

## **Astrobiology News May 2019: Astroethics: Environmentalism & Ethics Meet Extraterrestrial Life**

The title of my news this month deliberately mirrors the title of the wonderful book published late last year, *Astrotheology: Science and Theology Meet Extraterrestrial Life*, edited by CLP member Ted Peters. My son, Jason, and I recently led an adult class at our church that examined some of the topics raised in the last part of this book in light of pressing environmental issues on Earth. Our tag-team presentation utilized my background in astrophysics and Jason's in environmental science and ethics. Employing science fiction's successful method of critiquing human behavior by shifting the focus to aliens, we viewed the ending to the famous 1962 *Twilight Zone* episode, *To Serve Man*,<sup>1</sup> as a lead-in to a discussion about the horrors and unsustainability of animal agriculture, global climate change, and humanity's much-less-than-stellar record as stewards of planet Earth.

A recent UN report laid out the devastating impact humanity has had on nature.<sup>2</sup> The full report, compiled by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services,<sup>3</sup> is 1,800-pages long and draws on 15,000 reference materials. The 40-page summary for policymakers presents a powerful indictment of how humans have treated their only home. Yann Laurans of the French policy research institute says, "Land use now appears as the major driver of the biodiversity collapse, with 70% of agriculture related to meat production." Increasingly, both environmental and ethical arguments cite the necessity for transformational change, including shifting away from using economic growth as a measure of quality of life. As the title of Mike Berners-Lee's recent book suggests, *There Is No Planet B*.<sup>4</sup>

Environmental ethics was an important topic at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Toronto last November. One of the exhibit booths that caught my eye was a display by the *Interfaith Vegan Coalition*, which "declares that all life is sacred and interconnected. Our mission is to work with people of all faith and secular wisdom traditions to end human-caused violence, domination, and exploitation toward all beings." You can find resources for many faith traditions on their website.<sup>5</sup>

Astrobiologist David Grinspoon suggests that what truly demarcates the beginning of the geologic era that has been called the Anthropocene is also the answer to the question of what distinguishes human beings from other species on our planet: “We are the species that can change the world and come to see what we are doing.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, we are the one species on Earth that can both understand and do something about the impact of our presence and activity on our planet. The questions remain, will we act on this knowledge, and will we act in time?

Until next month,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0734684/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-48169783>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ipbes.net/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.amazon.com/There-No-Planet-Handbook-Break/dp/1108439586>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.idausa.org/campaign/sustainable-activism/interfaith-vegan-coalition/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://aeon.co/essays/enter-the-sapiezoic-a-new-aeon-of-self-aware-global-change>