

He Sees God in the Stars

Evolutionists despise him, and some Christians don't agree with his views on Earth's beginnings. But Hugh Ross—like no other man of faith—is taking the gospel to the scientific community.

When Hugh Ross looks for an opportunity to share his faith on an airplane, he tells the person in the next seat that he is an astronomer. When he wants to be left alone, he introduces himself as an evangelist.

"Chances are they will get up and find somewhere else to sit," he observes of the usual reaction to his preacher profile. "It's a sad commentary, but it works."

His scientific side, on the other hand, invariably leads to discussions about the universe and the meaning of life. "When they find out I'm an astronomer they start asking questions—it's such an easy avenue for witnessing," he says.

"An astronomer is asking the same fundamental questions that the theologians ask: What is out there? Why is it there? What is our purpose here?"

Mild mannered, with a boffin's shiny dome and slightly bookish air, Ross is spanning the chasm between science and faith. He effectively rests his telescope on a Bible tripod.

He believes the record of creation is like the 67th book of the Bible. A former researcher at the California Institute of Technology, Ross, 57, uses science to reach a segment of society that has dismissed the notion of God. Though secular scientists have largely rejected Christians, they give Ross a

measure of respect for his efforts to marry the laboratory and the seminary.

He is “the only Christian being listened to” by many scientists on mainstream university campuses, says Guillermo Gonzalez, assistant professor of astrophysics at Iowa State University. “Those who take time to find out about him are impressed by him very much,” Gonzalez adds.

At the National Center for Science Education in Oakland, California, which supports evolution, director Eugenie Scott concedes that Ross “does reflect a lot of mainstream science in his views.” Although some think “some of his science is pretty zany ... others feel he is making a contribution in helping conservative Christians embrace more science,” she says.

In addition, his supporters say, Ross inspires and equips many believers who have felt intimidated by the scientific community’s rejection of the Bible.

Mixing Science and Faith

“Most Christians don’t know how to deal with the atheist because they don’t know enough about science to have an honest answer to deal with it,” said computer programmer Ken Bell after hearing Ross speak at Ward Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Northville, Michigan, in January. “People like Hugh Ross fill that gap.”

Some 800 people braced subzero weather on a Wednesday night to hear Ross lecture for an hour and then spend two more hours answering questions from the floor on everything from the big-

bang theory to the Flood, quoting both the Bible and some of the latest brainiac discoveries.

Ross is not afraid to offer a blended Bible-and-science opinion on just about anything, from how Adam and Eve's descendants managed to populate the Earth so quickly to why the story of the Flood can be considered true.

Ross' effort to integrate science and faith "allows people to come to church and not feel they have to check their brains at the door," says retired surgeon Stan Lennard of Seattle, who helped found a local chapter of Ross' ministry, Reasons to Believe.

At their ministry headquarters in Glendora, California, near Los Angeles, Ross and his staff spend hours each week poring over the latest scientific papers across the spectrum, from astronomy to zoology, looking for evidence they say points to God and the reliability of the Bible. They also talk with non-Christian researchers to find out more about their latest work.

"Science is something that people who have had no Christian background can respond to," Ross says. "You can't point them to believers because they don't know any, or those they do know they don't respect their views [on science]."

He has taken his message to more than 200 campuses across the United States and overseas, and sold more than a quarter of a million books. Rattling off quotes, theorems, facts and statistics like a one-man encyclopedia, Ross uses numbers with lots of zeroes after them to illustrate the huge improbability that the universe evolved by chance.

Through his speaking, radio and TV broadcasts, writings and his Reasons to Believe Web site, Ross piles up the facts to underscore that life as we know it could not exist without the incredible “fine-tuning” of the universe, the characteristics of deep space and the hidden intricacies of the human body.

Having shown that the likelihood of our being here by accident is infinitesimally small, he goes on to observe that “the Creator cares for the human species to such a high degree that He did not consider it too expensive to create 100 billion trillion stars so we could have a nice place to live.”

Then he adds: “If He did all that for me, He must care for me a great deal.”

Ross helps his nonscientist audiences absorb information by leavening it with a little oh-my-gosh astonishment. He notes, for example, that one teaspoon of a certain binary neutron star is so dense it weighs 5 billion tons. He also points out that because of the expanding nature of the universe, your waistline is growing at the rate of about a trillionth of an inch each year.

He also uses dry humor to make his point. Once a staff member dressed up as an alien to promote Ross’ book, *Lights in the Sky & Little Green Men*, which addresses UFOs and the possibility of life on other planets. (Ross says evidence doesn’t point to life elsewhere.)

For the most part, even when vigorously challenged, Ross speaks with the matter-of-fact manner of someone relying on the data, not the delivery, to win the day.

