

Author Q & A

With Roy Abraham Varghese, author of The Wonder of the World: A Journey from Modern Science to the Mind of God

What inspired you to write this book?

This is a book that has been bubbling up in me for some thirty years. In a sense, it ties together themes and insights, phenomena and events that have run in parallel through the intellectual and experiential dimensions of my life. On the one hand, I have never ceased to be wonder-struck by the sheer beauty, creativity and energy of Nature. Nature cast a spell on me from my youngest days as I spent my time trekking through jungles and mountains. The mystical, even magical, dimension of Nature was the starting-point of my intellectual pilgrimage. On the other hand, I have been bemused by the indifference, even contempt, that many academic thinkers have shown for the datum that stares us in the face every waking moment: the wonder of the world. Fortunately, I came to know some of the finest philosophic and scientific thinkers in the world and realized that they saw a direct connection between the fruits of their intellectual labor and the self-evident intelligence of the universe. But this seamless communion of thought and experience, intellect and wonder seems to be a secret hidden from the general public. If it does anything, I hope *The Wonder of the World* can help its readers discover and celebrate this great secret.

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What hurdles did you encounter in writing it?

Two main hurdles. How do you communicate complex matters without lapsing into technical jargon and opaque abstractions? How do you restrict the range of your investigation when every fact is tied to another five and each of these five are themselves tied to five more and on and on? The reader will have to decide how well I've addressed these hurdles.

Why did you choose a dialogue format?

I am a firm believer that “preaching to the choir” is not the best use of time and energy. My primary intended audience is the community of skeptics/atheists. I have tried to address what I think are the most serious objections to a theistic view of things. In this context, I have laid out the positions of the most influential scientific critics of theism of our day. I hope to continue the dialogue with the intended recipients at least on the book's website.

Do you plan a sequel?

Certainly. The book addresses the existence of God and the soul. The next urgent question is whether or not there is a life after death and if there is one what it's like. The sequel will consider all the different options when it comes to an after-life

and the data in support of each. The question of the after-life deserves at least as much space and time as the subject of this book.

What credentials do you bring in writing a book about science? Normally one expects such works to come from professional scientists.

This work is concerned with the presuppositions of science and the philosophical interpretations you can make of scientific data. This is an area you might call ontology. Ontology, as I point out in the book, addresses essential and ultimate principles that underlie science but cannot be proved by science; thus science assumes but cannot prove that the world exists since any proof implicitly assumes the world's existence. Now Einstein himself, in *Out of My Later Years*, pointed out that the man of science is a poor philosopher. With regard to the data of science, I have tried to report as best I can, the consensus or majority position of scientists in the major areas of discussion. Various scientists have kindly reviewed my text to check it for material error with respect to quantitative facts. Where I stake out my positions and venture certain theses is in the ontological interpretation of the scientific data. Here the domain experts are not scientists but those who argue from and apply ontological principles. In addition, this book is targeted at a popular audience—not one that's familiar with the technical jargon of professional scientists. To a certain extent, I have tried to “translate” esoteric concepts into simple prose.

What are the most important theses of your book?

The book tries to share three (what I call) “discoveries:”

1. Modern science emerged from a matrix articulated and precisely formulated by the four greatest thinkers of four major world religions, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This matrix, the womb of science, may be thought of as a supra-scientific Theory of Everything that begins with the fundamental “God equation.”
2. Science itself bears unmistakable witness to a fundamental truth embodied by this matrix: the universe was brought into being by an infinite Intelligence, God.
3. It is possible to see God here and now through the Wonder of the World.

Obviously every one of these theses is controversial and subject to argument. My book is an attempt to show not only that the evidence supports these “discoveries” but that the burden of proof (at least in the case of the first two) is really on those who deny them.

What lies at the heart of your thesis as it relates to science and religion?

I believe that both science and religion proceed from the intelligence that is self-evident in our experience. Is there a meeting-point between the two? I believe it is in the domain of ontology. The “worlds” of mass-energy, self-identity, consciousness and language, explanation and purposiveness, autonomous agency and reproduction are the starting-points of ontological inquiry. Traditional theism has tried to make sense of these phenomena with certain conceptual structures. I hold that it is precisely these structures that acted (and act) as the engine driving the scientific enterprise.

