Stephen Hawking's theology is a black hole

By Chaplain Corey T. Thornton

A number of years ago, I had the pleasure of reading the book, "*A Brief History of Time*" written by the celebrated cosmologist Stephen Hawking. In his book, Hawking walks the reader through advanced scientific theories on such topics as the origins of the universe and black holes, conveying them in a simple manner that non-specialists like me can understand. At first, I was intimidated to read it, but to my surprise, it proved to be fairly easy to read while being extremely informative. As it turned out, I was not the only fan of this book, for it has sold nine million copies since its first publication in 1988. Since then, Hawking has enjoyed the status of a popular culture icon, a status that very few scientists, except perhaps Albert Einstein, have achieved. His publications, media interviews and television appearances have made him known to a broad audience (even to many of us who got "C" plus grades in science).

Just as Einstein was recognized by his bushy un-kept white hair and mustache, Hawking is recognized by a less fortunate feature, his paralysis. At the age of 21, he was diagnose with a motor neuron disease and has been confined to a wheelchair for most of his adult life. Another result of his disease was the loss of his voice. He now communicates using a computer generated voice. All of these iconic images would be meaningless if Hawking wasn't a first class theorist and educator. As the director of the department on research at Cambridge, he certainly is both. For these achievements, I am an admirer of Stephen Hawking the cosmologist. In a recent interview that I read online, it was to my disappointment to find that I was not able to be an admirer of Stephen Hawking the philosopher and theologian.

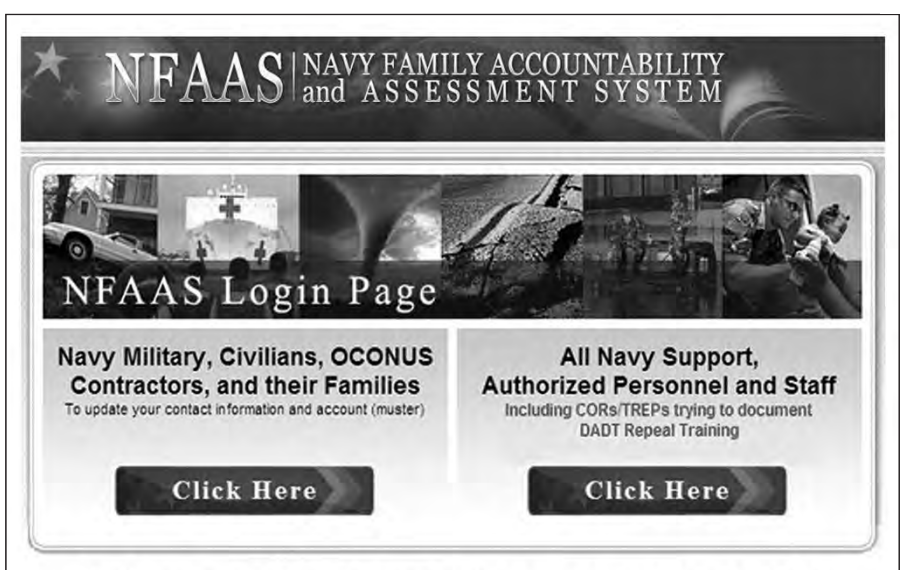
Hawking was interviewed by the *Guardian* May 15. Although several scientific topics were addressed, Hawking also discussed his ideas on life after death and on God. Concerning the former he is quoted, "I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark." Concerning the latter, Hawking asserts that there is no need for a creator to explain the existence of the universe. He explains this further in his book, "*The Grand Design*," published in 2010. Because these topics can be touchy ones, especially for religious people, and Hawking is openly anti-religious, it is not surprising that a number of prominent religious scholars published counterstatements to his. I would encourage anyone with a keen interest in this to read the interview and their responses.

My concern with the interview is not that Hawking holds views that differ sharply from mine. With our free press, one gets practice appreciating others' views and beliefs. My concern with Hawking is that he makes an all too common error to believe that because he is an expert in one particular field, that his views in other fields are also authoritative. In other words, because he is an expert cosmologist, Hawking seems to believe that that qualifies him to speak as an expert philosopher and theologian. For such a prominent scientist to speak on these topics with little to no regard for the rigors and disciplines involved in these fields was arrogant and misleading. I would hold as little of regard for Hawking's advice on how I should cook my supper as I do on his views in these matters. By comparison, Rachael Ray is likely not an expert in cosmology but she comes up with some great 30-minute recipes!

To be clear, Hawking has the right, as we all do, to hold positions on these important aspects of life and death. What I would encourage all to consider is how we arrive at our positions. To look at this another way, when I read Hawking's book, I took into consideration the enormous amount of research that went into it, not just by him but by the succession of theorists on whose shoulders he stood. It is important to know that Hawking did not come up with all of his theories by himself but, instead, inherited the research of those who labored before him. This is also true of those who have been considering and developing positions concerning God and life after death. There are rich religious and philosophical traditions that come from the best insights of individuals and communities stemming over thousands of years. Those who wish to speak authoritatively to a mass public would do well to have immersed themselves into these studies beforehand. This is not only true for Hawking but for everyone who we hear or read in the media. How often have you been watching an interview on television and asked, "Why is this person someone I wish to hear from on this topic? What makes them an authority?" One would hope that asking these questions would lead to the discovery that the person is indeed in a position to speak knowledgeably, but wouldn't you want to be aware if they weren't?

One scientist who has approached these topics with appropriate consideration and respect is Francis S. Collins. He is a pioneering medical geneticist who once headed the Human Genome Project. In his book, "*The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*," Collins explains that as a Christian believer, "The experience of sequencing the human genome, and uncovering this most remarkable of all texts, was both a stunning scientific achievement and an occasion of worship." It's worth noting that Collins invested 25 years of research and development before publishing his book. He knew that, although he was an expert in the field of genetics, that that did not make him an expert in his religious beliefs. It certainly seems that he holds his beliefs as devoutly and sincerely as many religious scholars, but he also respects the fact that the study of those beliefs can be a lifelong endeavor.

As a person with religious convictions, I was disappointed in Hawking's flippant dismissal of belief in God and an afterlife. In the same way, I am disappointed when poorly executed science is promoted in the name of religion. These issues are too important to not be seriously considered by each of us. In the end we may find that our perspectives on science and religion differ, but we should continually endeavor to study and mature our understanding with integrity. So if you wish to learn more about black holes, read Hawking's book. When studying philosophy and religion, there are many scholars in these fields that will serve you better.



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