WOULD YOU BAPTIZE AN EXTRATERRESTRIAL?

Rick Hinshaw

Guy Consolmagno, S.J. and Paul Mueller, S.J., *Would You Baptize an Extraterrestrial … and Other Questions from the Astronomers' In-Box at the Vatican Observatory* (New York: Image, 2014)

"Science is God engaging with us."

Thus do Jesuit Brother Guy Consolmagno and Jesuit Father Paul Mueller challenge – most effectively, in "Would You Baptize an Extraterrestrial" – the oft-stated contention that science and religion are mutually exclusive, or, worse, inherently in conflict with each other.

Brother Guy, with two degrees from MIT and a Ph.D. in planetary science from the University of Arizona, and Father Paul, who holds master's degrees in philosophy, theology and physics, as well as a Ph.D in history and philosophy of science from the University of Chicago, are well situated to examine, and to describe for us, the very natural, positive relationship between religion and science. Both are members of the research staff at the Vatican Observatory, "the official astronomical research institute of the Catholic Church." Brother Guy, a scientist specializing in "planetary physics and geology, and especially the study of asteroids and meteorites," has worked there since 1993. Father Paul, whose "expertise is the history and philosophy of science – especially that of physics and astronomy" – has worked at the Vatican Observatory since 2010. Prior to that, he was a member of the philosophy faculty at Loyola University in Chicago.

As they make clear at the outset of this work, "Science and religion have common historical roots," and "the war between

them (if there is one) has not been eternal." The Catholic Church in particular, as their own work and that of their colleagues at the Vatican Observatory attests, has been historically, and is today, not only supportive of, but actively involved in, scientific research.

Using their own extensive experience as Catholic scientists, they explain the relationships between religion and science, and debunk some of the myths about each – not in a contentious, argumentative way, but rather in a positive, persuasive way – using light-hearted humor throughout, and, perhaps more importantly, writing in a breezy, down-to-earth style that makes their scientific and theological reflections accessible to even the most novice of readers in either field – as I can personally attest, particularly in the field of science, never my academic forte.

Indeed, Father Paul explains, this is a constant challenge faced by scientists: making their research understandable to a general public that is often affected by their findings and discoveries, while at the same time avoiding the tendency to "dumb down" scientific discussion in a way that "inhibit(s) the conversation among scientists."

But this book is clearly written for the average person – for all those who struggle with the apparent conflicts between faith and science: those who tend to give greater authority to the Bible over science, those who routinely give science "the last word over biblical faith," and those who "think that *both* science *and* faith should be taken seriously" but who "struggle" to hold the two together. And so they write in a very light, engaging fashion, using a series of dialogues between themselves that easily holds a reader's interest, while opening our minds to new information and answering – although perhaps not in the absolutist, definitive way we might desire – some of the frequently asked questions they hear repeatedly about the relationship between faith and science.

Their dialogue, in fact, is built around six such frequently asked questions, involving the "biblical Genesis vs. Big Bang" theories of creation; the "Galileo Affair"; the star of Bethlehem; the end of the world; the "demotion" of Pluto from the status of a planet to a "dwarf planet"; and the question that became the book's title, "Would you baptize an extraterrestrial?"

Each chapter is compelling, in the details the authors provide, from their own research and experience about each of these topics; in the answers they offer; and in the new questions they raise for us to contemplate – perhaps, after reading this book, with a broader perspective.

Certain of their observations stand out. For example, they contend that the perceived "war between science and religion" dates *not* "from the [17th century] time of Galileo, as so many people seem to think," but "only from the late Victorian era" some 200 years later – placing it, in the observation of this reader, at the cusp of the impending 20th century secularist revolution, which has advanced the idea of an inherent conflict between science and religion as a way to discredit and ridicule religious belief.

Brother Guy illustrates this by describing "the most memorable time" he was asked this book's title question.

It was prior to a talk he was to give at the Birmingham Science Festival in England in 2010.

"As it turned out, the day of my talk happened to coincide exactly with the visit of Pope Benedict to Birmingham," he recounts, "so the cream of British journalism was there" and naturally "all they wanted to ask me about was the Pope." But "they kept asking me questions like 'What is your biggest source of conflict about the Pope?' Or 'Has the Pope ever tried to suppress your scientific work?'

