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Are We Ready to Meet an Alien Culture?
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Earlier this month, NASA announced that it had discovered 54 Earth-like planets orbiting other stars in the Milky Way. These exoplanets, as they are called, were discovered by the Kepler Satellite and are approximately the size of Earth. More importantly, they orbit their sun at a distance where the temperatures are moderate enough for liquid water. Water, of course, is a key building-block of life.

No, we have not discovered aliens. But, if there are any, scientists have just found where they might be hanging out. In the inimitable fashion of American journalism, many news outlets suggested this brought us a step closer to finding alien life forms. (A step closer to something we don't even know exists!).

One of the most interesting of these solar systems, called KOI 157, contains not just one but five planets in its habitable zone. This increases the odds that life might be found there.

KOI 157 is also 2,000 light years away. There is lots of time to prepare for making contact with the aliens. That's good, because we are not ready.

In our public imagination, we tend to see aliens in the singular. That makes it easy to identify their intentions. In "E.T.," we met a little nice guy who threatened no one and just wanted to go home. In "Men in Black," we met individual aliens, all of whom had criminal tendencies; the only question lay in when they would break a law, or eat someone.

American film and television frequently depict hordes of aliens, but interestingly, most hordes come in the singular. The classic "War of the Worlds" told the story of an invading alien army. There was just one army, carrying out its one goal of invasion. Films as different as "Independence Day" and "Cocoon" simply repeat the theme of one set of aliens with only one purpose.

And don't forget "Star Trek," which gave us the Borg, many beings controlled by one mind, or the one goal of the Daleks from the British "Dr. Who" (Exterminate! Exterminate!).

"Star Trek: Deep Space Nine" brought some complexity to the portrayal of aliens. Not only did it follow the earlier "Star Trek" with multiple species such as Klingons, Vulcans, and Romulans, but its ongoing interaction with them revealed elements of alien social structure, governance and individual personality quirks. But there is a difference between calmly watching a fictional TV show about aliens and meeting and interacting with an actual alien society. The latter would not be viewed calmly or rationally but through the lens of jangling emotions. Those emotions would quickly reduce the alien society's complexity to something singular, simple, and probably misleading. One quick way that would take place is through our attitudes toward their religion, whatever that might be.

To illustrate my point, think about how America views foreign societies, which are human, not alien. The American media began reporting the Egyptian revolution by emphasizing the variety of people involved: young and old, poor and middle class, educated and non-educated, etc. Then the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamicist organization, became involved. Suddenly, the story became Mubarak the dictator vs. the religious fanatics. The people's will and actions suddenly were seen as misguided, for as pundits argued, it would only lead to a religious dictatorship worse than Mubarak's.

If we are going to be ready to meet alien cultures, then we must become consistently more sophisticated about how we understand human ones. We must attempt to understand their complexity and not grow fearful when religious organizations get involved and attempt to improve their own society.

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