the University of Padua. He also played a major role in founding the Brera Observatory near Milan.⁴² In his *Philosophiae Naturalis Theoria* (1758), he advanced the startling notion

(based on a chemical theory about the nature of fire) that “in the sun itself, & in the stars, ... there may exist bodies ... [that] may grow & live without the slightest injury of any kind to their organic structure.”⁴³ More remarkable still was his speculation that matter ultimately consists not of hard atoms with mass (a common notion of the time), but rather as centers of force with attractive and repulsive forces. Perhaps such bodies of matter, he proposed, can interpenetrate one another: “There might be a large number of material & sensible [perceptible] universes existing in the same space, separated one from the other in such a way that one was perfectly independent of the other, & the one could never acquire any indication of the existence of the other.”⁴⁴ He elaborated: “What if there are other kinds of things that are different from those about us, or even exactly similar to ours, which have, so to speak, another infinite space, which is distant from this our infinite space by no interval either finite or infinite, but is so foreign to it, situated, so to speak, elsewhere in such a way that it has no communication with this space of ours; & thus will induce no relation of distance.” He goes on to suggest that these multiple universes could exist “in a time situated outside the whole of our eternity.”⁴⁵

The breadth of Boscovich’s theory is stunning: God could have created not just intelligent life on other planets, but entire parallel inhabited universes in parallel eternities. In a work published after his death, the theorist even considered the possibility of “a sequence of similar universes,” some of which were in size like tiny grains of sand compared to others.⁴⁶ His vision in many ways foreshadowed much later speculations in cosmology and physics, such as the multiverse theory and the many dimensions posited in string theory.

The French Catholic philosopher Comte Joseph de Maistre (1754–1821) addressed directly and confidently the issue of Christ’s relationship to extraterrestrials. In his *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg* (1821), he criticized certain theologians who reject the notion of ETI “for fear that it disturbs the doctrine of redemption,” and who instead insist that “the other planets are mere globes, *destitute of life and beauty*, which the Almighty has launched into space, apparently like a tennis-player, for his amusement solely.”⁴⁷

By the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the notion of extraterrestrial intelligence was no longer widely considered an eccentric and perhaps impious speculation by the well-read in Europe and the United States. In many ways, it had become a near-dogma among astronomers and a common assumption among many theologians as well. St. John Henry Newman (1801–1890), the English Catholic convert theologian, cardinal, and man of letters, complained in his celebrated *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870) that in his day, any doubts in religious circles about the existence of ETI were seen as “blasphemy.”⁴⁸

Catholic Poets, Priests, and a Blessed

In this period, Catholic poets such as Aubrey de Vere (1814–1902)⁴⁹ and Alice Meynell (1847–1922)⁵⁰ wrote lyrically of ETI and their relationship to Christ. Numerous prominent Catholic clergy across the United States, England, France, Germany, Spain, and Italy wrote about their conviction that ETI exists.⁵¹

Among the clergy was Père Joseph Félix (1810–1891), a prominent Parisian preacher, who announced in 1863 to thousands of the Catholic faithful in Notre Dame Cathedral that

the plurality of worlds was most certainly compatible with Christian beliefs. He told those scientists who saw belief in ETI as a barrier to faith, “Put into the sidereal world [the realm of distant stars] as many populations as you please ... Catholic dogma has here a tolerance that will astonish you and ought to satisfy you.”⁵²

For more than two decades in Italy, the pluralist position was promoted by the prolific Fr. Angelo Secchi (1818–1878), the director of the Roman College Observatory and the leading Italian astrophysicist of his day. In 1856, he noted in a work about the new Observatory, “It is with a sweet sentiment that man thinks of these worlds without number, where each star is a sun which, as minister of the divine bounty, distributes life and goodness to the other innumerable beings, blessed by the hand of the Omnipotent.”⁵³

Another prominent proponent of such ideas was the German priest and seminary professor Joseph Pohle (1852–1922), who joined the founding faculty of The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, in 1889. Though Pohle was known among German and American seminarians primarily for his massive theological reference book, the twelve-volume *Textbook of Dogmatics*, in Germany he was recognized as a leading proponent of multiple inhabited worlds. His *Star Worlds and Their Inhabitants* (1884–85) combined science and history with metaphysics and theology to consider the probability of inhabitants in various celestial bodies, including those of our solar system.⁵⁴

One last Catholic voice of the nineteenth century deserves mention. The celebrated German mystic and stigmatist Blessed Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774–1824) allegedly received numerous private revelations throughout her lifetime. These reportedly included visions of planets and other celestial bodies both inhabited and uninhabited, some “awaiting a future population.” The authenticity of some elements in her writings has been questioned, largely owing to inconsistencies in the work of poet Clemens Brentano, who assembled the works after her death. Yet, we should note that for half a century, a number of eminent Catholic theologians who examined the documents found no reason to doubt that the existence of such creatures was in accord with a traditional Christian view of the universe.⁵⁵

“The Liveliest Speculation” at the Dawn of the Space Age

Before 1900, numerous publications about ETI made little effort to distinguish between scientific and religious views. But throughout the twentieth century, fewer explicitly Christian voices were heard to address the matter. The American astronomer Carl Sagan (1934–1996), himself an agnostic,⁵⁶ concluded regarding the history of ETI speculation, in this field as in others, that “science has systematically expropriated areas which are the traditional concern of religion.”⁵⁷

Nevertheless, according to the American astrobiologist Douglas Vakoch, it was at the beginning of the “Age of Space,” in the middle of the twentieth century, that a flurry of brief but provocative Christian theological speculations about ETI appeared in response to space exploration. One scientist of the period, the Executive Secretary of the American Rocket Society, observed that “the liveliest speculation” about ETI came from Catholic theologians.⁵⁸

Summing up the thought of a number of these theologians writing between 1955 and 1965, Vakoch observed, “The dominant position of this group was that belief in extraterrestrial beings is consistent with both science and Christian theology. Most of those who took a position on whether such life is probable argued that it is.” Vakoch’s survey of this decade includes references to a number of Catholic theologians (many of them priests): Theodore J. Zubek, John P. Kleinz, Daniel C. Raible, A. Carr, J. D. Conway, James Harford, John J. Lynch, L. C. McHugh, and Angelo Perego.⁵⁹

Among these thinkers, the most common argument for the probable existence of ETI was the glory of God. Creatures in other worlds would glorify God not just by their very existence (manifesting His greatness, love, wisdom, and power), but also by consciously and intentionally acknowledging Him as their Creator. Some suggested that certain extraterrestrial races might even glorify God in a better way than we do.⁶⁰

One prominent twentieth-century saint firmly agreed with that idea. The celebrated Italian Capuchin priest and friar St. Pio of Pietrelcino (aka Padre Pio, 1887–1968) once insisted in private conversation that “other beings” exist “who love the Lord. ... The Lord certainly did not limit his glory to this small Earth. On other planets other beings exist who did not sin and fall as we did.”⁶¹

Pope St. Paul VI (1897–1978) reportedly found the possibility of extraterrestrials to be reasonable and could see how “the universal Church” would in that case include more than the human race.⁶² And when Pope St. John Paul II (1920–2005) was asked by a child in a public audience, “Holy Father, are there any aliens?” the saint did not respond, “That is contrary to Church teaching” or “We don’t know.” Instead, he replied simply, “Always remember: they are children of God as we are.”⁶³

Since that time, the number of Catholic theologians, philosophers, and scientists addressing the subject has multiplied. Among those who consider ETI a possibility or even a probability, and its existence not contrary to the Church’s teaching, we could include Thomas O’Meara,⁶⁴ Marie I. George,⁶⁵ Peter M. J. Hess,⁶⁶ Fr. George Coyne, SJ,⁶⁷ Fr. José G. Funes, SJ,⁶⁸ Ernan McMullin,⁶⁹ Fr. Roch Kereszty,⁷⁰ Christopher Baglow,⁷¹ and others.⁷²

Other Forms of Nonhuman Intelligence?

