

"THE GOD OF THE GAPS?"

by Geoffrey R Usher

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When I was at Manchester College, Oxford, the President of the College was the distinguished scientist – and Unitarian – Professor Sir Alister Hardy. It was Sir Alister who presented me with my Ministry Certificate in 1980.

He had already founded the Religious Experience Research Centre, which had premises just beside the College, on the corner of Holywell Street and Mansfield Road.

After my move to Sheffield in 19091, I became a member of what had become the Alister Hardy Society – the Religious Experience Research Centre renamed in his honour. Over the years it moved several times, the main places being Westminster College in Oxford, and Lampeter in Wales.

The Society published a journal, and a number of occasional papers and monographs, and held meetings and lectures, usually coinciding with the Annual General Meeting to make people's travel worthwhile.

In later years a local group was set up in Chesterfield, south of Sheffield, and I was able to attend that group's meetings more frequently.

Some of the meetings were a bit "way out" or off-beat, as were a few of the people, but it was generally an interesting and thought-provoking extension of my Unitarianism.

I did not continue my membership of the Alister Hardy Society when I retired and returned to Sydney in 2010, in the same way that I relinquished some other memberships and associations.

At the meeting of the London Group of the Society on 15 September 1994, the speaker was the Rev Dr David Wilkinson, a Methodist minister and Chaplain to Liverpool University. Rev Dr Wilkinson held a PhD in astro-physics, and was a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society. In 1993 his book was published: God, the Big Bang and Stephen Hawkins. The title of his talk to the Alister Hardy Society was "Spirituality and Modern Cosmology".

He began by emphasising that he had come prepared to learn, since no-one knows all the answers to cosmic questions. Important, that:- no-one knows all the answers to cosmic questions.

However, he said, modern cosmology – the study of the world around us – modern cosmology had forced many people to consider religious questions in relation to science itself. They had been forced to consider those religious questions, even if they had no particular religious axe to grind, no particular dogma to defend.

It seemed that, the more we discover, the more religious questions we face – particularly questions about the emergence of spirituality in modern cosmologies.

Dr Wilkinson went on to recount in detail some of the modern knowledge of the awe-inspiring nature of the universe. Our sun is one of 100 billion stars in our galaxy, which is about 100,000 light years across. There are at least ten billion, and perhaps as many as a hundred billion, galaxies in the universe. As a rough analogy:- there are as many stars in the universe as there are grains of sand on all the beaches of the world.

Scientists are confident that the origin of the universe was about 15 billion years ago, beginning after the "Big Bang", as a point at which the models of our "local" physics break down.

In Dr Wilkinson's view, several areas in modern cosmology raise religious questions: for example, about origins.

He referred to the mathematician Edward Milne, and his book on the expansion of the universe and general relativity. At the end of his book, Milne wrote: "The first cause of the universe is left for the reader to insert, but our picture is incomplete without God".

One implication of Milne's claim is that only God could have made the "Big Bang" that started the universe. This implication supports a cosmological argument for God.

However, Dr Wilkinson said that he was uneasy about that argument, because it postulates what he called a "God of the Gaps" – which I took as the title for this sermon.

Charles Coulson warned: If science has a gap in it, beware of inserting God into the gap. If further scientific discovery enables us to fill the gap, what then happens to God? Would such a remote God create the universe and then leave it to its own devices? Questioning this kind of "God of the Gaps" – a "Deistic God" – raises further questions about where the laws of physics come from, and supports the idea of a transcendent God, or a power beyond the physical universe. As a Christian, and as a scientist, David Wilkinson saw God as continuously creating the universe and keeping it in existence by guaranteeing the laws of physics.

Then there is the question of purpose. To discover how the universe came into being does not answer questions of purpose or value or meaning or love. And those questions — the "why?" questions — are not answered by saying "there is nothing more."

David Wilkinson saw religion as suggesting that meaning or purpose lies beyond the universe and complements the discoveries of science by postulating a loving Creator.

