



God's Universe

By Owen Gingerich

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We live in a universe with a very long history, a vast cosmos where things are being worked out over unimaginably long ages. Stars and galaxies have formed, and elements come forth from great stellar cauldrons. The necessary elements are present, the environment is fit for life, and slowly life forms have populated the earth. Are the creative forces purposeful, and in fact divine?

Owen Gingerich believes in a universe of intention and purpose. We can at least conjecture that we are part of that purpose and have just enough freedom that conscience and responsibility may be part of the mix. They may even be the reason that pain and suffering are present in the world. The universe might actually be comprehensible.

Taking Johannes Kepler as his guide, Gingerich argues that an individual can be both a creative scientist and a believer in divine design--that indeed the very motivation for scientific research can derive from a desire to trace God's handiwork. The scientist with theistic metaphysics will approach laboratory problems much the same as does his atheistic colleague across the hall. Both are likely to view the astonishing adaptations in nature with a sense of surprise, wonder, and mystery.

In *God's Universe* Gingerich carves out "a theistic space" from which it is possible to contemplate a universe where God plays an interactive role, unnoticed yet not excluded by science.

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Editorial Review

From Scientific American

In *God's Universe*, Owen Gingerich, a Harvard University astronomer and science historian, tells how in the 1980s he was part of an effort to produce a kind of anti-Cosmos, a television series called *Space, Time, and God* that was to counter Sagan's "conspicuously materialist approach to the universe." The program never got off the ground, but its premise survives: that there are two ways to think about science. You can be a theist, believing that behind the veil of randomness lurks an active, loving, manipulative God, or you can be a materialist, for whom everything is matter and energy interacting within space and time. Whichever metaphysical club you belong to, the science comes out the same. In the hands of as fine a writer as Gingerich, the idea almost sounds convincing. "One can believe that some of the evolutionary pathways are so intricate and so complex as to be hopelessly improbable by the rules of random chance," he writes, "but if you do not believe in divine action, then you will simply have to say that random chance was extremely lucky, because the outcome is there to see. Either way, the scientist with theistic metaphysics will approach laboratory problems in much the same way as his atheistic colleague across the hall."

*George Johnson is author of *Fire in the Mind: Science, Faith, and the Search for Order* and six other books. He resides on the Web at talaya.net*

From [Booklist](#)

Astronomer Gingerich believes in a designed universe, although not in intelligent design (ID), the antievolution theorizing that some Evangelical Christian activists want taught in public-school science courses. His intent isn't, however, to flay ID as Michael Shermer does in *Why Darwin Matters* (see review on p.22); it is to explore a few topics in science that suggest design and a designer, God. He weighs the Copernican principle that intelligent life isn't exceptional in the universe against the Darwinian emphasis on the uniqueness of life on Earth. He probes the differences between atheist and religious scientists (this is where he dismisses ID along with "evolution as a materialist philosophy" as ideologies), especially over the big bang and cosmological teleology. Finally, he raises some "Questions without Answers" to point up the different, irreconcilable concerns of physics as opposed to metaphysics, science as opposed to religion. Utterly lacking scientific or religious triumphalism, demonstrating why both ways of knowing are indispensable, Gingerich's highly rereadable remarks may well outlast all the brouhaha of the ID-evolution fracas. *Ray Olson*

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Review

This little book--intelligent, provocative, and respectful of a range of views--shows how a modern scientist can support both evolution and intelligent design and, more generally, offers a meeting place for science and religion. (Alan Lightman)

In *God's Universe* Owen Gingerich makes the case that the probability is miraculously minute, first, that a planet hospitable to life could form after the Big Bang and, second, that once it had formed, intelligent life could develop there. Whether one agrees or disagrees, one will learn from this beautifully presented account of the relevant astronomy and physics. But that isn't all; Gingerich's reflections (as a liberal Christian) on the theological significance of all this are sensitive and deep. A truly fascinating read. (Hilary Putnam)

This is a timely and important book. In contrast to the shrill dogmatics on both sides of the current intelligent design debate, Gingerich offers a sweeping and authoritative account of our continuing encounter with, and

understanding of, the Universe of which we find ourselves a part. Meticulous in its scholarship, humane in its approach, generous in its tone, restrained in its assertions, but audacious in its scope, this little book is a solid and significant contribution to the ongoing debate. (Frank Rhodes, President Emeritus, Cornell University)

Writing in a style that is accessible and laced with interesting historical anecdote, Owen Gingerich uses his expertise in astronomy and its history, together with the insights of his Christian faith, to give a well-argued account of humanity's place in the cosmos. (Reverend Dr. John Polkinghorne)