We should also note that ETI is not the only form of nonhuman, nonangelic intelligence that has been pondered, and even affirmed, in the Catholic historical conversation. In the ancient Church, both St. Jerome, the “father of biblical scholarship,” and St. Augustine, arguably the greatest Western theologian of the early centuries, left no record of speculating about ETI, which is not surprising, given the limits of ancient philosophy. Yet, they did affirm the existence of other nonhuman, nonangelic forms of intelligence.

The Life of Paul the Hermit was written in the year 374 or 375 by St. Jerome. In that work, he offered a fascinating account of an encounter that St. Anthony of the Desert had experienced with a satyr, one of many nonhuman intelligent creatures portrayed by the ancients but now considered mythical. Someone might respond that perhaps Jerome was simply retelling the

story as he heard it without attempting to “demythologize” it, even though he did not believe in such things himself.

Nevertheless, Jerome went on to say, “Let no one scruple to believe this incident,” and declared in no uncertain terms that he believed the creature was real and the incident truly took place. As corroborating evidence, he claimed that only decades before, in the reign of the Roman Emperor Constantine, a satyr had been brought alive to the great city of Alexandria and publicly displayed. After it died, the body was preserved and brought to Antioch for the emperor to view.⁷³

Half a century later, in his celebrated *City of God* (written 413–26), St. Augustine reasoned that credible testimony of the existence of “sylvans and fauns” was so abundant that it would be “imprudent to deny it.” He speculated that there may be, interacting with human beings, certain nonhuman “spirits embodied” in a substance that, like air, is invisible to us but “felt sensibly [that is, through the sense of touch] by the body.”⁷⁴

Suggestive anecdotes have come from the testimony of Catholic exorcists. We have noted the conclusion of the seventeenth-century Italian exorcist Sinistrari that the existence of ETI would not be contrary to Catholic faith. In addition, he quoted St. Jerome’s story of the centaur and satyr, as well as St. Augustine’s remarks about sylvans and fauns, declaring that such nonhuman intelligent creatures actually exist.

Yet, Sinistrari moved beyond quoting ancient authorities, providing evidence from exorcists of his day who reported some attempted exorcisms that were unsuccessful. He argued that the invisible nonhuman intelligences they encountered on such occasions did not respond to the ministrations of the Church through the exorcists, demonstrating that they were not fallen angels (demons). “In the very World where we dwell,” he concluded, “there be other rational creatures besides man and the Angelic Spirits, creatures generally invisible to us and whose being is disclosed but accidentally, through the instrumentality of their own power.”⁷⁵

In the early twentieth century, the British Jesuit Fr. Herbert Thurston, SJ (1856–1939), came to similar conclusions in analyzing numerous accounts of exorcism across the centuries in Europe, America, and beyond. Many of these cases displayed parallels to the ones described by Sinistrari. “To attribute them all to diabolical agency,” Thurston observed, “is difficult.”⁷⁶

Could there be some kind of historical reality underlying the belief that a third rational terrestrial species exists, distinct from angels and humans? The question is increasingly important today, when the public ETI conversation has begun broadening to include other possibilities, such as terrestrial (or ultraterrestrial) nonhuman intelligence.⁷⁷

This brief historical survey is of course not intended to suggest that the possibility of NHI of various sorts has been proven or officially affirmed by the Church, nor that such a possibility has never been challenged by Catholic and other Christian thinkers. It does demonstrate, however, that the Catholic intellectual tradition has in many ways made room for such a possibility since ancient times. Considering that history, the Church in the twenty-first century should not hesitate to take up the matter in a more comprehensive and straightforward way.

A “Noble and Wondrous” Question

In response to the current renewed interest in UAP, the recently established Sol Foundation seeks to bring together “experts from academia and government to address the philosophical, policy, and scientific problems” presented by the study of UAP and the closely related topic of extraterrestrial intelligence.⁷⁸ To their credit, the organizers of the foundation seek to include religious scholars in their studies as well. At Sol’s inaugural symposium in November 2023, the present writer was invited to address the specific topic of NHI and the Catholic faith.

When the video recording of the presentation was posted online, viewers (as expected) posted a wide variety of comments. Many expressed their approval, or at least openness, regarding its thesis. In light of Church teaching and the history of Catholic thought on the subject, we have ample reason to believe that the Church, while remaining faithful to the Catholic Tradition, could accommodate a compelling public discovery or disclosure of extraterrestrial or other nonhuman intelligences.⁷⁹

Even so, one commentator offered a terse criticism: “The Catholic Church once again is playing catch up.”⁸⁰ These words reflect a wider sentiment found among many critics of the faith that the Catholic Church is typically caught off guard by new scientific discoveries that are contrary to its teachings. As a result, the Church seems to be revising its doctrine while pretending nothing has changed, a kind of “constant rearguard action,” as Pope Benedict XVI once described it.⁸¹

The history of the Catholic conversation about NHI demonstrates that in this matter, at least, the Church is by no means “playing catch up.” As we have noted, the Church has never issued a formal statement denying the possibility of nonhuman intelligence. The reluctance of most early Catholic thinkers to entertain the matter was based not on theology, but on the mistaken assumptions of a “science” they had inherited from pre-Christian philosophers. Once those philosophical assumptions were challenged and discarded, a number of prominent Catholic and other Christian figures showed themselves capable of imagining the fascinating possibilities of nonhuman intelligent life. Some of the resulting speculations anticipated certain scientific discoveries and theories of the twentieth century.

The Church has left the door open wide for Catholic scientists, theologians, philosophers, and others to explore the topic. We should look to St. Albert the Great, the thirteenth-century patron saint of philosophers and scientists, for encouragement in this regard. Thinking about the possibility of other inhabited realms, he insisted, “Since one of the most wondrous and noble questions about Nature is whether there is one world or many, a question that the human mind desires to understand per se, it seems desirable for us to inquire about it.”⁸²

2. UAP Studies Intensify the NHI Conversation

The organizers of the Second Vatican Council understandably felt no urgency in 1959 about considering the issue of extraterrestrial intelligence and other forms of nonhuman intelligence. But the matter has become much more pressing today, considering the worldwide multiplication of credible reports regarding UAP. This development has earned more focused attention from scientists, government officials, theologians, and other scholars, as well as voices in social and other media. As a result, the NHI discussion has grown rapidly in significance, breadth, complexity, and gravity in the United States and beyond.

The Catholic Church Is Uniquely Situated for the Conversation

For many of those engaged in this conversation, the primary question has shifted from the theoretical “Are they out there somewhere?” to the more unsettling “Are they right here, right now, with us?” Both questions obviously have serious implications for our understanding of the cosmos and our place in it, particularly for Catholic faith and life. Therefore, they must be explored carefully in light of the Church’s Tradition and the relevant scientific and testimonial evidence.

Adherents of other religious traditions will no doubt be wrestling with these far-reaching implications as well, to one degree or another. The Catholic Church is uniquely situated to make a meaningful contribution to this wider religious conversation: It embraces an estimated 1.39 billion members worldwide.⁸³ It enjoys a rich historical and lively intellectual tradition. And it possesses a multicultural scope and presence around the globe. For the Church to take a leading role among religious traditions in engagement with this matter could thus be transformative for the spiritual and cultural development not only of Catholics, but also of other Christians and non-Christians as well.

