

Jesuit rebuts reasoning behind claim that God didn't create universe

WASHINGTON - A Jesuit priest who is former president of Gonzaga University in Spokane, Wash., has taken to YouTube and his blog to rebut arguments raised by British physicist Stephen Hawking, who says in a new book that God had no role in creating the universe.

"Though Dr. Hawking is an outstanding physicist, his metaphysical skills are less than honed," said Jesuit Father Robert J. Spitzer, now president of the Magis Center of Reason and Faith in Irvine, Calif., who headed Gonzaga from 1998 to 2009. He made the comments in a seven-minute YouTube video titled "The Curious Metaphysics of Dr. Stephen Hawking."

Hawking, a member of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences since 1986, said in his new book, "The Grand Design," that "because there is a law such as gravity, the universe can and will create itself from nothing."

"Spontaneous creation is the reason why there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist," Hawking added. The book, written with physicist Leonard Mlodinow, was published Sept. 7.

Father Spitzer, author of the recently published "New Proofs for the Existence of God: Contributions of Contemporary Physics and Philosophy," said Hawking's "fundamental assumption about the universe" is "that it came from nothing."

But the priest said "what many term the first principle of metaphysics" is "From nothing only nothing comes."

"If the physical universe had a beginning (a point at which it came into existence) then prior to that point it was nothing," Father Spitzer said in his blog. "And if it was nothing then it could not have created itself (because only nothing can come from nothing).

“So what does that imply?” he asked. “The very reality that Dr. Hawking wants to avoid, namely, a transcendent power which can cause the universe to come into existence.”

Father Spitzer holds a doctorate in philosophy, three master’s degrees – in theology, divinity and philosophy – and a bachelor’s in public accounting and finance. He is currently producing a documentary on God and modern physics, which is scheduled for completion in November.

The claims in Hawking’s new book also drew comment from religious leaders of various faiths after an excerpt was published in The Times of London.

Britain’s Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks told The Times, “Science is about explanation. Religion is about interpretation. ... The Bible simply isn’t interested in how the universe came into being.”

Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury said that “physics on its own will not settle the question of why there is something rather than nothing.”

“Belief in God is not about plugging a gap in explaining how one thing relates to another within the universe,” he added. “It is the belief that there is an intelligent, living agent on whose activity everything ultimately depends for its existence.”

Jesuit Brother Guy Consolmagno, a Vatican astronomer who has studied both physics and philosophy, told Catholic News Service Sept. 3 that “the ‘god’ that Stephen Hawking doesn’t believe in is one I don’t believe in either.”

“God is not just another force in the universe, alongside gravity or electricity,” he added. “God is the reason why existence itself exists. God is the reason why space and time and the laws of nature can be present for the forces to operate that Stephen Hawking is talking about.”

Father Spitzer’s YouTube video and blog and information about his book and upcoming documentary are available at <https://magisreasonfaith.org>.