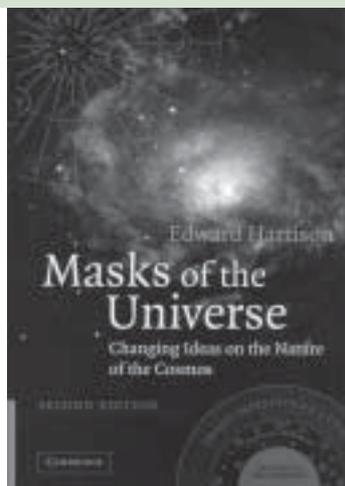




Masks of the Universe

by Edward Harrison

Cambridge University Press, 2003.
ISBN 0-521-77351-2. Pp ix + 331,
£20.00 (hbk).



This is an annoying book. It promises much, but skips too quickly over complex areas, such as Anselm's and Aquinas' arguments for the existence of God, in a mere seven pages. Its subtitle, *Changing ideas on the nature of the cosmos*, gives a fair indication of its range. Throughout the book the author picks up an idea, be it scientific, theological or philosophical, develops it for a few pages and then leaps on to another, slightly related, thought without coming to any proper conclusion. The language is florid, for example: 'We nowadays live in a universe where the question of its meaning is without meaning. Reason in faith has gone, and faith in reason itself without reason.' I know what the author means, but such sweeping statements are a regular part of this book. If that is the sort of thing you like, then this is the sort of book which will appeal.

Edward Harrison is a British-born astronomer who is Emeritus Distinguished Professor of Physics and Astronomy at the University of Massachusetts. He was previously Principal Scientist at the Atomic

Energy Research Establishment and Rutherford High Energy Laboratory.

Throughout the book he makes a distinction between Universe and universe. Universe is everything that actually exists, independent of our changing universe. The universes are our models of the Universe. 'A universe is a mask fitted on the face of the unknown Universe.'

I found nothing I would wish to disagree with regarding the astronomy, although Harrison does come out with the old story of Laplace saying to Napoleon Bonaparte 'Sire, I had no need of that hypothesis' – that hypothesis being God. Many historians of science now believe that story to be apocryphal.

The author does, however, have some odd ideas when it comes to theology. He contrasts the determinism of Augustine with free will ideas, but gives Pelagius as his example. It might be better if he chose someone else, such as Wesley or Armenius – Pelagius is best remembered not for his belief in free will, but for his approach to salvation. He describes the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* as an agnostic, which is hardly a reasonable description.

This is an annoying book: not just because it aims to cover so much in 331 pages, but because it does so in a way which favours vagueness rather than precision. I felt happier with *Our Cosmic Origins* by Armand Delsemme, which covers much of the same ground, but in a way which is more precise and to the point and had more solid astronomy in it. I will, however, look out for other books by Harrison and I did find the book well produced with relevant illustrations and a good index and bibliography. It does us all good to read an annoying book every now and then.

Jonathan Reynolds

Jon Reynolds is the Director of Education for the Anglican diocese of St Albans.

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