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God: The Failed Hypothesis and The Comprehensible Cosmos

(book reviews)

by Damien Broderick, news.com.au

Thanks to **Russell Blackford** for the link.

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Reviews of "God: The Failed Hypothesis: How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist" and "The Comprehensible Cosmos: Where Do the Laws of Physics Come From?"

DO we live in an age of resurgent belief, as the rise of fundamentalist Christianity in the US and of Islam elsewhere suggests? Or is the "faith of our fathers" getting corroded, as many believers suspect with dismay, by an unholy blend of sceptical science and consumerist self-indulgence? The popularity of The Da Vinci Code and Philip Pullman's death-of-God trilogy for young readers, His Dark Materials, is certainly striking. Film stars enthusiastically endorse a cult claiming that a galactic overlord named Xenu stranded us here 75million years ago.

Meanwhile, defiantly atheistic books have been bestsellers: evolutionist Richard Dawkins's The God Delusion, philosopher Dan Dennett's Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon and Sam Harris's brilliantly incisive little tract, Letter to a Christian Nation.

Then there are the claims by filmmaker James Cameron that the tomb of Jesus has been found. What in heaven's name is going on?

I have a sneaking suspicion that doubts about faiths are fuelled less by the shock of Darwinian insight, say, than by a deep, unconscious revulsion after 19 ardent true believers murdered nearly 3000 people on September 11, 2001.

Detesting militant Islam required no great intellectual courage on the part of Westerners, but a side effect has been a dawning sense that if one leading faith could propel such brutality -- could constitute, indeed, the new post-communist threat -- then perhaps religious conviction in general might be questionable.

Traditionally, brand-name religion is instilled from infancy, often with ferocious warnings against heretics and infidels, making

it hard to doubt the precepts with which one has grown up.

When I was a child in a parochial school, I parroted a catechism that explained vacuously "We cannot see God because he is a Spirit, and cannot be seen by us in this life". Later, I learned classic proofs for God's existence such as the argument from design (the world is complex and so must have a watchmaker), which the proven process of evolution had long ago dispelled.

Other arguments seemed, eventually, equally frail. The First Mover gambit was amusingly parodied by a friend's phrase: "If there's no God, who pulls up the next Kleenex?" One last-resort argument for the necessity of the divine was a real puzzler, though: Why is there Something, rather than Nothing? Who put the bang in the big bang? Veteran particle physicist Victor Stenger offers an answer to that deep question in his two new books, arguing a materialist, God-free account of the cosmos, equally antagonistic to superstition, the paranormal and religions archetypal and newfangled alike. He refuses to accept the polite accommodation urged by agnostic Stephen Jay Gould that science and religion can never be in conflict as they are non-overlapping "magisteria". Faith, for Gould, dealt with morals, science with testable fact.

This bid for mutual tolerance gained little traction in either camp. Evolutionary psychology pressed hard against the territorial prerogatives of religion, showing how traditional ethical codes had developed on the basis of templates selected -- for good and ill -- by a million years of human prehistory. But aren't the central dogmas of Christian civilisation, indeed of all the Abrahamic societies including Judaism and Islam, derived from the infallible word of God delivered in Scripture? Stenger offers a familiar corrective: the moral guidance of the Bible is confused and often reprehensible, supporting slavery and other atrocities. We interpret its words according to today's superior moral insight and sensitivity, so the interpretations given by Christians "must depend on ideals that they have already developed from some other source". Unlike some critics of faith, Stenger takes the tough line that deity is not just an unnecessary hypothesis or one where an honest thinker can choose to accept or reject it. No, it is "the failed hypothesis".

This is a bold claim indeed and certain to meet scornful rejection from prelates and pious alike. Undaunted, Stenger trots briskly through all the obvious claims and his objections to them, concluding in each case that the evidence for the traditional God is too weak to accept or can be dismissed as mistaken.

For example, while human life is well-suited to this planet (inevitably, since we evolved here), the universe as a whole is an uncongenial place, vast, empty and hostile. Far from being carefully designed and calibrated for humankind, the cosmos looks precisely the sort of place one would expect had it emerged unplanned from the void. That assertion still seems to most non-scientists merely a conjuring trick. How can something burst into existence from nothing? Philosophers debated this for centuries but the question assumes that "nothing" has a clear meaning. Actually, we never see nothing, only the change of one thing into another, the slow dispersal of energy into exhaustion.

As Stenger points out in his remarkable book *The Comprehensible Cosmos*, all the matter and energy in the universe, including the newly discovered dark matter and dark energy that comprise most of the cosmos, balances out to zero. "Nothing," as physics Nobel laureate Frank Wilczek put it, "is unstable". The void cannot be conceived as ultimately empty.

The astonishing random event that led to an explosion of matter and energy and expanding space time -- to the creation of a local universe -- seems finally within our mental grasp.

Stenger does not stint in his treatment of these remarkable ideas. The first half of his book sets out for any reader with a basic scientific training the way in which symmetry gives rise to the laws of nature: conservation of energy and momentum, the quantum rules that rewrote physics in the 20th century, special and general relativity. His lucid if demanding treatment offers a somewhat contentious account of the way in which everything we see about us takes the form it does because of one simple demand: that no standpoint is privileged over another.

This does not mean, as he takes pains to stress, that anything goes in the postmodern vein. Readers prepared to follow his argument into elementary calculus and quantum theory will find it spelled out in detail in the second half of the book. The tragedy of the 21st century is that so few people have been equipped by the education system to take that journey into hard-won insight. Which is probably one reason, when the pain and confusion of life become too great to bear, so many of us turn to Xenu or God and abandon the struggle to understand.

Damien Broderick's K-Machines won the 2006 Aurealis science fiction award for best novel.

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