

### **Question 6: Can Extraterrestrials be Saved?**

My sense is that most people think this question is either ridiculous or unimportant. In some ways I agree with those people. On the contrary, this question is central to many of the major tenants of Christianity and is becoming more important as we continue to explore the universe. The core elements of this question are universal salvation, the saving mission of Christ, humanity and the incarnation, and humanity. For this question, and to prevent a lengthy discussion of the word, extraterrestrials is defined as life forms that are not found on the planet Earth.

#### **Saved:**

The most important, and complicated, word in this question is the word saved. The term “saved” is usually used synonymously with the word “salvation.” Although these two words are not exact synonyms, I will use them interchangeably. The word saved comes from the root word in Latin “salvare” which means to heal. Following from last week’s question on evil, salvation implies that we are saved from the evil of the world; we are healed from the negative effects of the evil of the world and brought to full health. But this only starts the journey into the deeper meaning of these words. Saved also implies to recuse from, deliverance from, or to keep from. Hence when we say I am saved, it begs the question, “from what?” The quick answer: we are saved from the evil of the world. The person who is saved is no longer under the control of evil or feels the pull towards evil. This person is rescued from the effect of evil, delivered from its negative influence, and kept from falling into its temptations. The above discussion of the implications of salvation can easily be reduced to escapism: I don’t like the problems of the world so I hope for something that helps me escape from the problems of the world. The final element of salvation is very different from the other two. Salvation in its most exalted sense is entering into the life of God. This sense of salvation is the core definition used throughout the Scriptures and the language of the Church.

#### **Salvation as life with God:**

The final definition of salvation as life with God is so important that I want to spend an entire section developing this point and drawing out the implications of this definition.

#### **Life with God:**

The analogy that most people use to think of life with God is usually something like the episode of the Simpsons where Marge imagines Heaven: a place in the sky with lots of food and games where everyone is having fun and enjoying themselves. Basically, Heaven is a giant party in the sky. The reality of Heaven is something far less tangible. The core element of Heaven is that we are in God’s presence. Not in the sense that we know that God exists and that everything is about him, but in the sense that we see God in his entirety. This is beyond our imagining. The most common image of being in Heaven takes the current life we live and superimposes it into a sky world. This image does not describe life with God. Life with God is when we are brought into the mystery of the Trinity and made to share in their constant gift of love to one another. Heaven is more like becoming God than like entering a perfect country. Yet, we do not become *a* god. We become God.

### **Humans, Souls, and Salvation:**

As stated in the Book of Genesis, humans are made in the image and likeness of God, which is unlike any other creature created by God. Since we are sharers in the divine image, we have a special relationship with God unlike any of the creatures. Some of the qualities of the human used to describe this difference are reason and soul. Aristotle, and then St. Thomas Aquinas after him, defined the soul as the animating force of the body. The soul is that which gives life to the body. For instance, a plant soul allows it to grow. An animal soul allows it to move. This sense of soul gives an answer to the question of how are things alive. This sense of soul does not explain immortal life or what is uniquely human. The third element of the soul is the rational faculty that humans have. All humans have the ability to reason. This ability separates humans from the rest of the animal world. I also argue that this further extension of the definition of soul does not explain immortality.

The last part of the definition of soul is that soul is spiritual in nature. This means that the soul is a gift from God and is part of God living in us. We use language such as “the temple of the Holy Spirit” and “God dwelling in us” to explain the implications of the soul. Thus the soul is the connection between us and the divine; the part of us that directly connects us with God. The soul, then, separates us from other living things who do not contain the direct relationship with God that humans do. Humans share most fully in the divine nature due to God creating us that way. The main element that separates us is the soul. Human souls are different than animal souls. Human souls are individuated based on the person. Animal souls are individuated based on the species of animal. Therefore humans will share in the divine life of God based on their particular way of being a human whereas animals share in the life of God because they are part of creation.

Humans are saved, i.e. attain salvation; animals are not saved. Humans were created to share in the life of God. God created humans out of his desire to love creation and to have part of creation share completely in his life. Animals share in the life of God in their particular way, which is much reduced from what humans experience. From this last point come many of the questions that people ask regarding humanity and heaven. Why are only humans saved? Does my (insert pet here) go to heaven? Why can only humans experience the life of heaven? These questions are complicated and worth a brief explanation. As Isaiah 45:18 states: “God did not create it to be a waste, but a place to be lived in.” The world was meant for life, and the life that inhabits the world is part of the glory of God’s creation. Therefore the full restoration of all things, aka heaven or salvation, should include the entirety of creation.

