

A Review of the movie: *Contact*, and the book: *Contact*, by Carl Sagan, 1985.

"Surely, among the billions of stellar systems in the billions of galaxies that fill our universe, Earth's ability to support intelligent life isn't unique. The universe is too vast, and we're not that special-- something else is probably out there. It's just a matter of our finding it, or its finding us." Discover, May, 1993.

When sharing the faith with a person of an opposing worldview seems to be going nowhere, it's often helpful to ask the question: *"What would you allow to go against your worldview?"* In other words, what evidence would render your worldview untrue? It's even a good question to ask ourselves. What undeniable fact (or facts) would falsify the Christian worldview? The Apostle Paul notes in I Cor. 15, that the strongest fact would be the discovery of Christ's body in the tomb. He goes on to say that if Christ is still in the tomb our faith is in vain (vss. 12ff.).

Now if you do ask the above question with the one you are conversing with, be sure to find out first if they believe the universe is a rational place. Do they believe in truth, absolutes, and laws of logic? If this is not so, the conversation will bog down and go nowhere, because if the universe is not a rational place, facts and reason do not matter. Such belief is irrational. Their appeal will be to such subjective factors as feeling and personal experience. Only a few years ago this would be more rare than it is today. Due to the spread of Eastern philosophy and the New Age craze, more and more belief systems are irrational. Sadly enough, this cultural trend is beginning to affect those in the Christian camp. While tenaciously holding to some semblance of Christianity, they often do so divorced from its factual and logical construct. For example, today it is common to find Christians who claim to follow the historic faith while also believing in reincarnation or other contradictory tenets of eastern religion. Others claim to have no concern if the narrative events in the Bible have never occurred. In other words *"Nothing could falsify my faith."*

I discovered the presence of this irrational attitude several years ago when I posed the hypothesis of intelligent life on other planets. The question was: What would it do to your faith if intelligent beings were discovered to exist somewhere in the universe? Could your faith survive? Could this new fact be made to fit in the Christian worldview without tension? I was shocked with most of the answers. Most did not see any problem whatever with a possible discovery of life on other planets. My own interest in this issue (extraterrestrial life) led me to read widely on the subject. What I found was, that non-Christians and those hostile to Christianity, had the opposite opinion. Most were not shy to write openly that such a discovery would be the death knell of historic Christianity. Some, like scientist-writer, Carl Sagan, were not at all bashful in expressing their exuberance for the coming of that day. In 1985, Sagan published his first and only novel about this anticipated event. The title of the book was simply, *Contact*. Last summer a movie based on the book became a major hit. Soon millions more will see it when the video becomes available.

The movie, promoted as *"a thinking man's alien movie"* champions a distinct message. Ann Druyan, the late

Carl Sagan's wife, was quoted in our local newspaper as saying: "I acted as a consultant for the movie because of our desire to get our message across." And what is that message? Sagan's story of Ellie Arroway (Jodie Foster), an astronomer, for the SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) Project, is about the conflict between science and religion. According to Sagan, science has brought light to the world, and religion, much darkness. This message is embodied in the story of this hard-nosed empirical astronomer who is searching for the meaning of life by combing the heavens for radio signals from aliens, and by a kookie priest who believes the answers to life are found by looking inward. The two make "*contact*" early in the movie and develop an unusual relationship for two people coming from seemingly diverse worldviews. Ellie is of course the spokesperson for science, Palmer Joss (Matthew McConaughey) for religion.

McConaughey, the co-star with Foster, is a seminary dropout who has a beer with Ellie, and sleeps with her on the same day they meet. After having sex they discuss religion and he tells her how much faith in God means to him. He calls himself "*a man of the cloth without the cloth.*" Ellie's answers to his religious questions are the stock-in-trade answers one would expect of an atheist scientist. They also are an echo of what the author has written in previous books and articles. At one point Ellie responds to her friend's inquiry as to her belief in God with the mantra: "As a scientist I go where the evidence leads me." At another point in the movie, she says something like: "How can I believe in a God who supposedly created the entire universe and then erased all the evidence of himself from it?" ***Think of the irony here. Ellie, through her scientific method, can discern the difference between natural and intelligent signals coming through our atmosphere but unable to see the same hand of an intelligent Creator in the origin of the universe!***

