

Anthology sheds light on faith of great scientists

Christopher Fenoglio | Catholic News Service | Mar. 11, 2009

The Faith of Scientists: In Their Own Words

Edited by Nancy K. Frankenberry

Princeton University Press 523 pp. \$29.95.

For centuries, some of the greatest minds in history have grappled with the relationship between religion and science: Did God create the universe? Is man's position above all other creatures the work of divine management, a natural selection process or a lucky chance? Can we look deep into the universe or inside our own DNA and see the fingerprints of God? These questions have been debated since they were first posed and will continue to be discussed for all time. In our efforts to understand these issues, we tend to look first to the latest papers or focus on the newest interpretations.

That's a mistake, suggests Nancy Frankenberry in her new book, "The Faith of Scientists: In Their Own Words." To really explore these human and historical questions about God, the universe and science, one should first seek to understand the scientists themselves. Frankenberry facilitates this quest with an anthology of great source material: excerpts from the diaries, personal letters, essays, speeches and interviews from 21 of the world's greatest scientists. The writings explore the personal faith of these scientists, their views about God, and the place formal religion holds or doesn't in their own lives. The anthology shows that the faith of scientists can take many forms: religious or secular, supernatural or naturalistic, conventional or unorthodox. In this book we can discover the beliefs of:

- Galileo Galilei, the "father of modern science" who declared as fact the theory that the sun is the center of the solar system, despite the Vatican's strenuous disagreements at the time.
- Johannes Kepler, the astronomer who believed his scientific data revealed God's geometrical order of the universe.
- Charles Darwin, the biologist and author of "The Origin of Species," who was raised orthodox Anglican and had a conventional Christian faith, until his scientific work and personal losses led him toward agnosticism.
- Carl Sagan, the modern-day astronomer whose writings and popular television series "Cosmos" continue to uplift readers and viewers, taking us deep into space so that we can turn around and behold our own "pale blue dot" to see its true beauty.
- Jane Goodall, the anthropologist whose study of chimpanzees in Tanzania forced her to conclude that human beings are hard-wired for violence. Fortunately, man, with our larger brains, also has the capacity for far greater good.
- Stuart A. Kauffman, the theoretical biologist who argues that the complexity of organisms may result as much from self-organization as from natural selection.
- Ursula Goodenough, the biologist whose book, "The Sacred Depths of Nature," espouses the theory of religious naturalism.

Add in the writings from Isaac Newton, Blaise Pascal, Albert Einstein, Stephen Hawking, Freeman Dyson and many others and you have a valuable collection of source materials for your own quest for knowledge. Equally rewarding is Frankenberry's juxtaposition of scientists with differing views. For example, Einstein's views of determinism that every event is causally determined by an unbroken chain of prior occurrences are compared to Hawking's belief that God does indeed roll the dice, that uncertainty and chance must be part of the theory in explaining the origins of the universe. Heady questions for sure, made much easier to comprehend with the aid of Frankenberry's commendable work.

(Fenoglio is a columnist for the Tennessee Register, newspaper of the Diocese of Nashville, and recently published his first book, Kristin and the Santa Secret.)

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