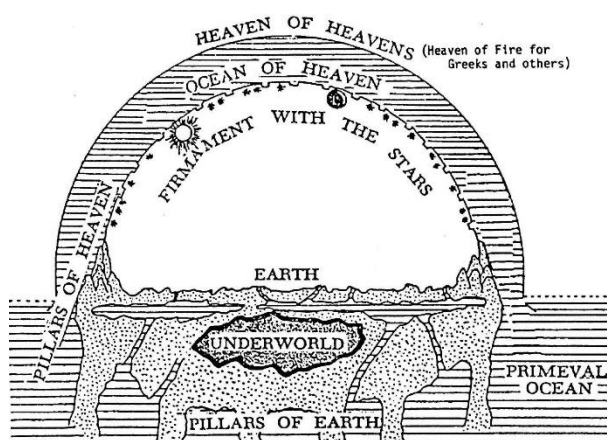

A New Model of the Universe Challenges Christian Conceptions

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The traditional Christian world picture has been profoundly and unalterably challenged in the last one hundred years.

The new map the sciences have drawn shows us a universe of stunning and strangely unfamiliar beauty, incomprehensible magnitude and power, which, for many, can evoke the dread of human insignificance and cosmic homelessness.

Many of the old fixities have disappeared from public consciousness. Space photography has rendered the idea of a creator God, as seated, enthroned above the clouds of Earth, no longer believable.



The creation, once seen as a one-off event, is known to be an ongoing process. Space is no longer a container filled with predetermined creatures, from stars to sparrows. Instead, we speak of new dynamic entities like cosmic expansion, evolution and space-time, warped and moved by gravity.

Since Einstein and Lemaitre, we know that the world we experience is not the world we measure. According to Max Planck, the deeper we plunge into solid matter, the more it dissolves into a symphony of energy vibrations. Here, we no longer find objects one can touch and measure but wave functions. At this level of organization, everything is connected to everything else. Even matter and

mind are now inseparable. This new world picture raises significant questions for Christianity and individual believers.

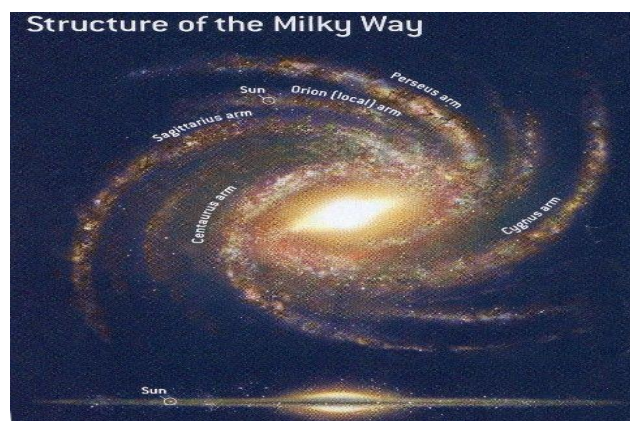
The one question that now suddenly takes centre stage asks how to speak appropriately about the mystery of God, who has revealed himself to this world in every phase of its becoming.

Next is the challenge of verbalising Christian truth claims in concepts that fit how the current generation, let alone future generations, will make sense of their world while remaining mindful that this new universe—its outworking, unfolding, and destiny—is still in the making.

Gone is the unwavering trust in the traditional reading of the biblical creation accounts as a step-by-step history of creation. Secular culture considers them, at best, foundation myths common in the ancient world. Here, questions arise about the revelatory value of the Genesis text, including its openness or resistance to interpretations beyond the literal.

General Relativity and astronomical observations tell us that the universe is expanding and that galaxies are moving away from us at ever-faster speeds. Moreover, there is now incontrovertible evidence for a Big Bang 13.8 billion years ago, the apparent point of origin of all there is.

In such a universe, God's creative intent can no longer be limited to humanity and its earthly habitat. Moreover, humanity has been given a new cosmographical address: the Milky Way Galaxy Orion Arm. To be more precise, our patch is located about 26,000 light years from the centre of a mid-size spiral star cluster with a diameter of about 100,000 light-years, centred around a massive black hole.



As light travels at 300,000 km per second, one light-year—the measure of astronomical distances—equals 9.5 trillion km. At that rate, it takes a photon 100,000 years to traverse the diameter of the Milky Way. The universe has 100 to 200 billion galaxies.