The movie (and the book) in a not so subtle way, demonstrates that science and traditional religion (read orthodox Christianity) are at loggerheads and cannot compromise. Nevertheless, the purpose of the movie is to show that science and *a certain kind of religion* can coexist, and that there is a kind of faith that is common to both. **This kind of religion that science can live with is one that does not make any truth claims.** It is one that is based on experience, one that avoids dogmatism, absolutes and authoritative revelation. As the movie develops, McConaughey's character, Palmer Joss, becomes a nationally known religious leader. He writes popular religious books, becomes a confidant of the president, and appears on talk shows. Most of his preaching is confined to making bland religious statements about faith in God. Always the emphasis is on the personal and experiential. Such a "faith" *can* coexist with science. Throughout the movie, Ellie with her sharp tongue, dismisses traditional religion. However, in the end she finds herself in a dilemma. She is convinced of the truthfulness of a personal experience she has had but cannot provide the proof for it. This is similar to Palmer's experience of God. She now understands that there are times when a scientist accepts certain things on faith without sufficient evidence.

In the movie, Ellie succeeds in finding radio signals from intelligent beings inhabiting a planet orbiting around the star, Vega. She then accomplishes the impossible by decoding the message. The Message (Sagan capitalizes it through out the book) consists of instructions to built a space-travel machine. A consortium of nations pools their funds and builds the machine. Ellie, with no surprise, maneuvers herself to become its

first passenger and succeeds in reaching this unknown planet. When there she meets an alien who takes the form of her deceased father. She returns, but something is wrong. According to earthly observers, the craft never physically left the launching pad! Ellie *knows* that she made contact. Much to her chagrin she finds that she had an experience, not unlike a religious experience. She knows she visited another planet and communicated with an alien but she can't prove she ever left the launching pad. The alien-designed spaceship traveled in some type of time- warp tunnel (in the book it is through a black hole) while having the appearance of sitting on the launch pad!

The book on which the movie is based may be the most autobiographical of all Sagan's writings. It is through his character, Ellie Arroway, that he bares his soul. In real life he was an astronomer, and he, like the 20th century existentialists, are acutely aware of man's finiteness. For most of his life as a scientist he was a leader in the quest for the search for extraterrestrial intelligence. This secular quest for transcendence is nothing more than Sagan's (and modern man's) search for redemption. In the movie, this redemption is even an act of grace in that the highly intelligent aliens seek out inferior and backward humans and present them with plans to travel to the heavens!

When Ellie, in one of her conversations, declares that God left no evidence for His creation I wanted to stand up in the theater and shout! As astronomer Ellie (Sagan) scanned the heavens, she accurately discerned man's finiteness, but totally missed the obvious inference of the infinity of its Creator (Romans 1:19,20). In the end Sagan says: "For small creatures such as we the vastness is bearable only through love." (*Contact*, p. 430). But without an infinite reference point, love can only be defined by finite humans. Sagan met his Maker earlier this year. We do not know his final state, but in the book, he ends with the cryptic statement that there is an intelligence (no capital) that antedates the universe. His cites as evidence the circle and the impossibility of finding an exact computation of *pi*.

Thinking Christians should see the movie **Contact** and read Sagan's book to be aware of the direction our culture is heading. We also should heed the command of I Pet. 3:15,16 to be ready with answers when questions like Ellie's are asked. I was deeply saddened when on several occasions Ellie had serious questions about the Christian faith but was only given superficial answers. Again I wanted to stand up in the theater and shout: "There are good answers to that."

Earlier we asked what difference it might make to the Christian faith if alien life were discovered. For this writer anyway, it would bring serious question to the truthfulness of the Christian worldview. There are at least two areas:

The first question that comes to mind is the uniqueness of man. Bertrand Russell, one of the most antichristian philosophers of this century, believed that man was alone in the universe, and that he was nothing more than "the phosphorescence of slime." Sagan in his writings certainly agrees with Russell's assessment of humanity, but he could never accept that man was alone. According to Sagan, there are about

400 billion stars in our Milky Way Galaxy. He believes (note the faith here) that 1 star in 10 must have planets. That's 40 billion stars with planets, and if each star has 10 planets, that's 400 billion planets in the galaxy! Since our solar system has only two planets that could sustain life (Earth and Mars) scientists estimate that if only 2 of 10 planets qualify, that's 80 billion planets that might have some form of life. It is further estimated, that 400 million to 40 billion of these planets might have intelligent life. One half of these may have civilizations more advanced than ours. This is just our galaxy. There are billions of galaxies in the universe! Some of these advanced civilizations could be trying to reach us. With these assumptions, millions of government funds have been spent trying to receive their signals.

