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Recent Scientific Discoveries of Galaxies Far Far Away from a UU Perspective

Rev. Dr. Sara Zimmerman

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It was a warm summer evening in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1982, and my then 12 yr old daughter and I went to see the new film ET, the Extra Terrestrial. I recall a sweetness about the experience, no doubt created by the cuddly being from intergalactic space. Afterwards, I recall there was a peaceful softness in the air and an upbeat feeling of harmony of all beings here and in the galaxy, an absence of hysteria that you might think a being from outer space might have caused. Instead, there was a delight in the cuteness of ET, ET learning how to dress like a human child, ET learning a second language. In no time didn't he learn enough English words and phrases to get along and get what he needed? A truly remarkable feat for such a young alien in a new land, not to mention a new planet!

Our family fell in love with this small, non-threatening character from intergalactic space. Just a few years before, in 1978, our own very popular Democratic Senator Bill Proxmire awarded his monthly symbolic Golden Fleece Award, it was a symbolic award he created to highlight government waste, to a NASA proposal to research methods of using large radio telescopes in a systematic search for radio signals from extraterrestrial civilizations. Senator Proxmire always garnered positive press and cheers from his supporters for his Golden Fleece Awards, and this one was no different. Proxmire's criticism of the proposed NASA's search for extraterrestrials was effective, and the funding was pulled. Was it the popularity of the film ET four years later that changed minds? Because it wasn't long after the film ET charmed us that the exploration of other galaxies and the idea of using government agencies to explore them became more acceptable.

Star Trek was also popular at the time, and had been since the late 1960s. Gene Roddenberry, humanist, former Air Force pilot and science fiction writer introduced unusual looking beings

and imaginary but believable situations in space, and a dignified way of handling difficult situations with creatures that usually had at least some basic humanoid features about them, although distorted or exaggerated,, or they had identical forehead tattoos and markings and dressed alike in the fashion of their planet. Roddenberry's admirable intentions of opening up significant roles for women and persons of color are new for his time. Glimpses of earth-based political and social situations emerge in the plotlines. Recently I learned that the 20th century author of Star Trek Gene Roddenberry was a huge fan of 18th century satirist Jonathan Swift, the author of Gulliver's Travels. Roddenberry once told interviewers that he had similar intentions that Swift had a century before. He said that in creating Star Trek, he was intent on satirizing 20th century culture using the same satirical model that Jonathan Swift had used in the 18th century. You didn't have to know that to enjoy his plots and characters. You didn't have to know that Gene Roddenberry was writing political satire about the foibles of humanoids.

Well, now I wish that Senator Proxmire, who by the way was an admirable member of congress but he could be wrong once in awhile like he was about funding space exploration, I wish that he and Gene Roddenberry were still with us to see how far our explorations have gone, and to know that it has been with the support and NASA contracts of individual entrepreneurs like Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk, and Richard Branson, and their companies Blue Origin, Space X, and Virgin Galactic. Here's a tidbit of how that competition is going: In a great book called Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and the Quest to Colonize the Cosmos, The Space Barons, the author Christian Davenport recalls a conversation between Musk and Bezos: picture Elon Musk saying to Jeff Bezos about some ideas that Jeff had proposed, Musk tells him, "Dude, we tried that and that turned out to be really dumb, so I'm telling you don't do the dumb thing we did." (p56)

An audio story published last month by the New York Times states, "The Search for Intelligent Life Is About to Get a Lot More Interesting." (Jim Gertner. 9/15/22). "In July, when NASA released the first batch of images from the Webb telescope, we could glimpse remote corners of the universe with new found clarity and beauty – a panorama of 'cosmic cliffs,' 24 trillions miles tall, constructed from gas and dust..." These first images from the Webb Space Telescope and additional powerful instruments being developed "will also allow us to view exceedingly distant objects for the first time." One of the goals of the searching is "to discern a biosignature – that is an indication that life exists or has (at one time) existed on those worlds." An example of an earthly biosignature is a clam shell, or a bird feather. But before scientists look for a biosignature, they would first need to determine if a planet's atmosphere had air, and then they would ask ok, what's in the air, and then after years of trying to answer that they could decide if there's a biosignature. There are teams working to find signs of technological civilizations on other planets. The purpose of their work is not to communicate with aliens, but to discover the

“atmospheres of distant worlds, and what those might tell us. As one scientist explained, “the civilization will just be doing whatever it’s doing, and we’re making no assumptions about whether anybody wants to communicate or doesn’t want to communicate.” (repeat) Isn’t that a remarkable change in assumptions? No longer assuming as many of our science fiction examples assume – like H.G. Wells’ The War of the Worlds, for example – it’s no longer an assumption that we would be at war with such creatures. We would like to study them, and I would think, be studied by them. Everybody curious, peaceful, interested in science, reasonable. Since the Webb telescope’s recent discovery of all those planets, we know there are plenty for everybody, no need to fight each other to be the first one there. No need to try and wipe out some other government’s space program. Why not share resources and cooperate? This is indeed happening in the present. Three weeks ago, on September 21, American astronaut Dr. Frank Rubio and two Russian cosmonauts launched into space in what is expected to be a six-month stay on the International Space Station.

