

Christianity is for Thinkers Also

Psalm 19: 1-6
Romans 1: 18-21
John 1: 1-5, 14, 16

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork.
That's how some of us older folk memorized it many years ago.
Still more years ago, these words had a strength
that we can hardly comprehend today.
Before light pollution, our ancestors could gaze up at the sky
to the six thousand or so stars that were visible to the naked eye
and grasp a glory that we mostly have to imagine.
For them, the heavens *were* telling the glory of God
and the firmament – the arch of the sky – *was* declaring his handiwork.
They could not help but believe that an almighty creator
of all this mystery and beauty must truly be
some awesome, fearful, fascinating being
worthy of unqualified worship and praise.

This beautiful Psalm still speaks to us today as poetry,
but we might be forgiven if we allow some scientific findings to creep in.
The sky will still be the sky – although
we know it to be the infinity of space, not a nearby dome.
Its declaration will still be the declaration of the glory of God – although
we will perceive God as even more powerful and more creative.
We know more about stars and planets than the Psalmist knew.
We know more of celestial physics and stellar chemistry.
Possibly we will learn more of extraterrestrial biology.
We certainly know that the universe is enormously more vast
than our early ancestors thought it to be.

Rick Peck, a teacher in Sterling, Virginia, wants to build a small replica
of the solar system centered upon a model of the sun.
To keep the planets to scale and to make them large enough to see,
the model sun would need to be 34 feet in diameter,
so maybe only a seven foot high arch will have to do.
But with that massive model sun,
the largest planet Jupiter will be only about 39 inches in diameter.
The earth will be softball size.
And Pluto – which used to be a planet – will be a marble.

But far more impressive than sizes are the distances.

If the model sun were here at the corner of Church and Eakin Streets,
the softball sized earth would be in orbit about nine feet away;
the meter wide Jupiter would be in orbit over the Drillfield;
and the marble sized Pluto would fly over Price's Fork.

Now multiply that by 1,230,861
and you get the size of the known solar system.

That's means there's a lot of empty space out there, but it's not empty.

Particles of all kinds, including tiny black holes, are moving through it.

The solar system is just the beginning.

It is centered around one of the smaller stars of the Milky Way galaxy
and that galaxy is only one of an uncountable number of others.

And they are far away: Moving at 186,000 miles per second,
light reaching us now from nearby Asteris left there 600 years ago.

What is beyond these millions of galaxies and billions of stars?

Nothing? What is nothingness?

Perhaps there is no end of the galaxies;
possibly they stretch into infinity;
maybe they bend back upon themselves, whatever that means.

You don't understand that? You don't understand an endless universe?

Don't fret. You don't *understand an infinite God either.*

A painting in the Taubman Museum in Roanoke

by the folk artist and self ordained preacher Howard Finster expresses it this way:

"Do you think God would quit with a little six day job?"

Space and its seems is more real than just dreams."

God's creation is amazingly beautiful in the other direction as well:

down through molecules and atoms and particles,
down through the indeterminacy of the direction of the movement of quarks,
down where physicists deal with probability and not a clockwork universe,
down where researchers at Virginia Tech are talking about
a fifth dimension in the universe that is about one billionth of a nanometer
that would be curled up in a state like that of the entire universe
at the time of the Big Bang.

And we have come over the last 150 years to understand more of God's creation of us:

As biologists deal with the genome,
where mutations take place to determine changes in offspring,
where genetic information is exchanged among organisms,
where chromosomes are sorted in reproductive cells to create in time new species.

Is God continuing the creation?

And if so, did God use the same principles of physics and chemistry
to create what is already here?

Perhaps you say, "God wouldn't have done it that way." Why not?
We have no right to restrict God in doing things the way God wishes.
Bill Cosby makes this point effectively in his Noah routine.
God's voice instructs Noah to build an ark.
"Who is this really?" Cosby responds.
"This is God."
"Yeah right, am I on candid camera?"
A bit annoyed, God gets to the business at hand,
but Noah replies,
"If you want this ark, why don't you build it yourself."
"Noah," God's voice thunders,
"you know I don't work that way."

God's ways are far beyond our understanding of causality.
God's purposes do not always open themselves to human analysis.
If God is sovereign, God can create the world in whatever way he chooses.
As creatures and not the creator, we must not be so arrogant to assume
that we know what God thought and what God did.
"We see through a glass darkly," writes Paul. (I Corinthians 13: 12)
We do not have God in our pockets; our God is too large for that.
But Paul also writes:
"Ever since the creation of the world
[God's] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are,
have been understood and seen through the things he has made."
(Romans 1: 20)

The more we know about these things he has made, the more we stand in awe.
Huston Smith has written,
"The larger the island of knowledge, the longer the shoreline of wonder."
Maybe that's just what God intended.
We are the creatures; God is the creator.
We are to worship; God is to be worshipped

As thinking people, we do not have to choose between science and religion.
Science can neither prove God's existence nor his non-existence.
Richard Dawkins, missionary for atheism,
and E. O. Wilson, proponent of amoralism,
have no scientific basis for their anti-religious harangues.
But then neither do we have a scientific basis to offer for the existence of God.
This is a question for a different realm.

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."
(Hebrews 11: 1)

That is the assertion of the author of the letter to the Hebrews.
Being so absolutely hard headedly sure of things is not faith.
It's not only self deception; it's the exact opposite for faith.

All too often, the acceptance of things not seen has been taken to mean
belief based upon matters thought to be beyond
reasonable and scientific explanation.
The problem with this, of course, is that science keeps moving on;
by this yardstick God's area becomes smaller and smaller.
In this spirit, Nikita Khrushchev could proudly proclaim
that his cosmonauts had gone up to the sky and did not find God,
obviously God could not exist.
But God is not best found in the unknown but rather in the known.
The normal workings of physics, geology, biology and chemistry
are also in the realm of God's action.

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. ...
All things came into being through him,
and without him not one thing came into being ...
And the Word became flesh and lived among us ...
[and] from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.”
(John 1: 1-16 passim)

Can we wrap our minds around the idea that God formed
an indeterminate universe in order to fashion a world
in which the creatures he would eventually create would have
choice to recognize God or not,
choice to love and adore God or not,
choice to obey God or not.
By creating a world in which quarks would always move in predetermined directions,
by allowing no choice or chance in the operation of the universe,
by constantly intervening in his own creation,
God could have made a perfect world,
but God preferred that we love him of our own free will.

“The heavens are telling the glory of God,
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork,
Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, no words; no audible voice.
Yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.” (Psalm 19: 1-4a)
– For those who can hear it. Amen.

Personal note: I have come to this understanding over the course of my career as political scientist and pastor, but it was good to find a biologist who has similar insight. **Finding Darwin's God** (New York, Harper Perennial, 1999) by Kenneth R. Miller of Brown University was helpful in writing this sermon.