What might the stages of that process of engagement look like? For what fundamental questions would we need to seek answers in each stage?

The First Stage: Exploration and Clarification

First, the Church could engage—beginning now—in a season of exploration and clarification regarding both NHI and UAP. In considering NHI, it would need to rediscover and explore thoroughly the relevant elements of its own tradition: theological, scriptural, philosophical, historical, and social. In considering UAP, it would need to examine not only the scientific evidence, but also the lived experience of Catholics and others who testify to personal UAP encounters. Such a broad and thoroughgoing investigation could lead to a more accurate discernment of how a traditional Catholic understanding of the cosmos might both accommodate and be expanded and enriched by evidence of UAP realities.

In this first stage, two fundamental questions would need to be addressed: Is the possibility of NHI (beyond the angelic) excluded by the Catholic faith—or is there room within the essential contours of that faith for a more complex, nuanced, and mysterious cosmic reality than we have commonly imagined? And if there is indeed room, what fitting place might that reality find in Catholic faith and life?

The Second Stage: Confirmation and Assimilation

The second stage of engagement would begin if the world should have a compelling public confirmation by scientists, government officials, or even religious authorities of the existence of NHI. Perhaps even a public, undeniable encounter with that reality might take place to provide an indisputable confirmation.

At that time, Catholics and other Christians would need to assimilate the new empirical information through careful study, reflection, and prayer. Just as their spiritual ancestors had to grapple with the theological implications of the Copernican Revolution, as well as the encounter with previously unknown peoples of the Western Hemisphere, believers would have much to ponder that requires a response of “faith seeking understanding” (as St. Anselm once posited).⁸⁴ Catholic leaders, both clergy and laity, would play an essential role in helping them meet that challenge.

Officials of the US government and other nations have long attempted to prevent or at least minimize public awareness of UAP evidence.⁸⁵ According to common speculation, one reason for that strategy is the fear that a public confirmation of nonhuman intelligence—especially NHI that is present on Earth—would result in worldwide panic, social and political chaos, economic turmoil, and worse. Some evidence that such a fear entered early (and continuing) US government decisions can be found in a report to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in 1960 by an influential American think tank focusing on public policy. It warned of the possibility of cultural, religious, and social disruption if the discovery of ETI should be disclosed to the public. The report suggested that civil authorities, in consultation with scientists, would need to consider withholding such information.⁸⁶

Since then, the results of several surveys dealing with this topic have suggested that a significant majority of American religious believers of various traditions would not panic over the confirmation of ETI (and, presumably, other forms of NHI). Other surveys have differed in their results. Perhaps a public NHI confirmation would cause less disruption than many have feared. Nevertheless, as details and speculations about the newly affirmed reality would emerge, Catholics, other Christians, and adherents of other faiths would almost certainly welcome some clarification and reassurance from their religious leaders.⁸⁷

In this stage, the pressing question would be how to provide relevant faith formation and effective pastoral care in such an unsettled, unsettling time.

The Third Stage: Dialogue, Discernment, and Cooperation

A third stage of the engagement process could begin if—in an even more stunning development—open contact with NHI visitors should make some form of communication with

them possible. (The second and third stages would of course converge if the initial public confirmation were accompanied by evidence of communication.) At that time, the Church would need to engage in a carefully considered dialogue with our new interlocuters. Such an ongoing conversation would present opportunities to discern—again, if possible—their spiritual and moral status; the providential plans God might have for them; and the path toward building a prudent, just, and mutually beneficial relationship of cooperation between our species and theirs.

At the same time, engagement with NHI could teach us more about what it means to be human. By learning more about creatures who are like us in certain ways but fundamentally different in others, we could gain a better understanding of ourselves, including a clearer definition of the concept of *imago Dei*, the “image of God.”

The essential question of this stage would be what could we learn from them, and what we could teach them.

Finally, we should note that even if the second and third stages of this imagined process never come to pass, a careful study of this subject offers important spiritual benefits. It presses us to ponder questions that can draw us more deeply into many profound theological and spiritual truths. Such a careful consideration of NHI in light of the Catholic faith can enrich our understanding of God, His redemptive plan, human nature, and our universe.

3. Exploration and Clarification: Topics to Consider

The topics to be explored and clarified in considering the possibilities for nonhuman intelligence are myriad. Some could be of import for every human being on our planet. Others have particular relevance for Catholics and other Christians.⁸⁸ Among the latter, as we have noted, one question must precede the others as foundational for all the rest: Is the existence of nonhuman intelligence (other than angels) contrary to the Catholic faith?

Is NHI Contrary to Faith?

Several factors must be considered in answering this fundamental question—not just theological, but also historical and hermeneutical:

- Has the Church ever formally declared that the existence of NHI is contrary to the Catholic faith?
- Are there doctrines of the Church that would rule out NHI by implication?
- What is the reasoning of those, in the past as well as the present, who have found a conflict between the existence of NHI and the Catholic faith, and what is the reasoning of those who have found no such conflict?
- Does the apparent absence of specific reference to NHI in Scripture have any bearing on this question?
- Are there scriptural and magisterial texts (such as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*) that seem to bear on this issue?
- How have scriptural texts with potential relevance to this issue been interpreted by widely recognized commentators such as the Church Fathers, St. Thomas Aquinas, and others?
- If these commentators offer multiple plausible interpretations, would any of those interpretations suggest that the texts are not necessarily relevant to the existence of NHI?
- Is the scope of the meaning of such texts (not only in Scripture, but also in magisterial documents) necessarily cosmic, or might it be limited to our planet?
- What is the *imago Dei* (image of God)? Does the Church teach that it is limited to human beings on Earth?

- Does Church teaching about the special status of human beings, human “dominion” over other creatures, and the ways in which “all things” are created for humanity, necessarily rule out the existence of NHI? How would the intended scope of these teachings (cosmic or only earthly?), as expressed in Scripture and magisterial documents, shape their interpretation?
- What philosophical issues might bear on this foundational question?
- If the existence of NHI is contrary to Catholic faith, how do we account for UAP? Would we be able to conclude that every case for which science can offer no reasonable explanation must be attributed to observer hoax or misidentification; secret advanced human technology; government psychological operations; demons and angels; or human time travelers?
- Finally, if the teachings of the Church do not rule out NHI, what can we learn from current scientific and testimonial evidence that might make its existence seem more probable? We should note that the Catholic and broader Christian community is today clearly hindered in its efforts to explore and clarify the matter because of the lack of transparency demonstrated by secular governments and other relevant actors. Christian theologians, philosophers, historians, scientists, social scientists, and other scholars need as much relevant data as possible to examine for their discernment.

How Would NHI Fit into the Fundamental Contours of Christian Faith?