However, also happening in the present is the buildup of the new U.S. branch of the armed forces, the Space Force. The Space Force was created during the Trump administration. So there’s cooperation on the International Space Station, while there is preparation for war on the other. To think about that, let’s look at this question:

If some country wants to fight off everyone else, in intergalactic space, what would our position be as a church, as a denomination?

What would our position be toward those who will want to fight the earthly enemy in space? In the light of how much turf and space can be seen out there, such wars seem ridiculous; nonetheless there will be threats of space wars. What is the UU position on that threat? Another way to explore that question is to ask: what do Unitarian Universalists mean by the word “peace” in our Sixth Principle?

As Unitarian Universalists, we do not have a creed, although some of our roots are in Christianity, we do not recite the Apostles Creed as some of us did in the churches of our childhoods. Instead of a creed, we have principles to live by and sources that support the principles. (BTW --These principles and sources are printed in the order of service on the back cover.) Today I am lifting up The **Sixth Principle** which states that “We, The member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant to affirm and promote The goal of **world** community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” **Especially since the Webb telescope discovered much evidence of galaxies far far away, isn’t it time to incorporate the word “intergalactic”?** So the revised 6th principle would state: **“We affirm and promote**

The goal of world and intergalactic communities with peace, liberty, and justice for all.”

All the reasons for doing that are contained in the 5th source.

The **Fifth** source says “The Living Tradition we share draws from many sources, including Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.” Reason would tell us that engaging in any kind of space war would be not only dangerous but extremely foolish – there is apparently already more junk and debris in space than can be dealt with, and it isn’t going anywhere. Imagine what a space war would do to create more floating junk that is never going to decompose.

The results of reason and science now reveal galaxies far far away, The Webb Telescope is only the first of additional powerful telescopes being developed that will show us just how small we are, just teeny tiny specks, and many times smaller than that and just how large our galaxy and galaxies beyond ours are. By adding the word intergalactic to our Sixth Principle, we would model our goals of peace, liberty and justice into deep space, the space that needs to be shared with careful attention to its viability by all earthly powers.

No doubt some will say there is no hope for continued cooperation in intergalactic space, and so they reason, don’t go and take the steps to add the word “intergalactic” to our 6th Principle. Critics will say forget it, it’s hopeless, No doubt some will echo Senator Proxmire in his golden fleece award to space exploration in 1978 and say, look we’re in a crisis point in our economy and can’t afford or approve of these wild goose chases into the unknown with the purpose of observing some weird alien culture.

The answer to the first objection – that there is no hope for cooperation in space – the answer to that is the good news I’ve already mentioned that Russians and Americans have been sharing spacecraft despite the Ukrainian conflict and the U.S. support of the Ukraine. The answer to the second objection – the economic one—is that exploring is worthwhile because in learning about other galaxies maybe we can learn more about our Blue Planet and how to survive on it for another millennia.

So if this suggestion is to become a reality, if the word “intergalactic” were to be added to the 6th Principle, the process for such a change is already in place. It involves several years of work, first for a local congregation to suggest it, and eventually, for it to grow and be studied, and become a statement that the entire General Assembly would vote on. In working toward a close to my comments today, a look at the 2010 Statement of Conscience passed by the General Assembly. The topic was Peacemaking. Here it is the Statement:

“We believe all people share a moral responsibility to create peace. Mindful of both our rich heritage and our past failures to prevent war, and enriched by our present diversity of experience and perspective, we commit ourselves to a radically inclusive and transformative approach to peace.”(end of quote)

When the time comes for one of our members to decide whether to join the Space Force, or decide what position to take about any intergalactic conflict, our denomination supports the personal discernment process. Supportive Item #5 in the UU Peacemaking document from 2010 reflects the years-long careful process that the supporters participated in to define the UU denomination’s position on war:

“For Unitarian Universalists, the exercise of individual conscience is holy work. Conscientious discernment leads us to engage in the creation of peace in different ways. We affirm a range of individual choices, including military service and conscientious objection (whether to all wars or particular wars), as fully compatible with Unitarian Universalism. For those among us who make a formal commitment to military service, we will honor their commitment, welcome them home, and offer pastoral support. For those among us who make a formal commitment as conscientious objectors, we will offer documented certification, honor their commitment, and offer pastoral support.”

This Statement was the result of many years of discussion. In creating it, members of our congregations wrestled with the definitions of just war, came up with a clear statement of military service as a choice (we are not a peace church like the Quakers or Mennonites), and express honor and pastoral support.

I’m mentioning that in closing because compared to that complicated and heavily itemized Peace Creating Statement that the congregations of the UUA passed at General Assembly in 2010, having accomplished an admirable, remarkable and complicated process, in comparison to that process, wouldn’t the addition of the word “intergalactic” to the 6th Principle be much less complicated? And less controversial? Who would object? Well, someone might go to the microphone at General Assembly and argue that you don’t need to keep the word “world” if you regard the word “intergalactic” as subsuming “world.” Thus is the nature of Unitarian Universalists who value reason, and careful editing. It’s an inevitable question. The point is, all are engaged and interested in the process. You gotta love the process.

In closing, here again is the 6th Principle of Unitarian Universalism as I hope will be revised at a General Assembly in the future:

“We the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant to affirm and promote the goal of world and intergalactic communities with peace, liberty, and justice for all.”

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