



## God and the New Physics

By Paul Davies

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What is matter?

What is mind, and can it survive death?

What are time and space, and how do they relate to ideas about God?

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Mr. Davies knows the arcana of physics the way a plumber knows wrenches, and he can make sense out of quite daunting ideas.... One of the most adept science writers on either side of the Atlantic." -- Timothy Ferris, *The New York Times Book Review*

"The concepts are breathtaking...the general thrust of modern physics is amazingly well described." -- *The New York Times Book Review*

#### About the Author

**PAUL DAVIES** is Director of the Beyond Center at Arizona State University and the bestselling author of more than twenty books. He won the 1995 Templeton Prize for his work on the deeper meaning of science. His books include *About Time*, *The Fifth Miracle*, and *The Mind of God*.

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### Chapter 1

#### Science and religion in a changing world

'The wise man regulates his conduct by the theories both of religion and science.'

J.B.S. Haldane

'But because I have been enjoined, by this Holy Office, altogether to abandon the false opinion which maintains that the Sun is the centre and immovable, and forbidden to hold, defend, or teach, the said false doctrine in any manner...I abjure, curse, and detest the said errors and heresies, and generally every other error and sect contrary to the said Holy Church...'

Galileo Galilei

Science and religion represent two great systems of human thought. For the majority of people on our planet, religion is the predominant influence over the conduct of their affairs. When science impinges on their lives, it does so not at the intellectual level, but practically, through technology.

In spite of the power of religious thought in the daily lives of the general public, most of our institutions are organized pragmatically, with religion, insomuch as it is included at all, relegated to a stylized role. Such is the constitutional position of the Church of England for example. There are exceptions: Ireland and Israel remain religious states in the legal sense, while the revival of militant Islam is, if anything, increasing the influence of religion in political and social decision making.

In the industrialized world, where the impact and success of science is most conspicuous, there has been a sharp decline in affiliation to the major traditional religious institutions. In Britain, only a tiny percentage of the population now attend church regularly. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that declining church attendance can be directly attributed to the raised profile of science and technology. In their personal lives many people still hold deep beliefs about the world that could be classed as religious, even though they may have rejected, or at least ignored, the traditional Christian doctrines. And any scientist will verify that, if

religion has been displaced from people's consciousness, it has certainly not been replaced by rational scientific thought. For science, despite its great impact on all our lives at the practical level, is as elusive and inaccessible to the general public as any exclusive religion.

More relevant to the decline of religion is the fact that science, through technology, has altered our lives so radically that the traditional religions may appear to lack the immediacy necessary to provide any real assistance in coping with contemporary personal and social problems. If the Church is largely ignored today it is not because science has finally won its age-old battle with religion, but because it has so radically reoriented our society that the biblical perspective of the world now seems largely irrelevant. As one television cynic recently remarked, few of our neighbours possess an ox or an ass for us to covet.

The world's major religions, founded on received wisdom and dogma, are rooted in the past and do not cope easily with changing times. Hastily discovered flexibility has enabled Christianity to incorporate some new features of modern thought, to the extent that today's Church leaders might well have appeared heretical to a Victorian; yet any comprehensive philosophy based on ancient concepts faces a hard task in adapting to the space age. As a result, many disillusioned believers have turned to 'fringe' religions that seem more in tune with the era of *Star Wars* and microchips. The huge rise in popularity of cults associated with UFOs, ESP, spirit contacts, scientology, transcendental meditation and other technology-based beliefs testifies to the continued persuasiveness of faith and dogma in a superficially rational and scientific society. For although these eccentric ideas have a scientific veneer, they are unashamedly irrational 'cults of unreason', to use Christopher Evans's phrase from his book of the same title (Panther 1974). People turn to them not for intellectual enlightenment but for spiritual comfort in a harsh and uncertain world.

Science, then, has invaded our lives, our language and our religions, but not at the intellectual level. The vast majority of people do not understand scientific principles, nor are they interested. Science remains a sort of witchcraft, its practitioners regarded with a mixture of awe and suspicion. Browse through any bookshop. Books on science are usually catalogued under 'The Occult', and modern astronomy textbooks jostle *The Bermuda Triangle* and *Chariots of the Gods* for space on the shelves. Lip service may be paid to the importance of science and rational thought for ordering our society, but at the personal level most people still find religious doctrine more persuasive than scientific arguments.

We live in a world that, in spite of appearances, is still fundamentally religious. Ranging from countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia, where Islam remains the dominant social force, to the industrialized West, where religion has fragmented and diversified, occasionally into vague pseudo-scientific superstition, the search for a deeper meaning to life continues. Nor should that search be derided. Scientists also are searching for a meaning: by finding out more about the way the universe is put together and how it works, about the nature of life and consciousness, they can supply the raw material from which religious beliefs may be fashioned. To argue whether the date of the Creation was 4004 B.C. or 10,000 B.C. is irrelevant if scientific measurements reveal a 4 1/2 billion-year-old Earth. No religion that bases its beliefs on demonstrably incorrect assumptions can expect to survive very long.