The long history of the Christian conversation about NHI reveals a wide variety of speculation about the possibilities of their nature and status within a religious context. If the Catholic faith could accommodate the existence of NHI, these and other possibilities would need to be explored regarding the place of that reality within a larger theological framework. Beginning with the fundamental Christian assumptions that any existing NHI has been created by God (Revelation 4:11), is known by Him (Hebrews 4:13), is loved by Him (Wisdom 11:24), and is providentially governed by Him (1 Chronicles 29:11–12), some of the possibilities to be considered are these:

- **Origins:** Could some forms of NHI originate on other planets (extraterrestrials)? Could they be ultraterrestrials or other terrestrials—that is, a nonhuman species (or multiple species) who originate on Earth and inhabit Earth, but have remained largely hidden from humanity? Would God necessarily have created NHI to live in our universe, or could they come from a parallel or alternate universe or another dimension of some sort that He has also created? (“Dimension” would need to be clarified; depending on the definition, angels, for example, might be considered as “interdimensional.”) Could they be human time travelers from the future?
- **Spiritual status:** What might be the possible types of spiritual status for NHI? That is, if they are rational and free-willed, would they necessarily be made in the image of God? Could they be rational, free-willed creatures, yet *not* be made in the image of God? Would

they necessarily be conscious of God? Would their spirits be immortal, as ours are? How might their form of life be analogous to ours? How might it be different?

- **Corporeal status:** Could they be purely spiritual, as the angels are, or embodied spirits, as we are? Could there be multiple “tiers” of NHI between pure spirits and humans?
- **Capabilities:** Could they be in some ways superior to us (not just in their apparent technology)? If they are embodied spirits, could their bodies be invisible and immeasurable to us, yet still have the capacity to act in our physical world? Would their bodies be subject to death? Could they communicate directly into our thought processes, as angels (both fallen and unfallen) can? Could they have capabilities so different from our own (natural or technological) that their presence and actions might seem to us like “magic”?
- **Moral status:** Could they be morally fallen, as we are? Could they be unfallen? Could some be fallen and others unfallen (in differing species, or even among the same species, as with the angels)? Could some be unfallen yet still have the potential to fall?
- **Redemption:** If they are fallen, would God have plans for their redemption? If so, could the redemptive power of God’s incarnation on Earth as a human being have a “ripple effect” for NHI? Could God have other kinds of redemptive plans for them? Could God assume (join to Himself) the created nature of NHI, as he did our nature, to achieve more than one incarnation for the sake of their redemption? Since God the Son assumed a human nature, could God the Father or God the Holy Spirit assume an NHI nature as well? Could God become incarnate even in an unfallen NHI species simply for the sake of solidarity and friendship with them?
- **Ecclesiology:** How might NHI figure into the Church’s self-understanding regarding their potential membership in the Mystical Body of Christ, the administration of the sacraments, and other ecclesiastical issues?
- **Destiny:** What ultimate destiny might God have intended for them? What other possible destinies might they experience? Could they enjoy heaven? If they are fallen, could they be in danger of hell? Would they undergo a process of purification before enjoying heaven?

We should keep in mind that most of these questions assume that NHI would have at least some degree of commonality with human beings. Yet, some forms of NHI might be so different from us that any attempt at comparisons would largely fail.

4. Confirmation and Assimilation: Topics to Consider

Though it is difficult to gauge ahead of time the full impact of a compelling public confirmation of NHI, in such an event the Church must be prepared to respond quickly and effectively. Catholics and other Christians will need relevant faith formation and effective pastoral care amid potential “ontological shock”—the distressing experience of having their fundamental view of reality apparently challenged. If the Church has engaged in careful study and discernment prior to the event, exploring the (sometimes startling) possibilities for the reality that has been confirmed, the task of assimilation and reassurance should prove less challenging than it might have been without such preparation. Several new topics would need to be addressed in this transitional phase:

- What kind of spiritual impact is public confirmation of NHI having on Catholics and other Christians? Are they finding it difficult to pray, to engage in spiritual reading, to attend Mass? What faith-related questions are they asking pastors, teachers, and other religious leaders? What confusion, doubts, or even crises of faith are they experiencing? Are they being told that the existence of NHI disproves their faith? Are they encountering newly emerging beliefs that attempt to incorporate the NHI revelations into a new, alternative religion that they find confusing or appealing?
- What special challenges does NHI confirmation present to clergy and other religious leaders? Is their personal faith being challenged? Do they feel unprepared or overwhelmed as they attempt to minister to those they lead and to others who might seek them out for pastoral care? How can the Church provide pastoral care to the clergy themselves in this situation?
- What is the psychological impact of NHI confirmation on Catholics and other Christians? Are they experiencing fear, anxiety, or even panic as a result? Are they struggling with depression or hopelessness? Do they feel anger and mistrust toward the authorities, who had previously assured them that NHI does not exist, or even toward authority in general, if they believe they have been betrayed? Are any of them in denial, refusing to accept what they have heard, insisting instead that the confirmation is actually a government psychological operation or a diabolical deception?
- What are the possible consequences of publicly confirming the NHI, especially in terms of finance, politics, social stability, and culture? How has confirmation affected Catholics’ relationships with family and friends, employment, physical health, or plans for the future?
- How would the Church provide pastoral care to those who might seek to become Catholic as a result of their realization that NHI exists?

5. Dialogue, Discernment, and Cooperation: Topics to Consider

If the third phase of engagement occurs, efforts to contact NHI could reveal whether any of the possibilities envisioned in the first stage are actualized. The behavior of the NHI in contact could be observed and analyzed, and if possible, queries could be made to them about such matters as their nature, capabilities, and thought.

Given its significance as a global actor and influencer, and the weighty implications of NHI engagement for more than a billion Catholics worldwide, the Church would be justified in approaching whichever human institutions would have access to communication channels with NHI, seeking a role as an interlocutor.

Specific topics to explore:

- Are they aware of, or even in contact with, other forms of NHI? If so, the following questions would need to be posed for each variety of NHI encountered.
- Do they have what among humans would be considered a religion? Do they have beliefs about how and why the universe came to be, how and why they themselves came to be, what is their final (postmortem) destiny, and what is the meaning and purpose of life?
- Do they have a notion of a supreme God, multiple gods, or other spiritual beings? Would their beliefs have any resemblance to terrestrial varieties of monotheism, polytheism, monism, pantheism, animism, atheism, or agnosticism? What kind of relationship(s) would they expect to have with any divine being that they believe exists?
- Do they have a notion of divine revelation? Do they have a tradition (oral or written) that they would review in a way similar to our sacred texts or canon of Scripture? If so, how do such traditions compare with ours? In what ways might our traditions be complementary?
- What are their concepts and experiences of community? Does their civilization feature communities based on what we would consider to be religious ideas?
- What is their vision of the cosmos? Do they believe in a single universe only, a multiverse, or embedded universes? Do they believe that it has always existed, or that it had a beginning?
- Does their experience of time seem to resemble ours? Do they believe that time travel is possible?
- What is their self-perception? How would they describe their nature as a species? Do they have a concept of a soul or spirit? Do they consider themselves to have free will?

- Are their modes of reasoning like ours? Do they have emotions like ours? Do they have memory and imagination like ours? Do they suffer pain, either bodily or emotionally?
- Do they have a system of ethics? If so, how would they articulate it? Does it resemble any common human systems of ethics? Do they have a concept of love as it appears in Christian ethics? Do they have a concept of moral disorder? What habits of thought and behavior would they see as virtues? What about vices?
- Do they have knowledge of nonhuman, nonterrestrial life that is nonrational? How do they relate to such forms of life?
- Are there any ways in which their religious and ethical notions are congruent with Christian teaching?
- Are they artificial intelligence of nonhuman origin? If so, who created them, and why?
- Are they time-traveling humans (or of human descent) from the future? If so, why are they here?
- Do they have any interest regarding human thinking about all these matters? Are they making any attempts to persuade us that their views on these matters are correct and should be adopted by humanity? Do any of them show an interest in learning more about, or even adopting, our religious convictions and practices? How should we respond to that interest?
- How long have they been present on Earth? In what ways have they interacted with humans? Did that interaction in any way enter human mythologies, religions, and folklore?
- Are they open about their motives for interacting with humanity? How do we discern their intentions and agenda for relating with us?
- Do they exhibit what we might consider to be indicators of moral fallenness, such as indifference to our welfare, intention to harm us, manifest selfishness, hatred, deception, manipulation, or malice? Or do they seem to be free of such indicators?
- How much do they know about us?
- How do we go about building an ethics of interaction with NHI?
- If their intentions in making contact seem to be benevolent, how might we prudently find common ground for a relationship of mutual benefit and goodwill? If their intentions are not benevolent, how do we attempt to persuade them otherwise? Failing that, how do we prepare Catholics and others for resisting the threat they represent?

