Furman Magazine

Volume 59
Issue 2 *Fall 2016*

Article 10

9-1-2016

Cosmic Perceptions

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PAUL WALLACE
The author, a physics and astronomy professor, explores the science-religion debate.

Cosmic Perceptions

Paul Wallace is a champion for both science and religion.

BY ANDREW HUANG '11

Ali vs. Frazier. USA vs. USSR. Dinosaurs vs. Asteroid. Human history is fraught with conflicts, great and small. But one that overshadows them all is that of religion and science.

Unlike those other conflicts, however, there isn't likely to be a natural conclusion, a tidy showdown that delivers closure. After all, neither science nor religion are likely to go anywhere anytime soon. In the face of this, it's perhaps only natural to desire resolution and reconciliation—a way for these two diametrically opposed positions to exist in harmony.

To do so, one might start with **Paul Wallace '90** and his new book, *Stars Beneath Us: Finding God in the Evolving Cosmos.* Wallace is uniquely qualified for this daunting task. He holds a Ph.D. in experimental nuclear physics from Duke University and an M.Div. from Candler School of Theology. He teaches physics and astronomy at Agnes Scott College, as well as theology at Candler and at Columbia Theological Seminary.

But it's not solely the degrees, credentials, and crossover expertise behind Wallace that make *Stars Beneath Us* compelling. It's the fact that Wallace eschews the academic approach, one that can truly reconcile all the nitty-gritty details of science and religious thought. Instead, *Stars Beneath Us* is a work that's grounded in personal experience.

"I begin with stories and images that have as broad and immediate an appeal as possible so I can connect with people, as many and as varied as possible, which brings me joy," Wallace says. "Building a universal conceptual framework is tempting—in fact, as one who is scientifically trained, it is my first reflex—but it does not make me happy."

Central to *Stars Beneath Us* is a call to have a personal encounter with the cosmos. It is a vast and complex space that outstrips orthodox theology's ability to account, and therefore can destabilize the fundamentals of Christian faith. "Many Christians

ROBIN GAUCHER

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hesitate to fully embrace science, not because they're stupid but because they see the conflict and call it what it is," he says. Yet, within that wobbly, frightening challenge to orthodoxy, Wallace sees a way to get closer to God.

The cosmos—in all its soul-shaking infinity—confronts us with our triviality and ignorance, and in doing so, forces us to evaluate the scope of our knowledge. In stripping away orthodoxy that presents constricting limitations, Wallace believes there can be space for new ideas, new ways for approaching the science-religion debate.

"You have to let the cosmos do its work on you," says Wallace. "You can't just let evolution be a concept you think about occasionally. You have to locate yourself in its great stream. You belong to it, a work in progress, at every moment a new creation, a small but real part of God's evolving cosmos."

In truth, Wallace doesn't present a full-blown thesis that, once-and-for-all, reconciles the antagonistic positions of science and religion. He doesn't claim to have all the answers. "I live with inconsistencies. I know they're there. But I'm more interested in painting a picture of the world than I am in building a watertight thought system." And perhaps that allows for something more important: an avenue for more fruitful, productive thinking about how to situate religion and science within our own lives. ●

JACK DYLAN

THEN

Reflection on Furman as It Was

I met Edward Earl in 1986 when he was a senior double-majoring in chemistry and mathematics. He had invited us to observe Halley's comet through a telescope on the Furman golf course. I was astounded by Edward's vast celestial knowledge, which he eagerly shared in a way that was understandable to astronomy neophytes. Before meeting him in person, I had spotted him creating precise 90-degree angles while waltzing at the Viennese Ball and had heard stories about how he would snowplow straight down a mountain without turning when skiing with the chemistry department.

Prior to enrolling at Furman, Edward was the consummate intellectual, excelling beyond his years in math, physics, chemistry, computer science, and astronomy. He was also an accomplished violinist. With his focus on academia and music, Edward did not take part in social activities. However, being admitted to Furman changed all of that as he mentioned in his autobiography: "It was in college that I escaped from the interpersonal shell in which I had immersed myself previously. These years were noted for the friendships I developed, which were high in both number and quality. The scope of these acquaintances transcended all levels of university life, involving faculty, staff, and administrative personnel, as well as fellow students."

After graduation, Edward developed an expertise in mountaineering. He and his fellow climbers thrived on the challenge of navigating difficult peaks as well as the kinship that came from it. On August 18, 2013, he achieved his goal of being the first person in the world to climb all of the peaks with at least 4,000 feet of prominence in the contiguous 48 United States, which totaled 142 different peaks. A website that he helped develop (peakbagger.com) credits him with 1,607 ascents, including Mount Rainier, Denali, Aconcagua (Argentina) and Volcan Chimborazo (Ecuador).

Edward never forgot his Furman friends and made a strong effort to keep in touch. When planning climbing trips, he would meticulously map out the route that would allow him to visit as many acquaintances as possible. I was fortunate to be one of those friends and always learned so much while hiking with him.

Although Furman is known for its academics and cultural arts, our alma mater gives us many other priceless gifts. For Edward, Furman was a nurturing place to learn valuable social lessons. From there, he climbed to great heights in the company of good friends.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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