

This Man Sees God in the Stars

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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 Ross spent 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 silence]."

He has taken his message to more than 200 campuses across the United States and overseas, and sold more than a quarter-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 30 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 is 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 "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 campus-wise."

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.