If Sagan is correct, what does this do to the biblical doctrine of man created in the image of God? Note what some non-Christians say. Arthur C. Clarke, the noted science fiction writer, said: "*The rash assertion that 'God created man in his own image' is ticking like a time-bomb at the foundations of many faiths.*" Carl Jung said: "*In a direct confrontation with superior creatures from another world, the reins would be torn from our hands and we would, as a tearful old medicine man said to me, find ourselves 'without dreams.'* That is, we would find our intellectual and spiritual aspirations so outmoded as to leave us completely paralyzed." Another scientist, in a moment of candid admission said: "*My intelligence accepts the statistical certainty that other intelligences exist beyond the earth. But I hope I don't live to witness their discovery. Emotionally I am not prepared for that. Are you?*"

The Bible, in an ordinary reading, seems to indicate that the earth is the center of God's creation, and that man is the focus of His attention. He created man a moral being, who in a moment of testing, fell, bringing the whole creation under the curse. If these so-called beings are more intelligent than us, are they also moral beings? Were they affected by the fall? Or is this planet quarantined as C.S. Lewis speculated? And if there are myriads of such beings, all diverse and fallen, has God created for each a unique Incarnation? The Bible is totally silent on any physical life outside the earth.

A second question that the discovery of extraterrestrial life raises, is the matter of evolution and the origin of life. Sagan and his colleagues believe that if life is discovered on other planets, evolution can no longer be denied by creationists. Their assumption is that given the right conditions, life just happens, and has indeed begun spontaneously all over the universe. This seems contrary to all available evidence. From a scientific point of view, the origin of life on this planet is still a mystery. Most scientists believe life originated by chance. Those searching for life on other planets believe its coming into being is simply a matter of having the right conditions. It's like a law written into the universe. If the formula is right it happens!

Some scientists, who readily admit to the difficulty of life's origin happening repeatedly, speculate that life may have been transported to this planet either by some physical means (e.g., a comet), or by intelligent beings as some type of experiment. Many books, some serious, postulate that visitations from outer space have already occurred, and primitive earthlings called them gods, thus explaining the origin of religion.

There are some scientists (a minority) who believe intelligent life is probably a unique phenomena to earth. Frank Tipler, a physicist, believes intelligent life must be distinctive of earth, because if there are civilizations out there, most certainly some of them would be far more advanced than our own. Since we have not heard from them we must be alone. Others maintain that while we may eventually discover radio signals, it is virtually impossible to have physical contact. These planets are such great distances that travel by mortal humans in metal space ships is unimaginable. Science fiction writers, aware of these problems, speculate that humans can learn to survive for thousands of years of space travel by some sort of induced suspended animation. The other solution would be to greatly exceed the speed of light. Currently, most scientists believe this is impossible. In the movie, Sagan solves this problem by having Ellie travel down a black hole. Some speculate of even more strange remedies like parallel realities, or additional dimensions. There is a lot yet to learn about the physics of our Creator's universe, but the secular quest for salvation in the stars will be another dead end. As for me, I'm willing to put my faith on the line. Carl Sagan and his alter ego, Ellie Arroway, could not consider the Christian solution because they could not get beyond their materialistic and naturalistic assumptions. They were locked into only materialistic answers. Ellie said: "Please show me the evidence," but yet her worldview would not allow for the spiritual or the supernatural. It's as though she said: "What my net doesn't catch ain't fish."

"...[W]e are inventing imaginary creatures to protect ourselves against cosmic loneliness." Bruno Bettelheim

"If we must worship a power greater than ourselves, does it not make sense to revere the sun and the stars." Carl Sagan

"...[T]he formation of our solar system or the origin of life will never be fully understood until we discover other instances of these phenomena. It is essential to understanding the origin of our solar system to find another example." *Atlantic Monthly*, November, 1984.

"If some civilization out there has made its way beyond weapons, knowledge of its success would offer hope to a species in danger of destroying itself." *Atlantic Monthly*, November, 1984.

Other provocative books by Carl Sagan:

The Cosmic Connection.

Communication with Extraterrestrial Intelligence.

The Demon Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark.