

October 7, 2012

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

On other occasions I have commented on the patience of Saint Irenaeus, who set himself to refute the complex and highly arcane speculations of the Gnostics. In order to accomplish the task, this second-century Father of the Church was obliged to read many volumes full of the most awful sorts of nonsense. He had to study writers like Valentinian and Basilides. His pursuit compelled him to become familiar with the "unmeasured silence" of the Protенnoia, the "thought that dwells in light, the movement that dwells in the All." He was required to read endless treatises about "Barbelo," the female emanation of the Absolute; he could not escape investigating the various aeons, such as Autogenes. He had to work his way through the Syzygy and pursue theories about Mirotheaos and the Ogdoad. And so on, without end. When, in the year 202, he suffered martyrdom, I suspect Irenaeus felt a sense of relief.

Fortunately, we live in a more enlightened age. Modern people are well founded in the proven facts. For Instance, people nowadays do not adhere to exotic and improbable theories about the origins of nature and the structure of reality. What do modern people believe on these subjects?

Well, let us take an outstanding example of modern enlightened thought. Let us consider Dr. Lawrence Krauss, who heads the "Origins Project" at Arizona State University. Dr. Krauss's most recent book, *A Universe From Nothing: Why There is Something Rather Than Nothing*, was published earlier this year. It is obviously an important book, because it quickly made its way onto the best-seller list of *The New York Times*.

According to Dr. Krauss, the first concept we must dismiss is "God." God, it seems, not only has nothing to do with the origin of nature or the structure of reality; God is a useless distraction. Krauss writes, "Theology has made no contribution to knowledge in the past five hundred years, since the dawn of science."

Well, okay. We all have our little hang-ups, I suppose. If we want to be fair with Krauss, let's give him that one. Let's bracket God for the moment. If we cannot be theological, let us try to be at least logical, as Krauss claims to be. Let us hear him out. How does Krauss explain "Why there is something rather than nothing"?

Well, says Krauss, it wasn't always so. Until about 13.72 billion years ago, there really was nothing. (By the way, I love the scientific precision of that extra .72 billion. A lesser thinker would simply have rounded it off to 14 billion.) Until then, nothing existed. Then---and rather abruptly, it seems---there was something.

You see, Krauss explains, the pre-existent nothing was not ordinary nothing---le rien du jour, so to speak. It was real nothing, but it was nothing charged with energy. Then, somehow, this energetic nothing exploded into something. In just a second or so, you got---whammo!---atomic particles: electrons, neutrons, protons. That's what you got right away, as soon as the pre-existent non-existent went "bang!"

Then, about three minutes later---his calculation---protons and neutrons found their way to one another to form the first atomic nuclei. (Let me quibble: I suspect it was probably something closer to 3.72 minutes.) Then, everything sort of calmed down for about 300,000 years, while these new nuclei cooled off, so the electrons could find their way in and establish honest-to-goodness atoms.

Then, over the next billion (perhaps 1.72 billion) years, these atoms came together to form stars. Then, a couple of billion years later, nuclear reactions in the stars created heavier elements, such as iron and carbon. Eventually the stars exploded, sending iron and carbon and all the other elements out into the universe. And here we are now, we modern people, made of stardust: "One of the most poetic facts I know about the universe is that essentially every atom in your body was once inside a star that exploded." I am not making this up.

Krauss is not a writer of science fiction; he is a professor of theoretical physics at a notable university. So why does his stardust so closely resemble moonbeams? As the song says, even someone "sixteen going on seventeen" knows that "nothing comes from nothing, nothing ever could." I don't look for another long-suffering Irenaeus to come along any time soon, but I do hope even young people will notice that Krauss's theory is quite marvelously irrational.

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