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'Cosmos' doesn't duck the truth

Ken Briggs | Mar. 20, 2014 NCR Today

The TV series "Cosmos" is the product of huge choices about what to show and how to show it. Neil deGrasse Tyson, the brainy, avuncular host, steers a path aimed at those who know almost nothing about the universe's origins and those who have learned a lot. Perhaps the biggest divide he faces is between evolutionists and creationists. While it's tempting to assume that overwhelming evidence has put evolution in the driver's seat, the fact is that up to half of the population identifies with creationism on the surveys.

The question here was how Tyson would account for the birth and growth of the universe, up to and including the appearance of life on earth? Given the fact that the 13-part "Cosmos" is a commercial television venture, by Fox, audience appeal and the financial gains take priority. Tackling something like evolution head on could cause conflict and a loss of a big chunk of viewers.

The outcome remains to be seen, but Tyson's great credit, he didn't blink. He took the matter in hand and declared evolution not just a theory but "a fact." To add punch, he chose as an example of random selection the development of the eye over the eons. Creations have used precisely that example in an attempt to prove that organisms such as the eye could not have evolved. Under the theory of "intelligent design," this religious explanation has argued that unless all the pieces of the fully developed eye were in place, nothing would work. The blind, in effect, would be leading the blind.

Tyson took the challenge, as have others such as the noted biologist Kenneth Miller at Brown University, to deny that theory with facts gathered along the great chain of Being. Primitive creatures saw things through rudimentary eyes. The mechanism was there from early on. In a "let's make one thing clear" manner, Tyson firmly staked the premise of the theory on Charles Darwin and his successors.

He further reached out to defuse creationists by declaring that a scientific proof had been a profoundly "spiritual" experience for him. He was no atheist, evolutionist opponent of things spiritual but someone who could embrace both.

Though it's doubtful that Tyson's testimony will change many creationists' minds, his erudite, soft-spoken, respectful and often playful approach that at least invites changes of heart. He is caught up in the wonder of it all and that itself lends the program an ethereal, uplifting quality that could help mend the tear in American views toward creation.

That's a minor key in this huge symphony of the stars. To depict the adventures of this unimaginably vast space, the graphics are spectacular and the commentary succinct. Watching it with the premises Tyson has laid down makes it possible to affirm his story of the 13.8 billion years from the Big Bang with a Supreme Being involved with it somehow at every step

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