



# The Media Factor: Why God Has Gone Pop

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## I. STEPHEN HAWKING'S LEGACY

**I**N 1988, LIKE TENS OF THOUSANDS OF READERS WITH NO FORMAL TRAINING IN ASTROPHYSICS, I read Stephen Hawking's best-selling *A Brief History of Time*. Among other things, I was intrigued by his explanation of the anthropic principle<sup>1</sup>—which posits that we experience the cosmos because we exist (a physicist's way of saying "I think, therefore I am")—and by his suggestion that the universe came into being as a result of a creative act rather than a random one. A journalist, I wondered why I had never heard about such theories via mass media, which, at the time, were focusing on the broken laws and loose values of televangelists Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart. Hawking, a happy diversion then, was concerned about other fundamental laws and values:

The laws of science, as we know them at present, contain many fundamental numbers, like the size of the electric charge of the electron and the ratio of the

<sup>1</sup>For an interdisciplinary explanation of the anthropic principle, see J. D. Barrow and F. J. Tipler's exhaustive study *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle* (New York: Oxford University, 1986).

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*As scholars in both science and religion increasingly communicate in a technical and exclusionary language, the general public has developed a spiritual/pseudoscientific appetite that media are happy to satisfy in increasingly sensational ways.*

masses of the proton and the electron....The remarkable fact is that the values of these numbers seem to have been very finely adjusted to make possible the development of life. For example, if the electric charge of the electron had been only slightly different, stars either would have been unable to burn hydrogen and helium, or else they would not have exploded.<sup>2</sup>

While Hawking acknowledges that remarkably strange life forms could have evolved in universes other than ours, he concludes: "Nevertheless, it seems clear that there are relatively few ranges of values for the numbers that would allow the development of any form of intelligent life. Most sets of values would give rise to universes that, although they might be very beautiful, would contain no one able to wonder at their beauty."<sup>3</sup>

Since the publication of his book, Hawking's perspective has been subsumed (some would say trivialized) by pop culture. In the late 1980s, news about our cosmic origins was scant, available mostly in technical and scientific journals. In the early 1990s, would-be celebrity physicists published dozens of books, hitching their stars to Hawking's. Now news reports about the anthropic principle often are incomplete or sensational, as in this newspaper filler:

Is it a breakthrough or just scientific heatstroke?

Cosmologist Edward Harrison of the University of Massachusetts, writing in the September journal of the Royal Astronomical Society in England, says there must be a reason why our universe seems tailor-made to life's specific needs.

The slightest variation in physical laws that govern the cosmos "would result in a barren universe without stars or life," he writes.

The universe suits us because, if it didn't, we wouldn't be here to complain about it.

The universe was built by advanced aliens from another universe "compatible with their existence and therefore, like ours, finely tuned for life."

"Parent universes, by means of their intelligent inhabitants, give birth to offspring universes, which tend to resemble their parents," Harrison suggests. Based on what we know today, he said, "surely our descendants in the far future will have the knowledge and technology to design and actually create universes."

Meanwhile we can practice on making cars, VCRs and vending machines that work.<sup>4</sup>

Note the reporter's editorializing—taboo in a news story but allowed in a "brightener" (or print version of *America's Funniest Home Videos*). The reporter gets away with such wording because the media, in general, have a stock reaction to the word "alien," associating it with *The National Enquirer* and other tabloid scandal sheets. Nonetheless, tidbits like the one above share a common source: Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. He was not the first to posit the anthropic principle; he was the first to popularize it. Still, despite mind-boggling discoveries in eugenics and

<sup>2</sup>Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam, 1988) 125.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>David Lore, "Maybe the universe was custom designed for us," *Columbus Dispatch*, 23 August 1995, B1.

astro- and particle physics, many Americans to this day believe that the O. J. Simpson trial was the news story of the century.

