

# Contact: A Eulogy to Carl Sagan

## The Paradox of the Movie *Contact*

At the very beginning of the movie *Contact*, you should have noticed in the lower right corner of the screen a little dedication which read, "For Carl." This, of course, is Carl Sagan (1934-1996), the Cornell astronomer and science advocate to the public, whose 1985 novel was the basis for the movie.(1) Sagan passed away in December 1996, before the movie was released, after he struggled for several years with a rare blood disorder.

The movie serves as a fitting eulogy for the most visible member of the scientific community within popular culture. The phrase "billions and billions", attributed to Sagan, has become a part of the public's lexicon of scientific phrases, even though Sagan never actually used the phrase in print or in any of his public broadcasts or appearances. Sagan used it self-effacingly as the title for his final and posthumously published book.

Many of us know of Carl Sagan, but we know very little about him. As a planetary astronomer, Sagan made significant contributions to the fields of chemical evolution, Martian topography, and Venusian meteorology. He also served as an official adviser to NASA on the *Mariner*, *Voyager*, and *Viking* unmanned space missions. Carl Sagan led the charge both to the public and in the Congressional halls of government funding for space research and particularly SETI, the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence.

Sagan was awarded the Peabody Award and an Emmy for his stunningly influential public television series, *Cosmos*. The accompanying book by the same title is the best-selling science book ever published in the English language.(2) He earned the Pulitzer Prize for his book *Dragons of Eden* on the evolution of human intelligence, and numerous other awards and honorary degrees. He is the most read scientific author in the world, and upon awarding him their highest honor, the National Science Foundation heralded his gifts to mankind as "infinite."

The main character of *Contact*, Ellie Arroway, played by Jodie Foster, portrays Sagan's life in miniature. While not sharing Sagan's awards and rapport with the public, Ellie Arroway is a brilliant, driven, self-reliant young astronomer obsessed with SETI. Dr. Arroway endures scorn and ridicule from the public and science for her dedication to discovering signs of extraterrestrial life, just as Sagan has. Arroway, like Sagan, confronted with the demons of superstition, fundamentalism, and scientific jealousy, fought back with reason, sarcastic wit, and sheer perseverance.

Arroway parrots Sagan's views on the need for a rational, non-religious view of reality to solve our problems, his hope for an extraterrestrial savior to save us from our technological adolescence, and the wonder and beauty of the cosmos pointing to our species as a curious, brave, precious accident of the universe. What is paradoxical about *Contact* is not the conflict between faith and reason, but who is forced to rely on faith and experience instead of evidence. Following Ellie's trip through the galaxy and her conversation with an alien, she returns with no documentation. What was an 18-hour experience for Ellie appeared to be an uneventful few seconds to everyone else. She must ask a Congressional panel to accept her account of events on *faith* with no evidence. If you were paying close enough attention as the film wound down, however, you could discover that this paradox is only apparent. Ellie's data instruments recorded a full 18 hours—not a few seconds—of static. There was evidence of her experience, but it was withheld from Ellie by apprehensive government officials. The scientific validation once again highlights Sagan's conviction that science is mankind's only reliable tool in the discovery of truth, and that faith only covers up our fears and stifles our search

for answers.

*Contact* is a must-see film for those who wish to comprehend and knowingly confront our culture's hostility towards faith that relies on revelation.

## **The Paradox of Sagan's Views of Religion**

One of the most perplexing aspects of the movie *Contact* is the seemingly confusing portrayal of religion. The confusion, I believe, is only superficial. If you reflect on how the different traditional religion is discarded as irrelevant at best and dangerous at worst.

Sagan's disdain for traditional religion is clear from the beginning. Events from Ellie's childhood flashback through the early part of the movie and lay the groundwork for her rational rejection of traditional Christianity. In the novel, Ellie's father is portrayed as a skeptic of revealed religion; he views the Bible as "half barbarian history and half fairy tales."<sup>(3)</sup> In the movie, Ellie admits to Palmer Joss that her father was asked to keep her home from Sunday School because she asked too many questions that could not be answered, such as "Where did Cain get his wife?" Although this and other objections offered in the novel are easily answered, they are left unchallenged as apparently sturdy nails in the Bible's coffin.

When Ellie's father dies in the movie, the clergyman offers harsh and uncaring words about some things being hard to understand, that we aren't meant to know, and that we just have to accept it as God's will. This deliberately presents the God of the Bible as unknowable, cruelly inscrutable, and demanding of our acceptance. Ellie's response to the minister's attempt to be consoling is to berate herself on where she should have left extra medicine where it could have been reached in an emergency. Self-reliance and analytical thinking easily out-compete the minister's feeble lecture. In a conversation with Palmer Joss, Ellie confidently asserts that we created God so we wouldn't feel so small and alone. He's just an emotional crutch.

Two other characters in the film outline Sagan's view of the modern evangelical right. The long-haired preaching zealot is portrayed as a dangerous man, out of control and out of touch with reality. He later borrows a trick from Muslim fundamentalists by sacrificing himself in an attempt to derail the multinational project to build the travel machine. Richard Rank, the presidential advisor, represents that portion of the religious right that hungers and thirsts not for righteousness, but for political power. At a cabinet meeting, Rank offers sanctimonious drivel about science intruding into areas of faith and the message being morally ambiguous. If his remarks made you cringe with anger, they were supposed to.

