

How do the heavens go, with homes below?



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

The great scientific thinker Galileo once said “The Bible teaches us how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go.” He built his own telescope to search “the heavens” and what he discovered through observation, mathematics and reasoning was not what he was supposed to find. The powerful Church of the 17th Century didn’t want to hear what science had to say, especially if investigations in the natural cosmos contradicted officially authorized supernatural doctrines. Galileo, like Copernicus and Kepler, observed the motion of the planets and found evidence for the earth orbiting the sun. This was blasphemous heresy. Church teaching then, and in some corners of Christendom now, resists observable facts, while basing bookloads of belief on the unobservable dogmas of theology. As Galileo may have said about these faith-centered folks, their world revolves around the Son rather than the Sun. Thank heavens for Galileo.

Some ideas orbit our brains for many

cycles of seasons. Words and images from our past can linger long in our head space. I recall the lyrics from the old hymn we sang in our Baptist youth group: “I’ve got a mansion just over the hilltop, in that bright land where we’ll never grow old; and someday yonder, we’ll never more wander, but walk on streets that are purest gold.” As young believers, we couldn’t wait for that “bright land” of perpetual youth — we were fully prepared to meet our Savior in the clouds and live in his nebulous neighborhood for eternity. The first verse of the mansion song speaks of satisfaction with a simple cottage in this world, “But in that city where the ransomed will shine, I want a gold one that’s silver lined.” What does this tell us about the hopes and dreams of some believers?

The final verse: “Don’t think me poor or deserted or lonely, I’m not discouraged ‘cuz I’m Heaven bound; I’m just a pilgrim in search of a city, I want a mansion, a robe, a crown.” Now, don’t you wonder if the writer, or those who sing this in worship, mean it literally? If they do, I’m curious if they ever think about what it suggests. Do they truly hope for a large golden house in the sky, filled with silver, where they can walk around wearing a robe and crown on streets made of gold? Even for the most desti-

tute person who needs hope for the future, this vision of gleaming wealth and royalty in the “sweet by and by” seems excessive. After all, what use would precious metals have in heaven?

Am I being too literal? Maybe, but how else can we interpret this old hymn? Even if it’s meant to be taken metaphorically, it still begs the question: why sing this as if it’s true? Is it offering false hope, or actually not hopeful at all? Does it show firm faith or foolish fantasy to encourage a person living in a tiny, gloomy cottage, to pray for riches in “glory”?

Convincing someone this fantastic dream of a golden city in the sky is their reward, that endurance of misery now is part of God’s Plan, is hurtful, not helpful. When I was a chaplain with people living outside (daily orbiting social service agencies, hoping for assistance), I would never offer false assurances: “Don’t worry, have faith, you’ll have health, happiness and home some day.” That would be cold comfort and cruel.

I wouldn’t want to leave the impression that most religious faith is hostile or ignorant of scientific advancement. I’m not one to claim Religion and Science can’t find some degree of dialogue and common ground. After all, we live on the same terrestrial ground and some things are quite common, like curious

thinking (we could use a lot more of that). Reasonable people of faith understand that investigating our world and the cosmos is important and that faith is not in a position to explain the laws of Nature. Scientists and believers (and many believing scientists) agree that Religion cannot claim to be scientific and Science cannot claim to be a Religion. Galileo (like Copernicus, Kepler, Newton and others) believed in a God, and no doubt felt that using his “God-given” brain and senses was honoring the Creator. He also knew that an honest investigator follows the evidence without preconceived notions of what they will discover.

The small cottage where I lived for six years in California, tucked under olive and lemon trees behind a mansion, is now on property worth over \$4 million. What has value and worth changes with time. And while there may be no mansion awaiting our final move, what we dream of, or sing of, can make a world of difference in our search for an earthly home.

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