## II. EXCLUSIONARY LANGUAGE

Inarguably, Hawking won converts to cosmology. He introduced exciting concepts about which the typical lay reader knew little. I was also researching a book about American culture in 1988. I had hit upon a central theme that applied to several disciplines, I believed: *exclusionary language*. Those who spoke obscure, technical tongues were not responsible for all of our social ills during the Reagan-Bush years; however, they did affect culture in important ways:<sup>5</sup>

1. *The more specialized a discipline became, the more technical its language became.* As disciplines such as literature and criticism, philosophy and theology, and social and hard sciences formulated new terms to define concepts or discoveries, new techno-languages evolved.

2. *The more technical the language became, the fewer the people who understood it.* As each new techno-language was mastered by members of a discipline, they could discuss key concepts and discoveries with greater precision (although the best minds of one discipline, say, physics, no longer could easily share ideas with the best minds of another discipline, say, sociology). Moreover, fewer lay people understood these ideas (or even knew that they existed).

3. *When the intelligentsia abandoned the masses, the popular media fulfilled the latter's needs.* As important disciplines related to fewer and fewer people, specific cultural needs arose within the populace and were satisfied by mass media (especially television).

4. *The more sensational the media became, the more comfortable the intelligentsia became.* Relieved of the responsibility to share epiphanies of their disciplines, the intelligentsia seemed to grow more elitist, amused by tabloid media but unaware that they helped create the need for it.

The media factor—or the impact of exclusionary language on society—is at the heart of the God quest addressed in this edition of *Word & World*. In the existential 1960s, Americans asked, “Where is God?” In the tabloid 1990s, we got the answer: “God has gone pop.”

Consider the state of culture a decade ago when Hawking’s book appeared. It could be argued that many of the most enlightened theorists, scholars, and artists in our culture no longer appeared to care much whether the lay person understood their truths or epiphanies. As long as their activities received adequate funding, these intellectuals and specialists seemed content to let the populace feed on a

<sup>5</sup>Cultural influences are complex and include a variety of factors and events—political and population shifts, literacy and immigration rates, natural and man-made disasters, to name a few. But language is key in conveying the substance of these factors and events to citizens of a republic whose First Amendment assumes that truth will rise like cream to the top, with the press informing the electorate. As such, literature and mass media play an increasingly crucial role in our moral and intellectual development, as I explain in *Culture’s Sleeping Beauty* (Troy, NY: Whitston, 1992), whose title essay appeared in the Fall 1987 issue of *The Georgia Review*.

media menu of tab- and talkshows, reality programming, Nintendo and Sega Genesis, MTV, and greeting cards. In the case of theology, the clergy were losing touch with the masses, giving rise to Christian theme parks and prayer-scheme televangelism. With regard to literature and criticism, especially poetry, the popular audience had nearly vanished while the elite composed and performed in the university. In the case of astronomy and physics, the public—increasingly disenchanted with the space program—rekindled interest in UFOs, astrology, and psychic 1-900 numbers. The late Carl Sagan's important work with the PBS series *Cosmos* in the early 1980s was mostly forgotten. Until Hawking, whose slim book defied predictions of modest sales, many scientists were allowing pseudoscience to proceed unchallenged. As long as their federal projects were underwritten, they seemed to be saying, let the masses eat microwave cake.

Although Hawking confused lay readers with God talk, he did not underestimate them, providing an awe-inspiring perspective in his book. Unfortunately, at the time, a cadre of offensive talk show hosts—from Morton Downey Jr. to Howard Stern—were spawning an era of tabloid journalism that has influenced almost every facet of mass media to this day. Their pop-cultural legacy continues now in cyberspace. Technological advances that could have enriched society (i.e., the databases of the worldwide web) are also becoming exclusionary. So surfers are attracted to sites by sensational clip-art animation and tabloid-like opinion on the vanity presses of personal home pages. In March 1997, a tabloid tragedy representative of our age occurred on the web in the wake of a great cosmological event—discovery of the Hale-Bopp comet. The celestial wonder should have inspired enlightened discussion about astronomy, about atonement with the universe, about the magnificence of creation; instead, as everyone knows, the comet faded in the media glare of Heaven's Gate with the mass suicide of 39 cultists, lured by the mad aliens and angels of <http://www.heavensgate.com>.

