

that even the random knowing is random and therefore not knowing—would, in fact, be much more startling than the notion that we are created by a God who does not need anything for His own being and happiness. Still He had some purpose in mind in everything He caused to come forth out of nothingness, the imprint of which is found in everything that exists, including ourselves.

III.

"The simplest truth about man is that he is a very strange being; almost in the sense of being a stranger on the earth....," Chesterton wrote in *The Everlasting Man*.

"Alone among the animals, he is shaken with the beautiful madness called laughter; as if he had caught sight of some secret in the very shape of the universe hidden from the universe itself... It is not natural to see man as a natural product. It is not common sense to call man a common object of the country or the seashore. It is not seeing straight to see him as an animal. It is not sane. It sins against the light; against that broad daylight of proportion which is the principle of all reality"

The themes of Chesterton, that man is the real stranger on earth, that he remains homesick at home, that he is not a natural product of nature, are the ones that reflections on end times constantly bring up.

We notice that in Chesterton a secret remains hidden from us. Our laughter, that great mystery of our everyday living, hints at the very "shape" of the universe that is otherwise hidden from us. The counter point to end times is not nothingness, but times that do not end. Aquinas, commenting on Aristotle's notion of the eternity of the world—a world that repeated itself again and again—agreed with Aristotle that an eternal finite world was possible. He was not just speaking paradoxically. But he intended to be very precise. Aquinas meant that God as Creator, might have (though, as we know from revelation did not in fact) created a finite universe that was kept in existence eternally, in the eternity of God. This did not make it either God or anything more than it was.

The conclusion we draw from this penetrating remark of Aquinas on Aristotle's equally penetrating insight? It is that this precise world in all its incredible particularity—a particularity that includes us, in our particular history, in our particular era, in our particular planet—is the scene of a drama about man's relation to God from whence he came. The cosmos itself was created for a divine purpose that was

not simply that of beholding the cosmos itself in its admittedly incredible glory.

Man, each man, is more important than the cosmos. This is our dignity, in spite of the many theories that argue or imply that we have no dignity because the universe has no inner or external reason. Nor are we created just to be beheld. We are created to act, to judge why we are and accept the fact that we are, even while remaining finite and rational beings, infinitely more than natural beings. "It is not natural to see man as a natural produce," as Chesterton said.

We are not even well ordered, as Pieper said, even if we fulfill noble, world-historic tasks. These may be included in what it is to love God by loving our neighbor, but this is not the reason each of us is created. And we cannot avoid the existence of our own being's transcendent purpose even when we deny it. That too is but another way of affirming that we have to choose what we are. The end times, then, as they are presented to us, are designed to remind us of what we are—strangers in the universe—because the universe and its tasks, whatever they be, is not itself immediately the reason why we exist.

There is only one drama in the universe, a drama that repeats itself in each human life that has ever existed. That is the drama according to which he must freely decide whether the world and with it himself has no meaning, or whether what he is given, the "now without end," is the reason for his existence in the first place. However posed, the decision is always free. There is no other way in which the highest things could be given to us and be ours. *Only the hope for God-given salvation, for eternal life, sets man right from within*. Indeed, a "secret of the universe" that is "hidden from the universe itself" can be suspected.

Only that being who can see and know the universe from within it can suspect the laughter, the joy, the "mirth," as Chesterton called it in *Orthodoxy*, in which it was initially conceived and made to be. Such are the things we learn from wondering about why we are told so solemnly each year about end times.

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The End Times: The Secret Hidden From the Universe

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"The human being is not automatically well ordered just because he sets his hope on natural well-being, even though it may be something as great as peace on earth and just order among nations.... Only the hope for God-given salvation, for eternal life, sets man right from within.... Not only does it renounce an activism totally enclosed within the plane of history and insistent that no hope is left when there is nothing more we can do; it also renounces the mere otherworldliness of a supernaturalism excluding history, which would abandon political humanity to fatalism." — Joseph Pieper

I.

More than one commentator have remarked on the spate of wars, rumors of war, earthquakes, floods, tornados, fires, terrorist bombings, tidal waves, and other such unpleasant happenings that we have recorded in recent months and years on this Planet. The readings in the Liturgy for the last couple of weeks in the Liturgical Year and those at the beginning of Advent, moreover, recall, in one way or another, these same topics. They also point to a solution, though not one we might expect. They speak of the "times and moments" known only to God, the warnings to be prepared, the knowing not the day or the hour.

Convulsions in the sun and moon, floods, wars, earthquakes, plagues—all of these and more are mentioned or implied in Scripture for the end times. The Church does not hesitate to have us read about them, always a sobering experience, whatever we are to make of them. They must be read carefully, of course. It is not uncommon in the history of Christianity to find folks waiting, so far prematurely, for the end of the world based on a too literal reading these passages. The date of the so-called end of the world has been, indeed, quite a mobile one, and not something associated only with Jewish or Christian accounts. The Book of Daniel and the Apocalypse have sometimes been read as a kind of "events calendar" with the main show scheduled for a certain date. When the event never came to pass, doubt and ridicule were heaped on the whole business.

