

The Church must be ready to change



Congratulations are due to Br Guy Consolmagno SJ, Director of the Vatican Observatory and a Tablet columnist, for helping to set up this week's ground-breaking conference on science and religion. And for making clear what it was not about. There could be no scientific proof or disproof of the existence of God, he explained, as a deity whose existence could be proved or disproved would not be God. But that is not the end of the matter. Astronomy in general and cosmology in particular, when they take a rest from being bafflingly mathematical, are asking questions that can attract the inquiring minds of non-believers and believers alike. Perhaps, especially, the latter.

The subject of the conference – “Black holes, gravitational waves and space-time singularities” – has been situated precisely at the interface of pure science with philosophy, theology and metaphysics. This is Stephen Hawking territory, and though the world's most remarkable scientist said later he regretted ending his best-selling book *A Brief History of Time* with a reference to “knowing the mind of God”, he did put the issue on the scientific agenda.

It is reasonable to interpret the natural world as a revelation of the divine – its very rationality in particular – but God's Creation was not a scientific moment, and Br Consolmagno warns against treating it as such. Arguing from the Big Bang to theism, or indeed to intelligent design, is unsound. But to ask, “Why is there anything, and not nothing?” is to move in a religious direction. It raises questions of purpose, of wondering why rather than asking how. And astronomers are natural wonderers. The myth that science and religion are incompatible must finally be scotched. Scientists who are relaxed about their own religious beliefs should be more forthright in saying so. Believers tend to be less bothered by non-believers than the other way round, which can give the impression that believers have nothing much to say in reply. But Richard Dawkins has gone far too far in the other direction, and many thinking atheists are repelled by the contemptuous tone of his propaganda.

The relationship between science and religion needs careful thought, not bluster. This includes, on the one hand, recognising that the nineteenth-century battle over Darwinism was contrived, and that there was never anything to fear for religious believers in the theory of evolution; and, on the other, acknowledging frankly that the Galileo affair represented an incursion by Church authority into an area where it had no competence. Where religious or moral teachings partly rely for their persuasiveness on scientific evidence – the obligation to take action on climate change would be an example – they have

to make room for the fact that science, of its very nature, changes its mind. The same applies to moral teachings based on natural law. Science can legitimately ask whether a particular view of human nature is based on sound evidence; and if it is not, the teaching based on it has to be corrected.

Such humility can be painful. But good science also needs humility. It might not be able to answer the questions why – but it can put them with great power. And believers must rise to the challenges they pose

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