The media factor has cheapened spirituality in our time. The populace ought to be in awe in this era as science confirms—bit by bit, byte by byte—cosmological and biological models suggesting a unified design grander than any researcher or theologian might have envisaged. Theologians ought to be sharing with their congregations a new vision of a magnificent Almighty able to spawn a universe out of pinpoint singularity or reverse time at the cellular level via the cloning of symbolic sheep. Instead our news magazines feature a mad-eyed Marshall Applewhite on their covers and our pizza ads clone flocks while mock biologists gorge on pepperoni.

Mass media might be able to cover the age responsibly if their own researchers instructed them in a language that the beat reporter really understood. But even in journalism scholars speak an exclusionary tongue that other experts in the same discipline have a hard time comprehending. Here is an example of such language, excerpted from the introduction of an article in the prestigious, and once readable, *Journalism Quarterly*:

To do empirical research on effects of message variables, it is generally necessary to examine responses to actual messages that represent, embody, or instantiate

the values of the variable of interest. The adequacy of actual concrete messages as instantiations of variables is central to any assessment of the validity of such an experiment.<sup>6</sup>

Translated, this means: “You have to have actual messages to study variables in messages. If you are going to study the effects of a message, you had better make sure your variables really exist in your messages.” The article would be of particular interest to pollsters in public relations who study the effects of language on audience and provide us with snapshots of culture. The irony, of course, is that few working pollsters would be able to understand the piece. Indeed, Guido H. Stempel III—who edited *JQ* for 17 years and is recognized as one of journalism’s top media researchers—struggled a few minutes to provide the above translation, commenting: “I have never seen the word ‘instantiation’ used like that...and really wish I hadn’t.”

Such writing, some will argue, is necessary to explain research in the social and hard sciences. (That, alas, is why it is also *exclusionary*.) But that argument does not exonerate mass media, which have a constitutional obligation to translate such jargon and report discoveries accurately and completely. The cultural stakes are too high to allow specialists in physics and eugenics to operate in a media vacuum, especially when recent discoveries trespass on religious turf and have the potential to advance social and moral values.

### III. RELIGION AND SCIENCE

In some ways, the media factor is similar to the church factor in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Tabloid information is as useless as dogma in a society that aspires to progress spiritually as well as technologically. Lest we forget, the Roman Catholic Church theorized a version of the anthropic principle long before cosmologists speculated on the fine-tuning of the four forces of nature. The historical difference, however, is that the Vatican clerisy maintained that humanity is central in creation; alien life is consigned to nine orders of angels, some of them fallen and/or transformed. Such a perspective arose out of a lingering Aristotelian influence, namely, that God created a perfect universe with Earth at the center of things.

For centuries outspoken theologian-scientists challenged that view. For instance, Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) emphasized humankind’s incomplete knowledge of God and cosmos while Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) believed in a multitude of worlds and extraterrestrial life; but their counterparts—especially during the life of Galileo Galilei (1564-1642)—were content to debate about angels and demons, what we in media call “standard tabloid fare.” While it is true that enlightened clergy in Galileo’s day might have believed the Earth revolved around the sun, they also feared that such a disclosure would contradict the Bible, still a concern today, ironically, among fundamentalist Christians to whom the long-

<sup>6</sup>Sally Jackson, Daniel O’Keefe, and Dale E. Brashers, “The Message’s Replication Factor: Methods Tailored to Messages as Objects of Study,” *Journalism Quarterly* (Winter 1994) 984.