And then there is Palmer Joss, the enigmatic, amoral, has-been priest. Palmer Joss's New Age religion sees truth as relative and the real issue as oppression. Joss has no quibble with the conclusions of science, just its attempts to overstep its boundaries and rule our lives. His knowledge of God is limited to an experience on which he does not elaborate and that intellect cannot touch. Perhaps the attraction between Joss and Arroway is the challenge they represent to each other. Joss's religion is at least scientifically informed and therefore intriguing to Ellie, and she is scorned by the same scientific establishment that Joss distrusts. A match made in Hollywood.

Sagan left no room for any faith that does not embrace the conclusions of a scientific materialism. This needs to be kept in mind when Joss challenges her about her belief in God during the hearings. When the other multinational members speak up in defense of Joss's question, it is clear they are only referring to some politically correct supreme being, not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

## Sagan's Extraterrestrial Hope

Even in a scientifically sophisticated film such as Carl Sagan's *Contact*, we run into our culture's preoccupation with life beyond our planet. Though Carl Sagan spent some of his time combating the UFO crazies, he nevertheless held out a hope that there are civilizations out there waiting to discover us, or us them. Where does this conviction come from? For a scientific materialist and humanist like Carl Sagan, this confidence comes from two sources. First is the notion that if life evolved here, it is presumptuous of us to think that we are alone. Certainly life has evolved elsewhere! Second is Sagan's and others' fear that our species sits on the brink of self-destruction and we will need some outside help to overcome our predicament.

In a conversation with Palmer Joss, Ellie Arroway gives a calculation of sorts to explain her confidence in life having evolved elsewhere. She is looking up into the plethora of stars in the nighttime sky and says, "If just one in a million of those stars has planets, and if only one in a million of those has life, and if just one in a million of those has intelligent life, then there are millions of civilizations out there." It is a little surprising that a film of such high caliber would get this one wrong. If you take each of those probabilities and multiply them together, that's one in a million million million, or a billion billion, or in scientific notation,  $10$  to the 18th power. Current estimates suggest that the stars number approximately  $10$  to the 22nd power. That would technically leave only 10,000 civilizations in the universe, not millions. That would mean that we are alone even in our own galaxy.

In another essay (Are We Alone in the Universe?) I summarized the calculations of Christian astronomer Hugh Ross. Ross estimated the probabilities of all the necessary conditions for life occurring by natural processes. Ross concluded that if all we have to depend on are physical and chemical processes, then we are alone in the universe. Life could have evolved nowhere else. Even the biochemical complexities of living cells are revealing that life requires intelligence (See my review of *Darwin's Black Box*). Sagan's confidence that life is super-abundant in the universe is grossly out of proportion.

The second reason for Sagan's hope of other civilizations was expressed well by Ellie Arroway. An international panel, assigned the task of choosing the one individual who would enter the machine and perhaps visit this alien civilization, queried each candidate what one question they would ask. Ellie said she would want to know how they survived their technological adolescence without destroying themselves. Sagan has been a tireless supporter of nuclear disarmament. He truly feared that we would destroy ourselves before we reached our full potential. In the opening scene of his *Cosmos* television series, he remarked that our species was "young and curious and brave; it showed much promise."<sup>(4)</sup> Couple this fear with the conviction that there is no God, and the only source of hope for a salvation from ourselves is another civilization more advanced than us, giving us some pointers for survival.

This confidence that an alien culture that could contact us would be more advanced than us is not unreasonable. If they have the technology to purposefully contact us, and this is something we cannot do, then their technology must be beyond ours. What is never explained, however, even though it is raised in the movie, is why we would expect this alien culture to be benevolent. It is just as likely, if not more so, that an alien civilization would be more of the variety depicted in the movie *Independence Day*. This hope reflects more on Carl Sagan's optimistic cosmic humanism than any scientific reality.

## Who Will Save Us, God or Aliens?

The movie *Contact* tells us of a more realistic scenario for a first encounter with an alien civilization,

than, say, *Men in Black*. A radio signal is received from space that is broadcast at a frequency that is equal to the value of hydrogen times pi and gets our attention by counting the prime numbers from 1 to 101 in sequence. The message is authenticated as coming from the star Vega, 26 light years away. The message is eventually decoded and found to contain the plans for constructing a machine for one person to apparently travel out into the galaxy. Ellie Arroway, a young astronomer who discovers the message, eventually boards the machine and travels out into space for a close encounter of a supposedly more realistic kind.

A very tantalizing line is repeated three times in the course of the film. When Ellie Arroway, as a child, asks her father if there are any life forms out in the universe, he says that if there isn't, it would be an awful waste of space. Palmer Joss repeats the line to an adult Ellie as they engage in a conversation under a starry sky in Puerto Rico. It is a poignant scene as Ellie clearly is stunned as she recalls her father saying the same thing. Ellie, herself, repeats the phrase at the end of the film as she is addressing a group of school children and is asked if there is life out there in space.