Finally, we should note that some who speculate about NHI have concluded that, given their apparent technological superiority over humanity, they would also necessarily enjoy moral

and spiritual superiority. That notion has been dubbed by Lutheran theologian Ted Peters “the ETI myth,” “a scientized version of the gnostic redeemer myth.” Even in human history, we can see ample evidence that technological superiority does not imply moral and spiritual superiority.⁸⁹

Since we have no guarantees that any ETI we encounter would be unfallen or have religious views more in accord with reality than ours, Catholic and other Christian theologians would need to caution us about the presumption that whatever NHI think and communicate to us must be true. The knowledge of NHI visitors would necessarily be limited, and they might be mistaken about not just matters of religion, but even matters of science. They might also be quite capable of deceiving us.

Again, these questions presume that NHI nature and ours would have enough commonalities to make such communication possible and intelligible. We have no guarantees that this is the case. We might simply have to find ways to coexist without mutual understanding.

6. From Understanding to Action

The topics and questions proposed to this point are offered as possible paths to understanding NHI and UAP. Such understanding could lead, then, to wise action by the Church at every level, from the Vatican to the local parish. The consequences of a public NHI confirmation would touch Catholics at each of these levels, of every theological orientation, in every walk of life, in every nation. Other Christians, adherents of other religions, and people of no faith would all be affected. The Church’s response must bring the light of faith to bear on the countless challenges such a development will pose.

What concrete actions might the Vatican take? The bishops and diocesan leaders? Parish clergy and lay leaders? Religious orders and hospitals? Catholic schools? The Catholic academic community? Catholic publishers and other media? The Catholic people in the pew? Here are some suggestions for a prudent and proactive path of response and action.

The Vatican

An appropriate response to such a worldwide development necessarily requires strong Vatican leadership. Several immediate actions would enable the Catholic Church to take the lead in an effective response, not only for its own members, but for other faith communities as well.

- Vatican officials could be appointed to meet with representatives of scientific and other scholarly organizations involved in NHI and UAP studies around the globe (such as the Sol Foundation). These representatives would seek the perspectives and concerns of the Vatican in this regard, and they would provide initial briefings and later updates on NHI and UAP studies. Such communications could include scientific and testimonial evidence, as well as analysis of related political, social, and cultural developments.
- The Pontifical Academy of Sciences, the Vatican Observatory, and other Vatican agencies could organize international conferences and publish papers on the subject, similar to the study week on astrobiology that was held in 2009.⁹⁰
- Pontifical universities could be encouraged to make NHI and UAP studies part of their teaching and research on the intersection of faith and science.
- Since the International Theological Commission is tasked with helping the Holy See and the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF) examine “doctrinal questions of major importance,” this commission could be assigned to study the issue of UAP and offer its conclusions about whether the existence of (nonangelic) NHI would be compatible with Catholic doctrine.⁹¹

- If the DDF finds it prudent, a formal statement on the matter by the Dicastery would be extremely useful for astrobiology, astrotheology, and UAP studies in the Catholic community and beyond. If the DDF determines that the Catholic Church has not taken (and still does not take) a formal position on the existence of NHI, such a statement would offer needed clarification on the issue. If the DDF concludes that the existence of NHI is incompatible with Catholic doctrine, such a statement would press Catholics in UAP studies to search for alternate explanations for UAP occurrences whose characteristics suggest a nonhuman origin. If the DDF concludes that the existence of NHI is in fact compatible with Catholic doctrine, such a statement would allow considerable freedom and provide renewed motivation for Catholic researchers in astrobiology, astrotheology, and NHI/UAP studies to continue their work.
- Another matter that needs clarification has to do with certain claims, which are currently receiving renewed attention, that some Vatican officials have long been aware that NHI is a reality but have not revealed that knowledge. Of particular interest is the claim that the Holy See was involved in the transfer of a crashed and retrieved craft from Magenta, Italy, to the United States in 1944.⁹² If these popular claims are groundless, a clear denial of them by Vatican officials would help put such speculations to rest. If the claims have some merit, the Vatican could set an example of integrity and transparency by confirming them publicly and taking the lead in global public confirmation of NHI and UAP realities. Either way, it might be prudent for the Vatican to issue some definitive statement on the matter.
- The Vatican media could play an important role in bringing the NHI and UAP conversation to the attention of Catholics worldwide, shining the light of faith on the subject amid considerable confusion caused by so many conflicting voices.
- The Vatican archives may include documents and material holdings that are relevant to NHI and UAP studies. Researchers could be welcomed and assisted in finding those holdings for analysis.
- The Vatican could play an indispensable role in hosting and otherwise encouraging ecumenical and interreligious dialogue on this topic. Conferences and research could be focused on an honest exchange of views among representatives of various faith traditions, clarifying both their differences and commonalities, as part of a joint effort to seek the truth together about this important matter and to reaffirm their common humanity.
- All the above suggestions are offered for the first stage of engagement. If we should enter the second stage, with an explicit, public confirmation of NHI, Catholics and many others throughout the world would look to the Vatican for an immediate public statement acknowledging the new developments and offering reassurance. In addition, prominent leaders of other faith traditions could be invited to issue a joint statement of this kind with the Vatican. It would be an unprecedented moment in history to act in solidarity, when the entire human family has an opportunity to reaffirm its commonality given the prospect of encountering intelligent nonhuman species.

- A universal call to prayer, issued and led publicly by the Holy Father, could focus on orienting Catholics and others toward a deeper faith in God’s loving sovereignty and providence in the face of mystery and uncertainty. Petitions could be included for discernment, consolation, and peace.
- The Holy See’s status as a permanent observer at the United Nations could allow the Church to address the world about this matter through that global forum as well.
- After the initial announcement, the Church would almost certainly need to engage in an extensive development of doctrine to accommodate the newly acknowledged reality. The previously suggested actions could place the Church in a more favorable position to begin that development.
- If the third stage of engagement should take place—making possible some type of communication with NHI—the Vatican could seek opportunities to send representatives for inclusion in the ensuing dialogue.