Still, these readings have been pondered for centuries and centuries from the first moments in which they were uttered and recorded. Indeed, few subsequent decades in the past several thousand years have passed in which it was not possible to say, at the end of a given year, that at least some, if not all, of these rather unpleasant events happened around us somewhere in the world. Modern communications make every crisis seem like it takes place in our back yard. We are as much concerned with crisis happenings in Virginia as in Japan, Hungary, Peru, or Pakistan. We are still here, of course, though billions and billions of us have already passed in and out of our mortal life while the species man continues and even grows in numbers. There are considerably more of us now living and living longer and better lives on this green planet than ever before at one time. However many of us natural disasters have eliminated, we go right on. Car accidents, abortions, cancer, even crime, are cumulatively much more lethal than natural disasters.

None the less, we do not have to be professional astronomers to suspect that eventually the sun will cool, the planets will collapse, life on this Planet will be impossible—at least if we judge solely by what we know and can reasonably predict. Science fiction writers even want us to prepare for space travel so that at least some remnant of our kind will survive somewhere in the cosmos. Evidently, such a catastrophic event is not in our immediate future, so we can relax. No doubt today, more people lie awake at night worried about the world supply of oil, itself a product of past eons, or the conditions of endangered bird species than those worried about their immortal souls or the upcoming burnt out sun. Apocalypses today, even natural disasters, are filled with efforts to find human culprits so that we can place praise or blame on those conceived to be the causes, or at least the causes of not being prepared or ready or effective. Sometimes it seems that we claim the right and power to prevent any cosmic event or local story from much bothering us.

The advocates of the big-bang and expanding universe theories, however, have at least made us conscious that our time on earth, even as a species that comes and goes out of existence individually and sequentially, is—though generous—limited. Moreover, besides cosmic catastrophes which evidently will go on whether we like it or not, we have human catastrophes which seem also to go on in some predictable manner. The November celebration of Veterans' Day reminds us that human-caused disasters are often much more lethal than natural causes. Nothing in Scripture indicates to us that both sorts of problems will not

to go on as long as we remain on this earth, however much we seek "peace and justice."

We may reduce incidence of such problems in a given time or place, but the same occurrences seem to rise up elsewhere or at another time. Our moral fiber is likewise as much challenged by natural as by human-caused disasters. Both cause enormous sufferings and call forth considerable sacrifices and virtue, so much so that one can almost wonder if there is not a plan to it all. Aquinas, after all, suggested that one of the reasons why God allows evil (presumably both natural and human) is so that He can bring forth from its results virtues and good deeds—mercy, for example—that we would not see without them.

II.

Christianity holds that there is order in the universe, in which order we ourselves participate after the manner of what we are, free and intelligent but finite beings whose personal destiny in each case is transcendent. That is, we are not just natural beings but we are to participate in the inner life of the Trinity. We cannot get it out of our heads, moreover, that some relation between our moral order and cosmic order does exist. Whatever we make of deterministic evolution theory, we do not think that it explains either itself or the obvious kinds of internal order we find in us, especially in living things. All this cosmos activity and variety are not going on just to be going on. Is not the very fact that we can wonder what is going on itself a hint that this wonder is not itself solely a product of determinism?

Scripture seems to speak of the end times as occasioned not so much in terms of sidereal or planetary happenings as of human moral happenings. Their ominous nature even seems to be a stimulus for more human metaphysical understanding of *what is*. Our relation to the world passes through our relation to one another and to God. This relationship is where the real drama of the universe exists; it is really why we are interested in it. Cosmic things go on, to be sure, whether we are virtuous or vicious. Still, the just do not always triumph, nor even frequently. The unjust seem to rule over much of the land. We are perplexed that there is not a one-to-one relationship between rule and virtue. When Augustine entitled his famous book, *The City of God*, he intended to teach us that this ultimate city we seek is not to be finally or directly found in this world.

Indeed, most Scriptural descriptions of end times picture a rather foreboding scene. They indicate that

mankind has gone too far in deviating from the measures or norms that are inbuilt in its nature or in those advised by revelation. Men are pictured as too busy with other things to notice the signs of these events, which are intended to be warnings to them. The new heavens and new earth, which are also depicted, are not usually presented as alternative to the more anxious descriptions but rather as what lies beyond them for those who are faithful. In other words, both forms of end times are to work themselves out.

Too often, these depictions of end times are presented as if their primary purpose is to frighten us into being what we ought to be anyhow. Mankind is also warned that if it wills not to listen, not much can be done. Man's freedom will not be interfered with. I suspect, however, since it seems quite clear in Scripture itself that those to whom these descriptions and warnings seem to be addressed are not going to listen or much change their ways. They are rather intended to be presented as information about the way the world is, including the way human beings choose freely to form themselves.

The question of why there is a world at all in which the sort of beings that we are can exist is one that deserves some reflection. Whatever we may think of the existence of other races of finite, intelligent beings elsewhere in the universe beside ourselves, the fact is that even though they might be out there someplace we do not know of them. Nor are they are not going to be substantially different from ourselves, though they may have chosen differently from us, as C. S. Lewis implied in his space trilogy and in Narnia. That is, they still will have to explain several things: why do they exist rather than not exist? why are they in the place they are? what can they know? what is their destiny? how they have chosen? They will be, in other words, finite, intelligent beings like ourselves looking out and realizing that they are the ones looking. The universe—minus the intelligent beings within it—sees nothing as it has no organs of seeing or knowing except in the rational creature.

In this sense, we are, on earth, probably in as good a place as any for questions of ultimate import to be asked and posed. And they *should* be asked. It is perfectly all right to wonder what we are all about. It is also sensible to suspect that we are not merely the result of swirling deterministic accidents that randomly came up with ourselves asking why we randomly came up. That result—