Sagan has drawn a bead on the argument for the existence of God from design, or the teleological argument. Waste implies misdirected design. If the universe was created for us and we are alone, why does it have to be so big? Surely we could have survived quite well in a much smaller and economical universe. But if you think about it, Scripture proclaims that the heavens declare the glory of God, not man (Ps. 19:1). Indeed, if the universe was created only for man's benefit, then it is a waste of space. We don't deserve it. But if the main purpose of the universe is to glorify the splendid, eternal, all-powerful God, it could never be big enough.

Another interesting theme is the form that the alien takes. After Ellie travels through the galaxy, she arrives at a large docking space station. She is somehow transported to a beach, resembling a picture of Pensacola, Florida she drew as a child. Eventually, a figure approaches. It is her father. The alien appears to her in the form of her father. He tells her that they thought this would make it easier for her.

It's fascinating that Sagan often complains that if God exists, why doesn't he make himself plain? Why not a cross in the sky or a mathematical formula in the Bible? Why is everything so obscure? One answer from Philip Yancey's book, *Disappointment with God*, is that God did reveal himself plainly to Israel during the Exodus and they still rebelled, and Jesus performed incredible miracles and still most rejected him. The Father does not want to coerce our love. So isn't it interesting that in Sagan's own story, when a superior intelligence wants to make contact with us, they put us in familiar surroundings, take on our form, and speak our language?! If they appeared to us in their true form, we would be repulsed. Isn't that precisely what the Father did for us in sending Jesus to live among us? It appears that Carl Sagan has unwittingly answered his own objection.

## **The Worldview of Carl Sagan**

Carl Sagan began his highly acclaimed public television series *Cosmos* with a grand overview of the universe and our place within it. With a crashing surf in the background, Sagan declares,

"The cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be."(5)

Sagan eloquently expresses his conviction that matter and energy are all that exist. He goes on to describe his awe and wonder of the universe. He describes a tingling in the spine, a catch in the voice, as the greatest of mysteries is approached. With excitement, Sagan tells us our tiny planetary home the Earth is lost somewhere between immensity and eternity, thus poignantly emphasizing our

simultaneous value and insignificance.

In the movie *Contact*, Dr. Ellie Arroway expresses this awe and wonder at several points in the film. The most dramatic episode occurs during her galactic space flight when she is confronted with the wonders to be seen near the center of the galaxy. She is at a loss for words in the face of such beauty and humbly suggests that a poet may have been a better choice to send on the trip.

While this is all very moving, the great emotion seems strangely misplaced and inappropriate. If the cosmos is indeed all there is or ever was or ever will be, why get excited? If we are lost between immensity and eternity, shouldn't our reaction be one of existential terror, not awe? Sagan borrows his excitement from a Christian worldview where the heavens declare the glory of God, which *should* produce a tingle in the spine and a catch in the voice.

In the next to final scene in *Contact*, Ellie attempts to defend herself by finally admitting that she has no evidence of her trip through the galaxy. But she has been given something wonderful, a vision of the universe that tells us how tiny, insignificant, rare and precious we are. In *Cosmos*, Sagan reflects that while we are a species that is young and curious and brave, our place in the universe is to be compared to "a mote of dust that floats in the morning sky." (6)

How can we be tiny and insignificant and rare and precious at the same time? Clearly Sagan cannot live consistently within his own worldview. His view of the universe dictates that all is meaningless chance and we are nothing special, yet he irrationally rejects the despair that logically follows in favor of being curious, brave, rare, and precious.

As Sagan neared death, many around the world were praying for him. Though clearly an enemy of the faith, the closing sentences of the novel *Contact* indicated a belief, a hope, in an intelligence that antedates the universe. Might he see the whole truth before he passes into eternity? In his final book *Billions and Billions*, his wife Ann Druyan writes, "Contrary to the fantasies of fundamentalists, there was no deathbed conversion.... Even at this moment when anyone would be forgiven for turning away from the reality of our situation, Carl was unflinching." (7) In reflecting on the many cards and letters she received upon his death from people telling of the impact Sagan had on their lives, she writes, "These thoughts comfort me and lift me out of my heartache. They allow me to feel, without resorting to the supernatural, that Carl lives." (8) Sadly, Carl does live, but not as she believes. Remember that enemies of the faith are lost and in need of a Savior. But even though they may be prayed for and witnessed to by colleagues up to the end, many, including Carl Sagan, will still, defiantly, die in their sins. It is a bitter, needless grief.

## Notes

1. Carl Sagan, *Contact* (NY: Pocket Books [Simon and Schuster], 1986).
2. Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), p. 459.
3. Sagan, *Contact*, p. 20.
4. Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* Video, "Episode 1: The Shores of the Cosmic Ocean" (Turner Home Entertainment, 1989).
5. Ibid.
6. Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980), p. 4.
7. Carl Sagan, *Billions and Billions* (New York: Random House, 1997), p. 225.

8. Ibid., p. 228.

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**See Also:**

- Probe Answers Our E-mail: “You Are Full of Hatred and Bigotry”