

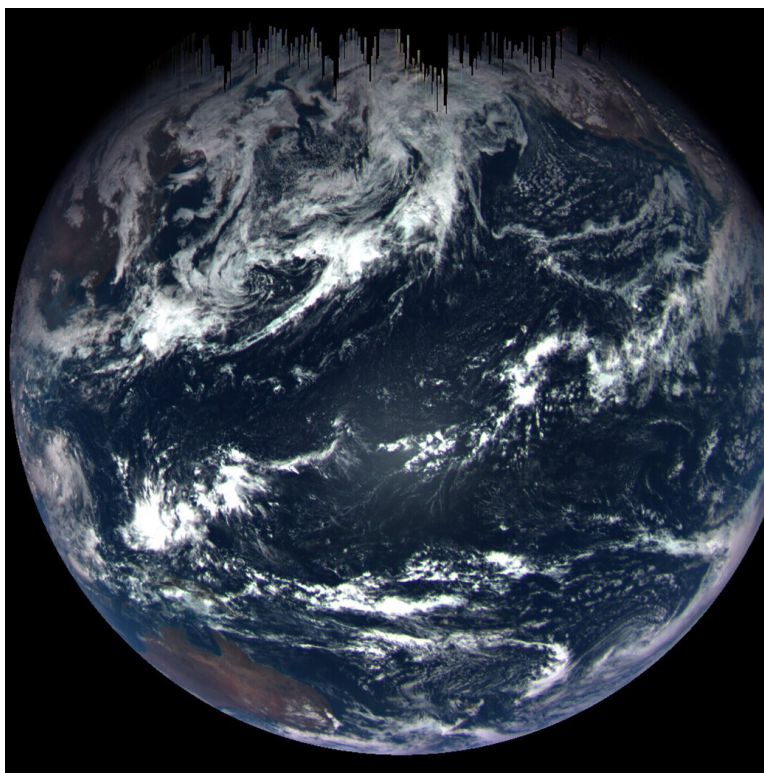
Virginia Theological Seminary

Millennials and the Impact of the 21st Century Scientific Revolution

by

Elta M. Wilson, JD, MS

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Does the recent explosion of scientific knowledge propel American millennials to relinquish their traditional religious identities and become the new “Christians in exile”? If so, why is this important, and what are its implications? Can millennials reconcile Christian faith with the impact of the 21st century scientific revolution?

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Introduction

Science drives the 21st century, and its impact now echoes in American churches as clergy confront the exodus of millennials. Examining the impact of 21st century scientific discoveries on millennials offers a different approach. Millennials struggle to integrate scientific knowledge of the universe with faith and a renewed sense of spirituality, and their needs call for a reconciliation that integrates the objectivity of science with the subjectivity of soulful, individual religiosity. It is a recognition of the mysteries of the universe.

Although many reach for ways to sustain traditional Christian beliefs within the millennial generation, there is sparse research assessing the impact of science upon millennials' religious attitudes. David Masci, editor for religious research for the Pew Research Center, notes, "Here [in the US] secularism has grown rapidly, which means it cannot be explained by generational turnover."¹ Conservative, Benedictine author Rod Dreher and op-ed contributor to the *NY Times* opined on August 2, 2017, "The most pressing problem Christianity faces is not in politics. It's in parishes. It's with the pastors. Most of all, it's among an increasingly faithless people."² It appears that established clergy have little training in science, and the issue seemingly escapes their vision. Even the esteemed collection of essays in Monahan's *Sociology*

¹ David Masci, "Q&A: A Look at What's Driving the Changes Seen in Our Religious Landscape Study," *Pew Research Center* (May 27, 2015): 2, accessed Sept 14, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/27qa-a-look-at-whats-driving-the-changes-seen-in-our-religious-landscape-study/>.

² Rod Dreher, "Trump Can't Save American Christianity," *New York Times* (Aug 2, 2017), accessed Aug 27, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/opinion/trump-scaramucci-evangelical-christian.html>.

of Religion: A Reader does not include one essay that addresses issues of science and religion.³

But all is not lost.

