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Religion May Motivate Humanity's Future Expansion into Space

By Jesse Emspak, Space.com Contributor | September 27, 2016 12:21pm ET



The Hubble Space Telescope has viewed many heavenly wonders, such as the Eagle Nebula's Pillars of Creation.

Credit: NASA, ESA/Hubble and the Hubble Heritage Team

It's been more than 40 years since a human stepped on another world, and the usual motivators — national pride, scientific discovery and even profit — may not be enough. Instead, people may turn to religion, according to some experts.

At [the annual Mars Society convention](#) in Washington, D.C. last week, in a panel called "Cosmos in Cosmoi — Worldview & Visions for the Future of Humanity as a Multi-Planetary Species," four experts discussed the reasons human beings have explored outer space, including religious and social motivators. The panel was moderated by Nicole Willett, education director of the Mars Society.

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The group noted that popular notions of the religion-science divide don't often hold up to scrutiny, and that the urge to go to remote places can be rooted in a fundamentally religious impulse. [[Should Humanity Take Religion on Interstellar Space Voyage?](#)]

"Religion has received a sometimes justified, sometimes not justified, rap as being opposed to science and knowledge," said Paul Levinson, a science fiction writer and professor of communications and media studies at Fordham University, during the Sept. 23 panel. "We should take this idea of interrelationship of space travel and religion a little further."

Levinson noted that human spaceflight to other worlds basically stopped in the 1970s, and that the motivations were clearly not powerful enough. "Since we got to the moon and we'd already beaten the Soviets that motive was gone," he said. Science proved insufficient as well. "Science continues to be motivating factor, but it's a weak motivation," he said. "NASA has tried, and it hasn't ignited any real passion."

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Profit hasn't proven very helpful, either. "Everybody wants to make a buck," Levinson said. "SpaceX has had some mixed success, and Richard Branson has put some money into it, but I don't see a fleet of spaceships going out beyond the solar system."

That led him to think [that some religious motive, based on wonder, might be the way to go](#). "There's a motivation every sentient being has. Every person and, for all I know, dolphins, has wonder... We ask what is the meaning of our place in the universe. Science doesn't even scratch the deepest parts of that question."

Lance Strate, also a professor of communications at Fordham, said the whole enterprise of space travel was always about more than just the science, or even beating the USSR. "Moses Maimonides came up with idea of planets as intermediary between angels and humans," he said. "All of this suggests we are trying to look for something beyond ourselves."

"The space program is channeling all these resources and labor to send people to our conception of heaven," he added. "Think about the question of what is the reason for doing this."

Beyond motivation, religions are not automatically challenged by space travel, Levinson said. He noted that evangelicals are more likely to [believe that aliens landed](#) in Roswell, New Mexico. Also, many of the questions that govern ritual and practice would take a different meaning in space. "Where is Mecca if you're on Mars?" he said.

Michael Waltemathe, a theologian at Ruhr-University Bochum in Germany, added that space's challenges to religious observance have already been hashed out. "There was a fatwa put out by Malay Muslim authorities on how to do rituals on the International Space Station — all this has been thought through," he said. (The fatwa says that one can use a "home" time zone to time the prayers, and simply [face in any direction](#).)

Rev. James Heiser, bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of North America, noted that Johannes Kepler's speculation on the nature of life on other planets wasn't a direct challenge to his faith.

Asked by Willett about the psychological aspects of long space journeys, Waltemathe added that the religious tradition of setting up monastic communities in remote areas could tie into space travel as well. "The theological idea was that these people were on their own to get a greater connection to transcendence," he said.

Levinson said some forms of religious observance may become less important, because when traveling in space all the celestial markers — moonrise, sunrise, sunset or what phase the moon is in, no longer exist. That could actually have a strengthening effect on religion, he said. "They will see these rituals are not that necessary and religion can then get down to exploring the basis of what religion is — which is what are we doing in this universe."

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