

The Strange Case of Frank Jennings Tipler

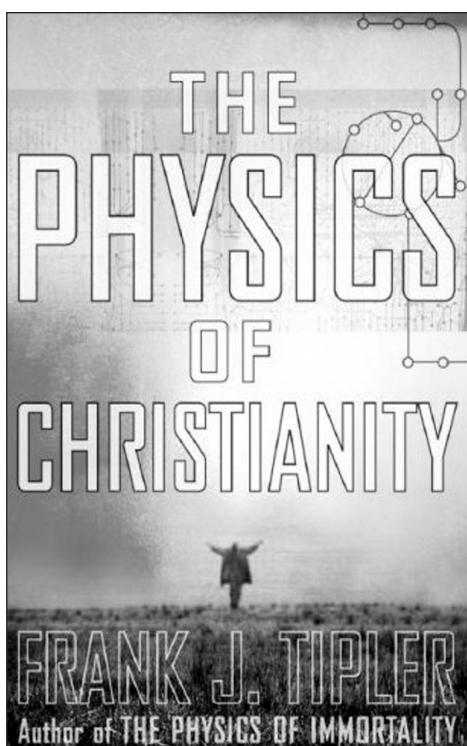
MARTIN GARDNER

The Physics of Christianity. By Frank Tipler. Doubleday, New York, 2007.
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The *Physics of Christianity* by Frank Tipler, a mathematical physicist at Tulane University, is a sequel to *The Physics of Immortality*, a bestseller in Germany before it was published here in 1994 by Doubleday. In that book, Tipler argued that anyone who understands modern physics will be compelled to believe that at a far-off future date, which Tipler calls the Omega Point (borrowing the term from the Jesuit paleontologist Tielhard de Chardin), God will resurrect every person who lived, as well as every person who could have lived! Our brains will be preserved as computer simulations and given new spiritual bodies to live happily forever in the paradise described in the New Testament.

In his new book, published in 2007 by Doubleday, Tipler goes far beyond his previous one. He claims that modern physics also provides reasonable explanations for the historical accuracy of all the central miracles of Christian faith, as well as the many alleged miracles that continue to take place, notably those associated with Catholic saints. "From the perspective of the latest physical theories," Tipler writes in his introduction, "Christianity is not a mere religion but an experimentally testable science." Roll over, Mary Baker Eddy!

It is no surprise that Tipler has become a conservative, orthodox Catholic. On page 217 he attributes



his conversion to the influence of the German Lutheran theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg.¹ "[He] spent fifteen years in a finally successful attempt to persuade an American physicist (me) that Christianity, undiluted Chalcedonian Christianity, might in fact be true and might even be proved to be true by science."

There are two ways, Tipler writes, to regard miracles:

1. They are, as David Hume famously maintained, supernatural events that violate laws of science.

2. They are highly improbable events performed by God, but without violating any natural laws.

The second view is the heart of Tipler's new book.

One can think of Tipler as a Christian version of Immanuel Velikovsky. A devout orthodox Jew, Velikovsky explained the great miracles of the Old Testament by invoking the laws of physics (see "Creationism, Catastrophism, and Velikovsky," *SI* January/February 2008). Thus, Joshua was able to make the sun and moon stand still in the sky because a giant comet erupted from Jupiter and passed close to Earth causing it momentarily to stop rotating. It also caused the Red Sea to part precisely at the moment Moses commanded it. The comet showered edible manna on Israel before it settled down to become Venus.

Velikovsky had no interest in New Testament miracles, unlike Tipler who is concerned with New Testament miracles but is silent on Old Testament ones. It would be interesting to know what he thinks about the dreadful fate of Lot's wife or the agony of Jonah in the belly of a whale. Tipler has a reasonable explanation

Martin Gardner's latest book is The Jinn From Hyperspace, a collection of essays, reviews, and fiction, published in 2007 by Prometheus Books.

for every miracle of Christianity, including those not in the Bible but infallibly validated by the Roman Church. All are caused by God, though “never ever” by abrogating any law of physics.

Tipler devotes chapter six to the Star of Bethlehem. The accuracy of Matthew’s account is never questioned. The star was not a supernatural event, nor was it a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn as some Bible commentators surmise. It was, Tipler assures us, a supernova bursting in the galaxy of Andromeda. God cleverly timed the nova so it would signal the birth in Bethlehem of his only begotten son.