Bob Smithson, a former research scientist and Silicon Valley entrepreneur who invited Ross to speak at a forum at his church with an ardent six-day creationist and avowed evolutionist, observed that the two other speakers had larger followings in the audience, but Ross “changed more minds ... He had something new that they had to think about.”

“I’m so impressed with his ability to blend science and Scripture,” says Mike Gatliff, a pastor who organized Ross’ recent visit to Michigan, “and how he can explain it to someone like me who is not a scientist, but a Christian who needs to be able to give answers to seekers.”

Challenging Scientific Pride

It’s clear to Ross that mankind did not appear on this planet by accident. Interestingly, many in the scientific community who don’t believe in God are asking hard questions about creation. An increasing number of non-Christian scientists, in fact, embrace the concept of “intelligent design”—the idea that there is some unexplained reason behind human life.

At the same time, some of these academicians are turning to the theory of panspermia—that life on Earth came from a faraway galaxy. Ross sees such exotic theories as symptoms of one of the hidden battles he faces in engaging the secular science world—its personal pride, which “puts an enormous barrier in their coming to Christ.”

He recalls seeing Caltech colleagues’ marriages breaking up. “How do you explain these people who are incredibly brilliant, and yet are so irrational when it comes to their life decisions? Why would people who are so well-educated make such

terrible decisions? I think it's pride," he says.

When Ross was growing up, reading textbooks was his idea of fun. He fell in love with the stars at age 7. When a teenager, he came to realize that he did not have the ultimate answers to life.

His studies convinced him that there must be a creator. He examined and investigated most of the other major religious writings, dismissing them, before turning his attention to the Bible. After studying the Scriptures daily for almost two years, looking for the inconsistencies he expected to find, he was persuaded that here was the ultimate truth.

But it was more than an intellectual assent. Although he had "high moral standards," he realized that he was not able to live up to the measure set by the Bible—that despite his sharp thinking, he was still a sinner in need of the Savior.

His evangelistic zeal emerged when he left his native Canada for Caltech.

At Sierra Madre Congregational Church—which he describes as charismatic—he began equipping others to share their faith, and became evangelism pastor.

Reasons to Believe was born in 1986. The ministry's home is an 11,000-square-foot former strip mall where 30 staff members research, write, record broadcasts and mail out materials.

There are several local chapters (Seattle's boasts about 350 members) that arrange events in their area as well as four overseas branches. The ministry also has a roster of volunteers—from NASA scientists to homemakers who have

completed Reasons' apologetics training course—who staff a hotline every day for two hours.

Callers include students working on projects, pastors preparing sermons, people wanting a Christian perspective on the latest science news and atheists who like to argue. More than one unbeliever has been led to Christ after being offered a Bible-centered answer to their questions.

Such encounters are “the heart and soul of our organization,” Ross says. “Our primary goal is evangelism.”

Not only is Reasons' scientific approach effective, it connects with a segment of society often missed by other evangelistic efforts, Ross asserts. “So many church leaders have this perception that the way you do evangelism is wait until somebody gets into moral difficulties, then approach them with the gospel,” he says. “Wouldn't it be better to get to those people before they have a divorce or their kids get on drugs?”

Ross maintains this is pragmatism, not elitism, citing the software industry as his most fruitful mission field in the country.

“You have these young men and women working 70, 80 hours a week; they don't have the time to be drinking and getting into trouble with the opposite sex. They can come to the Christian faith without a lot of the baggage other people might have, not because they are any more moral but simply because they haven't had the time or the opportunities,” he says.

Although Ross contends for the faith in a dimension that can

typically be measured or seen with a telescope or microscope, he is aware that he is engaged in an invisible struggle, too.

“This is spiritual warfare,” he says. “Ever since we birthed the ministry we have set up quarterly days of prayer and fasting, and we feel that this is largely the measure of the success we have had. We do it in recognition that our ministry is an offense to the evil one and therefore we can expect some spiritual attack.”

At the same time, he fears that some Christians are too quick to blame things on the devil or his demons. “He’s not omnipresent. ... He can’t create. We need to be careful not to blame Satan for things that are simply the result of our own failure and our own sin. ... If things are not making rational sense, then I will look for the demonic.”

One time Ross was praying before speaking at an atheists’ meeting at which he suspected someone would try to “ambush” him during the question time. He felt God leading him to a recent research paper, and he prepared some visuals of the information that he was subsequently able to use to rebut someone who tried to use the same document to stump Ross.

The challenger, a university professor, then asked which church Ross attended because, he said, he’d like to go there.

Although the scientific community is widely held to be hostile to religion, Ross says that in actuality a surprising number of those in the labs are not that different from the average person on the street when it comes to beliefs about God.

