

God's not in a hurry: Theology can be less parochial

Rich Heffern | Jan. 9, 2011 Eco Catholic

Last year we celebrated the 400th anniversary of Galileo first pointing a telescope at the heavens. He did not invent the telescope. Rather the significance of what he did lies in four things.



In his day it was commonly believed that the Earth was obviously the center of the

universe and that celestial bodies like the sun, moon and stars were "mystical" realms that orbited us. Galileo first observed that the moon, for example, was an actual place with some of the same features "valleys, volcanoes, mountains" that existed in his own native Italy.

Secondly, he observed that the planet Venus went through phases. Sometimes it was seen in its full glory, other times as a crescent and still other times it could not be seen. This was proof positive that the Copernican idea, introduced before Galileo's exploration, that all the planets including Earth did in fact revolve around the Sun was correct.

Third, he pointed his telescope at the Milky Way overhead and determined for the first time that the vast light cloud is actually made of individual stars massed together.

Fourth, he tenaciously held to the strategy that to find out how the world works, the best way is first to observe, then create possible explanations, then test these hypothesis to see which one is the most likely.

That strategy has enabled science to become the most reliable form of knowledge about the world. Climate change, the energy crisis, global pandemics, nuclear proliferation "many of the most urgent problems of the twenty-first century require science-based solutions. Yet Americans are paying less and less attention to scientists.

For every five hours of cable news, less than a minute is devoted to science; the number of newspapers with weekly science sections has shrunk by two-thirds over the past several decades. Rejection of science is rampant: 46 percent of Americans deny evolution and think the Earth is less than 10,000 years old; large numbers continue to attack the science of climate change; the public is in dangerous retreat from childhood

vaccinations.

Galileo himself was put under house arrest during the last few years of his life by the Inquisition, a dramatic example of how religious views influence science. Science in turn significantly informs our religious views, whether we like it or not.

The past 50 years have seen the birth and flourishing of what have come to be called contextual theologies -- theologies that take seriously the particular experiences and challenges of a specific setting. Liberation and feminist theologies arise out of the context of the insights of the poor and of women. Theologies that arise out of Southeast Asia or Africa have provided rich ways of shaping theological thinking.

John Polkinghorne, Anglican priest and scientist, winner of the 2002 Templeton Prize for outstanding achievements in linking science with religion, in his latest book *Theology in the Context of Science*, argues that the insights of modern science also provide rich context for theology. The dialogue between science and religion in our time, he feels, can contribute significantly to creative theological thinking.

?Science has discovered that the fabric of the cosmos is shot through with signs of mind, but it does not know why this should be so. Theology can render this discovery intelligible, through its understanding that the Mind of the Creator is the source of the wonderful order of the world.?

Polkinghorne cites, for example, important scientific discoveries made over the last two centuries about the existence of ?deep time? -- the immense span of gradually unfolding process that brought into being present forms, beginning with discoveries in geology. Today we know the Earth is 4.5 billion years old and the universe itself has an age of 13.7 billion years.

These vast time scales, he says, at least should encourage in the theological mind ?the idea that the Creator God is not in a hurry.?

He also points to theology?s ?parochiality? that ignores the vast scale of the universe, focusing only on planet Earth. ?Yet the Sun is an ordinary star among the hundred thousand million stars of our galaxy, the Milky Way, and the Milky Way itself is a pretty ordinary galaxy among the hundred thousand million galaxies of the observable universe.? What are the role and meaning of the human in such a vast place? Theologians need to consider these questions.

Scientist Alan Hale, discoverer of the Hale-Bopp comet that appeared in our skies in 1996, told that the California religious cult Heaven?s Gate members had bought an expensive telescope shortly after the comet?s first appearance. However, they returned it to the shop, saying it was defective. ?Why?? the shopkeeper asked. They answered: ?You can?t see the UFO with it!?

Many were reporting a ?Saturn-like object? following the comet, and the California cult had centered their apocalyptic beliefs on this unidentified flying object. They interpreted passages from the four gospels and the book of Revelation as referring to a visitation from the heavens.

In an interview the telescope shop owner suggested maybe they should have questioned their beliefs, not the telescope.

In March, 1997, 39 members of the cult committed mass suicide.

This story seems an apt parable that illustrates Polkinghorne?s point. Our theology needs to be adjusted to reflect the new information about who we are, where we are and how we got here. Ignoring the science story is like Heaven?s Gate rejecting the telescope because it didn?t confirm their ?story.? Maybe the story needs

adjusting ? incorporating ?deep time? into our religious story.

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