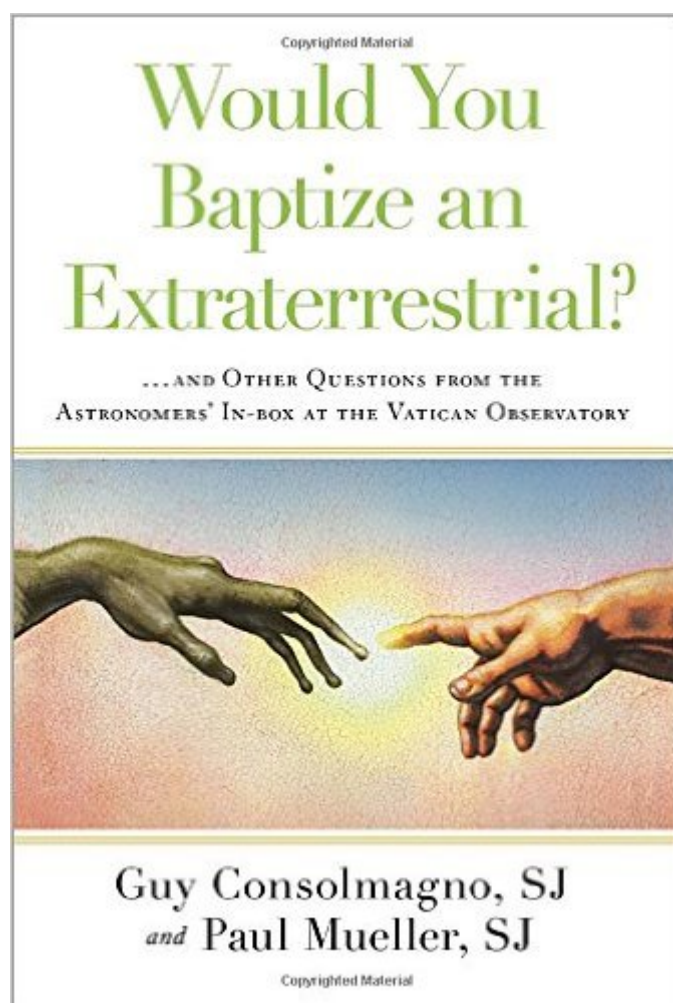


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Would You Baptize An Extraterrestrial?: . . . And Other Questions From The Astronomers' In-box At The Vatican Observatory



Synopsis

Witty and thought provoking, two Vatican astronomers shed provocative light on some of the strange places where religion and science meet. Imagine if a Martian showed up, all big ears and big nose like a child's drawing, and he asked to be baptized. How would you react? Pope Francis, May, 2014 Pope Francis posed that question "without insisting on an answer!" to provoke deeper reflection about inclusiveness and diversity in the Church. But it's not the first time that question has been asked. Brother Guy Consolmagno and Father Paul Mueller hear questions like that all the time. They're scientists at the Vatican Observatory, the official astronomical research institute of the Catholic Church. In *Would You Baptize an Extraterrestrial?* they explore a variety of questions at the crossroads of faith and reason: How do you reconcile the Big Bang with Genesis? Was the Star of Bethlehem just a pious religious story or an actual description of astronomical events? What really went down between Galileo and the Catholic Church and why do the effects of that confrontation still reverberate to this day? Will the Universe come to an end? And could you really baptize an extraterrestrial? With disarming humor, Brother Guy and Father Paul explore these questions and more over the course of six days of dialogue. *Would You Baptize an Extraterrestrial* will make you laugh, make you think, and make you reflect more deeply on science, faith, and the nature of the universe.

Book Information

Hardcover: 304 pages

Publisher: Image (October 7, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0804136955

ISBN-13: 978-0804136952

Product Dimensions: 6.3 x 1.1 x 9.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.2 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars See all reviews (54 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #199,641 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #118 in Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Biographies > Popes & the Vatican #208 in Books > Textbooks > Science & Mathematics > Astronomy & Astrophysics #299 in Books > Science & Math > Astronomy & Space Science > Cosmology

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How did you come up with the concept for this book? Guy: We really only came to understand, ourselves, what this book was all about by actually writing it. Paul: Guy and I found ourselves talking a lot, over the last few years, about the peculiar frustration we've been feeling with the kinds of questions that we get asked here at the Vatican Observatory – questions that people send by e-mail, or ask us when we give public talks. For Guy, that frustration was a long-term thing, since he's been at the Observatory for 18 years. For me it was a new thing, since I arrived at the Observatory just four years ago, in 2010. Guy: Some of the questions we kept being asked seemed to be a little off. At first, I was tempted to just dismiss them. (Baptizing aliens? Oh, come on!) Paul: Don't get us wrong – we're delighted that people are interested in the Observatory and its work, and we think it's great that people want to ask us important questions about science and faith. But more often than not, the questions that we get seem to presuppose that there's some sort of opposition between science and faith. The questions are often posed in such a way that we can't give an answer without taking sides between science and faith. But Guy and I have no interest in taking sides – from our perspective, there is no opposition or inconsistency between science and faith. Guy: The fact that people kept asking such questions made me realize that there must be something serious and real behind them if only I could put my finger on what that was. Maybe those questions had hidden assumptions that weren't quite right. But how could we tease out those assumptions? Paul: Gradually we realized that the way for us to respond was to start out with the questions that people were asking us. But instead of trying to give answers, we should first try to sharpen and deepen those questions. If we could bring to light some of the assumptions and presuppositions hidden behind the question, then maybe we'd be able to re-pose the questions in a better way. Maybe we'd be able to come up with similar-but-different questions which wouldn't so much demand an answer as invite people to ponder and to go deeper.

What made you decide to write it as a dialogue? Paul: Writing the book in dialogue form, as a conversation, left us free to consider questions from various angles, in an informal way. Guy: At first we tried to smooth it all out into one narrative, but that just drained the life out of what we were saying. Finally, we realized we were speaking in two different voices, we were each telling stories based on our own personal histories. Paul: And the dialogue format meant that Guy and I would not have to agree with each other all the time!

What is one of the strangest questions you've been asked during your career as a Vatican astronomer? Paul: Once when I was getting a haircut here in Italy, the barber asked me whether the Pope talks with aliens at the Observatory! But you know, lots of strange questions come up in barbershops. Guy: Someone wanted to know if I was really in touch with aliens. When I told him I was not, he replied, "Ha! I knew you wouldn't tell me the truth!"

What's sad are all the people like him who don't ask questions but who are sure they already know the answers. Unfortunately, the more certain they are, the more likely it's nonsense. Over the years, some people have e-mailed me offering long, detailed proofs that everything we know about religion is wrong, or everything we know about science is wrong. Others have sent me detailed descriptions of their own interactions with aliens. I really feel for those people; they are in need of the sort of help that no one can give them over the internet.

What was your initial reaction when Pope Francis discussed the possibility of baptizing Martians?

Guy: I had to laugh. I knew what he was driving at, of course; but I also knew how some people would immediately take it in the wrong direction, as if he were saying we should actually be baptizing Martians. Sure enough, pretty soon there were all sorts of rumors on the internet that a Papal announcement about aliens was imminent! Paul: Of course that was not the Pope's intention. His main topic was the controversy in early Christianity, as to whether people had to become Jews first before they could be baptized as Christians. The early Christians ultimately came to realize that the message of Christ is universal "it is open to all people, not just to the Jews. So the point that Pope Francis was making was mainly about the universality of the Christian message, not about Martians. He was using the question about baptizing Martians to illustrate how difficult and strange the question of the universality of the Christian faith was for the early Church.

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