

The Starry Messenger

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The Star of Bethlehem illumines this Season as a sign of the Mystery we celebrate, pointing the way to the Child we worship as God made Man. It links the Magi and the Manger (*Matthew 2-2-12*) and evokes the Glory and the Good News of the angelic choirs.

However, this “starry messenger” delivers different messages to different people, and it is important for Christians to ponder the true Message in its incomprehensible mystery as well as its appealing human dimensions.

Media will trot out their annual parade of theologians and scientists to rationalize or to debunk the “star” story, and literalists and mythologizers will do battle once again. For many, unfortunately, this pseudodebate will reconfirm stereotypes about Religion and Science and the presumed conflict between them.

However, my own Christmas thought is that this Season and the Mystery it enshrines actually invite us to learn from Science how to revalue the Religion we profess. Let me try to explain briefly why I find this line of thought so fruitful at this time of year.

I begin with my reference to the “starry messenger.” This was the title (*Sidereus Nuntius*) Galileo gave his first published treatise on his telescopic observations which supported the theory of Copernicus that a revolving earth orbited around the sun.

And we all know about Galileo, don't we? He defiantly confronted superstition, rejected the Bible as revealed truth, and defeated obscurantist authority with the light of free scientific inquiry. Right? Well, not quite.

This is not the place to explore the complexities of the “Galileo affair” or the bloodless martyrdom which has made him the icon of “science vs. religion,” leaving a wound in the Church that has never completely healed.

Suffice it here to note that Galileo was a man of profound religious faith (right to the end of his life, even after his ordeal) as well as a scientific genius. So was Copernicus. (It has been said that both, by the way, were Cathedral Canons, a curious fact that trivia buffs may wish to pursue.)

Galileo was no theologian, but he clearly agreed with the axiom (attributed to his contemporary, Cardinal Cesare Baronius) that “the Bible teaches us how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go.”

When Galileo's telescope revealed that the murky cosmic cloud of the “Milky Way” was in fact an unimaginable array of stars beyond numbering, he recognized new and virtually limitless realms of religious as well as scientific understanding.

He was equally conversant with the already established exegetical principle, embraced by Cardinal Robert Bellarmine (often cast as the villain of the Galileo affair), that if a received interpretation of a scripture passage is found to be in irresolvable conflict with firmly established facts of human knowledge, then the interpretation must be revisited and revised.

Unfortunately, Galileo's observations and intuition did not, by the emerging standards of his own empirical science, yet constitute “firmly established facts” to prove conclusively Copernicus' theory. This fine scientific/theological nuance was quickly submerged in the politics of a Church locked in controversy with the Reformers over biblical interpretation.

Galileo also collided with an attitude that has perennially infected the Church, namely, that the “teaching authority” must be protected, even at risk to the truth the authority is established to teach. In the event, Galileo's coerced recantation capitulated to the teaching authority at a cost to both religious and scientific truth that we are still repaying.

Now, what does all this have to do with my Christmas reflection on the “starry messenger”? First of all, astronomy (from the Magi-astrologers to Galileo to Hubble to the present) offers a splendid image of the

majesty and Mystery of creation, as the Psalmist understood: *The heavens declare the glory of God, the Ornament proclaims his handiwork* . (Ps . 19:1).

Astronomy also suggests an analogy for conflicting approaches to interpreting sacred scripture, including the Christmas story. Most Christian scholars study the scriptures as the astronomer studies the stars: resolved to know them as fully as possible, but resigned to ever-expanding mystery. Others approach the Bible like astrologers, seeking hidden codes, portents, predictions, and certainties that dispel mystery. (There is in fact a current best-seller about “bible codes.”)

This second approach is symptomatic of a tendency of many believers to “shrink” the Mystery of Faith to fit comfortably inside their personal needs and fears and set rigid limits to expanded or changing understanding. Herein, I think, lies the perceived conflict between Religion and Science. Here lies also the need to rediscover the truth that each pursues in its own way.

Earlier in this century, a noted scientist published a major report on the state of science in America and entitled it *Science: the Endless Frontier* . More recently another scientist writes of a “naive optimism of scientific inquiry, that is, a conviction that there is a real world “out there” that we can explore and know with increasing levels of certainty, even though the fundamental categories of scientific knowledge remain the same: what we know, what we know we *don't* know, and what we don't even know we don't know.

This scientist also likes, as I do, Blaise Pascal's image that “the growth of knowledge is like an expanding sphere in space. The greater our understanding (symbolized by the sphere's volume), the greater our contact with the unknown (the sphere's surface).”

My question is: why cannot Religion, like Science, perceive the “endless frontier” of God's presence and action in the world, knowing what we don't know and reckoning equally with expanding knowledge and deepening mystery?

Instead, in every age (not just Galileo's), some people of Religion seem compelled to shrink Pascal's sphere to a neat little ball that will fit snugly within our feeble human grasp. This I think subverts and betrays the true nature of Faith and Religion, and we have much to learn from the excitement of the scientific quest and what it continues to reveal.

This brings me back to Galileo's *Starry Messenger* . Why did he give a poetic title to his scientific treatise? Can't we rightly speculate on the surge of joy in this man of Science and man of Faith when his little lenses resolved the milky cloud into myriads of stars and unexplored realms of new knowledge, relegating our little sphere to its proper place in the solar system and the universe?

Today our telescopes ride satellites into space and see --- through billions of galaxies, each with billions of stars --- the near-dawn of our universe.

How can Science and Religion not be partners in exploring the endless frontiers of continuing creation and discovery? The answer, I think, has been suggested by two acknowledged experts in their fields.

Science can purify religion from error and superstition. Religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes. (Pope John Paul II)

Science without religion is lame. Religion without science is blind . (Albert Einstein)

So --- when the Starry Messenger of the Gospels returns again this Season, may we see with new eyes the endless frontier opened to us by the God of the Galaxies, who “calls each star by name,” and numbers the hairs of our head, and became Flesh, and dwelt among us, and dwells among us still.