Although not aligning themselves with any particular denomination, American millennials are feeling more spiritual—not less. Their spirituality expresses a sense of wonder at new knowledge of the universe: “For instance, among U.S. Christians, there has been an increase of 7 percentage points between 2007 and 2014 in those who say they feel a deep sense of wonder about the universe at least weekly (from 38% to 45%).”⁴ It is this very sense of wonder that impacts the millennials so profoundly. John Spong told us in 1999 that Christianity must change or die.⁵ As the millennials drift away in droves, it becomes a matter of Christian survival. We must change, evolve, and grow with the Holy Spirit as a new sense of the universe is unveiled to us.

I. Defining Millennials

Defining millennials as those between ages 18 – 35 in the US, there are 80 million millennials in the United States.⁶ They are the biggest group of demographic decline within the

³ Susanne C. Monahan, William A. Mirola, and Michael O. Emerson, eds., *Sociology of Religion: A Reader*, 2d ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016).

⁴ David Masci and Michael Lipka, “Americans May Be Getting Less Religious, but Feelings of Spirituality Are on the Rise,” *Pew Research Center* (Jan 21, 2016) :2, accessed Oct 24, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/21/americans-spirituality/> .

⁵ John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* (NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1999), 1.

⁶ Anthony Cilluffo, “10 Demographic Trends Shaping the US and the World in 2017,” *Pew Research Center* (Ap 27, 2017) :2, accessed Sept 14, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/27/10-demographic-trends-shaping-the-u-s-and-the-world-in-2017/>; Sarah Guldalian, “The Millennials: Reflections on Reaching a Lost Generation for Christ,” *Missio Apostolica* 21, no. 1 (May 2013) :41.

US churches.⁷ Pew Research Center studies document that 1 in 3 do not identify with any religious affiliation.⁸ Those who acknowledge being unaffiliated with any church tend to remain so as adults.⁹ As a brief word of caution, these statistics appear weighted toward Caucasian millennials. Some research suggests that within the us Black churches are more able to retain their millennial members as Blacks are more closely tied to their churches by cultural expression and a sense of sanctuary.¹⁰

Observers have suggested that millennials practice a form of public spirituality. As they look elsewhere for support, millennials tend to form groups that reflect the functions of churches, yet are couched in secular terms. For example, they engage in environmental groups, creative communities, and the like.¹¹ How can we respond to these millennials?

II. US Millennials are a product of the scientific revolution and differ fundamentally from their forebearers.

Both the physical and cultural development of millennials support the beginning of a new human mind and thought process. Millennials are set to integrate both emotion and beauty with

⁷ Michael Lipka, “Millennials Increasingly Are Driving Growth of ‘Nones,’” *Pew Research Center* (May 12, 2015) :1-2, accessed Sept 14, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/millennials-increasingly-are-driving-growth-of-nones/>.

⁸ Lipka, “Millennials Driving Growth,” 1-2.

⁹ Lipka, “Millennials Driving Growth,” 2.

¹⁰ Morgan Lee, “Why Black Churches Are Keeping Millennials,” *Christianity Today.com* (Jan/Feb 2015):34, accessed Sept 14, 2017, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/januaryfebruary/why-black-churches-are-keeping-millennials.html .

¹¹ Jaco Hamman, “The Millennial Generation and the Church: Doing It Differently,” *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 25, no. 3 (Nov 2015): 162.

technology at a higher level of thought.¹² It is a visible rupture in culture and in human existence.¹³ The horizon of time itself has grown from a few thousand years to 13.8 billion years and presents the question of what existed before then, if anything, including theories of multiuniverses.¹⁴ Millennials have grown up in megacities rather than small towns.¹⁵ They are multicultural.¹⁶ They have constant access to information and the written word.¹⁷ For them the primary issue is information about what and why and is it trustworthy.

Millennials represent change.¹⁸ They are the only generation that since birth think and respond differently than generations proceeding them. Electronic methods and real-time communication define their reality while they consider outer space exploration, quantum physics, multi-universes, and space-time concepts of mindboggling billions of years. Their lives, including their religious beliefs, reflect the impact of these new discoveries. More importantly, these discoveries display the stunning humility of an enormous and overwhelming universe. Millennials of all economic strata have grown up with a visual and conscious image of planet

¹² Daniel S. Levine and Leonid I. Perlovsky, "Neuroscientific Insights on Biblical Myth: Simplifying Heuristics Versus Careful Thinking: Scientific Analysis of Millennial Spiritual Issues," *Zygon* 43 (Dec 2008): 812-817.