“There are a lot of Christians out there in the scientific

community. They are typically introverted and are not too willing to make public their faith," Ross says. "Anti-Christians on the campus tend to be very aggressive. The extroverts tend to be the unbelievers, so the public gets an unbalanced perception of what really goes on on the campus."

The Genesis Debate

Ross certainly has his critics in the mainstream scientific community. But surprisingly, some of the harshest evaluations of him come from within the church.

Creationists who believe God formed the world in six 24-hour days fume at Ross' idea that each day mentioned in the first chapter of Genesis was a longer period of time. This "day-age theory," his critics argue, is either evolution in disguise or a dangerous effort to make modern-day science acceptable at the expense of truth.

One critic describes Ross as "heretical at best and neo-orthodox at worst," while another refers to NavPress, which publishes Ross' books, as "once-biblical" for giving him a platform. A third has accused Ross of being a cult leader.

The idea that the planet is only 6,000 or 12,000 years old, a view held by many evangelical Christians, is "the No. 1 barrier ... in coming to faith," for many intellectuals, Ross contends. "They say, 'If this is what Christians believe, then there is no way that I can give my life to Christ.'"

He believes many Christians who hold to this "young earth" view do so because it's the only one they have been offered to counter evolution, and they breathe a sigh of relief when

presented with an alternative. "They are zealous for their faith," Ross says. "We have no problem motivating them to do so. Give them the right tools, and they get even more excited."

Mark Clark, professor of political science at California State University in San Bernardino, says Ross' ministry "saved my faith." He had embraced young earth creationism because "it seemed to make sense." But he found himself developing "Christian schizophrenia" because he could not bring his weekend and workday worlds, and their conflicting realities, together.

Clark took a Reasons' study course intending to prove Ross wrong, "but by a week-and-a-half I realized what I thought I knew was not true. I saw that your faith and your life could be integrated; there was no reason to fear those two things."

Ross has advocated a second Jerusalem Council on creation, following the model in The Acts of the Apostles, where the early Church leaders held a summit to hammer out an agreement on the contentious issue of whether or not Gentile converts should be required to follow Jewish custom and law. He believes the creation controversy is the biggest issue facing the church, more significant than the question of women's roles, "because of the impact it is having on evangelism."

He tries to avoid public debates with young earth creationists, preferring less confrontational forums where different views can be put forward. "I don't like to fight. I find it counterproductive," he says. "When you run into it you deal with it, but you don't go looking for it. We have better things to do."

Those things focus on leading people to the Creator through the wonders of creation. After all, this is a man who hosts “star parties” in his home, casual evangelistic gatherings where he introduces people to the wonders of the universe.

“Most secular humanists aren’t prepared to listen to the traditional, historical reasons for belief in God,” Ross says. Rather than argue about religion, he would rather tell people about what scientists discovered yesterday. Give him a telescope, or a scientific journal, and he will use it to lead you to Jesus.

How Old Is The Earth?

When it comes to how long it took God to create the world, Christians don’t agree.

Few issues divide evangelical Christians as fiercely as how they interpret the Bible’s account of creation.

While “old earth” creationists such as Hugh Ross argue for what is also called “progressive creation,” with each of the days of God’s work actually long periods of time, “young earth” believers insist the world was made in strictly 24-hour cycles.

Old-earthers don’t have a problem with science dating the universe to some 14 billion years, and the earth just shy of 5 billion, while plotting man’s arrival somewhere around 50,000 years ago. Young-earthers are adamant that the earth and man

are just a few thousand years old.

“You don’t get millions of years from the Bible,” says an emphatic Ken Hamm of Answers in Genesis, the country’s largest creation science organization, which has plans for a \$20 million Creation Museum near its headquarters in Florence, Kentucky.

But together with the likes of Kent Hovind, who through his Creation Science Evangelism ministry in Pensacola, Florida, offers a \$250,000 reward to anyone offering scientific proof of evolution, Hamm says that young-old earth is really not the issue. “It is biblical authority,” he argues.

Objectors to the old earth viewpoint say that it throws up a significant theological issue beyond the matter of whether modern science is trustworthy or not. Extended periods of creation, instead of regular days, would require death of living creatures before the fall. So what happened to God’s perfect world, they ask?

“The problem is not so much their science as their theology,” Ross responds. He says young-earthers sentimentalize the deaths of nonsoulful animals because it makes them think of their pets.

He is also concerned by what he calls young-earthers’ “biblicism,” and warns that their views can encourage a form of Gnosticism “because only the Bible is trustworthy, not the physical realm.”

One of the only denominations to take an official position, the Assemblies of God (AG) in its paper on the issue says that

though some people argue for “eons of time” in the creation days, it holds to the view that “the Genesis account should be taken literally.”

A licensed AG minister, Dennis Lindsay, president of Christ for the Nations Institute in Dallas, told Charisma that as someone who had held to an old earth view, he “laughed out loud” when he first read young earth literature.

