

Who Says Heaven Is Up?

The Collapse of the Three Story Universe: Christianity in an Age of Science—A Review

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SciTech Editor

On April 12, 1961, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Alekseyevich Gagarin became the first human to journey into space when his Vostok spacecraft completed a single orbit of Earth. Following his historic feat it was widely reported in the Western press that Gagarin said, either during his flight or shortly afterwards, “I looked and looked but I didn’t see God.”

Did the cosmonaut actually say those words? Not likely. Gagarin himself was a baptized member of the Russian Orthodox Church. In 2006, his close friend, Colonel Valentin Vasilyevich Petrov, said, “Those words originated in a speech by Nikita Khrushchev about the state’s anti-religion campaign. ‘Why are you clinging to God?’ Khrushchev said. ‘Here Gagarin flew into space and didn’t see God.’ Yuri never spoke those words. He was a believer.”

The question of “seeing God” was treated ideologically. The Soviet premier asserted that Gagarin proved there was no God. The Western press diminished the Soviet Union’s scientific and technological success (and Gagarin’s heroism) by asserting it to be merely an achievement of “godless communism.”

But where is God really? The question is more than an ideological brickbat because it goes to the heart of what it does or does not mean to be a believer. It’s the question Daniel Wolpert asks in his fascinating book, *The Collapse of the Three Story Universe: Christianity in an Age of Science*. It’s also a question, mostly unasked and certainly unanswered, when we sing Johann Schütz’s famous hymn:

Sing praise to *God Who reigns above,*

the God of all creation,

The God of power, the God of love,

the God of our salvation.

With healing balm my soul is filled and
every faithless murmur stilled:

To God all praise and glory.

Or Reginald Heber’s magnum opus:

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!

Early in the morning *our song shall rise to thee;*

holy, holy, holy! merciful and mighty,

God in three persons, blessed Trinity!

These are but two of the many hymns that talk about God “above” somewhere to whom our “song shall rise.” But where is *above* exactly? Well, everybody knows, don’t they, that *above* is *up* in *heaven* and that is *where* God is? What everybody knows is the **Three-Story Universe** or, as Wolpert dubs it, “TSU.”

However, to paraphrase what Dorothy said to Toto, “I’ve a feeling we’re not in the TSU anymore.” With particle accelerators and the Higgs boson, with a continuously-staffed space station trivializing Gagarin’s single orbit of Earth, with human minds grappling with the incomprehensible vastness of deep space or the equally incomprehensible smallness of quarks, TSU just doesn’t make sense anymore.

Wolpert argues that thousands have left church “precisely” because TSU doesn’t make anymore sense. While church attendance and membership have declined since the early 1960s, asserting one specific reason for the decline may claim more than can be appropriately documented. But that’s a quibble. Certainly the church’s hymnody and praise songs—can praise songs properly be labeled hymnody?—use TSU images. My own pastoral experience of forty years suggests that most people, even if scientifically literate, deal with TSU images okay. After all, in ordinary conversation even cosmologists will talk about *sunrise* or *sunset*.

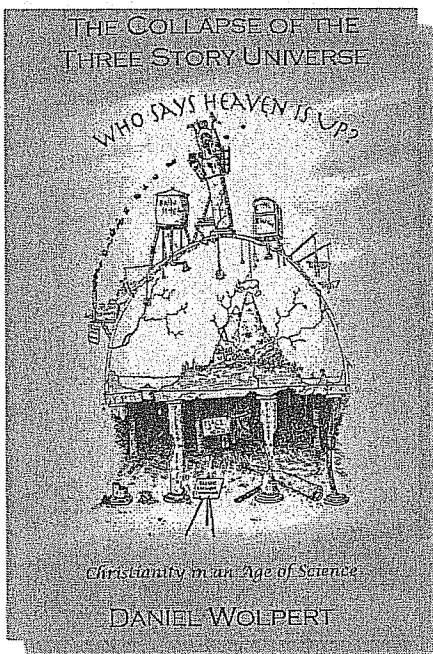
Whether or not TSU images are significant factors of church decline, Wolpert’s more important point is that the church is better served when Christian faith no longer rests on images of material reality that are untrue. Truth and untruth are never trivial matters. So if, like Dorothy and Toto, we find ourselves in a different, non-TSU world, we need to inquire after God. Such inquiry requires thinking about images that allow us to understand how an “invisible being” can be part of “our material reality in a manner that is both significant and consistent with what we currently understand about that reality.” (11)