The Bishops

The bishops would of course play an essential role in the engagement process at every stage. Their many potential contributions to the NHI and UAP conversation would be made not just within their respective dioceses, but also in episcopal conferences such as the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), whose mission calls them to “act collaboratively and consistently on vital issues confronting the Church and society” and “offer appropriate assistance to each bishop in fulfilling his particular ministry in the local Church.”⁹³

- In the United States, the National Advisory Council of the USCCB could deliberate about NHI and UAP and recommend that the bishops consider addressing it.
- If the bishops agree that the subject merits attention, they could address the topic in a number of ways appropriate to the structure and processes of the USCCB, including engagement by the executive and administrative committees as well as by various standing committees as referenced below. If a more public and comprehensive response is desired, perhaps it could be included within (or as one of) the strategic priorities of the next four-year USCCB Strategic Plan.
- The USCCB Committee on Doctrine would have a special role to play as it “assists the bishops and committees of the Conference in areas of faith and morals, providing expertise and guidance concerning the theological issues that confront the Church in the United States.” Its mandate includes “the relationship between science and faith,” which would have particular relevance for this topic.⁹⁴
- Other USCCB committees could assist the bishops with regard to NHI and UAP in their respective areas of specialization: Evangelization and Catechesis (faith formation); Communications (media relations, media production and programming, publishing); Clergy, Consecrated Life, and Vocations (pastoral care); Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth

(lay ministry formation and pastoral care); and Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (shared Christian and interfaith understanding and cooperation).

- Assisted by the USCCB, the bishops, along with their diocesan staffs, could lead Catholics to action in their respective dioceses throughout these same areas of ministry (doctrine, catechesis, communications, pastoral care, and interfaith efforts). Diocesan resources could be developed or assembled (with the help of the USCCB, Catholic institutes, and Catholic publishers) for distribution to clergy (relevant magisterial documents and other suggested reading, homiletic aids, pastoral guidelines) and for the use of laypeople in their parishes (books, pamphlets, online resources, TV and radio broadcasts, and more).
- If the second and third stages of engagement with NHI and UAP should take place, both clergy and lay Catholics would no doubt welcome a public pastoral acknowledgment of the situation, with reassurances, from their bishops as well as from the Vatican.
- Bishops could publicly join the Holy Father in his universal call to prayer.
- All resources for faith formation, preaching, and pastoral care regarding NHI and UAP would need updating to reflect the newly acknowledged realities.

Pastors and Other Clergy

- Pastors, other priests, and deacons are of course on the front lines in helping their people grow in faith and holiness, and the stages of engagement with NHI and UAP will present significant challenges in that ministry. In the first stage, the primary concern would be faith formation, helping parishioners to understand the Church's teaching about the subject considering both history and current developments.
- A second, urgent concern at the parish level merits serious attention immediately: pastoral care for those who report having had personal experiences with NHI or UAP and who seek either protection or some way to reconcile those experiences with their faith. Such people may approach clergy for counseling or even for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. They need to receive a sympathetic response of listening, counsel, and prayer.
- As is the case with paranormal phenomena in general, careful discernment is required to help such "experiencers" understand these events. (Many experiencers go unidentified because of the stigma associated with reporting; if the Church begins to normalize discussion of these issues, no doubt many more will be willing and eager to report.) Such experiences cannot be simply dismissed reflexively as mental health issues, impostures, or even diabolical encounters. The kind of protocols that are standard for sorting out claims of paranormal or mystical phenomena may be useful in identifying cases that are medical, psychological, or fraudulent. In cases that do present a common diabolical profile, referral to a duly authorized exorcist may be necessary for further discernment. Exorcists themselves would need to develop strategies for distinguishing between diabolical encounters and possible encounters with nonhuman intelligences that are not demonic.⁹⁵

- Holding small group meetings in the parish, in which NHI and UAP experiencers can gather to discuss their experiences confidentially and pray together, could be a useful addition to individual counseling, as it would set the conversation within the context of the Church's spiritual care.
- Clergy and other counselors are often called on to help people deal with major catastrophic events and other unsettling developments in the world. Typically, such developments are natural, political, military, social, or financial. In the second and third stages of engagement, which involve public NHI confirmation, the events may cause more fundamental disruption and dislocation, at a spiritual and even ontological level. The clergy must be prepared to walk closely with their people through the shock, confusion, anxiety, denial, and even anger that many may feel. They will need to offer honest answers to troubling questions (to whatever extent is possible), reassurance of God's presence and care despite uncertainties, and hope for the future.
- In addition to individual pastoral care, in the second and third stages the clergy could continue to help their parishioners and others through clear and accessible catechesis on the topic (especially in homilies). Listening sessions could be useful in understanding more fully what specific concerns parishioners would have.

Religious Orders and Hospitals

- In all three stages of engagement, religious orders—especially those with charisms of education and health care—could offer their own members and those they serve the same catechesis and counsel as recommended for clergy in the parish. Catholic hospitals could play a key role in this service as well.
- In case of social, political, or financial disruption in the second or third stages, religious orders with charisms of charitable and social services might be called to respond to significantly greater challenges in caring for the material needs of their communities.

Catholic Schools

- All the above suggestions for engagement in parishes also would apply to Catholic schools as well, but with special attention to the needs of children, youth, and families. Catechesis would need to be age appropriate; curricula could be developed that deal with the topic.
- Children are often among those who report NHI or UAP encounters, and families sometimes report intergenerational experiences. If students or their parents approach teachers or counselors with such reports, they would need the same kind of support suggested for the parish and referrals to a priest.

The Catholic Academic Community

- Involvement by the Catholic academic community is vital for exploring, clarifying, and developing NHI and UAP studies. The current stigma in most academic circles (both

religious and secular) regarding these studies must be overcome so that scholars are free to research and teach about these matters.

- In the short term, Catholic scholars could begin now to address certain popular claims in UAP studies that call for challenge and clarification through scholarly analysis, providing scriptural, historical, and theological context. Examples would include claims that Ezekiel's wheel in Scripture, as well as personifications of the sun and moon in traditional Catholic paintings, actually represent aliens and their spacecraft. Such unsupported claims, lacking essential context, contribute to the current stigma within the academic world about UAP studies.
- Catholic academic institutions and associations could invite their faculty members and other scholars to develop courses addressing the intersection of faith and science regarding NHI and UAP studies, or to include the subject within the study of a broader field.⁹⁶
- Catholic scholars in non-Catholic institutions could take the lead in NHI and UAP research and instruction.
- Relevant research and scholarship could be encouraged by academic institutions and associations through grants, writing sabbaticals, journal publications, conferences, symposia, and media productions. Catholic benefactors with a potential interest in the subject could be approached for funding.
- Seminaries especially could help train clergy and lay leaders to be prepared for the engagement process.

Catholic Media

- The Catholic press, broadcasters, book publishers, filmmakers, social media, and other media can have significant influence in bringing a subject to their audiences' attention and deepening their understanding. Though some Catholic media outlets (like most religious and secular outlets) still avoid this topic, the stigma of addressing it seems to be fading, especially in social media. The opportunity is ripe for Catholics to demonstrate leadership in this regard.
- More book-length treatments in NHI and UAP studies from a Catholic point of view are especially needed. The subject matter is broad, complex, and nuanced, meriting in-depth and comprehensive analysis.

Catholics in the Pew

- Catholics in the pew have important roles to play in the engagement process as well. Even those without leadership positions in the Church would have much to do.
- First, they should pray for their engagement in this matter, and the engagement of the Church and society as a whole, to be guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

- Second, they would have the responsibility to inform themselves about relevant developments in the Church and society. They would need to exercise prudence in discerning matters in the light of faith, especially about the sometimes dubious and confusing claims that circulate on social media. In this activity, resources provided by the Church to engage in prayerful reflection would merit serious attention in the search for understanding. Parents would, of course, have a pressing responsibility to help their children in this regard as well.
- Third, they could influence others in the parish, their extended families, and the wider community to engage with these developments in a spirit of calm, prudence, discernment, and faith.
- Finally, if they have had what they believe to be personal experiences of NHI or UAP, they should seek assistance from Catholic clergy or other counselors in dealing with the effects of such experiences. If they know others who report similar experiences, they should urge those acquaintances to seek help as well.

