

Burbank Leader

In Theory: Balancing science, religion

2:29 PM PDT, September 22, 2010

According to physicist Stephen Hawking, theology is unnecessary when it comes to explaining the origins of the universe. "God may exist, but science can explain the universe without the need for a creator," Hawking said on "Larry King Live." He goes on to say: "Science can explain the universe, and that we don't need God to explain why there is something rather than nothing, or why the laws of nature are what they are." Does Hawking's statement anger you? How do you, as a person of faith, balance theology and science when speaking about the origins of existence? Are religious responsible for knowing both sides of the creation equation?

Answer:

What we can prove to be true and what we believe to be true are not always the same thing.

That is why most people talk about faith, not proof, when they describe their affiliation with a particular religious tradition. And we have been given the ability to exercise free will about both of these things. Stephen Hawking has the acute intellectual capacity for using science to theorize that the universe could arise spontaneously, without the need for God. That does not mean that everyone has to agree with him. So why should his statement make us angry or afraid?

One thing that Hawking does not say is also significant. He does not say that God does not exist. He simply says that the universe could have come into being without God's intervention. The question then is whether the belief that God created the universe is critical to a belief in God's existence. From my point of view, those two beliefs can exist simultaneously or not, without one being dependent on the other.

One of the principles of the Unitarian Universalist tradition is that we support the right of each person to "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning." That statement doesn't suggest that we can believe whatever we want; it means that we are challenged to continue our journey throughout life, discovering meaning in the experiences that we have and investigating them in a conscientious way. This vital piece of the Unitarian Universalist covenant is also based on the belief that truth is an ever-deepening and expanding reality, not the end of the road.

We have been given brains with the expectation that we will use them in all areas of our lives. If our beliefs cannot stand up to further investigation, perhaps we need to go deeper.

The Rev. Betty Stapleford
Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills,
La Crescenta

Science doesn't anger me. My faith is not threatened by it. Anglicanism has always seen human reason as a perfectly valid source of authority, along with scripture and church tradition. Still, Stephen Hawking's statement does highlight a shift, if not a crisis in theology, among thoughtful Christians.

The Nicene Creed, which I say every Sunday, begins: "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen." Yet, just as I do not understand God to be a literal father, a gendered anthropomorphic being, so I do not understand God to be the literal creator of the universe, in a hands-on, clay-

molding way ("Here's the sun — Ta da!"). So, if you get right down to it, I'm saying "I believe" something I don't literally believe.

I can always reconcile faith and science by saying that the Big Bang was God's idea. Or that it's because of God's goodness that gravity and quantum theory should so magnificently structure the universe. I call this the "turtles, all the way down" answer — a phrase popularized by Hawking himself. We can choose to find God, find grace, in the subflooring of scientific theory.

But I am more likely to reconcile faith and science by mysticism. Some look at the beauty of nature and say, "Surely there must be a God, who created all this." I look at the same beauty and say, "Ah yes, God is beauty, and here is an icon of it, for me to enjoy. Here is nature, to escort me into and help me bask in the beauty and peace which is God. I don't need for God to have caused nature; I just know that nature helps me find God."

If Hawking is right, that causes no crisis of faith for me. I don't need for God to be the creator of the universe. "Creator" is just a handy word, to express the abundance of life which God is for me. I know God exists because I have been in the presence of God; I need no further proof than that.

The Rev. Amy Pringle

St. George's Episcopal Church,

La Cañada

I took science in college that explained the idea of the creation story, the Earth only being about 4,000 to 5,000 years old. It was a pretty good argument and they had some scientific evidence to back it up. They ended it with the idea that even Darwin renounced his theory at the end of his life. We could have a debate on this issue as well; in fact, I could write a whole article on this topic alone.

But to answer the question, it doesn't really bother me. I live in an environment where I have Christians who believe as I do, others that are more rigid and extreme, and brilliant people who do not have any belief in God. The point is, I believe the creation theory; but thoughts contrary to it do not ruffle my feathers.

Hawking also said that if he could travel through time — which he said is theoretically possible — he would go to the future to "find if M-theory is indeed a theory of everything." (M-theory presents an idea about the basic substance of the universe.) So where is his proof on this topic?

Debates between Christians, scientists and even scientists who adhere to the Christian faith will ensue as long as there is human existence. My viewpoint is that we just need to know what we believe and realize. Does it really matter if we are not in the sciences? It certainly is not an issue of salvation.

Kimberlie Zakarian

La Vie Counseling Center,

Pasadena

Everyone says goofy things from time to time, even the brightest among us. Stephen Hawking is not immune, neither does he approach "theology" with benevolent neutrality. Hawking is also not God, nor can he mathematically deny God's existence; this second part about the inability to deny God's existence, Hawking seems to affirm. But the wackiness of Hawking's assertions can be seen in his using laws of the existent universe to explain its existence, knowing full well these laws didn't exist before the universe which exhibits them. In other words, before something comes into existence, it doesn't exist. Nothing there is just that, nothing! And the scientific law of biogenesis states "from nothing, nothing derives." As well, science is a discipline that only observes the physical universe, of which God and eternity are separate.

