

## Readings at the Intersection of Culture and Faith Unlikely Theologians and the Coleridgean Imagination

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### Books Discussed

*The Future of the Universe: Chance, Chaos, God?* By Arnold Benz. New York: Continuum, 2002. 176 pp. \$19.95 (paper).

Or in the space and the freedom given me for this column. In various ways, I try to bring forward the work of powerfully imaginative individuals who are not officially counted as theologians. My first nominee this time is Arnold Benz, Professor of Astrophysics at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich. he is a cosmologist-one who studies the birth and death of stars, the formation of planets, and the origin of the visible universe at the Big Bang. In *The Future of the Universe: Chance, Chaos, God?*, he forthrightly engages the religious challenge posed by what his discipline now tells us about the origin and ultimate fate of our planet. In doing so he reviews astrophysics for general readers and with the eyes of a poet, regarding all this relatively new scientific information as a potential source of metaphors whereby to reincarnate the reality of God for our own times. From start to finish, *The Future of the Universe* impressed me as scientifically rigorous, theologically nuanced, and adeptly literary. Thinkers like this are rare.

Religion requires participation just as science demands objectivity, Benz contends: we are involved, even complicit, in a relationship both with God and with the cosmos we observe. At the core of religion (as he understands it) is the uncanny but common, momentary experience in which all this weary world blurs and we find ourselves intimately belonging to a cosmos that is overwhelmingly gorgeous and profoundly, mysteriously coherent. Such "participatory knowledge," Benz contends, is prerequisite to the only kind of meaning with moral value: science and religion must be understood as separate domains of knowledge addressing or trying to understand distinctive categories of human experience. As Coleridge explains this issue, imagination calls the whole of our complicated humanity into coherence with itself, with the due subordination of its powers to one another.\*\* As a result, the truth to which imagination testifies cannot, like the truths of science itself, be wholly independent of us and our choices. The objectivity of science cannot generate the moral significance for which we yearn nor can it deconstruct what faith provides J

More specifically, Benz argues, "the reality that appears through science can . . . serve as a metaphor that makes perceptions intelligible on a wholly different level. On that other level of perception, personal participation and faith are essential" (p. 122). Although scientific results on their own do not provide a basis for hope, they "can offer a metaphoric ground for helping believers as well as others to appreciate the religious character of humanity's hope for newness" (p. 16.1 ). Benz wrote this hook at least in part to reconcile his own objective, scientific perceptions with his participatory, religious experiences but without fudging either one. He turns to metaphor and to deeply literary symbolic thinking to do so: what we have here is a poet who also happens to be a physicist.

Benz made clear to me what I had never understood quite so directly before: if one takes a long enough view, the cosmos itself is fabulously dynamic. "The new arises in the universe repeatedly, in many ways and forms," he explains (p. 157). Nothing is fixed or static except on the short and narrow view. We are made of stardust, he explains (pp. 32-33), which is to say we are not only kin to the Milky Way, but like it subject to the repeated cosmic outbreak of the new and the unpredictable-but-not-disorderly. The natural world as known by astrophysics is clearly not a closed, absolutely determined causal network in which everything can at least in theory be accounted for. In physics at this very sophisticated level, much happens that cannot be accounted for until afterwards, in hindsight-which is to say the accounting remains in formal ways incomplete.

The Easter event, he argues, can be understood metaphorically as yet another instance, so familiar to astrophysics, of how the new arises not out of nothingness, but out of existing material whose structure is in decay. By extension, then, "Good Friday and Easter revolutionize the traditional conception of God. God is recognized now as one who takes part in the suffering of decay and, at the same time, as one who creates new form and order" (p. 123). The eventual extinction of the earth's sun is not, then, necessary or objective proof that existence is absurd or that the glories of the earth will trail away into meaningless ashes and dust. The paschal event makes hope possible-not objectively, of course, but through or by our willing participation in the relationship to God to which faith (and mystical experience) testifies.

That is hardly a new claim theologically. But I was astounded to see just how well it also accords metaphorically with central observations and theories in astrophysics. What Benz offers is not "natural theology" in its ordinary naive and sentimental form. This is physics turned to poetry, and then poetry rendered symbolic in a very delicate and convincing way.

In a letter to me and in the acknowledgement section, Benz offers his thanks to Julia Gatta, an Episcopal priest, and to her husband, English professor John Gatta. They encouraged him to write the book and then translated it into English (a translation he checked and revised himself). It seems to me that our thanks are due to them as well: Benz has obviously enjoyed long and rigorous arguments with theologians who must have imaginative capacity no less remarkable than his own. I should note that *The Origin of the Universe* has been through four editions in German and translation into five other languages. A summary essay written by Benz and titled "Theology in a Dynamic Universe" can be found at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/0591-2385.00381>.