Wolpert argues that TSU neither describes accurately what we know about material reality nor does it provide a framework for thoughtful and faithful understandings of God. His argument begins by describing the world as we “experience” it. Earth is flat. The sky is up and looks like a curved dome. The sun comes up and goes down. There is a “greater light to rule the day” and a “lesser light to rule the night” and there are “the stars.” In fact, the world we experience is very much like the biblical description of it.

Living in this world, humans become aware that we are aware. Humans think about things and about ourselves thinking about things. This capacity of mind sets us apart from all other living things on Earth. Our capacity of awareness gives us the power to manipulate, make, and change things in ways no other creatures can. By virtue of this particular attribute, Earth appears to be “ours.”

We also become aware that we didn’t

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"build this." We are aware of time and that things happened before we were here. Awareness of time and space makes us aware of creation. That is, we experience a created world, a world we know we did not make and we know that were it to vanish, we could not build it again. We know that individual things can only make more of themselves. "A fly cannot make a cow." Humans can make lots of new things—bridges and telescopes, pots and refrigerators, temples and clothes, rockets and iPads—and we are the only creatures who can do so.

So our human awareness leads naturally to asking how creation came to be. And since we know that we can make things, it seems a natural inference that "someone" or "something" like us, but much more powerful, "built this."

Therefore, it is not one giant leap for mankind to affirm that whatever or whoever created everything must have a mind similar to ours—vastly superior, but not dissimilar. This vastly superior person or being or thing is GOD. All human societies reach this conclusion. The names and stories and images that express the conclusion differ, but not the conclusion itself. Following this mental path along with the human experience of the world leads quite naturally to imagining a Three-Story Universe as the way things are. In a pre-scientific age, TSU makes sense of how humans think and experience the world.

However, with the emergence of science, although our experience of the world doesn't change—the sun still comes up and goes down—our knowledge about what "actually is" changes dramatically.

Wolpert writes: "When the created universe was small and new, the whole spiritual enterprise was manageable. However once the universe became both vast and very old, then God was pushed to the margins of space and also to the margins of time. God became far away and too old. Finally, as we discovered the various scientific laws that govern reality, it seemed there was no longer the need for an intelligent agent to make things go. Now God was out of real estate, out of time, and out of a job. At this point, God just went 'poof' and

vanished altogether." (41)

Had the church done sound theological work as science deepened human understandings of the way things are, perhaps TSU would have faded away naturally as new understandings of God evolved. Unfortunately, such was not the case. The church stuck with TSU and some in the church still stick with TSU. The church felt threatened by the idea that the moon, for example, wasn't a disk on the dome of the sky and that Earth was not the "center" of all things. Stuck on TSU, the church boxed itself into a corner and "become the author of its own woes." (16)

Wolpert argues that TSU is the equivalent of a map. It's a *picture* of the territory of the creation.* Maps change over time as a territory is better explored. But the church didn't accept new learnings and clung to the old map. The issue isn't about our experience of the world. The issue is "Where does God go if 'He' isn't walking around above the dome in the sky?" (17)

The End of the (TSU) World

When the world as we know it ends, what do we do? Well, let's *think* about it and *thinking*, that is, what *minds* do, opens the door to a new world.

Wolpert observes that throughout history and across all cultures, humans have experienced a religious or spiritual impulse and a sense of the "other." Some dismiss this as massive delusion, but Wolpert argues that is an unscientific conclusion, ignoring evidence of human history and anthropology. If nothing exists that could be labeled with the word GOD, then it would be reasonable to expect some culture somewhere sometime to have no thought or sense of the 'other.' There is no evidence of such a culture and the universality of the 'other' is a piece of evidence that God exists.

*A contemporary meme claims that ancient maps noted "here be dragons" on unexplored territories. More accurate research indicates there is perhaps only one such map. The "Lenox Globe" (ca. 1503-07) is a five-inch diameter copper sphere with the notation *HC SVNT DRACONES*, i.e. "here are dragons," appearing on the eastern coast of Asia, a notation probably *not* intended to indicate an unexplored territory.