¹³ Michael Serres, *Thumbelina: The Culture and Technology of Millennials*, translated by Daniel W. Smith (London: Rowan & Littlefield International, 2015), 6.

¹⁴ Serres, *Thumbelina*, 5.

¹⁵ Serres, *Thumbelina*, 2.

¹⁶ Serres, *Thumbelina*, 4; Ryan T. Fouts, "Embracing Luther's Theology of *Tentatio* as a Key to Reaching the Millennial Generation," *Missio Apostolica* 21, no. 1 (May 2013):70; Sarah Guldalian, "The Millennials: Reflections on Reaching a Lost Generation for Christ," *Missio Apostolica*, 21, no. 1 May 2013, 42.

¹⁷ Serres, *Thumbelina*, 6.

¹⁸ Serres, *Thumbelina*, 2-14.

earth. Today, the lesson that all people inhabit the same planet cannot be denied. Either we all win, or we all lose.

Churches and those that research and support millennials grapple with a new paradigm. A popular writer for the *Washington Post* Zauzmer on March 30, 2017, suggested that millennials “...yearn for communal ties without belief in supernatural intervention.” While use of the term “supernatural” virtually sneers at spiritual faith and humble wonder for the mysteries of the universe, it does reflect the essence of millennials’ need for a faith that embraces scientific knowledge. As millennials grapple with the new, different issues presented by 21st century science, they correspondingly search for new, different ways to consider these issues. Both the physical and cultural development of millennials support this search as millennials integrate their scientific knowledge with personal, spiritual needs.

III. How can US Christian churches respond to millennials?

Millennials need to find Christ within their own experience.¹⁹ Although their experience encompasses the impact of science within this century, analyses of millennials have generally relied on their assessment using traditional religious values. Theological research seemingly skims over the impact of recent discoveries. Millennials find themselves grappling with a scientific revolution that profoundly and fundamentally changes the perspective of life itself. For example, the recent knowledge of the known size of our universe; a new sense of time over billions of years; the possibility of other life forms; the colonization of other planets; and

¹⁹ Andrew Root, “Stop Worrying About the Millennials,” *ChristianityToday.com* 59 no.1 (Jan/Feb 2015):36, accessed Sept 14, 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/>.

research at the smallest level of quantum physics. The impact of these discoveries upon millennials' spirituality urgently calls for research, and theological thought.

Asking millennials to return to traditional religious values assumes that spiritual truth does not change because "Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever."²⁰ This static view overlooks how our perception of Jesus and our culture have changed. Biblical passages of slavery are routinely ignored. US women can choose mates, own property, vote, and become priests. Similarly, the church has grown. Today, Jesus is seen through changes in history and acquired knowledge. At issue is whether we can sustain the values Jesus taught within the context of our current knowledge of the universe.

Change is slow as power brokers do not willingly relinquish their position.²¹ Condescending and judgmental attitudes towards millennials abound. Jeff Cloeter suggests clergy ask millennials to tell their story as if it were a panacea that would alter reality and keep them within the church.²² While we all like to tell our stories, this minimizes the genuine challenges faced by millennials.

Ryan Fouts poses a traditional approach to millennials, suggesting we simply accept the millennials engagement in godly struggle or *tentatio* as Martin Luther himself advocated. Fouts suggests reembracing *tentatio* as part of the Christian way of life.²³ While godly struggle or

²⁰ Guldalian, "The Millennials: Reflections," 42.

²¹ Serres, *Thumbelina*, 13.

²² Jeff Cloeter, "On Millennials and Story," *Missio Apostolica*, 21 no.1 (May 1, 2013): 48.

²³ Ryan Fouts, "Embracing Luther's Theology of *Tentatio* as Key to Reaching the Millennial Generation," *Missio Apostolica*, 21 no. 1 (May 2013): 63, 67.

tentatio besets everyone at some point in life, applying this approach to millennials in general ignores fundamental change in our knowledge of the universe.