In seminary I learned an interesting equation which Hawking tries unsuccessfully to sidestep. It goes like this: The universe had a beginning (science and theology generally agree) and things that have beginnings have some cause for their genesis. The cause must exist beyond and before them, and theologians call this cause "God." Now the option may be that the cause is personal or impersonal, but only a person determines to cause. Ergo, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1 NIV).

Yes, it bothers me when celebrities pontificate about things of which they know little, and audiences listen because they are renown in some other discipline.

Should clergy be apprised of both sides of arguments relating to their faith? Absolutely. We can't spend every waking moment putting out the devil's fires, nor can anyone know everything about everything; but we should know something about things challenging our doctrine. If we're proven wrong, let's admit the earth is flat. If we're right, eternal life and everlasting damnation are the stakes.

The Rev. Bryan Griem

Montrose Community Church,

Montrose

Stephen Hawking's statement doesn't anger me.

All truth is God's truth, and that includes all scientific facts. As a God of order he has made consistent natural laws that we can rely on and study. My understanding of the scientific approach is that we as imperfect, finite creatures are trying to understand creation only by what we can observe and test. And that's always going to be limited and imperfect. Science will never give us all the answers, and many of the answers we claim to have now may, in the future, prove to be incorrect.

I'm all for Christians excelling in the sciences and becoming acquainted with current scientific theories. I believe that science will ultimately prove, not disprove, the claims of the Bible. I keep in mind that science cannot provide an eyewitness account of the creation, but that the Bible does. Scripture also teaches us that creation has a purpose.

Colossians 1:16 affirms that: "By Him (Jesus Christ) all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things have been created by Him and for Him."

Our hearts cry out for purpose in life that rises above mere biological existence. Our faith satisfies that very real, God-given need.

Pastor Jon Barta

Valley Baptist Church,

Burbank

I'm not so sure it's a matter of balancing theology and science as much as it's an issue of accepting progress and collective intelligence.

Personally, I can't accept the stories of Noah's Ark and Adam and Eve as truths, for example. These are stories with morals — more commonly referred to as fables — written by people who possessed no ability to scientifically explain natural disasters or how evolution actually occurred.

This isn't a practice exclusive to religions. The Greek civilization sought to explain the existence of stars, planets and behavior of nature using gods and goddesses. These tales existed because no one knew any better, and an explanation — any explanation — was more comforting than the unknown.

To accept every word in the Bible as true would be irresponsible, considering what we know. That blind adherence is naïve at best and downright dangerous at worst. Consider Leviticus 25:44: "I may possess slaves, both male and female, provided I purchase them from neighboring nations." If we were to accept that as true, we could drive down to Mexico and purchase indentured servants. Leviticus 19:19 gives me the right to stone my neighbor for planting two different crops. And Exodus 21:7 allows me to sell my daughter into slavery.

It seems to me that if we are going to shun everything we know about science and go with the fairy tale that God created everything in seven days, then we might as well stick with everything in the Bible, regardless of how morally repugnant it may be in our day and age.

Gary Huerta

Non-denominational,

Glendale

Stephen Hawking's statements don't anger me. In fact, I've read a couple of his books, and I plan to read his newest book, "The Grand Design," which is the basis for his most recent comments.

I respect his intellect and ability to deal with the crippling affect of ALS. Reading his books, and those of his peers, even in their simplified versions, is tough because of the concepts discussed — singularities, quantum mechanics, the theory of r, M-Theory (including multiple universes), strings, horizons, etc.

All too often, religious individuals want science to "prove" that God exists and that he operates based on their beliefs. On the other side, some scientists want to prove that God is an antiquated concept that should be abandoned.

To me, science and religion will come together some day and will confirm God and what he has done. But that day is not today. For now, I have to live by faith, but I am not afraid of science. Rather, I embrace it, but understand its limitations.

God, through the Bible, has only given us a glimpse of his handiwork in the universe. The Bible's focus is on God's interaction with man on this Earth. Accordingly, it is hard to extrapolate from the Bible all God has done and how he has done it.

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believe in continuing revelation from God. In one such revelation, it says: "And the Lord God spoke unto Moses, saying: The heavens, there are many, and they cannot be numbered unto man; but they are numbered unto me, for they are mine. And as one earth shall pass away, and the heavens thereof even so shall another come; and there is no end to my works, neither to my words. For behold, this is my work and my glory — to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Book of Moses 1:37-39).

Rather than assail science, we should use it to help us better understand God and his many wonders.

Rick Callister

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

La Cañada II Ward,

La Crescenta Stake