Wolpert also argues that we think and talk about God with our minds. At first, this seems trivial. But think about it. Animals don't worry or think about GOD. They have no altars and exhibit no behavior indicating concern for or about a deity of any sort. Why? Animals don't have minds that can conceive or communicate about (or with) GOD.

These two insights point to a way of thinking theologically about God in a scientific universe. The issue is, how do we speak of GOD in a non-TSU way, that is, thinking of GOD non-materially (GOD is not some *thing*) non-spatially (GOD is not some *where*), and non-temporally (GOD is not some *time*).

Wolpert argues with insights from quantum mechanics, most particularly, the implications of Bell's theorem. The theorem argues that once two subatomic particles are "entangled" they can affect one another's properties instantaneously even at great distance. This "action at a distance" sounds like science fiction, but Bell's theorem has experimental validation. Physicists still argue about the hows and whys and ifs, but there are some who claim that Bell's theorem represents the most profound discovery of science ever.

The point Wolpert makes is that science has found evidence that action at a distance is not only possible but demonstrated. It means that *mind* (thinking) is a property of reality that isn't dependent on what we call space and time. This leads to a vision of what GOD "looks like" in the modern era: "God is the mind of the universe that is independent of time and space." Further, the action of such a mind occurs not through force acting on mass but rather thought forming and organizing matter itself, a view reflective of the insights of quantum mechanics that "a universe that exists must be in relationship to a mind that creates." (45, 20)

The point here is not whether I have fairly and accurately described Wolpert's argument or even if his argument is correct. He acknowledges that such an argument is speculative but in the sense that all scientific theories are speculative. The questions are: is there evidence? and, what would

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 constitute such evidence?

What would be evidence that GOD exists? Is the human sense of the 'other' evidence? What about the nature of *mind* as related to but not simply subsumed in *brain*? Some atheistic arguments suggest anything called religious or spiritual is delusional, that science and education make anything remotely like GOD go poof. Wolpert doesn't mention him by name but in his *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins opines, "Science flings open the narrow window through which we are accustomed to viewing the spectrum of possibilities. We are liberated by calculation and reason to visit regions of possibility that had once seemed out of bounds or inhabited by dragons." He ends his book saying he's happy to live in a time when human minds push against the limits of understanding. "Even better," he concludes, "we may eventually discover that there are no limits." To argue, as Dawkins does, that what the human mind learns cannot be evidence of GOD, is an unscientific and arbitrarily "narrow window" on reality.

Yes, Wolpert's argument that "God is the mind of the universe ... independent of time and space" is speculative, but it is also in line with current understandings and is potentially testable. It cannot be simply dismissed because someone doesn't like the possibility.

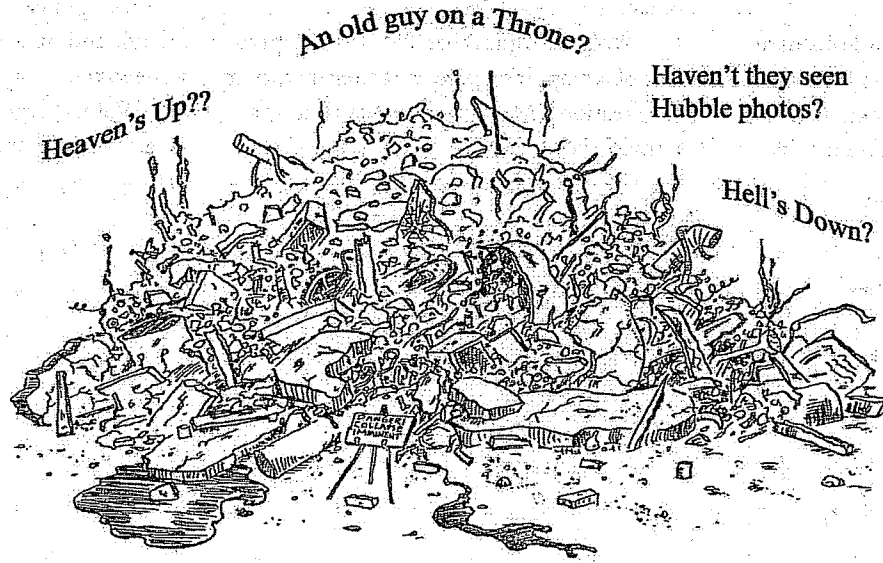
Living Bravely in a Non-TSU World

Wolpert's book contains brief chapters that develop his argument while reflecting on the implications for key issues of Christian theology and understanding. The chapters are:

- The Earth
- Inspired Creation
- Human Beings: A Theological Anthropology

- God
- Jesus
- Salvation
- Judgment and Grace
- Heaven
- Hell
- Scripture
- Eschatology—Mind Freed
- Bringing It All Together: Ethics, Contemplation, and Action.

Each chapter contains provocative insights worthy of further reflection. In this review, I focus on two, one briefly and one more fully.



THERE MUST BE ANOTHER WAY!
 (Front and back cover drawings by Trey Everett)

In the Jesus chapter, Wolpert acknowledges that "making sense" of Jesus in a non-TSU way encounters difficulties. Miracles, whether healing or natural, the virgin birth, the resurrection, and the scandal of particularity—God somehow "uniquely" present in a single person—are all difficult subjects. Also, if all of life has evolved in accord with the principles of natural selection, the sudden appearance of a unique, divine person makes no sense.

Wolpert argues, however, that if God is the *mind* of creation, is it not conceivable that this mind could become present in a human person? What if "Jesus was the One whose individual mind aligned fully, completely, and in a stable and consistent manner, with the mind of God, and as such was the mind of God"? (58)

In the chapter "Eschatology—Mind

Freed," Wolpert notes a human tendency to assume that what we know now will remain true in the distant future. Such assumptions are central in claims about "the end of the world" embraced in the variety of Christian eschatologies throughout the history of the church. The common core of all eschatologies is that at some point in the future, God will completely transform reality so that sin and death are finally defeated forever. Eschatologies typically include some kind of judgment wherein God sets right all acts of injustice and cruelty.

Of course, eschatologically speaking, TSU is front and center. Jesus comes out of the clouds, the heavens are "split open," and a "new heaven and a new earth" come **down** (from where?). Then in the end, depending on the eschatology *du jour*, some people go **up** to Heaven and others go **down** to Hell.

Wolpert teases out the theological goal of all eschatologies—freedom. Freedom from worry, fear, and hatred, freedom from every sin and even the tendency to sin, freedom from the constraints of old age, illness, and ignorance, freedom from death. Such radical freedom seems impossible but this freedom is what all eschatologies promise (at least for those who go **up** and not **down** at the end).

Wolpert argues that if this radical freedom is possible, it cannot be in a TSU-world. Radical freedom **cannot** be material, because the universe's matter is not radically free.

Yet the Christian vision of the *end* is neither a merging into some kind of oneness nor the extinguishing of the finite self. So he speculates that there must be some way that mind and matter can interact without the constraints that our minds now experience in the world of matter. How can these things be? Well, as Gabriel said to Mary, "with God all things are possible."

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Wolpert admits to speculating but argues that such a view is (1) consistent with what we know, and (2) freed from the TSU which is inconsistent with what we know.

Faithfulness in the Real World

Truly, truly, the Three-Story Universe has collapsed. We can still sing the hymns; the poetry of the words, as is true for all poetry, need not be read literally. But we can no longer keep a straight face while saying that Heaven is up. So Dan Wolpert's

book is worthy of careful reading. It is already helping me expand my own thinking about God and the world in which we now find ourselves.

Near the end, Wolpert writes: "The Three-Story Universe model is problematic because it deadens our faith by trivializing Christianity; turning it into a question about which way the elevator goes after we die. Developing a theological model consistent with the current scientific view of the universe brings our faith to life in the present. It helps us see that the point of the

gospel is, as Jesus says, to do what he commands; to liberate and realign our mental habits and behavioral patterns here and now, in the communities of the world, such that they are in-Spirited with the mind of a loving God. This new vision also helps us understand how God can be alive, present, and active within our world, not just far off and distant in space, or nonexistent altogether, the victim of discoveries about the 'laws of nature.'" (108)

To which I will heartily sing, "To God all praise and glory." Amen.