My arguments for God’s existence (as presented in the book) are three-fold.

The hard facts emerge in our immediate experience are these: (1) we live in a world of intelligent systems with the primary embodiment of this intelligence in the laws of nature; (2) we are rational, conscious beings; (3) things exist and none of these things can explain how they came to exist without reference to a pre-existing cause. These three facts led to three conclusions:

1) The intelligence that’s either embedded (an electron) or active (an organism) can only be explained by reference to the existence and immediate activity of infinite Intelligence. Inert matter cannot produce an intelligent system given even infinite time.

2) Minds can only come from an infinite Mind. Consciousness can only arise from an eternal Consciousness. It’s simply incoherent to suppose that matter, blind, mindless matter, could ever produce consciousness or thinking.

3) Absolute nothingness cannot produce something given endless time; in fact, there can be no time in absolute nothingness. Since the something that exists in the world does not contain within itself an explanation for its own existence, it can only be explained in terms of a Being that explains both its own existence and that of everything else.

What is your position on the ongoing controversy between evolutionary theorists and the Creationists?

I think both sides could be helped by an understanding and appreciation of the ontological issues. A lot of the controversy stems from confusion at the conceptual level. Certainly there can be more than one way to view the data: but any such view is necessarily ontological not scientific. By “view” here I don’t mean “scientific theory” which is more a model for organizing the data. View, rather, is a presupposition or interpretation that cannot be tested with scientific tools or methods; it cannot even be understood in quantitative terms. Science can tell us about the physical history of the universe. But the question of why the universe exists is a kind of question that can only be addressed by ontology. For that matter, such fundamental notions as energy, life, intelligence, consciousness, purpose and the like have to be defined and described at a pre-scientific, even pre-philosophical, level. I think we should address these domains on their own terms not in terms of some pre-set ideology. In some senses, to use a cliché, I adopt a holistic as opposed to a reductionist approach when it comes to the data of our experience. With regard

to the interaction between the divine and the world-historical, I have proposed a software/hardware model.

The key to the whole creative process is the progressive introduction of new laws that organize and generate new realities. Just as the laws of the universe, the intelligence of inanimate nature, came to be at the same time as the universe, so also the intelligence that is life, consciousness and rationality came to be simultaneously with the emergence of living organisms, animals and humans. All three kinds of intelligence are by their very nature intangible and so their introduction in the world was necessarily intangible. Nevertheless, all three are real and have concrete effects on the world around us. I hold that every manifestation of intelligence is ultimately grounded in infinite Intelligence. But there’s no succession of processes in the divine Mind concurrent with the transitions and leaps in the world; the changes take place entirely in the world, driven though these are by a transcendent blueprint.

What, in your view, are the most fundamental mysteries uncovered by science? Why should we not believe that these problems will one day be “solved” by science? After all many of the things attributed to God have now been found to be a result of natural forces and laws. Faith in a god of the gaps is at best a precarious state of affairs, apt to be overthrown by the next major scientific breakthrough.

As I say at the onset, at the foundations and frontiers of modern science we find five great mysteries: energy, life, consciousness, mind and the intelligence embodied in the laws of nature. Science describes and documents the marvelous reality of these five and of other everyday mysteries like language, reproduction and seeing. But science cannot tell us how any of them emerged or what is their source or, in the case of the first five, even define their nature.

Now I don’t believe that God should be sought in a gap or a loophole. But what we call a gap is subject to interpretation. Is the distinction between absolute nothingness and the universe a “gap?” True nothingness is necessarily outside any possibility of scientific investigation. Likewise, science as science cannot tell us anything about the nature and structure of conceptual thought: of understanding for instance. I believe that, by their very nature, certain ontological questions lie forever beyond the reach of science. There are two ways of answering these questions: theist and monist (monists can be materialists or spiritualists). The real argument when it comes to ontological issues is between theism and monism not science and religion. Science, I hold, necessarily rests on a theistic view of the world.

The Wonder of the World

By Roy Abraham Varghese

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