### **Why are humans saved?**

The final two questions of the above paragraph are worth a more lengthy explanation. The simple answer to why are humans the only ones saved is that God created humans to be unique in this way. God created humans uniquely to share in understanding God, serving God, and loving God. No other creature was created for the purpose of coming to know God in the way that humans do. Thus humans are unique. But, why did God create humans in this way? Could God have created other creatures with these same abilities? I don’t know why God chose to create humans unique from all creatures. We could easily flip this question and state that God

could have chosen any creature to occupy the same place as humans. Therefore it is not that humans are special on their own, but that God created them in this special way. The answer to the second question – could God have created other creatures with the same abilities as humans? – is yes. God could have created other life forms, aka. extraterrestrial life, that could share in the same abilities and possibly the same hope of salvation as humans.

### **Humanity and Salvation:**

The possibility of other life forms sharing in the same abilities as humans and the same hope of salvation has many difficulties. The first major difficulty regards the incarnation. One of the major premises that underlies our theology of salvation is that God came in human form to be like us in all things but sin. God incarnated himself so that he could bear the same burden as humanity and thus restore humanity to its intended state. God also came in human form to show us the fullness of himself and to give us a way to himself. This same idea needs to be predicated on any other species or life form that is promised salvation. If there is another life form in the universe who contains the same abilities and promises as humans, did they also experience the incarnation and thus God became like them? Does this imply that God has many forms and that human is only one of the many? Do we exalt humanity too high in assuming that we are the only ones saved?

The second major premise that underlies the possibility of salvation for other life forms is the universal promise of redemption. When God promised eternal life to his creation, he didn't promise it to only a select few. God's promise of restoration and redemption was promised to the entire created order of the universe. When Jesus, God, became incarnate on Christmas Day two millennia ago, the entire universe experienced God coming in the flesh. When Christ died on the Cross on Passover in 33 A.D., the entire universe experienced redemption as one event. When God manifests himself at the end of time, the entire universe will see God and be brought to the final judgement all at once. If we hold to the universality of God and his mission, then we must also hold that these same events are also universal.

### **Can extraterrestrials be saved?**

I have already stated some of the foundational principles for this question. God is universal, and what God does is universal. Therefore, if God chooses to save the entire cosmos, then the entire cosmos is saved. This is precisely what God has chosen to do. Therefore the entire universe is brought into the saving mission of God. All of creation will be saved in its particular way. Humans have a different way in which they will be saved and understand salvation compared to the rest of the universe. This difference is due to God's choice in choosing humans as opposed to any other creature. Anthropologically, humans have the capacity to reason that gives us the ability to know and understand God. Therefore the capacity to reason separates us from the rest of the created world and provides us with the necessary ability to know God, unlike other creature.

In order for a creature from another planet to enter into the life of God, attain salvation, this creature would need to be able to reason like a human and be in the same relationship as humans. This creature would need the capacity to know God. On top of that, God would need to reveal himself to those creatures and thus bring them into his life by virtue of becoming like them.

**Implications for extraterrestrials:**

For this next section I am going to make two foundational premises:

1. Extraterrestrials exist
2. These extraterrestrials share in everything that would make them human: i.e. have the capacity to reason

**Extraterrestrial rights:**

If extraterrestrials are considered human by virtue of having reason and all the qualities that would indicate their humanity, then ethically we are required to give them everything that would be given to a human. Therefore the human-like extraterrestrials should have all the rights and responsibilities of any human on the planet earth. Extraterrestrials would have the right to human treatment, required to obey the laws of the land they reside in, equal opportunity to vote and exercise civic duties. Likewise we would be required to treat them as equal to humans and give them the rights and responsibilities that apply.

**Extraterrestrial baptism:**

If extraterrestrials are brought into the same saving mission of God and worthy of attaining salvation, then we should also make them full members of the Church through the Sacraments and life in the Church. Thus, human would no longer be defined by how we look or by the planet Earth, but by the properties of reason and adoption into the family of God. I see great difficulty in reaching a conclusion of this caliber. How do we determine the level of reason of an individual? Even with modern science and psychology we can barely determine if someone is mentally competent to provide for themselves. Similarly, to determine the level of reasoning and decide whether they are part of the family of God seems beyond our capability.

**Terracentrism:**

Yes, I made up this word. The core meaning behind this word is an exclusive focus on the planet Earth. Similar words are anthropocentrism, an exclusive focus on humanity, heliocentrism, a view that the Earth revolves around the sun. The idea behind this phrase is that we are currently focused on an exclusive sense on the planet Earth. If an asteroid hit the planet or something catastrophic were to occur, we would see the universe as coming to an end. If we found human-like life on other planets, our focus would shift as we realize that we are not alone in the universe. Thus we would shift from an exclusive focus on the planet Earth to a more expansive focus, hopefully.