Millennials function differently and think differently than Martin Luther did in the Middle Ages. Millennials are charged with integrating a time frame of billions of years, space filled with billions of galaxies, and now the very real possibility that humans are not the only advanced form of life. This presents huge difficulties and conundrums for their generation, particularly for their religious belief systems. They are the first generation to integrate knowledge of the known universe of billions of galaxies with a concept of a creator. Millennials grapple with how the human mind can expand its thought process and consciousness to consider these issues. It is a fundamental change in human thought beyond a personal, inner struggle.

Examining yet another example, the concept of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD) misdirects analysis and shuns the effort of millennials to find spiritual grace through simple acceptance of the universe and good works. While MTD does not offer a theological basis for its rather scattered beliefs and sense of inner peace, it is a basis for a deeper connection with spiritual values. This effort to integrate both science and religion calls for more than outright dismissal. As some millennials seek to find a moral path, some criticize its impact upon the tradition of faith as “parasitic.”²⁴ It is seen as an attempt to use the church as a feel-good place.²⁵

²⁴ Chad Lakies, “Candy Machine God, or, Going to Church without Going to Church: Millennials and the Future of the Christian Faith,” *Missio Apostolica*, 21 no. 1 (May 2013):15, 16, 20.

²⁵ Lakies, “Candy Machine God,” 15, 16, 20.

Other authors suggest that an older congregant “adopt a millennial” or be a “surrogate parent.”²⁶ As a parent would speak to a child, the millennials are here positioned as inexperienced, child-like, and worse, judged.

Research indicates political beliefs are the most likely reason millennials leave the church. Millennials hold a measured dislike for a mix of politics with religious beliefs. By definition, millennials are younger, and their political positions tend to be more liberal. Conservative political positions espoused within the church alienate millennials to the point of disavowing their religious identity.²⁷

The relationship of millennials to the church today is like that of the uncircumcised in the time of St. Paul when they sought to become Christians. The answer is still the same: “...if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing.” *Galatians* 2:21. It is not the place of millennials to follow the law as clergy and theologians perceive it. It is the burden of theologians to understand and support their struggle; the millennials’ burden to discern.²⁸

IV. Millennials struggle to integrate personal spirituality with scientific knowledge.

As millennials grow and mature, it is their struggle and that of human kind –a universal sense of *tentatio* --to integrate a personal sense of spirituality with scientific knowledge of the universe through substantive theology.²⁹ New eschatological issues are commonly

²⁶ Guldalian, “The Millennials: Reflections,” 46.

²⁷ Masci, “Q&A: What’s Driving the Changes,” 3.

²⁸ Root, “Stop Worrying About the Millennials,” 36.

²⁹ James A. Wiseman, *Theology and Modern Science: Quest for Coherence* (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2002), 131-132, 149.

acknowledged, yet are so enormous as to overwhelm comprehension: the demise of earth and our solar system, the expected collision of our galaxy with Andromeda, and even the collapse of the universe—all this over billions of years. It is the knowledge of something that we cannot understand. It is overwhelming.

At the most popular level, examples of 21st century scientific impact abound. On August 21, 2017, our entire nation celebrated the solar eclipse with stories carried on all media. The *NY Times* reported people traveling across the nation like awestruck tourists to get a better view.³⁰ For the first time our nation literally celebrated the position of our earth within our solar system. Another example is Osiris-Rex, a NASA probe/spacecraft. It flies to the asteroid Bennu to collect samples from the cosmos estimated at 4.5 billion years old. This is what millennials are asked to conceive of as “time.”³¹ A picture of earth, included on the title page herein, was taken by the Osiris-Rex as it traveled at 19,000 miles per hour 106,000 miles away.³² Such photos are now commonplace. There are many other obvious examples of 21st century science that permeate our culture: the International Space Station; space travel; various Apollo Missions; plans to colonize Mars; daily use of satellite connections for television, GPS, cellphones, and the www. A millennial in the US cannot avoid the impact of these discoveries.

³⁰ Henry Fountain, “A Total Solar Eclipse Leaves a Nation in Awe,” *New York Times*, August 21, 2017, accessed Aug 27, 2017, <https://mobile.nytimes.com/2017/08/21/science/total-solar-eclipse>.

