Cosmic Perceptions

Andrew Huang ’11

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Cosmic Perceptions

Paul Wallace is a champion for both science and religion.

By Andrew Huang ’11

Paul Wallace

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

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—indeed, 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
“YOU CAN’T JUST LET EVOLUTION BE A CONCEPT YOU THINK ABOUT OCCASIONALLY. YOU HAVE TO LOCATE YOURSELF IN ITS GREAT STREAM.”

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 impersonal 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.”

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.

About the Author

Lori Siemens ’88 is a veterinary cardiologist living in the Sierra Nevada foothills of northern California.