

God beyond physics

There's more to God than Stephen Hawking can see

It is nice of physicists Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow to share their science-based conclusion about God. Absolutely no need for a divine Creator to set the Big Bang off, they say. The laws of physics are enough to do the trick on their own.

Their book *The Grand Design*, published last month, [September 2010] is a misnomer. They say there was no grand design. Specifically: “Because there is a law such as gravity, the universe can and will create itself from nothing. Spontaneous creation is the reason why there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist.”

That's clear, then. For the Christian creeds' “I believe in God, the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth”, the authors substitute: “I believe in M-theory, which one day will – perhaps – explain all.”

They may or may not be right about M-theory – that's for physicists to explore, confirm, modify or replace over the next couple of centuries. But what stands out for me is how hopelessly wide of the mark is their concept of God.

They aren't entirely to blame for that.. Most people in the churches assume the existence of a God who set everything in motion at the beginning of time. Creationists insist on God's role in creating life on earth. That's what the Bible says, and to many it still seems the most logical option on offer.

Both they and the scientists who delight in shooting them down, however, are caught in a time warp. The idea of God as the scientific explanation of the world and everything in it is a relatively recent aberration. For most of Christian history, that is not what God-talk has been about at all.

English scholar of religion Karen Armstrong traces the origin of this monumental misunderstanding to the rise of science in the 17th and early 18th centuries, and the church's misguided response to it. Her latest book, *The Case for God*, should be required reading for every scientist who pronounces on God – and for every Christian who argues against them.

Armstrong shows how the leading scientists of the period, including the towering Isaac Newton, believed their discoveries, and especially the evidence of design in the workings of nature, provided the ultimate proof of a creator God.

Preachers took great comfort from this. Human reason was throwing light on a supreme intelligence evident in nature. Natural laws implied a lawgiver, design in nature required a designer. Religion and science basked in mutual reinforcement.

Then things began to come unstuck. In one field after another – astronomy, physics, geology, biology, psychology, medicine – scientists found they could make sense of what they were observing without recourse to God. Where science once offered evidence of a divine creator, now it raised serious doubts.

Most of the modern tension between science and religion boils down to a failure to recognise that they are separate domains, each with its own perspective on reality and each valid in its own sphere. Jumble them together and all you get is what Armstrong calls “a clash of misplaced certainties”.

Suppose with Hawking, for example, that M-theory proves indeed to be the holy grail of the physicists’ quest, “the ultimate theory of everything”. (M-theory embraces a family of theories involving sub-atomic vibrating strings as the basic building-blocks of the universe – M originally stood for membrane.) As he says, achieving that would be a scientific triumph.

And it would be no threat to religion at all because, says Armstrong, “religion was never supposed to provide answers to questions that lay within the reach of human reason”.

Its task was to help people to “live creatively, peacefully and even joyously with realities for which there were no easy explanations and problems that we could not solve: mortality, pain, grief, despair, and outrage at the injustice and cruelty of life”.

Its symbols, of which God is the foremost, are not there to be dissected like a frog in a laboratory, but engaged with imaginatively till they transform.

In other words, good religion helps people find meaning and purpose in their lives and relationships. It expands and adds depth to the experience of being alive. It demands an ethical response. It brings out the best in our humanity. The concerns of science lie elsewhere.

Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein sums it up best: “When we understand every single secret of the universe” – and, thanks to Hawking, we may be getting closer – “there will still be left the eternal mystery of the human heart.”

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