

Moreover, physics has been teaching us for more than a century that these very particles are themselves not solid. Einstein's famous equation, $e = mc^2$, means that all material things, including the sub-atomic particles which comprise every physical thing, are ultimately not material at all. They are energy. And that energy, we can suppose, is the energy of the "creative imagination" of God, in which the universe of material things exists.

So the question, Where is God?, turns out in reality to be the question, Where are we? God, it turns out, is the existence within which we and all creation exist. Our universe is, as it were, a cosmic jellyfish suspended in the ocean of God. This is humbling to the geocentric/egocentric human pride. But it is also full of hope and beauty. None of us is alone in an uncaring universe, for the universe is God living out his love moment-to-moment, and God's love is closer to each of us than our own thoughts. And when there is sorrow, we can always turn our attention outward in prayer, beyond ourselves, into the loving heart of God, who in his love of each of us, has chosen to bring us into existence and hold us there, in his heart.

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is pervading our physical world. But this model suggests that the physical world precedes the presence of God, that the physical world is something “to which” God comes (and from which God can withdraw.)

It is, as I say, natural to see the world in this way. For most of us, we have the experience of the physical world long before we recognize the presence of God pervading it. And so we easily understand the physical world as the primary mode of existence—as preceding the presence of God—and when we later experience God pervading the world, we understand it in precisely those terms: God seeps himself throughout the fabric of existence.

However amenable to our customary view of things this model is, it is as misdirected as the ancient geocentric cosmologies of the Jews and the Greeks. Regardless of our experience of the primacy of the physical world, the fact is that God, the source, precedes the physical world. The Creator precedes the creation. In fact, when we reflect on the act of creation itself, it is clear that the physical world (and all else) arises from God, or more precisely, arises *within* God. We and all creation are simply the product of God’s willing us into existence. And where does this take place? We are willed into existence by God *within* God’s “creative imagination.” (I use this term which describes our human faculty in a metaphorical way here because we have no more descriptive term for whatever faculty of God’s we are here discussing.)

So, we have come to this. Our physical world—and everything else—the universe—is an on-going project of creation, undertaken by God within his loving heart. He is able to create the universe of beings and hold them in existence moment-to-moment within his spirit, within his mind, within his heart—however one chooses to express the idea. We exist solely and completely in the loving heart of God.

God permeates the physical world because it exists wholly within the person/mind/spirit of God.

And yet, in spite of the truth of all this, in our day-to-day lives we maintain an existence in some way separate from God, the matrix in whom we exist. Again by way of metaphor, we are “of God” and also separate from God in the same way that in our own minds, any idea which we have—any image or thought—is of course “of us” but at the same time different from us, since we can look upon it and examine it as an object. Metaphorically, we exist in the heart of God in a similar way. We arise in the energy of God’s mind, but we also exist as the product of that mind—as an image or idea of that mind. (Hence, God is able to endow us with real choice, with free will. Our wills are held in existence by God, but we ourselves independently make the choices that are made in them.)

The question arises, How can God, who is spirit, hold in his (spiritual) mind the physical world, which is characterized by solidity and heaviness? Our science answers this. The solidity of the world is in our perception of it. Our world is solid and we experience ourselves as solid because we were formed to experience it in that way. Minute observation reveals, however, that the physical world is anything but solid. The greatest part of it is empty space. Almost all of “outer space” is empty. And almost all the volume occupied by each atom is empty space. In addition, recent particle physics has discovered that at the very edge of our ability to observe these entities, sub-atomic particles freely slip into and out of existence. Existence is not a stable and solid thing; it is a continuing process in which the existence of the component parts of physical objects is from moment to moment unpredictable and indefinite.

stories, God is presented as a physical being, manipulating a pre-existing physical universe. In Genesis, God physically divides the pre-existing waters of chaos in order to expose the dry land. Later, in an act of physical respiration, God blows air—the “breath of life”—from his lungs into the lungs of the newly-created Man. And still later, God is described as taking an afternoon stroll through his Garden of Eden. In all this, God is presented as having a physical existence.