In summary, a serious and sustained engagement with the subject of nonhuman intelligence, and the growing concern worldwide with unidentified aerial phenomena, will require prompt and multifaceted action by the Catholic Church. These suggestions will no doubt lead to others by those who have come to recognize the importance of the matter.

Conclusion: How Will the Catholic Church Respond?

Are we alone in the universe with God and the angels? The question is ancient. Yet, current developments are now pressing us with more urgency to seek an answer. Centuries ago, certain visionary Catholic thinkers were far ahead of their time in speculating about this and other cosmic matters. Today, the Church has the opportunity again to demonstrate global leadership in searching for more of the truth about the greatness of God’s creation, and learning to live in accordance with whatever discoveries we may make. Will we take up that challenge?

If so, we will need to proceed with a sense of wonder—an attitude of humility in the face of mystery. Recall the biblical character Job. His agonized search to understand the ways of God led him in the end to confess that divine power and wisdom far exceeded his capacity to grasp them completely. “Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways,” he cried out, “and how small a whisper do we hear of him! But the thunder of his power who can understand?” (Job 26:14).

Nevertheless, Job humbled himself and placed his trust in his loving Creator. We should do the same, even as we continue to seek more answers about the kind of cosmos that God has created. As we hearken to the whisper, we must not fear if the thunder should shake us. After all, the thunder is born of the lightning, a sign that even in our night, somewhere the heavens have been pierced and filled with God’s light.

Notes

1. St. Anselm, *Proslogium*.
2. I extend my thanks to several readers who reviewed a draft of this paper and made insightful suggestions: Dr. Matthew Halsted, Dr. Luke Togni, Dr. Andrew Lichtenwalner, Rev. Daniel Stork Banks, Rev. Chad Cowan, and Fr. Matthew Gray. Any shortcomings found here are of course mine alone.
3. Vakoch, “Roman Catholic Views of Extraterrestrial Intelligence,” 167.
4. Weigel, *Letters to a Young Catholic*, 43.
5. Some writers have concluded that the possibility of extraterrestrial intelligence is ruled out by other explicit teachings of the Church; see, for example, the comments of Fr. Thomas Weinandy, OFM, in Duncan, “Aliens, Demons, or PSYOPS?” For one response to such claims, see Thigpen, *Extraterrestrial Intelligence and the Catholic Faith*, chapter 10, “Is ETI Compatible with Catholic Faith?,” 239–65.
6. “Astrobiology at NASA,” <https://astrobiology.nasa.gov>.
7. See, for example, the Galileo Project (<https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/galileo/home>); the Scientific Coalition for UAP Studies (<https://www.explorescu.org>); the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics’ UAP Integration and Outreach Committee (<https://aiaauap.org>); Villarroel et al., “Launching the VASCO Citizen Science Project”; and the scientists who presented at the 2023 Sol Foundation Symposium (https://www.youtube.com/@_SolFoundation).
8. See the goals of SETI, <https://www.seti.org>.
9. See the goals of METI, <http://meti.org>.
10. Brufke and Feis, “UFOs Could Threaten US Security.”
11. Barnes, “U.S. Has No Explanation for Unidentified Objects.” For the full unclassified report, see US Office of the Director of National Intelligence. “Unclassified Preliminary Assessment.”
12. For a recent example, see this version of the UAP Disclosure Act as a possible amendment to be considered on the floor of the House of Representatives during action on the Fiscal Year 2025 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA, H.R. 8070), “Amendment to Rules Committee Print 118-36 Offered by Mr. Robert Garcia of California,” accessed May 29, 2024, https://amendments-rules.house.gov/amendments/GARCRO_115_xml240529153551283.pdf.
13. The literature that reports on these recent developments is rapidly multiplying. The history of such investigation and debate has been thoroughly documented, so we will not attempt a more detailed summary here. See, for example, “Chronology of Government Actions, Legislation, and Investigations,” in McCaw, “Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena,” 14–25; Coulthart, *In Plain Sight*; Kean, *UFOs*; von Rennenkampff, “10 Reasons to Take UFOs Seriously”; and von Rennenkampff, “Shocking History of UFOs and Nuclear Weapons.” For developments in government statements and policy, see von Rennenkampff, “2023”; von Rennenkampff, “Key Lawmakers Double Down on Solving the Mystery of UFOs”; von Rennenkampff, “‘True’ or ‘Crazy’?”; Rosenwald, “How UFOs Went from Joke to National Security Concern in Washington.” For scientific analyses, see the Research Library of the Scientific Coalition for UAP Studies (<https://www.explorescu.org/research-library/categories/scu-papers>). See also the other white papers of the Sol Foundation (<https://thesolfoundation.org/white-papers>).
14. For an extended account of the historical conversation, from antiquity to the present, see Thigpen, *Extraterrestrial Intelligence and the Catholic Faith*. This paper draws largely from the

- historical survey and theological analysis in this book.
15. For an excellent historical overview of the early “plural worlds” debate, see Dick, *Plurality of Worlds*.
 16. Wilkinson, *Science, Religion, and the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence*, 17.
 17. Aristotle, *De Generatione Animalium* 3.761b. 21–23.
 18. Wilkinson, *Science, Religion, and the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence*, 18.
 19. St. Clement, “The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians” in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:10–11.
 20. Origen’s distinctive notion of a plurality of worlds imagined them not as simultaneous, spatially separated realms, but rather as multiple universes in succession through time; see Thigpen, *Extraterrestrial Intelligence and the Catholic Faith*, 26–28.
 21. Origen, *De Principiis* 2.3.273, translated in George, *Christianity and Extraterrestrials?*, 221. George notes, “The Latin is taken from *Vier Bücher von den Prinzipien*, ed. Herwig Görge-manns and Heinrich Karpp (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976), 318.”
 22. Crowe, *Extraterrestrial Life Debate, Antiquity to 1915*, 20.
 23. George, “Aquinas on Intelligent Extraterrestrial Life.”
 24. Crowe, “History of the Extraterrestrial Life Debate,” 149.
 25. Josef Carl Koch, “Nicholas of Cusa,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 10:451. It is especially remarkable that Cusa anticipated so long ago the existence of exoplanets (planets beyond our solar system); such bodies were not discovered by astronomers until the last decade of the twentieth century.
 26. Nicholas of Cusa, *Of Learned Ignorance*, quoted in Crowe, *Extraterrestrial Life Debate, Antiquity to 1915*, 31.
 27. Dick, *Plurality of Worlds*, 42.
 28. Koch, “Nicholas of Cusa,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 10:449–51.
 29. McColley and Miller, “Saint Bonaventure, Francis Mayron, William Vorilong,” 388.
 30. McColley and Miller conclude, however, that although “Vorilong is the earliest of the theologians yet noted” to make this move, “others doubtless preceded him” (387n1).
 31. Quoted in McColley and Miller, 388.
 32. Aquinas had concluded that in addition to His incarnation in Christ, God could have chosen to join to His divine nature “another numerically different human nature,” though he did not have ETI incarnations in mind. See George, “Aquinas on Intelligent Extraterrestrial Life,” citing Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 3.3.7.
 33. Quoted in McColley and Miller, “Saint Bonaventure, Francis Mayron, William Vorilong,” 388.
 34. Copernicus’s reputation as an astronomer was such that his advice on reforming the ecclesiastical calendar was requested in 1514 by the ecumenical Lateran Council. He modestly replied that the length of the year and the months, and the motions of the sun and the moon, were not yet sufficiently known to attempt a reform. Even so, the incident spurred him to make more accurate observations. Seventy years later, these served as a basis for working out the new Gregorian calendar. See John Hagen, “Nicolaus Copernicus,” in Herbermann et al., *Catholic Encyclopedia*, accessed July 22, 2024, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04352b.htm>.
 35. Copernicus, *On the Revolutions*, 1.9, quoted in Dick, *Plurality of Worlds*, 62.
 36. The geocentric model of the universe came to be called the “Ptolemaic model,” after Claudius Ptolemy, a second-century Alexandrian mathematician, astronomer, and geographer. One of his most famous works, the *Almagest*, is the only surviving comprehensive ancient treatise on astronomy and was extremely influential in ancient, medieval, and Renaissance thought until