³¹ Nicholas St. Fleur, “A Deep Blue Vision of Earth from an Asteroid Hunter,” *New York Times*, Sept 27, 2017, accessed Sept 27, 2017, <https://mobile.nytimes.com/2017/09/27/science/osiris-res-earth-photo>.

³² St. Fleur, “A Deep Blue Vision,” 1.

It is the struggle of millennials, their *tentatio*, to integrate this overwhelming sense of time and space within their psyches, and somehow make sense of it all. This alone makes millennials inherently different from any previous generation. Our fundamental understanding of the physical world has changed to such a degree and so rapidly that the language of the millennials, their thought processes, and their basic understanding of the world differs. It is this struggle to integrate fundamental change into their human consciousness that calls for new theological thought.

Scientists themselves seek a foundation for their spirituality within the realm of Christian dome. Here are examples of *New York Times* best-selling books, all written by nationally recognized scientists, that grapple with these issues. They are read by millions. Theological research on millennials does not appear to consider them. Alan Lightman is a professor of humanities at MIT and author of several books on science and religion. His book *The Accidental Universe* contains an entire chapter on spirituality as he grapples with a vision of God: “God is beyond the restrictions of matter and energy and scientific analysis.”³³ Lisa Randall, professor of theoretical particle physics at Harvard and among those developing the Large Hadron Collider, has written two best-selling books advocating for scientific research. *Knocking on Heaven’s Door* dedicates a chapter entitled “Looking for Answers” to a discussion of science and religion. She concludes that “People want answers and guidance that science can’t yet provide.”³⁴ Yet another distinguished scientist Francis Collins, Director of the National Institute of Health in

³³ Alan Lightman, *The Accidental Universe: The World You Thought You Knew* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2013), 50.

³⁴ Lisa Randall, *Knocking on Heaven’s Door* (New York, NY: Ecco, 2011), 66.

Bethesda, Maryland and leader of the Human Genome Project, wrote the best-selling *Language of God*. His entire book is devoted to reconciling his faith with the discipline of science.³⁵

These scientists muse on spiritual questions directly impacting millennials and their development. While clergy and theologians struggle to understand new scientific discoveries and theories, scientists seek solace by themselves, in effect taking over the role of theologians. Those clergy who do seek change are mocked, much like millennials. For example, the *Washington Post*'s opening sentence in an article covering a conference of humanist clergy smacks of condescension: "The name of the gathering almost sounded like an oxymoron: The 'Humanist Clergy Collaboratory.'"³⁶ Substantive theological thought that supports the values and beliefs of Christianity consistent with evolving scientific knowledge need not be left to scientists by default.

V. Theology is challenged to integrate personal spirituality and faith with science.

Even as austere a source as Pope Pius XII of the Roman Catholic Church has acknowledged the role of science in theology. While addressing the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on November 22, 1951, many years before humans entered space, he noted that science

³⁵ Francis Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2006).

³⁶ Julie Zauzmer, "Clergy Who Don't Believe in Organized Religion? Humanists Think 2017 Is Their Time to Grow," *Washington Post*, Mch 30, 2017. <https://washingtonpost.com/2017/03/30>. Accessed Mch 30, 2017, and Oct 12, 2017, (key word search "March 30, 2017 Clergy").

had proved the existence of God by establishing the beginning of time: “Hence, creation took place in time. Therefore, there is a creator. Therefore, God exists.”³⁷

Scholarly research suggests the needs of millennials: a religious experience without political influence,³⁸ psychological support,³⁹ a sense of actively doing right such as social justice issues or community activities,⁴⁰ and a fundamental respect for their struggle (*tentatio*)⁴¹ including listening to their stories⁴². As adults, millennials are grappling with serious issues, and need scholarly support and a theological basis for their solutions.

In his essay on “Fundamental Religious Ideas and Modern Science” written in 1909, German philosopher Georg Simmel presented a basis for the globalization of religious beliefs.⁴³ He suggested there was no conflict between religion and science if a religious person is defined as one who reacts to life in a particular way rather than structured within a doctrine. Interestingly, he notes that even in the first century, belief in the Virgin Birth and the ascension of Jesus were as contested then, as now. He opines that if religion is defined as part of one’s inner

³⁷ Pope Pius XII, “Modern Science and the Existence of God,” Pontifical address, Pontifical Academy of Sciences, Vatican (Nov. 22, 1951), para 51, Sept 15, 2017, <https://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/P12EXIST.HTM> .

