

INTRODUCTION

One of the finest things about teaching is being present for exact moments of understanding. You can't always be there when these happen, and, strictly speaking, you can't always know it when they do. But when lights turn on they can be hard to hide, especially if they're of the high-wattage variety.

The most memorable moment of this kind happened for me about ten years ago. It was the first day of one of my introductory astronomy classes. Such courses often begin with the obvious view, the night sky as seen with the unaided eye, and this one was no exception. As part of my standard opening spiel I mentioned this modest fact: Under a dark and transparent atmosphere, with an unobstructed horizon and healthy vision, one can see at most about 3,000 stars. And if we were to remove our home planet from under our feet we would see 3,000 more, for a total of 6,000 stars. In general students are mildly surprised that the number is so small—some expect millions. We chatted about it briefly. Then I glanced down at my notes and prepared to move on to the next topic, the constellations.

When I looked up I was surprised to see an expression of near-trauma spread across a student's face. I will never forget it. He was sitting on the left, two rows back, scarcely breathing. It was so surprising that I paused and asked him if he was okay. Was it something I said?

His look of horror turned into a sheepish grin and he explained himself: “It’s just that you said that there are stars under my feet, and I had never really thought of it like that before. Wow!”

Then, to everyone’s delight, he laughed out loud.

He was about twenty years old and a very good student. Was he really learning this for the first time? Could he have possibly missed something so obvious?

It’s unlikely. I suspect something more interesting happened that day. He had known the fact for years: The spherical Earth is surrounded on all sides by stars. But until that day this knowledge was a mere concept for him, like a dry husk encasing a bud of green actuality. At the moment in question the husk fell away and reality was recovered. The stricken look on his face suggested to me that the stars far beneath his seat became tangible to him in that instant, that the words *up* and *down* momentarily lost all content. Perhaps he felt the faint flutter of vertigo. He certainly felt *something*. In that short span of time the absolute became relative and the strangeness of the world was revealed in all its simplicity.

We are not accustomed to finding ourselves within the cosmos we imagine. We know that the Earth and other planets go around the Sun, but it is a strange and wonderful experience to lie under the night sky, locate two or three planets, and use them to get a physical sense of the solar system, to see and to *feel* its actual tilt and turn, and to find yourself in it. It’s fun to familiarize yourself with the basics of evolution, but deeply mysterious to locate your own tiny and particular self within its great stream. Chemistry is interesting on a blackboard, but mind-blowing when you become aware of it working within your own body, silently keeping you alive moment by moment.

I have read many books, academic and popular, on the well-worn topic of religion-and-science. I have attended (and delivered) more than my share of religion-and-science lectures and watched

more than my share of religion-and-science debates. I have taught religion-and-science courses in churches, colleges, and seminaries. These experiences have taught me a lot about the topic and about the great interest many people have in it. They have also led me to conclude that, at the popular level, the topic has become as lifeless as a husk.

You may disagree. The Internet is full of people arguing about this issue; books about religion and science tend to sell; religion-versus-science debates make for exceedingly popular viewing; evolution continues to divide Christians in America. How can I claim this topic is lifeless? How is it dull? Because the issue has stagnated. People are arguing and books are selling, but (again, at the popular level) I have not encountered a new argument or sensed any development since at least 1999, well before Richard Dawkins and his fellow New Atheists revved up their scientifically motivated harangue against religion of all kinds (what's new about them is their attitude, not their arguments).¹ There is plenty of noise but no life. Nothing new is happening.

The popular media tend to emphasize the divide between those who embrace science and reject all forms of religion (e.g., the New Atheists) and those who embrace religion and reject science (e.g., creationists). These two groups seem to do little more than heave rhetorical bombs at one another. Such bombast sells books, and there's nothing like it for fueling Internet rage, but man is it *boring*.

Between these extremes is a broad field occupied by those who wish to reconcile religion and science. In general they believe, as I do, that there is no essential conflict between the religious and the scientific. Many in the middle have labored honorably to bring these

1. 1999 is the year that Kenneth Miller's *Finding Darwin's God* was published. It contains what I believe is a novel discussion—which I ultimately find unsatisfying—about God's action in the world.

two great ways of knowing together, and, seeing how neither religion nor science seems to be going anywhere soon, I believe the future belongs to them. I value their erudition and their dedication to the hard work of peacemaking.