abandoned Catholic concern somehow has been transferred. In sum, if the Bible does not mention a scientific fact, then that “fact” must be disputed. Contemporary theologian Ted Peters, acting director of the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences in Berkeley, writes that this is a fallacy—*argumentum ex ignorantia*—the argument from ignorance: “because the Bible ignores UFOs and ETI [extraterrestrial intelligence], therefore UFOs and ETI do not exist. This is fallacious because no one has ever claimed that the Bible constitutes the exhaustive supply of all knowledge that can be known. It is logically possible for things to exist that are not mentioned in the Bible. Toyotas and Swiss watches and Big Mac hamburgers exist indisputably, but they are not mentioned in the Bible.”<sup>7</sup>

Peters has had a theological interest in the specter of extraterrestrial life since the late 1970s.<sup>8</sup> His religious colleagues may believe that life exists elsewhere in the universe; but they are not re-interpreting the Bible to reflect that notion in scholarly articles, which few, if any, lay people read. According to Peters, “One would expect, therefore, that theological leaders would want to respond to the rise in space consciousness by providing some intellectual guidance. Yet, surprisingly, relatively little is being done. The subject is too widely ignored, in my judgment.”<sup>9</sup>

Overwhelmingly, scientists believe the Earth is only one of a plentiful number of planets that should have spawned intelligent beings, based on the immense size of the universe and the apparent uniformity of physical laws. The prospect of abundant alien life was first discussed during a 1960 conference of physicists and astronomers during which Frank Drake introduced a mathematical model that theorized “about a million extraterrestrial civilizations scattered across our galaxy.”<sup>10</sup> Drake’s view was popularized by pre-Hawking celebrity scientist Carl Sagan in an episode of his PBS series and in a chapter of his accompanying book, *Cosmos*. Sagan put forth a formula that includes the number of stars assumed to have planets in the Milky Way, the number of planets that should have spawned life, the fraction of those that should contain intelligent life, the fraction of those that would have evolved into technological societies, and the fraction of those that would have avoided nuclear annihilation. Wrote Sagan, “If 1 percent of civilizations could survive technological adolescence, take the proper fork at this critical historical branch point and achieve maturity, then...the number of extant civilizations in the Galaxy is in the millions.”<sup>11</sup>

Sagan believed that those alien civilizations also evolved by coincidence, siding with naturalists who claim creation was a random act. Others prefer the existential view, acknowledging that the universe may have been created but arguing that our place in it is as random and insignificant as a biochemical spill.

<sup>7</sup>Ted Peters, “Exo-Theology: Speculations on Extraterrestrial Life,” *CTNS Bulletin* (Summer 1994) 7.

<sup>8</sup>See his *UFOs—Gods Chariots? Flying Saucers in Politics, Science, and Religion* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1977).

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>10</sup>Gregg Easterbrook, “Are We Alone?” *Atlantic*, August 1988, 29.

<sup>11</sup>Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Ballantine, 1992) 250.

Finally others—including religious and agnostic cosmologists—increasingly believe that the universe was created for beings like us to wonder at and experience. To be sure, even some atheist cosmologists, reckoning with the anthropic principle, theorize that intelligent beings—because of their consciousness—have been included in the universe in a meaningful way. Often they have specialized in mathematics, marveling that their equations make sense in deep cosmos, a notion that runs against the grain of evolutionary theory. Humans may require basic math to herd buffaloes, hunt lions, or hone weapons, as it were, but those numbers should not compute out of habitat in Taurus and Leo or on Mars. In a real sense, these scientists have thrown a monkey wrench at Darwin, another megastory ignored by mass media.