But as he studied more he came to embrace the young earth position he now teaches at the Pentecostal training school. Not only did old earth thinking present a major issue concerning death and sin, but the scientific evidence for a young earth was “overwhelming,” he said.

They take a different view at Pat Robertson’s Regent University in Virginia Beach, Virginia, which last October invited Ross to take part in a Facts, Faith & Evolution conference. Vinson Synan, dean of Regent’s School of Divinity, said that since World War II, Pentecostal schools had been “more open to the idea of geological days rather than 24 hours.”

Senior Foursquare leader Jack Hayford, founder of The King’s Seminary in Van Nuys, California, who described Ross’ ministry as “one of the timeliest of the recent gifts God has given the church during this season,” told Charisma he was troubled that “so massive and mysterious an issue” as creation has provoked some Christians to attack others.

If an interpretation of creation acknowledges the inspiration and authority of God’s Word, that humankind is a special creation, that God is the author of all and Jesus is the one

by whom and for whom all things were made, then, “I believe it is right that we provide latitude of thought, without leveling charges of heresy or mandating a literalism that the Scriptures themselves do not require of us,” Hayford says.

Finding God in the Laboratory

It was science that led chemist Fazale Rana to faith in Jesus.

An analytical chemist who once did research for beauty-care products and underarm deodorants, Fazale Rana now directs his scientific mind to the question of inspiration, rather than perspiration.

“There’s tremendous beauty in the universe around us, in nature,” says the vice president for science apologetics at Reasons to Believe, the ministry of astronomer Hugh Ross. Rana believes understanding more about how the universe operates will drive scientists toward the God behind it all.

“God’s creation opens up a window into God’s glory. You can appreciate the sheer elegance of a sunset, but when you consider the physics of what is going on, there’s a whole new experience of God’s glory.”

He speaks from personal experience. While in graduate school, he began to question whether natural processes really could account for the intricate systems he was exploring in the cell, as he had been told so often. “I became convinced that there had to be a supernatural base for life.”

Reading the Bible, he later gave his life to Christ. But he compartmentalized his faith, finding Christian views incompatible with the reality of his daily work.

Then he came across Ross and Reasons to Believe. “I discovered I could make everything fit. I could fully integrate my faith into my life. ... I knew I could offer a compelling defense for being a Christian,” he says.

The death of his father, a Muslim, spurred him further to want to share his faith with others, using science as a tool. He volunteered with Reasons, becoming a full-time staff member in 1999. He speaks, researches and writes.

“I’m discovering that there are a lot of scientists out there with similar convictions, but very few of them are willing to be outspoken,” Rana says. “If everybody could stand up at once we would actually have a significant percentage [of believers], at least in biology and chemistry, and the scientific community would realize this is not just a few iconoclasts questioning whether naturalism is the best way to explain things.”

The Bible and Biology

Christians who disagree with evolution are fighting important legal battles.

The evolution-creation debate remains a hot one in public

schools, as Micah Spradling discovered at Texas Tech University in Lubbock.

Looking for a recommendation for his medical school application, the 22-year-old enrolled in Michael Dini's biology class, only to find himself at the center of what could prove to be a significant test case.

Spradling, a Christian who believes in creation, discovered that his professor had a policy of not recommending students who rejected evolution.

"I could put up with listening to his point of view, but when he told me I had to believe a certain thing, I knew I had to draw the line," Spradling told Charisma.

He switched to Lubbock Christian University for the required class, but word of his stand reached the Liberty Legal Institute, whose chief counsel, Kelly Shackelford, described Dini's policy as "open religious bigotry."

Shackelford complained to the U.S. Department of Justice, whose inquiry prompted a policy change: Dini no longer requires his students to believe in evolution; they simply must be able to explain the theory.

Although evolution is taught widely across the country, creationists have had reason to celebrate in Ohio and Georgia, where they have won some ground in the last year.

In Ohio, last December, the State Board of Education adopted a set of science standards that require students to be taught

evidence for and against Darwin's theory—though it said that the policy should not be seen as support for the idea of intelligent design.

In Georgia, a few months earlier, the Cobb County School Board had approved a policy that requires a “balanced education” regarding the origins of life. The board had previously decided that disclaimer stickers needed to be added to all science textbooks, defining evolution as “a theory, not a fact.”

Despite the controversy surrounding such decisions, Ross says the public education system is “wide open” for Christians to offer scientific evidence for faith, “if you go with a humble attitude ... not attacking their science but letting them ask questions.”

To contact Hugh Ross' ministry, Reasons to Believe, call (626) 335-5282 or visit their Web site at .

Andy Butcher is Charisma's senior writer and news director. He interviewed Hugh Ross in Michigan in January.