

AT HOME IN THE UNIVERSE

George V. Coyne, S.J.

A Bit of Science

It is clear from all of the sciences, including geology, molecular biology, paleontology, comparative anatomy, cosmology, etc., that evolution is an intrinsic and proper characteristic of the universe. Neither the universe as a whole nor any of its ingredients can be understood except in terms of evolution. We human beings came to be through evolution and evolution is a daily happening. As the universe expanded from the Big Bang and evolved, stars were born and stars died. Since stars are born and sustain themselves by creating a thermonuclear furnace whereby light elements are continuously converted into heavier elements, when they die the stars pour out to the universe these heavier elements. And then a second generation of stars is born, not now of pure hydrogen but of the enriched chemistry of the universe. Thus, the universe is being continuously enriched with heavier elements. This process continued until through the build-up of ever more complex chemicals the human being came to be. Our sun is a third generation star and we are literally born of stardust.

All that I have presented thus far about the evolution in the universe of complex organisms, including ourselves, has occurred by natural processes intrinsic to a universe which is about 14 billion years old and contains about 10^{22} stars. Thus far science, even though no scientist would claim to have the ultimate truth about any of this. But what relevance does all of this scientific knowledge have to our being at home in the universe?

God Did It

Although God transcends the universe, he is working in it through his providence and continuous creation. This stress on God's immanence is not to place a limitation upon God. Far from it. It reveals a God who made a universe that has within it a certain dynamism, as seen by science, and thus participates in the very creativity of God. In such wise God emptied himself so that he could share his infinite love with his creation.

To my mind this view of the evolutionary universe and of our place in it, derived at least partially from the sciences, and of God's role in the universe,

derived from the reflections of a religious believer upon that same science, may help us in a further understanding of our home. We, in a special way, share in the creativity which God desired the universe to have. I have not spoken above of the spiritual nature of the human being because that cannot be an object of scientific research. But the reflections of a religious believer upon the nature of God and his relationship to the universe brings us undoubtedly to a recognition of our spirituality; in fact such reflections are themselves an exercise of that spirituality.

At Home as Co-Creators

Reflections upon our scientific knowledge of the universe bring us to a recognition of our role as co-creators, so to speak, in God's continuous creation of the universe. Our Christian vocation is, therefore, not a choice taken independently of the world around us; it derives from our very nature in the universe. It cannot be separated from faith, our relationship of love to God, the source of all love, of all creativity in the universe. Co-creators in the universe can only realize their vocation if they are constantly united to God, the source of all love. Christian identity is much more than what Christians do. It is bound intimately to the very nature of the universe which drives us as co-creators to carry out our mission in union with the Creator.

Our vocation through our baptism is a participation in the intrinsically missionary nature of the Church, the concrete presence of the Creator among his co-creators. God is continually encountering the world in new and creative ways because the world God created is responsive to continual encounter with its creator. The wisdom of God in emptying himself to create a world which shares in his creativity requires that, since God is the one God of all creation, such participation in his creativity must be universal. It cannot favor any particular social, cultural, religious movement. While to function any given vocation must be limited, it cannot be exclusive. We are only at home in the universe when no one and no thing is excluded from our creative love.