A leading proponent of the “consciousness” view is Paul Davies, professor of mathematical physics at the University of Adelaide, who writes:

I belong to the group of scientists who do not subscribe to a conventional religion but nevertheless deny that the universe is a purposeless accident. Through my scientific work I have come to believe more and more strongly that the physical universe is put together with an ingenuity so astonishing that I cannot accept it merely as a brute fact. There must, it seems to me, be a deeper level of explanation. Whether one wishes to call that deeper level “God” is a matter of taste and definition. Furthermore, I have come to the point of view that mind—i.e., conscious awareness of the world—is not a meaningless and incidental quirk of nature, but an absolutely fundamental facet of reality. That is not to say that *we* are the purpose for which the universe exists. Far from it. I do, however, believe that *we* human beings are built into the scheme of things in a very basic way.<sup>12</sup>

The title of the book in which the above citation appears is *The Mind of God*, an allusion to a Hawking phrase in *A Brief History of Time*—actually a spurious phrase for Davies, Hawking, and Carl Sagan. Use of the term “God,” found in many indexes of science best-sellers, has misled book buyers eager for spiritual information—in some cases, affirmation—about that heretofore religious term. As Ted Peters tells me in a letter:

When the scientists themselves shift from the exclusionary language of the laboratory to the language of the public domain, they engage in inflation and the borrowing of symbolic meanings that contribute to this misunderstanding. [These] scientists have not exactly vacated the arena of public discourse; rather, they have filled it with misleading diction.

Similarly, this applies to Stephen Hawking. Hawking and his [late] colleague, Carl Sagan, are belligerent naturalists and atheists. However, in order to make their books sell, they refer to God constantly. “God” sells books.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, in tandem with tabloid media, scientists also are contributing to the popularization of God. They have no ethical problem implying that they believe in a creator when they really are using the term “God” as an abstract synonym for complex phenomena. They often claim Einstein did this, neglecting to note his

<sup>12</sup>Paul Davies, *The Mind of God* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992) 16.

<sup>13</sup>Ted Peters, letter to author, 4 May 1995.

belief in a superior cosmic intelligence.<sup>14</sup> Nor do they worry about measuring the big bang's effect on creation. But the *reason* for creation, they say, can only be assumed—a logical stopping point in such discussions. However, problems arise when some of these scientists share their assumptions, launching into flawed theological arguments. Until recently, speculation about who set the universe into motion has been considered outside of science and under the domain of theology. In a word, cosmologists like Hawking, Davies, and Sagan have been encroaching on religious ground—a news story of mass appeal, mostly ignored by journalists and theologians alike.

#### IV. THE FAILURE OF THE MEDIA

This is why, in the first place, I became interested in the anthropic principle. As a journalism ethics professor, I am disturbed by the news media's poor performance in covering both religion and science. Ted Peters shares this concern. He writes:

As a trained theologian who has some understanding of religious phenomena, I find appalling the level of ignorance expressed by those who write articles describing and interpreting religion in America. Nearly every discussion of religion that I notice betrays the cultural bias of the secular elite of the east coast establishment which, among other things, thinks that when it has pictured a conservative Southern Christian Protestant as a braying jackass they have done their job for intellectual respectability.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, East Coast journalists may be biased against religion. That issue is addressed by John Dart and Jimmy Allen in a pamphlet funded by the Freedom Forum—one of the most respected organizations in journalism. In 1980, an attitudinal study known as the Lichter-Rothman survey reported that half of 240 journalists had no religious affiliation and 86 percent said they seldom or never attended religious services. Such results were used to condemn journalists nationwide. But the respondents worked in New York City or Washington, D.C., for the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and CBS, NBC, ABC, and PBS news departments. According to Dart and Allen, "In contrast, our study found that 72% of the 266 editors responding nationwide said that religion was important in their lives....Only 9% of the editors and 4% of the religion writers said 'none' for religion."<sup>16</sup>

Although many of these editors acknowledge the importance of religion, they also, apparently, do not fully understand it. Here are a few of the Freedom Forum conclusions:

<sup>14</sup>In *Ideas and Opinions* (New York: Wings, 1954), Einstein rejects an anthropomorphized God but shares "rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law, which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection" (40).

<sup>15</sup>Peters, letter to author.

<sup>16</sup>John Dart and Jimmy Allen, "Previous Research and Skewed Perceptions," in *Bridging the Gap: Religion and the News Media* (Nashville: Freedom Forum/Vanderbilt Univ., 1993) 42.