"They didn't want to hear me tell them," he writes, "how much

Pope Benedict supported the Vatican Observatory and its scientific work." They "were looking for a juicy story and for ways to make me look stupid, or at least to make my Church look stupid." So they moved on to the next "gotcha" question: "Would you baptize an extraterrestrial?"

When Brother Guy answered with what he intended as a joke – "Only if she asks!" – the journalists "all got a good laugh, which was what I intended." But "the next day, they all ran my joke as if it were a straight story, as if I had made some sort of official Vatican pronouncement about aliens."

These are the kinds of problems we know the Church faces when it tries to communicate its serious scientific scholarship to the public through a hostile, and often intellectually shallow, mainstream media.

And of course, for those modern secularists anxious to discredit the Church's commitment to scientific research, the "Galileo Affair" is a handy tool. While this book is informative and entertaining throughout, its chapter titled, "What Really Happened to Galileo?" itself makes it a vital read. Brother Guy offers us an extensive timeline of that period which puts the Galileo controversy into a clear context. He notes that many of the claims now taken as irrefutable "facts" in that case are "just plain wrong." He points out that "in spite of what popular opinion would have you believe, the Church" – not only now, but historically – "is actually pretty good at allowing theological and philosophical debate and even tolerating dissenting points of view." The Galileo case is so often cited by those seeking to portray the Church as "antiscience," he writes, because "it's one of the few examples they can come up with where the Catholic Church made that particular mistake." And he makes a persuasive case that the mistake was made in that instance because Pope Urban allowed political considerations, not science, to guide his actions.

“More often than not,” he laments, whenever the Church “has tripped up over the years,” it has resulted from its being “tied up in politics.”

Science, too, is influenced by politics – as well as other internal, non-scientific factors, including “personalities, egos, multiple agendas and all sorts of human considerations,” Father Paul makes clear. “We all bring our own distinct human tang to everything we touch,” Brother Guy agrees – science as well as religion. “It’s not pure.”

Like these other factors, political influences – in both religion and science – are oftentimes internal, within the particular religious or scientific community. But they can also be external – as in Pope Urban’s need, in Brother Guy’s analysis, to mollify competing factions in Europe’s Thirty Years’ War. Today, I would submit, we see science constantly under pressure from outside factors – some economic, as in the competition for grant money or the need to get new products on the market; some health-related, as in development of new treatments and medications for illness and disease; and virtually all of it political, given government’s extensive involvement in the economy, in health care, and in providing grants for scientific research.

Indeed, as Brother Guy points out, “The conflicts you read about in the popular press” between religion and science “are usually not about science but about the use of science. No one doubts the biology behind stem cells; the issue is not whether the science is accurate, but whether using the technology based on that science is a good idea.”

And that seems to be the major point of departure between science and religion: that where science concerns itself with the “physical world,” as Brother Guy puts it, “religion worries not just what’s happening physically, but who’s doing it, and why, and what are the possible side effects to individuals and society.”

Yet, the authors argue, this does not have to lead to irreparable conflict between science and religion. We do not have to choose, they write, “between science and religion, between reason and faith.” Rather, the two fields can beautifully complement one another in the human quest for truth.

This echoes St. John Paul II, who termed faith and reason the “two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth.” In this complementary relationship, scientific discovery can tell us what is possible; ethical considerations, guided by faith, can then help us determine what uses of those discoveries will best serve individuals and society in a just way.

Science has to recognize, Brother Guy writes, that “there is more to reality” than simply “a list of mere facts.” People of faith need to remember that while scientific discoveries may change some of our understandings about God’s creation – even as changes in religious practices over the years have reflected growth in our understanding of God – “the truth itself does not change. … God is the same as He ever was. If there was any change, it was in us.”

“Many proponents of science go too far when they try to explain love, or to explain away God, scientifically,” Father Paul writes. “And many people of faith respond with unnecessary fear and panic to these excesses on the part of science – just as some in the Church responded to Galileo with fear and panic.”

Christians and scientists are together, Brother Guy contends, in seeing the world as “an intelligible *logos*” that “can be understood via reason.” And “when we try to make sense of the world via reason, we are imitating God; we are acting in the image of God.” Thus, he writes, scientists, “no matter whether or not they believe in God, as far as I am concerned, by what they do, they are giving praise and honor and glory to God.”

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