

Religion could survive discovery of ET, survey suggests

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Could the world's religions survive the discovery of extraterrestrial life? Or would their beliefs be so shaken that they would eventually collapse?

A survey ([pdf](#)) discussed on Tuesday at a meeting on the search for alien life at the [Royal Society](#) in London suggests religion would survive.

The survey, designed by [Ted Peters](#), a professor of Systematic Theology at the Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, asked 1300 people whether they thought the discovery of extraterrestrial intelligence would shake their individual belief, the strength of their religion as a whole or would adversely affect the beliefs of other religions. The survey included both religious and non-religious people, and most respondents were based in the US.

None of the 70 Buddhists questioned thought that the discovery of ET would undercut their belief systems, although 40 per cent thought it could pose problems for other religions.

More Roman Catholics believed ET could pose a problem for their faith. Only 8 per cent of the 120 surveyed thought that their individual beliefs would be shaken, but nearly a quarter – 22 per cent – said it could adversely affect their religion. Even more – 30 per cent – thought it could threaten the beliefs of other religious people.

Singled out

The patterns were similar for the other Christian sects surveyed, including evangelical and mainline Protestants, but there was not enough data to draw firm conclusions about people of other religions, such as Hindus and Muslims.

Of the 205 people who identified themselves as non-religious (either atheists or those who describe themselves as spiritual but not religious), only 1 per cent thought it would affect their atheist or spiritual outlooks. But 69 per cent thought the discovery of ET could cause a crisis for other world religions. An average of only 34 per cent of religious people shared that belief.

[Paul Davies](#), an astrobiologist at Arizona State University in Tempe was one of the first to suggest that the world's religions would not cope with the discovery of ET. And he still believes such a find would pose theological problems for Christians.

"They believe that Jesus came down to earth to save humankind – not dolphins, Neanderthals or extraterrestrials," he said in response to the survey results. "To make sense of this, either you need multiple incarnations [of Jesus on other planets] or a reason why this planet and this species was singled out for special attention."

'Extraterrestrial brothers'

Many survey respondents expressed no such qualms. A Roman Catholic said: "I believe that Christ became incarnate (human) in order to redeem humanity and atone for the original sin of Adam and Eve. Could there be a world of extraterrestrials? Maybe. It doesn't change what Christ did."

Another wrote: "From an evangelical Christian perspective, the Word of God was written for us on Earth to reveal the creator... Why should we repudiate the idea that God may have created other civilisations to bring him glory in the same way?"

"There is nothing in Christianity that excludes other intelligent life," asserted an evangelical respondent.

Indeed, Vatican astronomers have [said in recent years](#) that there is no conflict between believing in God and in the possibility of "extraterrestrial brothers".