- “An unhealthy distrust exists between religionists and journalists, even a fear of each other in many cases. Religious figures fear being misunderstood and misrepresented; journalists fear making mistakes and incurring religious wrath”
- “It appears there is more ignorance about religion than bias in the average newsroom. Overt anti-religious sentiments are rare, but uninformed reporters are often intellectually lazy about getting their facts straight when assigned to cover religion stories”
- “The nation’s newspapers and broadcasters largely refuse to take religion seriously”<sup>17</sup>

In another essay, the authors of the study quote Bill Moyers, known for his media work in religion and mythology as well as poetry. Moyers maintains: “Mainstream journalists mostly ignore religion because they don’t understand it and because they are worried about misinterpreting it. They do know it’s a subjective series of subcultures *for which there is no common language* [my emphasis].”<sup>18</sup>

As Moyers notes, exclusionary language is at the heart of the problem. Moreover, one can substitute “science” for “religion” in each of the above findings and accurately represent complaints against media from that sector of society. Michael Shortland and Jane Gregory explain why most researchers avoid mass media: “The pessimists’ worst possible case is that your colleagues will never speak to you again, your reputation as a serious scientist will end up in tatters and the source of your research funding will one day mysteriously run dry.”<sup>19</sup> In general, scientists distrust media to report their discoveries accurately, believe there is more ignorance than bias in science writing, and yearn for more thorough and serious coverage. But an even greater problem exists, again related to language. Now more than ever the global electronic media are telling us *less and less about more and more*. At the same time, science has been telling us *more and more about less and less*. Thus, journalism and science are understanding each other less and miscommunicating more to a society whose citizens are overwhelmingly religious and scientifically uninformed. Suffering from spiritual hunger, many of these Americans have embarked on a pop-cultural quest because that is the only path left now to locate God.

The result has been huge gaps in lay knowledge. Few general readers in 1992-93 understood the importance of the Cosmic Background Explorer discoveries supporting the big bang theory. So incredible were these breakthroughs that some otherwise reticent physicists were tempted to view them as empirical proof of God. Chief among them was George Smoot, COBE team leader, who kicked off a furor among scientists and theologians when he announced to reporters: “If you’re religious, it’s like seeing God.” Such statements, of course, run entirely against the grains of both religion *and* science. For centuries religion has been

<sup>17</sup>Dart and Allen, “Divided by Seas of Suspicion,” in *Bridging the Gap*, 5.

<sup>18</sup>Dart and Allen, “The Sacred Versus the Secular,” in *Bridging the Gap*, 33.

<sup>19</sup>Michael Shortland and Jane Gregory, *Communicating Science: A Handbook* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1991) 6.

successful in suppressing science from making empirical statements about God so that now some physicists comprehend the spiritual dimensions of their work but suppress, finesse, or misrepresent them intentionally, out of fear that exposure will invite persecution—not from theologians but from their own colleagues.

#### V. A NEW DIALOGUE

In sum, religion and science must begin a new dialogue to prevent God from going entirely pop in the new millennium. The dialogue will lead to greater awareness and truer spirituality. Finally the media must play the role as arbitrator and start the process by covering religion and science with new zeal. The time is fast approaching when theologians will need to understand scientific discoveries if religion hopes to appeal again to the masses and address the complex problems of living in an unstable, environmentally endangered world. Likewise, scientists will need to use a common language to explain those complex problems if they hope to receive enough public support to solve them. As astronomer Hugh Ross notes, "Such mysteries as salvation, the Trinity, and atonement clearly require dimensions of space and time beyond our own, or perhaps super dimensions that encompass space and time capacities."<sup>20</sup> Physicists can learn from theologians how to explain complex truths in archetypal ways. As both sides and the media might acknowledge, the beauty of scientific principles *and* religious commandments lies in the simplicity of the phrase and the power of the word. ⊕

<sup>20</sup>Hugh Ross, "Cosmology's Holy Grail," *Christianity Today*, 17 December 1994, 27.