But frankly, I find nearly all of the (popular) middle-ground work to be unconvincing. Much of it is written by traditional Christians who love and understand science, but who nevertheless tend to view science as a problem that must somehow be “dealt with” or worked around by people of faith. They never allow science or the cosmos to shape their theology at a deep level. The driving idea behind much of their work seems to be that if you’re creative and put in enough effort, you can bring traditional Christianity together with the evolving cosmos in such a way that both retain their integrity. And they may even succeed at this, at least in the narrow sense of logical consistency. The academic problem may be solved, but the resulting models are so out of harmony with themselves, so unwieldy, monstrous, oftentimes goofy, and so contrary to lived experience that it seems hardly worth the effort.²

This must be a result of the relentlessly academic nature of the topic. There seems to be a widespread belief that religion-and-science is, at root, an intellectual issue and therefore it must be explored by purely intellectual methods. This is an understandable mistake, for religion-and-science writers must import ideas from (at least) the fields of science, theology, and philosophy. Each of these is a vast discipline—or, to be precise, family of disciplines—with its own language, assumptions, and values. When you bring them together in an attempt to construct a universal model of reality, it can bog down into a head game pretty quickly. Unwieldy, monstrous, and goofy results come as no surprise at all.

2. The unmanageability of the topic is evidenced by its very name: religion-and-science. There really should be a single word for it.

One solution to this problem is to start not with universal principles or concepts but with normal human life. A wise pastor friend once advised me that, whenever an issue is to be worked out, you should do what Jesus did: “Start with the person.” At the time we were talking about same-sex marriage, but I think his suggestion can be applied to religion-and-science. *Stars Beneath Us* is, so far as I know, the first religion-and-science book written from a consistently—and explicitly—personal perspective.

The personal is what moves us. The personal is what changes us and might even open us to the world. Concepts alone have little power for deep change; they must be rooted in life as we know it. When they do connect, when one’s ideas and one’s actual life are woven together, great things start happening. Just ask that student in my class. It was not his head knowledge alone that shocked him that day. He had known the facts since he was a child. But at that moment, what had for years been merely conceptual became, to use a stained-glass word, incarnational. The facts never went away, but they became profoundly present in such a way that he himself got involved. He was no longer playing with an idea; he was being played by reality. The stars were not just in his head; they were actually and truly *down there*, light years beneath his sneakers.

This book has been a long time coming, and I’m grateful to Tony Jones for seeing something good in my proposal and for believing it could work. Thanks go out to him and to Lisa Gruenisen for seeing it through to completion. To those behind the scenes at Fortress who made the book possible, thank you. I am also grateful to my dear friend Jake Myers who connected me with Fortress in the first place.

There is nothing new under the sun, and I must mention two people whose work has deeply affected me and who will see their influence in *Stars Beneath Us*. Catherine Keller, whose *Face of the Deep* almost single-handedly shook me out of my fixation on classical theism and simultaneously alerted me to the bottomless riches

of the book of Job, is one of them. Reading her work is like walking into the studio of a great artist: her intelligence is matched only by her creativity and imagination. William Brown made me love Job even more with his brilliant *Seven Pillars of Creation*. I am grateful to him not only for that outstanding book but for his friendship.

My brother-in-law Keith Pierce is not an editor, but he should be. He faithfully read through every chapter as I wrote them and went over every last word of the final manuscript. His sharp eye, his experience as a reader, and his sensitivity to language and his knowledge of “how books should go” made him an invaluable help throughout the writing process. I also thank my friend Ben Reiss, who encouraged me to keep sending off book proposals when I had nearly surrendered my dream of being an author.

Mark Sargent’s honest words from the pulpit of Rome First United Methodist Church set me on the path that led to my ordination and to this book, and I will always be grateful for his presence on this planet. I am indebted to Greg Lovell and Michael Tutterow for keeping me on that path when night fell and I couldn’t see a thing, not even the stars.

To my people at Agnes Scott College: thank you for supporting me in my rather unconventional career. To my people at Berry College, particularly Michael Bailey, Ron Taylor, and Todd Timberlake: thank you for not disowning me when I left. To my people at First Baptist Church of Decatur: thank you for letting me off the deacon and Sunday-school-teaching hooks while I worked on this book. I’m coming back now.

My family knows how long and strange the road has been, and if they hadn’t been on it with me I would have given up long ago. I thank all of them to the moon and back: Dad, Mom, Mom, Dan, Kristen, Sherry, Keith, and all the cousins. My aunt Bettie Clark’s interest in me and support of my work have made this book possible. To her I send profound gratitude. My children Henry, Julia, and

Kristen probably don't know what an education and inspiration they have been to me, but I've never learned so much or laughed so much as I have with them. Where do such beautiful people come from?

Finally, as Johnny Cash says, I've got a woman who knows her man. Elizabeth has been my partner in marriage for nearly twenty-five years, and with her help I've come to know the beauty and miraculous love this human life offers, and to accept it. *Stars Beneath Us* is dedicated to her.