- the Copernican Revolution.
37. This influential philosophical notion is traced historically in Lovejoy, *Great Chain of Being*.
 38. Dick, *Plurality of Worlds*, 61–62.
 39. Campanella, “Defense of Galileo”; Dick, *Plurality of Worlds*, 111; Alexander Pope, “An Essay on Man: Epistle 1” (1733–34), lines 23–28, accessed July 22, 2024, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44899/an-essay-on-man-epistle-i>. On Protestant voices, see Thigpen, *Extraterrestrial Intelligence and the Catholic Faith*, 51.
 40. Sinistrari, *Demoniality*, para. 42–43.
 41. Crowe, *Extraterrestrial Life Debate, 1750 to 1900* (1999 ed.), 37.
 42. Crowe, *Extraterrestrial Life Debate, 1750 to 1900* (1986 ed.), 156–58.v
 43. Boscovich, *Theory of Natural Philosophy*, 166.
 44. Boscovich, 184.
 45. Boscovich, 199.
 46. Quoted in Marković, “Boscovich’s Theoria,” 150.
 47. de Maistre, *Soirées de Saint-Pétersbourg*, 318–19; English translation available in Lynch, “On Sacrifices.”
 48. Newman, *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 383.
 49. de Vere, “Death of Copernicus.”
 50. Meynell, “Christ in the Universe.”50.
 51. Thigpen, “‘Globes of Gold or Diamond’: Voices of Catholic Poets and Priests,” chapter 3 in *Extraterrestrial Intelligence and the Catholic Faith*, 153–80.
 52. Félix, *Le progrès par le Christianisme*, 120–21, translated in Crowe, *Extraterrestrial Life Debate, 1750 to 1900* (1999 ed.), 411.
 53. Secchi, *Descrizione del nuovo osservatorio del collegio romano*, 158, translated in Crowe, *Extraterrestrial Life Debate, 1750 to 1900* (1999 ed.), 422.
 54. Crowe, *Extraterrestrial Life Debate, 1750 to 1900* (1999 ed.), 430–31; Pohle, *Die Sternwelten und ihre Bewohner*, 415–16, 427–28, 457–58.
 55. Schmöger, *Life of Anne Catherine Emmerich*, 206–9.
 56. Achenbach, “Carl Sagan Denied Being an Atheist.”
 57. Sagan, “UFO’s,” 271.
 58. Vakoch, “Roman Catholic Views of Extraterrestrial Intelligence,” 167.
 59. Vakoch, 167.
 60. Vakoch, 167.
 61. Castello, *Così parlò Padre Pio*, 217; English translation provided by Bret Thoman. Costello was one of St. Pio’s “spiritual sons.”
 62. Francisco, “Possibilità di una redenzione cosmica,” quoted in in O’Meara, *Vast Universe*, 87n19.
 63. Corrado Balducci, “Ufology and Theological Clarifications,” remarks presented in Pescara, Italy, June 8, 2001, accessed July 22, 2024, <https://www.scribd.com/document/134453494/Corrado-Balducci>.
 64. O’Meara, *Vast Universe*.
 65. George, *Christianity and Extraterrestrials?*
 66. Hess, “Multiple Incarnations of the One Christ.”
 67. Coyne, “Evolution of Intelligent Life on Earth.”
 68. Funes, “Road Map to Other Earths.”
 69. McMullin, “Life and Intelligence Far from Earth.
 70. Kereszty, “Christ and Other Possible Universes and Extraterrestrial Intelligent Beings.”

71. Baglow, “What Can Catholic Theology Say about Extraterrestrials?”
72. As noted in my book on this subject, I count myself among these “others.”
73. St. Jerome, “Life of Paulus the First Hermit.”
74. St. Augustine, *City of God*, 23.
75. Sinistrari, *Demoniality*, para. 42–43
76. Thurston, *Ghosts and Poltergeists*, 202–3.
77. See, for example, Puthoff, “Ultraterrestrial Models.”
78. See the Sol Foundation website, <https://thesolfoundation.org>.
79. My book on this subject includes both a historical survey of the ETI conversation and an extensive theological analysis of scriptural texts and magisterial documents relevant to exploring the possibilities within the traditional bounds of authoritative Catholic teaching. See Thigpen, *Extraterrestrial Intelligence and the Catholic Faith*.
80. “Paul Thigpen, Ph.D. on Insights from Catholic Theology on UAP and Nonhuman Intelligence,” posted February 12, 2024, The Sol Foundation, YouTube video, 00:59:51, <https://youtu.be/AlMQf0ydV20?>
81. Ratzinger, “In the Beginning,” 6. I owe this insight, and the reference to Pope Benedict’s comment, to Dr. Stephen Barr.
82. St. Albertus Magnus, *Alberti Magni Opera Omnia*, pt. 1., p. 55, quoted in and translated by Dick, *Plurality of Worlds*, 23.
83. L’Osservatore Romano, “New Church Statistics Reveal More Catholics, Fewer Vocations.”
84. St. Anselm, *Proslogium*.
85. See, for example, Mellon, “Pentagon’s New UAP Report Is Seriously Flawed”; and von Rennekampff, “Pentagon Is Lying about UFOs.”
86. Dews, “Communication, Technology, and Extraterrestrial Life.” On the possible effects of public disclosure of the existence of ETI, see Weintraub, *Religions and Extraterrestrial Life*; and Dolan and Zabel, *A.D. After Disclosure*.
87. Peters, “Extraterrestrial Life and Terrestrial Religion.”
88. Most of the following questions are addressed in “Nothing Is Impossible with God: Is ETI Compatible with Catholic Faith?,” chapter 10 in Thigpen, *Extraterrestrial Intelligence and the Catholic Faith*, 239–65.
89. Peters, “Extraterrestrial Salvation and the ETI Myth,” 366
90. Glatz, “Vatican Discusses Extraterrestrial Life.”
91. See “Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith,” The Holy See, accessed July 22, 2024, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_pro_14071997_en.html; and “International Theological Commission,” The Holy See, accessed July 22, 2024, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_pro_14071997_ictheology_en.html.
92. “The 1933 Magenta, Italy UFO Crash,” posted March 18, 2024, UAP Gerb, YouTube video, 00:25:21, <https://youtu.be/FGiwgyLY7Aw?t=25s>.
93. “About Us,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, accessed July 22, 2024, <https://www.usccb.org/about>. The suggestions that follow are particular to the context of the United States, but can be adapted in various ways to episcopal conferences around the world.
94. “Doctrine,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, accessed July 22, 2024, <https://www.usccb.org/committees/doctrine>.
95. Sinistrari, *Demoniality*; Thurston, *Ghosts and Poltergeists*.
96. See, for example, Kereszty, *Jesus Christ*, a Christology textbook that deals with NHI.

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