

## Astrobiology News March 2023: The Power of Preaching with the Sciences

For the past couple of years, I've been honored to be one of the science consultants for the *Preaching with the Sciences* project<sup>1</sup> led by Rev. Dr. Ed Foley of the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. This past Sunday, I was thrilled to see one of the creative products of this project, when Fr. Ed integrated scientific investigations into the history and presence of water on Earth into a Lenten homily on Living Water. I think what made this particularly effective is that the homily preceded a presentation by a long-time friend and one of the most talented public speakers I know – planetary scientist Br. Guy Consolmagno, Director of the Vatican Observatory. Putting faith and science into conversation by putting religious leaders and scientists (who are occasionally both) into conversation helps draw each deeper into contemplating the mystery of the natural world around and within us. This is what the theme of *Religion and Science Weekend 2023* was all about.

Science doesn't "solve mysteries" so much as it *deepens mystery*. The relationship between mystery, awe, and wonder, is beautifully discussed in a recent article<sup>2</sup> by CLP member Rev. Bruce Booher, who offers many valuable resources for exploring this relationship in faith and science on his website.<sup>3</sup> In *Dangerous Wonder*, theologian and church leader Michael Yaconelli expressed the view that the most critical issue facing Christians today is dullness. He says, "We have lost our astonishment."<sup>4</sup> He went on to say that the church should be full of Christians who seek questions rather than answers, mystery instead of solutions, wonder instead of explanations. Can science help stimulate the religious imagination and recapture some of that astonishment?

Astrobiology, in its investigation of the origin, evolution, distribution, and future of life in the Universe, offers much to stimulate the imagination and inspire awe, wonder, and curiosity. The current count of known exoplanets - planets that orbit other stars - is well over 5,000, comprising a delightful assortment of worlds both similar (at least in some respects) and dissimilar to our own. These worlds range from rocky planets, to hot gas giants that orbit close to their stars, to "super Earths" that have no analogs in our Solar System, but may be worlds with vast oceans that could support life as we know it. The planetary system known as TRAPPIST-1 consists of seven Earth-sized worlds that orbit so close to their cool, red dwarf star, the entire system would fit well within the orbit of Mercury in our Solar System!<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, many of the exoplanets that have been discovered rival worlds envisioned years ago by creative science fiction writers. Although we've yet to discover life beyond Earth, over the next decade, we expect to learn a lot about the habitability of other worlds. Whether we'll discover other intelligent civilizations is an open question, but if you'd like to be part of the search, check out the recently launched *Zooniverse* project, *Are We Alone in the Universe*.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ctu.edu/initiatives/preaching-with-the-sciences/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.luthscitech.org/awe-and-the-sabbath-rhythm-of-life-part-one/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://mysteryandawe.com/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.alisonmorgan.co.uk/Books/Yaconelli%2098.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://esahubble.org/images/heic1802d/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.zooniverse.org/projects/ucla-seti-group/are-we-alone-in-the-universe>

CLP member Rev. Dr. Ted Peters of the Graduate Theological Union and the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences in Berkeley is a leader in putting astrobiology in conversation with theology and ethics, and reflecting on what the discovery of extraterrestrial life might mean for human beings and other life on Earth.<sup>7</sup> I personally think we should add science fiction writers to the mix of dialog partners.<sup>8</sup> After all, science fiction can be wonderful for engaging the imagination and stimulating conversations on what might be and what should be. Science fiction therefore has the capacity to help encourage and bridge conversations between scientists, ethicists, and theologians, and to reach a wider variety of public audiences.

Whether congregations are urban, suburban, or rural, I think there are things religious leaders can do to help their parishioners experience wonder and stimulate curiosity both within and outside their places of worship. Multisensory encounters are particularly effective, as anyone who's ever experienced a total solar eclipse knows! The CLP website contains many resources that can help year-round, such as the scientists who've signed on as CLP consultants<sup>9</sup> and the wonderful repository of sermons on religion and science that have been crafted by many of you.<sup>10</sup> If you'd like to learn more about *Preaching with the Sciences*, please register and join us for the upcoming conversation on March 25, when this project will be featured in a webinar offered by the Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology.<sup>11</sup>

Until next month,

Grace

Grace Wolf-Chase (she/her/hers)  
Senior Scientist; Senior Education & Communication Specialist  
Planetary Science Institute  
[gwolfchase@gmail.com](mailto:gwolfchase@gmail.com)  
<https://www.psi.edu/about/staffpage/gwchase>  
Vice President, Center for Advanced Study in Religion and Science  
([CASIRAS](#))

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<sup>7</sup> <https://tedstimelytake.com/books/astrotheology/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14746700.2018.1525221>

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.theclergyletterproject.org/Resources/sci\\_expert\\_data\\_base.htm](https://www.theclergyletterproject.org/Resources/sci_expert_data_base.htm)

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.theclergyletterproject.org/Resources/Res\\_Sermons.htm](https://www.theclergyletterproject.org/Resources/Res_Sermons.htm)

<sup>11</sup> <https://faithscience.org/preaching/>