

35 Questions Christians Ask Scientists

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Introduction

All the way down and all the way out

Neil DeGrasse Tyson, an American astrophysicist and spokesman for science and reason, when asked in an interview if he believes in God responded:

The more I look at the universe, the less convinced I am that there is something benevolent going on... I look at disasters that afflict Earth, and life on Earth: volcanoes, hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, disease, pestilence, congenital birth defects. You look at this list of ways that life is made miserable on Earth by natural causes, and I just ask, "How do you deal with that?" I have no problems if, as we probe the origins of things, we bump into the Bearded Man. If that shows up, we good to go! Okay? Not a problem. There's just no evidence of it.¹

Here Tyson is referring to what theologians call "natural evil," which is death and suffering caused by nonhuman agents. It's a time-worn problem and a pretty good argument against God.

Human beings do often suffer prolonged, brutal, and mindless ends. So, I get it when Tyson talks about nothing benevolent going on. There *are* all those diseases, after all, and natural disasters, and genetic mishaps. I'm surprised he didn't add a catastrophic asteroid impact to his list, which is simply a matter of time. But really, we don't need a list to know the truth: All lives, human and otherwise, are at every moment vulnerable to 10,000 oblivions.

Yet here I am, writing this introduction, and there you are, reading it. This fact is easily overlooked, but it is important. It took a lot of work to put this book together, and Good Faith Media and I have done our best. But you really have no idea. To make this book possible, you first must have a universe in which to have it. You need a bang—the bigger, the better. From the bang must come light, and from the light must come both matter and antimatter. But they must be a little off-balance so there's a bit more matter than antimatter: about 1,000,000,001 particles of matter for every 1,000,000,000 particles of antimatter. That's harder than it sounds.

Then you need to wait around for billions of years while nuclei are assembled inside stars and dying stars and supernovas. These nuclei must be bound together just right—not too loose, not too tight—and then they need to collect some stray electrons and drift around the cosmos for at least a few hundred million more years, settle down on a nice planet—not too hot, not too cold—and assemble themselves into molecules and then bacteria, which must, a billion years later, evolve into algae, then fish and amphibians and reptiles and weird rat-like primates and hominids and, finally, writers, publishers, and readers. The list of requirements

and problems to solve is quite long, actually, before you ever get to things such as writing, marketing, and designing the cover.

But all this has actually happened, and here I am writing these words and there you are reading them. Here we are, communicating with one another in the midst of existence. I am impressed with existence, so much, in fact, that I believe Tyson's list of miseries, when weighed against the miracle of this moment, and against the cumulative miracle of all mornings and all evenings and all moments of existence, comes up short as an argument against God.

If it sounds strange to talk about existence, it is because existence is rarely acknowledged. It is rarely acknowledged because it is rarely sensed. Science can help us sense it, or art, music, sustained religious practice, great violence, or great loss can do it. But mostly we wander around "sunk into the everydayness of our own lives," in the words of Walker Percy.² In such a state it is easy to overlook the great generosity of existence.

Now existence is not only generous but also, by all reports and without exception, beautiful. By beautiful I do not mean pretty. Sister Wendy Beckett, a Roman Catholic nun and art critic, said it well: "Beauty is a not a pretty word, but it is a strong word."³

I know a man who might agree with Sister Wendy. In our family folklore he is known as Peter the Mean Neighbor. He lived near us years ago. He wasn't grumpy, and he wasn't cantankerous, and he wasn't depressed. He was *mean*. And he taught meanness to his son, who sometimes bullied my son Henry, two years younger than him. More than once I had to drive that young demon out of our yard, and more than once I had to explain to Henry that some people are just *mean*.

One summer afternoon a storm blew through and there appeared in the east a double rainbow the like of which I had never seen and have not seen since. I stood in our yard staring, stupefied.

Peter emerged from his house. His response was less reserved. A wide and wild smile broke across his lips. He whooped and hollered. His body sprang and twisted with each barbaric yawp. He looked like a bull rider without the bull. He was like a boy, new, vulnerable, not mean, filled to overflowing with this astonishing and holy thing. *This* is what beauty can do. Surely this was the work of God, a foretaste of the great and general feast.

