

# INFINITY WITHOUT DIVINITY

*Daltún Ó Ceallaigh*

Human evolution can be looked at in a number of ways – physical, environmental, societal, and cultural. Another way to approach it involves cognition. In contrast to other living creatures, humans developed a capacity for symbolic and abstract thinking which enabled them to go beyond instinctive reactions and understand better the world in which they existed in all its various aspects.

Insofar as they could not properly understand certain things, they needed to develop explanations to fill the lacunae. When it inevitably came to posing questions about the origin and destiny of the universe as well as its exact nature and extent, the supernatural idea came into being. In other words, deficiencies in knowledge and thinking were filled by religion.

In theistic terms, this became known as the god of the gaps theory. However, religious believers do not like this theory and insist that belief in a god or gods should be a matter of faith rather than default.



However, from the time of the ancient Greeks onwards, religion has been in constant retreat in the face of science. The earth is no longer flat; the sun does not revolve around it; phenomena such as earthquakes, famine, and epidemics are not the result of divine intervention, but due to shifts of tectonic plates, effects of climate, and spread of viruses, respectively,

And the onward march of science continues. The last bastion of religion concerns the temporal and spatial dimensions of the universe. Some Christians, for instance, having acquiesced in scientific discovery, transformed the Bible into a mere collection of parables and are prepared to go back to the big bang 14 billion years ago. But then they ask confidently ‘what came before that?’ And if science imminently comes up with some explanation, the question will be repeated of ‘what came before that?’, and so on. Of course, the believer has the answer, namely ‘god’. And if the nonbeliever poses the question of ‘what came before god?’, the response is that ‘he or she always was and always will be’.

However, couldn't the nonbeliever respond in turn that perhaps a godless and boundless universe always was and always will be. That is not an established scientific answer, but rather a speculation that we may eventually come to realise that the mystery of the cosmos arises not from its existence but from the limitations of human cognition.

Up to now, humans have been accustomed to thinking in linear terms of a beginning and an end and measurements of space. Already, we have been given several inklings of the shortcomings of our cognitive processes by the theorising and research of physicists, particularly in the last 150 years. One thinks, for example, of the revolutionary advances made by such as Einstein. But there is still much work to be done before definitive conclusions can be reached about the biggest and most fundamental questions, if, in some cases, ever. In fact, one wonders if we are on the verge of simply accepting infinity without divinity.