

Vol 1, No. 15 • April 18, 1984

A supplement to Catholic newspapers, published by the National Catholic News Service, 1312 Massachusetts Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005. All contents copyright ©1984 by NC News Service.

Faith Today

the awesome spectacle of creation

Subtle is the Lord

By Dolores Leckey
NC News Service

My husband was reading a book recently titled "The First Three Minutes," by Steven Weinberg. The title refers to the first three minutes of the known universe.

Weinberg is a Harvard University nuclear physicist. His theory is that in the beginning there was nothing: no time, no space, no matter, no light. Nothing. Then an unimaginable explosion occurred. It not only brought time and space into being, but it set off a series of critical events for creation as we know it.

But how could it all happen, this unimaginable explosion?

Across the Atlantic Ocean at Britain's Cambridge University, Stephen Hawking also probes the hidden parts of the universe. And he lives with questions about the reasons for its existence.

Hawking is a physicist and cosmologist, one who studies the origins of the universe. He once told an interviewer that he wanted to know why the universe exists at all and why it is as it is. Later, a New York Times writer asked Hawking if this search had a religious component. The scientist's reply, which strikes me as reverent in its simplicity, was: "I suppose so. But I would have thought that everyone would want to know that."

One senses that Hawking is reluctant to use the word "God" too lightly. One also senses his humility before the mystery that sustains the universe. In that sense, he is in the great tradition of Albert Einstein.

A larger-than-life statue of Einstein graces the front garden of the National Science Foundation in Washington, D.C. It is a seated figure, and college students like to have their photographs taken in the Einstein embrace, as if they feel at home with one who himself felt so at home in the universe.

His sculpted face seems to me at once peaceful and restlessly curious. The enormity of Einstein's creativity is there, and so is the simplicity of his life. It causes me to wonder

about his mind and spirit.

One of Einstein's biographers was Abraham Pais, a colleague who knew him for a number of years. Pais writes that while Einstein's life was not one of prayer and worship, it was one of deep faith — a faith not easily explained. It was a faith that drew him into a life-long effort to discover the laws of nature.

We catch a glimpse of Einstein's faith in his remark, "Subtle is the Lord, but malicious he is not." The scientist further explained himself, saying: "Nature hides her secrets because of her essential loftiness, but not by means of ruse."

This remark reveals a profound respect for the cosmic order, and for the mystery behind that order. It reflects the insight of the ancient Israelites, from whom we learn that, in the end, we can only revere what the mystery reveals.

Scientists like Weinberg and Hawking and Einstein focus much attention on the mysteries on the horizons of the galaxies. Others, however, dig into the earth, looking for clues to the beginnings of human life.

Some have seen the entire scientific adventure as a threat to Christian belief in God as Creator and Sustainer. But I wonder how

the scientific quest — the quest for knowledge about what was and is — would detract from the glory of such a Creator?

Clearly, Pope John Paul II welcomes the search and the searchers. Not long ago he told a group of scientists: "All scientific progress, pursued with rectitude, honors humanity and is a tribute to the Creator of all things."

It seems to me that every time another fossil is unearthed, every time a new star is noted, every time the human mind constructs yet another hypothesis, the intricacies of the Mind of the Maker, to use the phrase of Dorothy Sayers, are uncovered a little.

And human creativity, like human love, helps us to envision the Creator, the one we call God.

I asked my husband, who likes to think about such things, what kind of a God would initiate the unimaginable explosion that Weinberg theorized about in his book, and the complex developments that followed.

"A God capable of the most wonderful puzzle," my husband responded. "We'll never tire of it. That's our inheritance from the God of the universe."

(Mrs. Leckey is director of the U.S. bishops' Laity Committee.)

In pondering the origins of the universe, scientists such as Albert Einstein display a kind of deep faith and a high regard for the abiding mystery of nature. Above all, writes Dolores Leckey, every scientific discovery deepens our awareness of a marvelous and elaborate Creator.



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