And more importantly, in these stories, God is presented as manipulating a physical world which exists separately from him. God is presented as the Creator, not in the sense of creating the universe *ex nihilo*, from nothing, but rather, in the sense of forming and structuring an organized universe out of an unformed, chaotic primordial material—the “waters.” When he is finished, the world exists and goes on from moment to moment independently from God. God sits on his heavenly throne, observing human history, and from time to time, especially when he hears the prayerful cry of his People, intervening mercifully in human affairs.

We still pray with that understanding: asking—sometimes begging—God to intervene in our affairs and to begin to take control of situations which we cannot control ourselves.

However, the Christian Church knew from the beginning that God is not a physical being. The Gospel of John depicts Jesus as teaching that “God is spirit” (4:24). And especially during and after the Middle Ages, the Church taught that this God-Spirit created the physical world *ex nihilo*—out of nothing. Simply by an intention of his will—simply by a word—God made material things exist, though he himself is not material. This idea easily provokes the question, Then what is God’s relationship with the physical world? How and where does the physical world exist?

Conventionally, we believe that the world exists separately from God. Our belief that we pray to God who is “up there,” somehow removed from the physical world, expresses this assumption of the independent existence of physical reality. Historically, this belief has expressed itself in an extreme form in the philosophy of Deism. Deism holds that in the beginning God created the physical world and then set it going to run by itself according to natural laws. God himself observed the physical world from a heaven unassociated with it, but did not intervene in it.

But can God create something that is not himself? How can something that is “not God” come from God as its source? Everything that exists must in some way be “of God.” – And the experience of God had by so many (millions of) people of every culture and religion throughout history is that God is in all things and throughout all things—that the spirit of God permeates all creation. Given this, how could it be that the physical world exists separately from God?

The conclusion is that it simply cannot be the case that the physical world exists separately from God. The beings in the world must in some way be extensions of the being of God. And our human (mystical) experience that we are able to recognize, sense, experience, feel—even communicate with—the presence of God in and flowing through the beings which inhabit the world around us—this experience leads us to ask whether it is the case that God is present within the physical world, or whether it is rather that the physical world is present within God.

This is crucial. As humans, our ancient and habitual way of understanding our world is essentially geocentric (which, interestingly, is “egocentric” in a variant spelling.) If we know anything in our human experience, it is that we know ourselves to be “here,” in this physical world. When we have the experience of the presence of God, it is natural to interpret that the spirit of God

reasonable to raise one's hands upward and to look toward the sky when one prayed.

In the second century A.D., the Greek Egyptian astronomer, Claudius Ptolemy, proposed a new *geocentric* model of the universe which was accepted as the standard model for 1400 years. As it was developed by Christian thinkers, this model held that the earth was a stationary sphere, located in the center of a set of concentric, rotating crystalline spheres, each of which contained one of the known planets: the moon, the sun, Mercury, Venus, Jupiter, and Saturn. Beyond the outer sphere was a final sphere, which contained the "fixed stars" (as distinguished from the "planets," known as "moving stars"). This final sphere was dark, and the stars were actually holes, through which the brilliant light of the glory of God shone. For God's kingdom was located in a glorious, light-filled place beyond the final sphere. In this Christian extension of Ptolemy's model, it was also completely reasonable to raise one's hands upward when one prayed and to look toward the divine kingdom beyond the stars.

Everything changed when Nikolaus Copernicus proposed a scientifically formulated model of the universe in which the sun, rather than the earth, stood at the center of the known universe. The earth and the other known planets, Copernicus held, orbited the sun. As later scientists developed this model, it became clear that there was no "beyond" where God might have his heaven. Rather, the earth and the Solar System were part of a galaxy of stars. And intergalactic space, filled with innumerable galaxies, extended to the boundaries of what appears to be an eternally expanding known universe—a universe expanding into a space that it creates as it expands. In other words, there is literally nothing beyond the boundaries of the universe.