Chapter seven reveals for the first time the dark secret of the Virgin Birth. It was a rare case of parthenogenesis! This is the technical term for births that lack male fertilization of a female egg. The phenomenon is fairly common among certain vertebrates such as snakes, lizards, and turkeys; Tipler sees no reason why it can’t occur in humans, and he suspects it actually does occur. He is convinced this happened with Mary. Moreover, he thinks Mary’s parthenogenesis could be confirmed by careful analysis of Jesus’s blood on the Shroud of Turin!

Tipler has no doubts about the genuineness of the Shroud. Two microphotographs of the blood are introduced, and Tipler claims that its DNA is consistent with Mary’s virginity. True, the Holy Spirit played a mysterious role in the Virgin Birth, but the birth broke no biological laws. The Bible, Tipler reminds us, implies that Joseph did not believe his young wife when she denied that any man was involved in her being with child.

All conservative Christians believe Jesus was free of the original sin that resulted from the Fall, which has been passed on to all descendants of Adam and Eve. Catholics think that Mary, too, escaped original sin. (It is a Catholic heresy to reject the Immaculate Conception.) How does Tipler explain the way Jesus and Mary differ in this manner from all other humans?

Tipler’s answer is wonderful. There must be genes that carry original sin!

This could be verified some day, he writes, by first identifying the gene. Thus, failing to find evidence of the gene on the Shroud of Turin would explain the sinlessness of both Jesus and his mother.

(I am, dear reader, doing my best to keep a straight face while I summarize Tipler’s convictions.)

Chapter seven is about Jesus’s resurrection. Here Tipler plunges into technical regions of quantum mechanics (QM). He is a firm believer in what is called the “many worlds interpretation” of QM. All I need say here about this fantastic view is that it assumes the reality of a “multiverse” that contains an infinity of universes similar to our own. Millions of these parallel worlds contain exact duplicates of you and me. Tipler quotes Stephen Hawking as saying to him that the many worlds interpretation of QM is “trivially true.”

If Hawking said this I think he meant that the many worlds interpretation is a useful language for talking about QM, but its infinity of parallel worlds are not “real” in the same way our universe is real. However, for Tipler they are very real. Denying the multiverse, he says “is the same as denying that $2+2=4$ ” (Tipler 16).

Here is a typical paragraph about Jesus’s Resurrection:

I am proposing that the Son and Father Singularities guided the worlds of the multiverse to concentrate the energy of the particles constituting Jesus in our universe into the Jesus of our universe. In effect, Jesus’ dead body, lying in the tomb, would have been enveloped in a sphaleron field. This field would have dematerialized Jesus’ body into neutrinos and antineutrinos in a fraction of a second, after which the energy transferred to this world would have been transferred back to the other worlds from whence it came. Reversing this process (by having neutrinos and antineutrinos—almost certainly not the original neutrinos and antineutrinos dematerialized from Jesus’ body—materialize into another body) would generate Jesus’ Resurrection body.

Although Tipler has nothing to say

about the resurrection of Lazarus and other revivals of the dead mentioned in the New Testament, presumably they have similar explanations.

Tipler also reveals, so help me, exactly how Jesus managed to walk on water. He performed this great magical feat by “directing a neutrino beam” downward from his feet. Similar neutrino beams account for his ascension into the clouds, as well as how his resurrected body was able to dematerialize and rematerialize. Mary’s assumption is similarly explained: Tipler recommends checking her tomb for tracks of nuclear particles that would have been generated by her assumption. Apparently, Tipler thinks her corpse floated into heaven from her tomb rather than from a funeral procession as legend has it.

Chapter nine describes how physics explains the Incarnation, and how it also can account for the real presence of the Lord’s body and blood in the bread and wine of the Catholic Eucharist.

I will spare the reader accounts of Tipler’s belief that within fifty years computers will surpass human intelligence, and how our organic brains will be replaced by computer emulations as the universe moves inexorably toward the Omega Point. When that point is reached, an evolving God will become omniscient in the sense of knowing everything that can be known and omnipotent in the sense of being able to do everything that can be done. As Thomas Aquinas taught, there are things God cannot do, such as create a world that contains logically impossible things like a triangle with four sides or a creature that is both a perfect human and a perfect horse. It is best, Aquinas adds, not to say there are things God can’t do, but that there are things that can’t be done.