"Now hold it right there," I hear Tyson say. Beauty, sure. But holiness? God? There is no evidence. But Tyson is a scientist, so he keeps an open mind. He says we still might "bump into the Bearded Man as we probe the origins of things." There's a little irony there, perhaps, but I want to know: What does Tyson *really* think it might look like if scientists were to bump into God?

In my own time as a scientist, I worked in two directions and ended up in two equally remote locations. As a graduate student and postdoctoral associate, I studied atomic nuclei. With our trusty proton accelerator, my colleagues

and I drilled down into the heart of matter and mapped out details of certain nuclei, details no one had ever seen before. We were captained down the rabbit hole by quantum mechanics, a counterintuitive but reliable guide to the world of the impossibly tiny. And at no point on the journey did we bump into anything Tyson might recognize as divine. We found no bearded men, no encoded messages, no particles in the shape of Jesus, no stamp saying “Made by Yahweh,” and my dissertation said nothing about God.

As an astrophysicist, I traveled in the other direction. Our group worked on quasars, among the most distant objects ever studied. I remember one quasar in particular: 3EG J2006-2321 (we astronomers really have a way with names). Its light traveled for seven *billion* years before being intercepted by our orbiting telescope. We collected and sifted data, and it was just as it had been in the nuclear lab: Not one of us bumped into God. And so, the paper on 3EG J2006-2321, just like every other paper in the *Astrophysical Journal*, is silent on the topic of God.

Drill deep into the heart of matter, and we do not bump into God. Peer outward to the edge of the big bang, and we do not find God. But what we do find is beauty, and plenty of it, all the way down and all the way out. Granted, this is not the obvious beauty of a double rainbow. It builds over time. It takes work. It fills the imagination with light and space and mathematics and existence. But does it fill us with God? With holiness?

I believe it does. Here I might leave Tyson and other empiricists and atheists behind, and that’s fine; for all I know, they will enter the kingdom of God ahead of me. But the beauty of the world is not just epiphenomenal froth created by our oversized brains for the purpose of survival in a brutal cosmos. Scientific explanations are fine as far as they go, but sometimes they don’t go far enough. Beauty, I say, is a reliable clue to the secret of the world. Beauty, I say, is recognition. It is the divine image in us recognizing itself in a world made, and being made, by God.

I think scientific study amplifies one’s previous commitments. If Tyson brings mere skepticism to science, he will walk away more skeptical than ever. If I bring conventional religious belief to science, I will walk away slightly radicalized, knowing the cosmos is a cathedral and that God is not a code or a stamp, not a thing among things. God is instead the ground of all being, the mystery behind the beauty we call “existence.” And science can only deepen that mystery; it does not and cannot solve it.

I hope this book increases your sense of wonder at the world while also adding a little to what you know about it. Some sentimental people believe that the more you know about the universe the less mysterious and wonderful it becomes, but knowledge and wonder do not compete; they cooperate. The more you learn about the cosmos, the more questions you have about it, the more conscious of your ignorance you become, and the more aware of wonder you become. This is the great paradox of learning.

Most religion-and-science dialogue suffers from peoples' overwhelming need, on virtually all sides of the discussion, to be right. This creates an atmosphere that repels those of us who love knowing things but who have also made peace with not knowing things, and with mystery. If this book alleviates this situation even a little, then I will be a happy and grateful author.

I thank Johnny Pierce and Bruce Gourley for taking me on as a regular columnist for *Nurturing Faith Journal*. They have been the finest of colleagues and the best of friends. I am also grateful for all others at Good Faith Media who have made my column and this book possible. And finally, I offer my largest thanks to you, my reader, and to all who have read my column, corresponded with me, and sent in questions. This book is dedicated to you.

Notes

¹www.youtube.com/watch?v=I0nXG02tpDw.

²Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2019), 13.

³Image, *A Conversation with Sister Wendy Beckett*, vol. 27, 2003.