And so, we get back to Archbishop Ramsey's question. Where *is* heaven? Where *is* God? It's clear from our scientific understanding of our universe that not only is God not "up there," but also that there *is* no "up there." When we look "up," we are actually looking "out there." And so, when we look upward to pray or when we say that Jesus "came down from" heaven, we are referencing a way of understanding how God's universe is constructed, that no one has seriously believed in for 400 years. Old habits die hard.

And I suppose that's especially true in this case because our Christian faith hasn't really given us a good alternative to the old understanding. When we ask "Where is God?" and answer, for example, that we "know God in our hearts"—which, of course, we can do—we cannot be saying the God exists simply in our hearts, for then we would be willing God into existence. If that's the case, then God does not objectively exist; God is simply the product of our desire.

And if we say, with the Catholic Church, that heaven is "a state of being" in which we exist in perfect union with God, there is very little for our understanding to grasp onto. For this concept of "state of being" does not identify the relationship between God's (spiritual) world and our experienced physical/spiritual world.

Here we are at the heart of the problem: what is the relationship between the spiritual and the physical? Our experience teaches us that we are simultaneously physical and spiritual beings. We eat, and we pray—physical human life and spiritual human life. And when we pray aloud—or chant or sing holy songs—we are able to combine these spiritual and physical modes of life most naturally.

But what about God? What is God's relationship with physical life? In the Jewish creation

Where Is God?

March 3, 2012

Once while I was a college student in New York City, my roommate and I went up to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine to hear Michael Ramsey, then Archbishop of Canterbury. More than forty years later, I still remember the question he posed—"Where is heaven?"—and the way he posed this question. He said simply that people say heaven is above us, "up there," that when we pray we look up toward heaven, and when we reflect on Jesus, we say that he "came down from" heaven. But, the Archbishop said, when we look through telescopes up into the sky and out into space, what we see are other planets and other stars. What we don't see, of course, is heaven.

The rest of Archbishop Ramsey's talk—and the answer he offered to his question—I don't remember. I was too young. It was the iconoclasm of his question that struck my rebellious, college-age sensibilities. I imagine that the answer he offered was similar to the subject of this reflection, which is the result of maturing, of attention to the God whom I am now striving to know, and of blessed conversations with wise and Godly people who have guided me to experience the Divine in my own life. Back in 1962, I could not have understood the Archbishop's answer because I had not myself experienced God.

Where can we begin, in order to recognize—to experience—the presence of God in our lives? Let's start—where else?—in cosmology. For the first seventeen hundred years, Christians had been looking "up" to heaven, believing that God lived "up there." And the Jews before them, from time immemorial, had done the same thing. That's because both the Jews and the Christians had passed down from one generation to another an understanding of how the universe was put together.

The Jews believed that the earth *was* the universe. They thought that the earth was a disk of solid land. This disk was supported by pillars. (They never asked what the pillars were resting on.) Stretching over the disk of earth was the "firmament," the sky, which was understood to be a half-sphere of material, the edge of which rested on the ocean. The ocean flowed outward from the rim of the earth-disk past the bottom edge of the half-sphere of firmament. The firmament, then, captured the "bubble" of air—the atmosphere—which filled the space between land and ocean below, and the firmament above. Beyond the rim of the firmament, the ocean merged with the waters that flowed under the earth (and sprang through the earth as springs) *and* with the waters that flowed up the side and around the top of the firmament (and fell to the earth as rain and snow through holes in the firmament.)

All earthly activity occurred in the air-filled space between the earth and the firmament (which was believed to be a mile or two above the earth.) It was in this space that the sun and the moon moved. They arose out of the ocean to the east of the earth-disk and set into the ocean to the west. During the night they traversed the waters beneath the earth to rise again the next morning in the east.

And so, the universe was conceived to be a structured opening or, we might say, a bubble of organized existence which God created or constructed amid the chaotic waters. And where was God? In this understanding of the universe, God lived in the "highest heavens," a place above the firmament, above the waters above the firmament, where he sat on his throne, observing the goings-on on earth below. Since God dwelt "up there" in that place above the firmament, it was completely