By Alex Makowski

MIT is being judged itself on sweeping aside the curtains that veil scientific knowledge, but perhaps intellectual heretics have been leading us astray for the past few hundred years. Once science was a noble art, its answers to questions much more straightforward than the present mumbo-jumbo of sub-atomic particles that intrudes upon the other. The time is the twelfth century, by the University, England. The lecture hall, filled with the daws astronomy class, trembles in the flickering light of two candles. Once again the attendant warns the students present not to stray outside the college walls after dark – this past Saturday eve the townspeople beat up yet another student. Then hands clap, everyone rises, and Ronald of Bath (known to present day undergraduates as Ron Bruno, MIT graduate student in physics) strides in wearing a cape and flowing gown.

The doctor's credentials are impeccable: five years of study at the University of Toledo, extended study of the works of Ptolemy, and the all-important blessings of the Church. Bidding the class be seated, he prepares his lecture notes and demonstration materials.

"Astronomy," he begins, "is undoubtedly the noblest science." It treats, for example, the noblest possible subject, the incorruptible heavens. Not the clumsy studies of medicine and law, but rather, astronomy, proving that time represents the rotation of the various spheres about a still earth.

Obviously, man's own intellect is not powerful enough to determine this knowledge without help. Divine revelation, as interpreted and forced by the Church, is an important factor, and observation itself often helps the way to new theories. We can conclusively prove, for example, that the water in the universe must fill a spherical area: falling drops of water are round, water is homogenous, so all the water in the universe must be concentrated in a round shape.

Observation and logic

Similar combinations of observation and logic prove that heavier materials tend naturally to the center of the universe within the earth sphere. A handful of sand thrown into a pitcher of water sinks immediately to the bottom, demonstrating the tendency of the heavier earth to take its proper place below the water. Does anyone doubt that the earth remains still? The doctor asked two volunteers from the class to aid him. One of them held a pencil at eye-level and sighed to a spot on the floor. The other student placed his finger on the floor directly under the pencil. When the pencil was released, it fell and landed exactly on the finger, proving that the earth remained stationary. Similarly, we can demonstrate that the earth must be round, and calculate its circumference.

Basic elements

As far as the composition of everyday material is concerned, the four inner spheres hold the four basic elements: earth, water, air, and fire (see chart). The path of a half-circle revolved 360 degrees, the sphere is the only possible form for the various components of the universe. When compared with a cube, for example, it is apparent that a sphere is the only geometric solid that when rotated always intrudes upon itself. The corners of a rotating cube sweep out areas of space the original surface did not fill. Were the constituents of the universe cubes, God's natural order would be upset when rotation forced part of the planet cube into the fixed star cube.

Order

The order of the spheres is also important, bespeaking the transition from chaos to order, from imperfection to perfection, involved in moving from the inner earth sphere through the middle spheres to the firmament. Ptolemy has well demonstrated that progression of time represents the rotation of the various spheres about a still earth sphere.

For those unwilling to trust human reason, we can examine the reliable evidence our senses provide. Occasionally, God's natural order for the spheres is disrupted, and one of them will intrude upon the other. The results are violent, as anyone who has ever seen lightning (fire) spread across the sky (air) and heard the corresponding de- scription of thunder can attest. A piece of parchment exposed to a similar area of violent intrusion succumbs and breaks apart into the three elements – earth, air ("wind"), and fire – that constitute it.

Natural plan

Here a student interrupted to demand how we humans could possibly see the planets and stars through the sphere of fire. The doctor replied that the fire sphere is invisible when confined to its natural place in the universe, only becoming apparent to the eye when drawn into another sphere.

These and similar persistent questions prompted the doctor to issue a warning, the last and by far the most important lesson of his lecture. "Reason," he explained, "can only take us so far. When our reason seems to contradict the Church, we must rely on our faith."

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