In this book we shall be looking at some of the very latest discoveries in fundamental science, and exploring their implications for religion. In many cases the old religious ideas are not so much disproved as transcended by modern science. By looking at the world from a different angle, scientists can provide fresh insights and new perspectives of Man and his place in the universe.

Both science and religion have two faces: the intellectual and the social. In both cases the social effects leave a lot to be desired. Science may have alleviated the miseries of disease and drudgery and provided an array of gadgetry for our entertainment and convenience, but it has also spawned horrific weapons of mass

destruction and seriously degraded the quality of life. The impact of science on industrial society has been a mixed blessing.

On the other hand, organized religion comes off, if anything, even worse. Nobody denies the many individual cases of selfless devotion by religious community workers all over the world, but religion long ago became institutionalized, often concerning itself more with power and politics than with good and evil. Religious zeal has all too frequently been channelled into violent conflict, perverting man's normal tolerance and unleashing barbaric cruelty. Christian genocide of the South American native populations in the Middle Ages is one of the more dreadful examples, but the history of Europe generally is littered with the corpses of those slain because of minor doctrinal differences. Even in this so-called enlightened age, religious hatred and conflict fester all over the world. It is ironical that although most religions extol the virtues of love, peace and humility, it is all too often hatred, war and arrogance that characterize the history of the world's great religious organizations.

Many scientists are critical of organized religions, not because of their personal spiritual content, but for their perverting influence on otherwise decent human behaviour, especially when they involve themselves in power politics. The physicist Hermann Bondi is a harsh critic of religion, which he regards as a 'serious and habit-forming evil'. He cites as an example the excesses of the European witch-craze:

In much of Christian Europe the godfearing used to burn old women suspected of being witches, an arduous duty they felt had been clearly put upon them by the Bible. The facts on witch burning are clear enough: First, faith made otherwise decent people commit acts of unspeakable horror, showing how ordinary and everyday feelings of human kindness and revulsion at cruelty can be and have been overruled by religious belief. Secondly, it exposes as utterly hollow the claim that religion sets an absolute and unchanging foundation for morality.

Bondi claims that the ruthless power wielded by the Church and other religious institutions over the centuries leaves these organizations morally bankrupt.

Few would deny that religion remains, for all its pretensions, one of the most divisive forces in society. Whatever the good intentions of the faithful, the bloodstained history of religious conflict provides little evidence for universal standards of human morality among the major organized religions. Nor is there any reason to believe that love and consideration are lacking in those who do not belong to such organizations, or are even committed atheists.

Of course, not all religious people are fanatical zealots. The vast majority of Christians today share a revulsion of religious conflict and deplore the Church's past involvement with torture, murder and suppression. But the outbreaks of spectacular violence and brutality in the name of God which still plague society today are not the only manifestations of the antisocial face of religion. Segregation in education and even habitation continues in supposedly civilized countries like Northern Ireland and Cyprus. Even within their own ranks, religious organizations often sanction prejudice, whether against women, racial minorities, homosexuals or whoever their leaders decree to be inferior. The status of women in Catholicism and Islam, or blacks in the South African Church, I find particularly offensive. Although many people would be appalled that their own religion might be described as vicious or intolerant, they will readily agree that the world's *other* religions have a lot to answer for.

This sad history of bigotry seems inevitably to result once religious organizations become institutionalized and constitutionalized, and has prompted a huge disaffection with established religion in the Western world. Many are turning instead to the so-called 'fringe' religions, in an attempt to find a less strident and more

gentle route to spiritual fulfilment. There are, of course, a wide variety of new movements, some of which are still more intolerant and sinister than the traditional religions. But many emphasize the importance of mysticism and quiet inner exploration, as opposed to evangelical fervour, and so attract those people who are critical of the social and political impact of the established religions.

So much for the social side of religion. What of its intellectual content?

For the greater part of human history, men and women have turned to religion not only for moral guidance, but also for answers to the fundamental questions of existence. How was the universe created and how will it end? What is the origin of life and mankind? Only in the last few centuries has science begun to make its own contributions to such issues. The resulting clashes are well documented. From its origin with Galileo, Copernicus and Newton, through Darwin and Einstein, to the age of computers and high technology, modern science has cast a cold and sometimes threatening light on many deep-rooted religious beliefs. Accordingly, there has grown the feeling that science and religion are inherently incompatible and antagonistic. It is a belief encouraged by history. The early attempts by the Church to hold back the flood-gates of scientific advance have left a deep suspicion of religion among the scientific community. For their part, scientists have demolished a lot of cherished religious beliefs and have come to be regarded by many as faith-wreckers.

There is no doubt, however, about the success of the scientific method. Physics, the queen of sciences, has opened up vistas of human understanding that were unsuspected a few centuries ago. From the inner workings of the atom to the weird surrealism of the black hole, physics has enabled us to comprehend some of nature's darkest secrets and to gain control over many physical systems in our environment. The tremendous power of scientific reasoning is demonstrated daily in the many marvels of modern technology. It seems reasonable then, to have some confidence in the scientist's world-view also.

