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The day we found the universe

Rich Heffern | Jan. 6, 2010 NCR Today

Today is the Feast of the Epiphany. Another epiphany that occurred in January -- January 1, 1925 -- is celebrated and explored in a recently published book I'm reading now. Until that date, we humans didn't know exactly where we were. That day astronomers learned conclusively that the universe extends at least a million light years or more and faint clouds of light observed by the world?s largest telescope at the time twinkled from distant galaxies. Essentially, the date marked the universe?s discovery, science writer Marcia Bartusiak argues in her newly published history of early 20th century astronomy, *The Day We Found the Universe*, published by Pantheon Books.

I wrote a column [1] last month about the important night sky light -- that of the Andromeda galaxy -- that enabled Edwin Hubble to make his important discovery that was formally announced on Jan. 1 in 1925, that our Milky Way home galaxy is just one of billions.

Bartusiak writes: ?Our celestial home was suddenly humbled, becoming just one of a multitude of galaxies residing in the vast gulfs of space.?

Her tale focuses on the dramatic insights, sidesteps and missed opportunities, persistence, pride and bits of luck that accompany the process of scientific investigation. Details regarding countless personalities like astronomers Edwin Hubble (after whom the Hubble Telescope is named) and Harlow Shapley, the interplay between them and the times in which they worked make this story satisfying for anyone who wants to learn how science has uncovered a creation story and an almost unimaginably vast geography of the heavens that must inform our religion, our theology, our spirituality.

See also Dennis Coday's blog [2] about and links to a podcast interview with Jesuit Fr. George Coyne, former director of the Vatican Observatory. "The universe glorifies God," Fr. Coyne says, "in a way I never would have known had I not tried to understand it scientifically."

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Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/news/spirituality/night-sky-lights-lead-us
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