If this gigantic dimension of our neighbourhood was not impressive enough, let's zoom out further. Here, we find our home Galaxy to be just one in a snowstorm of galaxies numbering by the trillions, each with hundreds of millions of stars like our sun.

The immeasurable dimension of creation raises questions about humanity's place within it and the very essence of human creation as it relates to cosmic history and evolution.

What was traditionally called a broken, fallen, even divinely cursed world divorced from its creator by the moral failure of a primordial couple becomes, in the new story, the product of a relentlessly unfolding, self-organising cosmic process, albeit from a perspective of faith being divinely originated.

This picture clashes with one of Christianity's central claims that death, diseases, predation, and all other evils of the natural world, like earthquakes and tsunamis, are all attributable to the moral failure of the first human beings, Adam and Eve. It raises questions about believable anthropology, including the meaning of sin and death in the context of an evolving species, the rise of consciousness, the meaning of Homo erectus altruism, the nature of human agency, the meaning of sacrifice, scapegoats, and reconciliation. Clearly, a move toward an evolutionary anthropology, away from the idea of a Fall, would reexamine the traditional interpretation of Jesus' death.

In the new story, order appeared out of chaos following the first flaring forth of the creation. Blue whales and butterflies, clams and caterpillars, dinosaurs and dingoes and eventually self-conscious humans emerged from the ashes of burned-out stars, once swept together by gravity with uncanny precision as if fine-tuned for life.

In short, an evolutionary view of the cosmic process raises vital questions about God's relation to evolution, chaos and self-organisation, the rise of human consciousness, the ability to recognise symbols, religious experiences, and meaning itself.

How, for instance, will the church explain theologically the rise of subjectivity from "mindless matter" and its ultimate future? Let alone the moral attributes of the relationship between the creator and humankind.

The irrepressible scientific challenge is here to stay. While millions of people may never ground their world picture in the Standard Model of cosmology, millions more cannot escape the global reach of culture-shaping influences, which are increasingly consigning the traditional creation model to the status of a museum piece.

All these developments were already known 60 years ago when the eminent biochemist and chaplain of Oxford University, Arthur Peacock warned the churches about their resistance to these discoveries.

Since then, the painful results of what he foresaw have been unfurling in the UK and continental Europe. Today, the heartland of the Reformation and the lands where Catholicism had its home for most of its history are the most secularised regions of Europe. In Germany, churches lose 500,000 members annually, with questions of believability as the main issue.

What is the Christian response? Many find the prospect of having to deal with this knowledge explosion very threatening. Many others have become frustrated and ceased accepting the Genesis text as divine utterance while retaining its symbolic and metaphysical value.

Others, no longer convinced of Christian verities, have begun to ignore normative Christianity or left the church. This is increasingly the case among Europe's young, who regard the church as unscientific, even antiscientific.

Others bristled, like Martin Luther, when he heard of the discovery that the earth was orbiting the sun. For him, nothing contrary to the "Word of God" could exist. The sun moved around the earth, the centre of everything. Besides, Joshua had prayed, and the sun stood still. So, it must have been moving – end of discussion.

In practice, most churches continue with a strategy of "business as usual." However, this procrastination and pretending the challenge does not exist or will disappear only moves the church still further away from the much-changed culture it seeks to reach.

Taken together, I've become convinced that the Copernican revolution was mere child's play by comparison with the challenge that Christianity is facing in this moment of history.

This conviction was immeasurably strengthened after watching Professor Brian Cox's brilliant presentation on the origin and beauty of the universe before a packed audience in the Sydney Opera House, with symphonic accompaniment performed by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra (January 2, 2024).

To draw attention to what a cross-culturally oriented church may be called to embrace if it wants to take the new cultural environment seriously, The Discovery Papers offer question-raising content aimed at reawakening the Christian imagination still shackled to a view of the world now five hundred years out of date.

When the Apostle Paul drafted his new ideas about God and how we relate to God, they took centuries to reach the then-known world. Today, ideas about scientific discoveries can spread in minutes. The Christian church has lost control of the narrative that drives our culture, and even with a recalibrated theological vision, it will not be easy to influence it.

In conclusion, the new universe story offers us a unique opportunity to deepen our understanding of God's creation and explore the theological implications that arise from it.

By embracing scientific research's insights, letting go of outdated pre-scientific conceptions, and engaging in dialogue with the scientific community, we can navigate the intersection of science and faith with wisdom and grace.

Therefore, let us embark on this journey of discovery and allow the New Universe Story to enrich our faith and deepen our relationship with the Creator.

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