The scientist and the theologian approach the deep questions of existence from utterly different starting points. Science is based on careful observation and experiment enabling theories to be constructed which connect different experiences. Regularities in the workings of nature are sought which hopefully reveal the fundamental laws that govern the behaviour of matter and forces. Central to this approach is the willingness of the scientist to abandon a theory if evidence is produced against it. Although individual scientists may cling tenaciously to some cherished idea, the scientific community as a group is always ready to adopt a new approach. There are no shooting wars over scientific principles.

In contrast, religion is founded on revelation and received wisdom. Religious dogma that claims to contain an unalterable Truth can hardly be modified to fit changing ideas. The true believer must stand by his faith whatever the apparent evidence against it. This 'Truth' is said to be communicated directly to the believer, rather than through the filtering and refining process of collective investigation. The trouble about revealed 'Truth' is that it is liable to be wrong, and even if it is right other people require a good reason to share the recipients' belief.

Many scientists are derisory about revealed truth. Indeed, some maintain it is a positive evil:

Generally the state of mind of a believer in a revelation is the awful arrogance of saying 'I *know*, and those who do not agree with my belief are wrong'. In no other field is such arrogance so widespread, in no other field do people feel so utterly certain of their 'knowledge'. It is to me quite disgusting that anybody should feel so superior, so selected and chosen against all the many who differ in their beliefs or unbeliefs. This would be bad enough, but so many believers do their best to propagate their faith, at the very least to their children but often also to others (and historically there are of course plenty of examples of doing this by three and ruthless brutality). The fact that stares one in the face is that people of the greatest sincerity and of all

levels of intelligence differ and have always differed in their religious beliefs. Since at most one faith can be true, it follows that human beings are extremely liable to believe firmly and honestly in something untrue in the field of revealed religion. One would have expected this obvious fact to lead to some humility, to some thought that however deep one's faith, one may conceivably be mistaken. Nothing is further from the believer, any believer, than this elementary humility. All in his power (which nowadays in a developed country tends to be confined to his children) must have his faith rammed down their throats. In many cases children are indeed indoctrinated with the disgraceful thought that they belong to the one group with superior knowledge who alone have a private wire to the office of the Almighty, all others being less fortunate than they themselves.

Nevertheless, those who have had religious experiences invariably regard their own personal revelation as a sounder basis for belief than any number of scientific experiments. Indeed, many professional scientists are also deeply religious and apparently have little intellectual difficulty in allowing the two sides of their philosophy to peacefully coexist. The problem is how to translate many disparate religious experiences into a coherent religious world-view. Christian cosmology, for example, has differed radically from Oriental cosmology. At least one must be wrong.

It is a great mistake, however, to infer from the scientist's suspicion of revealed truth that he is necessarily a cold, hard, calculating soulless individual, interested only in facts and figures. Indeed, the rise of the new physics has been accompanied by a tremendous growth of interest concerning the deeper philosophical implications of science. It is a lesser-known side of scientific endeavour, and it frequently comes as a complete surprise. The pathologist, writer and television producer Kit Pedlar describes his astonishment, while planning a television series on mind and the paranormal, at coming across the concern that modern physicists have for broader issues:

For almost twenty years I occupied my research time as a happy biological reductionist believing that my painstaking research would eventually reveal ultimate truths. Then I began to read the new physics. The experience was shattering.

As a biologist I had imagined the physicists to be cool, clear, unemotional men and women who looked down on nature from a clinical, detached viewpoint -- people who reduced a sunset to wavelengths and frequencies, and observers who shredded the complex of the universe into rigid and formal elements.

My error was enormous. I began to study the works of people with legendary names: Einstein, Bohr, Schrödinger and Dirac. I found that here were not clinical and detached men, but poetic and religious ones who imagined such unfamiliar immensities as to make what I have referred to as the 'paranormal' almost pedestrian by comparison.

It is ironical that physics, which has led the way for all other sciences, is now moving towards a more accommodating view of mind, while the life sciences, following the path of last century's physics, are trying to abolish mind altogether. The psychologist Harold Morowitz has remarked on this curious reversal:

What has happened is that biologists, who once postulated a privileged role for the human mind in nature's hierarchy, have been moving relentlessly toward the hard-core materialism that characterized nineteenth-century physics. At the same time, physicists, faced with compelling experimental evidence, have been moving away from strictly mechanical models of the universe to a view that sees the mind as playing an integral role in all physical events. It is as if the two disciplines were on fast-moving trains, going in opposite directions and not noticing what is happening across the tracks.

In the coming chapters we shall see how the new physics has given 'the observer' a central role in the nature of physical reality. A growing number of people believe that recent advances in fundamental science are more likely to reveal the deeper meaning of existence than appeal to traditional religion. In any case, religion cannot afford to ignore these advances.

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