



Perspective/Opinion

Who Are We? A Reflection on Human Uniqueness and Life Beyond Earth at the

Intersection of Bioscience and Religion

By Annie Friedrich, PhD and Ryan Spellecy, PhD

Earlier this month, the Medical College of Wisconsin, along with Marquette University and Viterbo University, hosted its first seminar on 'Big Questions' at the intersection of bioscience and religion. A perhaps unlikely pairing of a theologian and an astronomer explored what it means for humans to be unique in the vastness of the universe...

A theologian and an astronomer walk into a room...while this may sound like the beginning of a joke, this was the scene on Monday, December 5 for the inaugural session of a new seminar series called 'Big Questions,' which explores the intersection between bioscience and religion. Moderated by MCW's Aasim Padela, MD, this series aims to foster interdisciplinary humble and fruitful dialogue, build bridges of understanding, and spark curiosity at the juncture of religion and science. The series seeks to replace the question of science *or* religion with "where do science and religion find common ground?"

More than 50 MCW faculty and staff, medical students, and community members were in attendance to hear from two notable speakers. Astronomer Jennifer Wiseman, PhD, the Emeritus Director of the Dialogue on Science, Ethics, and Religion at the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Her remarks were followed by a reflection from theologian Jonathan Crane, PhD, MPhil, MA, who is the Raymond F. Schinazi Scholar of Bioethics and Jewish Thought at the Ethics Center, and Professor of Medicine and Religion at Emory University.

The question that began this series is a simple one: if there is life on other planets, what does that mean for human significance? Dr. Wiseman explored this question in light of astronomical discoveries, while Dr. Crane offered a Jewish perspective on the question of human uniqueness in the context of life beyond earth. While these perspectives may seem to be at odds, Drs.

Wiseman and Crane had more in common than one might think, which is perhaps the point of interdisciplinary dialogues such as these.

In the Vastness of the Universe, are Humans Significant?

As Dr. Wiseman approached the podium, the lights were dimmed as a breathtaking photo of thousands of stars filled the screen. Thanks to technology like the Hubble Telescope, stars are no longer just small pinpricks of light; the image on the screen showed bright flashes of red, blue, and yellow. According to Dr. Wiseman, there are more than 200 billion stars in our Milky Way galaxy alone, which may lead one to feel small and insignificant.

Astronomer Carl Sagan may sum up this feeling of insignificance: “Who are we? We find that we live on an insignificant planet of a humdrum star lost in a galaxy tucked away in some forgotten corner of a universe in which there are far more galaxies than people.”

And yet, Dr. Wiseman did not find this insignificance or smallness deterministic or fatalistic. Rather, she saw this as an opportunity to be inspired. Space exploration provides an invitation to explore what we don’t yet know or have not yet encountered, and Dr. Wiseman accepts that invitation gladly.

***Betzelem Elohim*: A Jewish Perspective on Human Uniqueness**

At the end of her remarks, Dr. Wiseman offered a counter to Dr. Sagan’s quote in Psalm 8:3-4 which says, “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is the man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?” Dr. Crane picked up the Psalms, as well, acknowledging that Jewish tradition recognizes that things outside of this earth are significant because God created them.

Yet, their significance is not a threat to our own. Humans are particularly unique, according to Dr. Crane, because humans are *betzelem Elohim*, made in the image of God. But what if other beings who are also “made in the image of God” are discovered? Would human uniqueness and superiority fail? We may not be the exclusive owners of *betzelem Elohim*, but we were given revelation, and Dr. Crane notes that this dialogue with God is what matters.

The Significance of Human Significance

While questions of human uniqueness and significance are surely important questions worthy of exploration for their own sake, one might well be skeptical of the importance of these questions when our pediatric hospital is at—or over—capacity due to a triple threat of COVID, RSV, and influenza. When pressing deadlines or clinical responsibilities overwhelm, taking time for philosophical reflection may seem trivial at best or irresponsible at worst.

But, as Dr. Crane argued, being “made in the image of God” provides a certain comfort that allows us to “take risks” about science, healthcare, and the pursuit of knowledge. Reflecting on human significance—whether from a religious or scientific perspective—encourages us to push forward in our research endeavors and to take risks in our teaching as we develop a new curriculum and employ teaching techniques and modalities that may stretch us. As we seek to *transform* medical education, surely, we could all use comfort and the permission to take risks, as transformation does not come without challenges and risks.

Perhaps some of us are already confident of human significance. When a learner comes to us for help, overwhelmed by the subject matter or stresses of life, we take time to listen because we know they are unique and significant. If we did not believe in human significance and the intrinsic value of human beings, perhaps we would not have chosen this field in the first place. Yet this affirmation of human significance, whether from a scientific or religious perspective, reminds us to approach our work with a spirit of service and compassion that can transform the practice of medicine, medical education, and the biomedical sciences.

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