I have always felt the words should be "Science and Religion"--not "Science or Religion." Owen Gingerich offers both intellectual heft and spiritual stamina to back up that claim. This slim volume will pay rich dividends to the seeking mind and the longing soul. (Dr. Tim Johnson)

Gingerich pleads for separating physics from metaphysics, efficient causes from final causes, how from why...In the end, he persuaded even a hardened skeptic like me that there might, possibly, be more to the cosmos than is dreamt of in my philosophy. (George Scialabba *Boston Globe* 2006-07-23)

Gingerich's work is a survey of the conflicts--and confluences--between hard science and deep faith; along the way he provides a brief but magisterial history of science that is as astute as it is original. He's a superb writer too, handling scientific and theological complexities with equal aplomb but enlivening his account throughout with poetry, dramatic anecdote, and snippets of autobiography...Because he is also steeped in science, both as researcher and historian, Mr. Gingerich is aware of how improbable and even fantastic his Christian faith must appear to skeptical colleagues. In slipping so effortlessly into both realms--provable fact and unsearchable mystery--Mr. Gingerich reminds me of some adroit intellectual amphibian, calmly at home in contiguous but incompatible terrains...A sense of wonder animates this book, but it's never the swooning and manipulative wonder of such showmen as the late Carl Sagan; rather, it's the verifiable fact in its specificity, abetted by the promise of some final cause beyond all our telescopes, which informs Mr. Gingerich's awe. (Eric Ormsby *New York Sun* 2006-09-13)

Astronomer Gingerich believes in a designed universe, though not in intelligent design (ID), the anti-evolution theorizing that some evangelical Christian activists want taught in public-school science courses. His intent isn't, however, to flay ID as Michael Shermer does in *Why Darwin Matters*; it is to explore a few topics in science that suggest design and a designer, God. He weighs the Copernican principle that intelligent life isn't exceptional in the universe against the Darwinian emphasis on the uniqueness of life on earth. He probes the differences between atheist and religious scientists (this is where he dismisses ID along with evolution as a materialist philosophy as ideologies), especially over the big bang and cosmological teleology. Finally, he raises some Questions without Answers to point up the different, irreconcilable concerns of physics as opposed to metaphysics, science as opposed to religion. Utterly lacking scientific or religious triumphalism, demonstrating why both ways of knowing are indispensable, Gingerich's highly re-readable remarks may well outlast all the brouhaha of the ID-evolution fracas. (Ray Olson *Booklist* 2006-08-01)

In his slim and elegant new book, *God's Universe*, Gingerich finds that indeed everywhere he looks he can discern the hand of a benevolent Creator--all without compromising his adherence to a rigorous methodological scientific naturalism...Despite the fact that as an atheist I do not see the hand of God in the universe--I found myself cheering for this lucid and poetic little book...In this time of sectarian wars, when theists and atheists are engaged in increasingly hostile incivilities, Gingerich lays out an elegant case for why he finds the universe a source of encouragement for his life both as a scientist and as a Christian. We do not have to agree with his conclusions to be buoyed and enchanted by the journey on which he takes us. (Margaret Wertheim *Los*

Angeles Times Book Review 2006-11-12)

Gingerich's *God's Universe* is the brief and elegant apologia of an emeritus professor of astronomy and the history of science at Harvard University. As a historian of science, Gingerich is well aware of the complexities involved in producing scientific and religious knowledge. The history of science is one in which progress is made through the 'persuasive coherency' of the new picture that is presented, rather than through simple knock-down proofs. It is at this general level of world pictures that Gingerich's Christian faith generally finds its expression. (Thomas Dixon *Times Literary Supplement*)

[An] elegant little book...Attractively and accessibly written. (Sarah Coakley *Harvard Magazine* 2007-05-01)

God's Universe is less an apology for faith in the age of science than it is a humble meditation given by a leading American astronomer on the possibility that a scientist can be a person of faith and retain intellectual credibility...Gingerich is a theistic evolutionist who is willing to confess God as Creator of the universe. He accepts the scientific datum demonstrating that we are the product of evolution and rejects intelligent design (as defined by Philip Johnson, Michael Behe, and the Discovery Institute) as an alternative scientific explanation for human origins. This rejection of intelligent design as an ideology doesn't rule out the possibility of what he calls "small 'd' design." His is, therefore, a humbler quest, one that looks to theology rather than to scientific theory for a sense of meaning and purpose in the universe. (Robert Cornwall *Congregations* 2007-09-01)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jess Bolan:

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