³⁸ Masci, “Q&A: What’s Driving the Changes,” 2.

³⁹ Boehme, “The Church and the Culture of the Millennials: The Best or Worst of Times?,” *Missio Apostolica* 21 no 1 (May 2013) :100, 104, 106.

⁴⁰ Hamman, “The Millennials Generation and the Church,” 162.

⁴¹ Fouts, “Embracing Luther’s Theology,” 63, 65, 66.

⁴² Cloeter, “On Millennials and Story,” 48, 50.

⁴³ Georg Simmel, “Fundamental Religious Ideas and Modern Science: An Inquiry [1909],” in *Essays on Religion*, trans. Horst Jergen Helle (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1997) 3.

state of mind and the essence of one's being, rather than as actual knowledge of the world, religion becomes how the world is experienced such as through culture and emotions. One's religiosity then resembles an emotional reaction that science cannot prove or disprove.⁴⁴

On analysis, this avoids the question of how the religious experience is integrated into one's life rather than compartmentalized within an inner state of mind. Millennials are so strongly impacted by the scientific revolution of our time that they face the difficult work of integrating their religious beliefs with their factual knowledge of the world rather than settling for compartmentalizing their religious beliefs.⁴⁵

Theologians are challenged to reconcile the objectivity of science with a personalized sense of faith. Science objectifies the world and implies a sense of alienation. The universe does not recognize individuals but seemingly applies laws of physics to produce random outcomes. In opposition is the subjective perspective of faith and spirituality that nurtures the inner, emotional state of mind. It speaks to the essence of each individual—the soul that burns as the source of individual truth.

This dichotomy calls for a bridge of reconciliation, a third perspective that integrates the objectivity of science with the subjectivity of soulful, individual religiosity. In humility, it draws from the acknowledgement that the universe is beyond our comprehension, and its understanding is part of a sacred journey into the mysterious. While the universe is an integrated whole, it is not anthropomorphic, and yet, it has revealed the lives of those among us who have enriched our consciousness, Jesus, Moses, and Buddha among them. This is the path to interreligious

⁴⁴ Georg Simmel, "Fundamental Religious Ideas and Modern Science," 3-6.

⁴⁵ Wiseman, *Theology and Modern Science*, 131-132.

faith in which compassion and the call of social justice are fundamental. It points toward a general spirituality encompassing all peoples.⁴⁶ To millennials, born of the scientific revolution, the path of faith expresses “the nature of God as Absolute Mystery.”⁴⁷ Albert Einstein, from the perspective of both his scientific genius and Jewish heritage, concluded:

The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. ...A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, of the manifestations of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty, which are only accessible to our reason in their most elementary forms—it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute the truly religious attitude; in this sense, and in this alone, I am a deeply religious man.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Philip Clayton, *Religion and Science: The Basics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 62, 164.

⁴⁷ Peter C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 253.

⁴⁸ Albert Einstein, *The World As I See It* (La Vergne, TN: [Snowball Publications](http://SnowballPublications.com), 2014), 16; Also accessed Oct 13, 2017, <https://history.aip.org/exhibits/einstein/essay.htm>; Originally published as Albert Einstein, “Living Philosophies,” *Forum and Century* 84 (1931): 193-194.

Conclusion

By focusing on the impact of 21st century science on millennials, we unravel their unique perspectives and needs. Theology is challenged to integrate personal spirituality and faith with science. Jesus said, “And now Father, glorify me with your very own splendor, the very splendor I had in your presence before there was a world.”⁴⁹ As millennials experience the mysteries of creation before there was a world, let us reach for the bridge—the third perspective-- between science and religion.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ John 17:24, *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary Language* translated by Eugene H. Peterson (Colorado Springs, CO: Nav Press, 1993), 227.

⁵⁰ Levine and Perlovsky, “Neuroscience Insights”, 818.

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