

Immortality and outer space

[Thore Bjørnvig](#)[1], MA in the History of Religions - May 14, 2012 - 12:08

[Astroculture](#)[2]

When reading popular scientific works on the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI), there is usually a reference to the "Drake Equation." The equation was created by astronomer Frank Drake as an agenda for the first scientific meeting on the possibilities to communicate with, and search for, intelligent life beyond Earth. The meeting was held in 1961 at the Greenbank Observatory in West Virginia, USA, and among the better known participants was Melvin Calvin, who received the Nobel Prize for his research in photosynthesis during the meeting.

Equations and criticism of religion

The equation was a first attempt to calculate the number of intelligent civilizations that may exist in our galaxy. Briefly stated, it outlines a number of factors which, when multiplied give the number of extraterrestrial civilizations. The meeting concluded that there had to be somewhere between a thousand and one hundred million civilizations in the galaxy, which is quite a guesstimate, if ever there was one. (Recently it has been estimated that our galaxy contains 10 billion planets in the so-called "habitable zone" which of course says nothing about how many of those might be inhabited by intelligent civilizations).

Many supporters of the SETI movement have at times been highly critical of religion. Examples are Jill Tarter, who formed the model for the character Ellie Arroway in the movie *Contact* (1997), played by Jodie Foster, and Carl Sagan, who also attended the Green Bank meeting. The cause of the critical stance towards religion often is that religion is seen as something that could potentially hinder the results of science from being accepted.

The galactic encyclopaedia

One need merely note the title of one of Sagan's books: *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* (1996) to get a feel of how the border has sometimes been drawn up. Nevertheless, one can find statements in the SETI movement, which in the optics of the comparative history of religions are indistinguishable from religious statements.

An example of this can be found in Drake's thoughts on how we here on Earth might benefit from establishing contact with extraterrestrial intelligent beings, an area where the speculative character of SETI blossoms fully. Entranced, Drake speaks about the "Galactic Encyclopaedia," which we can expect to receive embedded in a signal from an extraterrestrial civilization.

The Galactic Encyclopaedia, Drake imagines, is a comprehensive encyclopaedia of knowledge, accumulated over eons and shared between numerous galactic civilizations. Here solutions to many of our problems can be found, such as for example how to arrange society so as to avoid war. Drake even suggests that we may achieve immortality as a consequence of contact.

Science and salvation

The reasoning, heavily paraphrased, goes as follows: Since the extraterrestrial intelligent beings, as part of their development, must have attained immortality, they are much more afraid of being killed than if they ? like us ? just had a short life cycle, with aging and death as the inevitable end. What could be more sensible than to make sure that everyone else in the galaxy has the same attitude ? by giving them the secret of how to put a stop to the biological death? Thus they ensure that all other races will share the pacifist mindset, and consequently will not pose a threat.

Speculative ideas as these unfold within the materialistic, scientific worldview that characterises the SETI movement. But the desire for salvation, and the theme of immortality, is nonetheless similar to ideas found in many religions. For example in Christianity in the form of its central scripture Revelations, where the consequences of the Thousand Year Reign and the arrival of the New Jerusalem are listed: "...there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain? (21.4).

Religion and confirmation

Thus, the SETI movement constitutes one of the border areas where religion and science thrive side by side, and at times cannot be told apart. It may well be that many SETI scientists do not want to think of ideas such as Drake?s as ?religious.? But if one neglects seeing them as such, one misses out on a significant aspect of those ideas.

As a twist to the story one could perhaps allow oneself the liberty to note that it is not inconceivable that parts of the SETI movement, considered as a religion, one day will be the first religious movements to be able to provide scientific evidence for their religious beliefs.

Frank Drake on immortality:

Frank Drake and Dava Sobel (1997 [1991]). *Is Anyone Out There?: The Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence*. New York / London / Toronto / Sydney / Tokyo / Singapore: Pocket Books (Simon & Schuster.).

Link to the SETI Institute: <http://www.seti.org/> [3]

An earlier version of this blog entry was published on 12 January 2012 on www.videnkab.dk [4].

 [space_planet_colourbox_copy.jpeg](#) [5]

This field is not in use. The footer is displayed in the mini panel called "Footer (mini panel)"

Source URL: <http://sciencenordic.com/content/immortality-and-outer-space>

Links:

[1] <http://sciencenordic.com/content/thore-bj%C3%B8rnvig>

[2] <http://sciencenordic.com/blogs/astroculture>

[3] <http://www.seti.org/>

[4] <http://www.videnkab.dk>

[5] http://sciencenordic.com/sites/default/files/blogimages/space_planet_colourbox_copy.jpeg