A third religious question relates to design, and whether the coherence of the cosmos implies a designer.

There is no strict proof that God is the designer of the universe. However, the evidence seems to point towards that being the purpose of God. Some scientists and astronauts have been left with feelings of awe at the intelligibility, majesty and beauty of the created universe.

In his book God and the New Physics, Paul Davies wrote: "In my opinion, science offers a surer path to God than religion." He implied that the design and balance of the universe make one ask if there is more to the universe than meets the eye.

Albert Einstein once said: ^{The} most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible even if only through mathematical statements."

David Wilkinson – a Methodist minister, remember – went on to say that revelation explains that an infinite God created our finite humanity, revealing himself in terms that we could understand by becoming the man, Jesus. While questions of purpose, origin and design do not lead inevitably to a knowledge of God, such knowledge comes to us through God, who reveals himself.

Wilkinson's language and imagery – God revealing himself by becoming the man, Jesus – indicate a fairly orthodox Protestant Christian theology which most Unitarians would find difficult to accept. But he saw religious experience as needing tangible public statements in space-time – statements like God revealing himself by becoming the man, Jesus – needing such tangible public statements in space-time as a kind of reference point, to distinguish good religious experiences from spurious ones.

He said he believed that, on balance, Christian theology is reasonable, and that the Jesus of history provides a kind of "plumb-line".

I would want to challenge the implied exclusivity of the Christian revelation – an implied exclusivity which has all too often led to arrogance, religious imperialism, fanatical intolerance, and devastating brutality.

I do not believe that the God of a universe as wonderful as the one revealed to us by science would have restricted his revelation to only a small segment of humanity. Or - in less anthropomorphic terms": I do not believe that the adherents of only one of humanity's religious traditions have a monopoly on the truth, or that they alone can understand what God is.

I believe that God is revealed – that we understand God – in many various ways. He/She/it is too elusive for any one definition, but I think of him/her/it in terms like:

Spirit of life and love
Creative force
Sustaining energy
Infinite and yet immediate
Eternal and yet present.

Do we create God in our own image? Are we created in an image of God? If humanity is in God's image, is not religious experience part of an infinite mind?

Science shows us how little we already know, and how much there is to know. While we speculate about the future, and while we speculate about our capabilities, we must work with what we have.

Religious experience takes us beyond our ordinary mind; the sense of the transcendent suggests that there is more than can be perceived directly.

We cannot simply dismiss religious experience as mere emotion; it reflects our capacity for a relationship with something beyond or greater than ourselves, - with what some call God.

And the new spiritualities respond to modern cosmologies. In The Tao of Physics, Fritjof Capra argued that Eastern religions, which stress the interdependence of everything in the world, have been validated by quantum theory.

A few months later, I took part in the Sheffield and District Unitarian Association's Religious Education Training Programme, arranged by Jean Mason and led by Trevor Jones, early in 1995.

One of the exercises related to our views of the relationships between God, the universe and humanity (not necessarily in that order).

There was a difficulty in that the relationships were all represented by diagrams using circles — giving the impression that God, the universe and humanity were all neatly finite, encapsulated entities.

The truth, of course, is a long way from that, so some of us had trouble choosing any one diagram, and wanted to negotiate a combination of two or even three different representations.

In response to the question of what lies beyond the universe, Einstein explained that space and time are part of the universe. The universe does not expand into space; it expands within space. Asking what is beyond the universe assumes that there is space beyond the universe; but that is impossible, since space must be part of the universe.

Waldemar Argow wrote:

Who has stood out on a night spangled with stars past all counting or conceiving, the quietness a palpable thing, time and space felt and even, somehow, understood, the mind leaping light years ahead beyond all known galaxies – I say, who has been one with such a night and not known a sense of order and purpose, of meaning and majesty behind the inscrutable face of things, a sense which is religious and religion's beyond all comprehending?

(Drawn largely from a summary by Michael Wright and John Franklin in News for the Alister Hardy Society, Insert to *De Numine* Number 17, 1994)