

IS CHRISTIANITY COMPATIBLE WITH SCIENCE?

David Wilkinson

DAVID WILKINSON EXPLAINS WHY A SCIENTIFIC EXPLANATION OF THE EXISTENCE OF THE UNIVERSE DOES NOT INVALIDATE THE ACTIVITY OF GOD.

The media has many voices who see science and Christian faith as incompatible; the late Stephen Hawking's 'The Grand Design,' Lawrence Krauss arguing that the universe came from nothing and, of course, Richard Dawkins. They argue that science says one thing about the origin of the universe and the Bible says something different and you have to choose which is correct. Then some say that science is all about fact but Christianity is just about faith, implying that faith is a kind of blind belief which bypasses the mind and reasonable argument.

As a scientist and a Christian, I find such voices naïve and somewhat simplistic. The fact that science and the Bible describe the origin of the universe in different ways does not immediately mean that one is right and one is wrong. Such a conflict model is far too easy and is not true to the nature of science or the nature of the Bible. If I ask, 'why is the kettle boiling?' I can have two answers: one, because heat energy increases the velocity of the water molecules to a point where bubbles form; two, because I need a cup of tea. One describes the mechanism, whilst the other describes the purpose. Therefore, 'the universe came about

through a quantum fluctuation leading to a Big Bang', and 'the universe is the creation of a sovereign God' are, for me, complementary descriptions of the same reality. Both are true, but different.

However, what about the fact/faith opposition? This assumes that science and Christian faith explore the world in completely different ways and are therefore incompatible.

GOD OF THE GAPS

I am very happy with Professor Hawking saying, 'God did not create the universe,' simply because the creator he describes is very far from the God of Christian theology. This popular image of a 'god of the gaps' who starts off the universe and then goes for a cup of tea, having nothing more to do with it, is a picture which is misleading and unhelpful. Professor Hawking's work has, over a period of the last two decades, continually showed that this god is completely inadequate, and for this he should be applauded. However, there remain questions raised by the same science, which leave open the possibility of a Creator and perhaps, for many, may point to a deeper story to the universe.

When Hawking published 'A Brief History of Time,' twenty-two years ago, he suggested a possible solution to a fundamental problem with the Big Bang, which is, 'what happened at the first moment?' Cosmology uses

its knowledge of the physical laws to reconstruct a model of what happened in the past, describing the universe well back to a time when it was only 10⁻⁴³ second old. At that point, our current theories break down due to an inconsistency between general relativity and quantum theory. Does this mean that we need God to 'fix' the initial conditions of the universe? Hawking, however, attempts to describe how the blue touch-paper of the Big Bang lights itself. On the basis of such a theory, the universe does have a beginning but it does not need a divine fixer to start it off.

There remain many scientific difficulties with such a theory, but I am excited to see it develop. Yet it raises some important theological questions; if Hawking is right, does God become redundant?

GOD OF SOMETHING

While a popular line of argument for the existence of God has been that if the universe began with a Big Bang, then who lit the blue touch-paper, such an attempt to prove God is not terribly convincing. It uses the approach that if science has a gap in it then insert God as the explanation. The trouble is that as the gaps became smaller and smaller in science, so God was pushed out into irrelevancy. This 'god of the gaps' all happens because of the mistake of confusing different types of explanation. Science and theology can give different but compatible explanations of the same thing. Some atheists believe that



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION | GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What amazes you about science?
2. What worries you about science?
3. What pictures does the Bible use of God's relationship with the Universe in contrast to the one where he simply lights the firework to get it all started?
4. Why did God create such a big universe?

once you have a scientific explanation then that is all you need. Some Christians believe that there are some things in the natural world that science should not explore because they are 'God's work'. I believe that both are wrong.

The Bible understands that the whole universe is the result of God's working and sustaining. He is as much at work at the first 10^{-43} second as at any other time. A scientific description of that moment in time does not invalidate it as being the activity of God as any other event.

Indeed, science does not answer all of the questions. There are numerous distinguished scientists who will applaud Hawking's scientific work but draw attention to other important questions which have a coherent answer in the Christian claim that this universe has a Creator. First, 'why is there something rather than nothing' is not only a question about mechanism it is also a question about purpose and meaning, the why question behind the universe's existence. Second, where do the scientific laws themselves come from? If the universe emerges as a quantum fluctuation, we need to ask where quantum theory itself comes from? Where does the pattern of the world come from and how is it maintained? Third, why is the universe intelligible? Einstein once said that the most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible. Yet why should this be the case, that the mathematics of our minds resonates with the mathematics of the

universe. Some scientists, including John Polkinghorne, suggest that the natural answer is that there exists a Creator God who is the basis of the order in the universe and the ability of our minds to understand it.

None of these insights prove to me the existence of God. My own belief in the existence of God and understanding of God's nature, comes from the Christian claim that God revealed himself into the space-time history of the universe supremely by becoming a human being in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. It is from that perspective that I welcome any scientific work on the story of the universe.

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