Before fifty years have ended, Tipler warns us, Armageddon will be fought with weapons that will make nuclear bombs seem like “spitballs” (254). There will be mass conversions of Jews to Christianity. Tipler dedicates his book

“To God’s Chosen People, the Jews, who for the first time in 2000 years are advancing Christianity.” After Armageddon, Jesus will return in glory to reign over a new Earth. How does Tipler know all this? Biblical prophecy says so! “Before the Second Coming,” he writes (369), I would expect to see a Jewish Pope.”

For a few moments, after finishing *The Physics of Christianity*, I began to wonder if the book could be a subtle, hilarious hoax. Sadly, it is not.

Note

1. Pannenberg was born in 1928 in what now is Poland. His best known works are *Jesus: God and Man* (1968) and a three-volume *Systematic Theology* (1994), both heavily influenced by Karl Barth. At

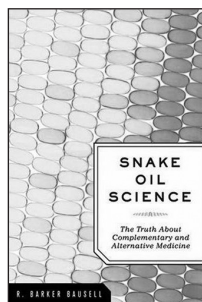
research almost always produces false positive results, that is, that the CAM therapy under investigation is effective when in fact it is not.

But just what is CAM? It is the set of practices that continues to be used in the absence of both scientific evidence that supports the practices’ efficacy and a plausible biological explanation for why they should be effective. Even worse, these practices continue to be used even after there is persuasive evidence that they are ineffective and their supposed biological basis is discredited. CAM practitioners do not value—and most, in his experience, says Bausell, do not understand—the scientific process.

Snake Oil Science is devoted primarily to the placebo effect. A placebo is a pharmacologically or physiologically inactive substance or procedure that can have a therapeutic effect if administered to a person who believes that he or she is receiving an effective treatment. To assess the efficacy of medical procedures and treatments, research must be designed to control for positive results that may be due wholly or in part to a placebo effect. The best type of research design involves random assignment of patients to a group that will experience the treatment under investigation, other patients to one or more groups that receive the placebo therapy, and another group that receives neither the treatment nor placebo. The best design also involves “double blinding,” meaning neither the researchers nor the patients know which group any given patient is in.

According to Bausell, the most obvious problem involved in integrating research on CAM is that so much of that research appears to totally disregard or to be totally ignorant of the best

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The Pervasive Placebo Effect

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Snake Oil Science: The Truth about Complementary and Alternative Medicine. By R. Barker Bausell. Oxford University Press. New York, 2007. ISBN 978-0-19-53168-0. 324 pp. Hardcover, \$24.95.

An ad in a recent edition of the *Charlotte Observer* newspaper was headlined “Treating Mind, Body and Spirit.” It touted a medical facility staffed by an MD who is a fellow in integrative medicine, an RN, and a “LAc, MSTOM” who is a diplomate of Oriental medicine. According to the ad, the facility blends “cutting-edge internal medicine with ancient and complementary therapies to deliver evidence-based holistic treatment. . . . Complementary therapies include meditation and massage, reiki and quantum touch, acupuncture, and much more.”

In the November/December 2007 SKEPTICAL INQUIRER, Edzard Ernst introduced us to The Prince of Wales’s Foundation for Integrated Health, a U.K. lobby group promoting “complementary healthcare.” And, says Ernst, the foundation has powerful support, including that of the U.K. Department of Health.

Under pressure, primarily from Iowa Senator Tom Harkin, the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) established an Office of Alternative Medicine, which became the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine. The center started funding high-quality,

well-designed clinical trials of complementary and alternative medicine (hereafter CAM) therapies. Bausell was the research director of an NIH-funded CAM specialized research center, where he was in charge of conducting and analyzing randomized clinical trials of acupuncture’s effectiveness for pain relief.

The establishment of the National Center for CAM is an interesting development in light of the CAM community’s discouragement of internal dissent based on the belief that the community was besieged from the outside and “that the validity of their therapies transcends conventional scientific methods altogether” (xii). This, says Bausell, is a contemporary version of the age-old phenomenon of the collision between science and belief.

The fundamental question Bausell addresses is whether or not CAM therapies work. The key to answering the question is the phenomenon of the placebo effect, which he considers “at least as interesting and counterintuitive as any New Age health practice” (xv). This book, says Bausell, is the first scientific evaluation of CAM. Most research on CAM has been poorly designed and executed. And poorly conducted