

Cosmic Perspectives edited by S. K. Biswas, D. C. V. Mallik and C. V. Vishveshwara, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. xix + 249. Scope: review. Level: general reader.

Every age and generation has its own picture of the universe and of man's place within it. This paperback re-issue of the famous review edited by Biswas *et al.* examines how the perspective has evolved over the centuries, up to the original date of publication in 1989. It consists of 14 chapters by some of the foremost scientists and historians of science of their day, each tackling a separate theme.

As the editors point out in the Preface, "The contemplation of the heavens has been one of the most enduring adventures of the human mind", inspiring awe and inspiration since the earliest times and leading naturally to the growth of astronomy and cosmology. In the beginning, their main function was to support religion but gradually, as time passed, science took on an independent role and developed the world-picture that we have today. Some religions, notably mainstream Christianity, readily adapted and encompassed the new knowledge.

In his Foreword, R. Hanbury Brown points out that astronomy has always played a major part in the development of science, quoting Tycho Brahe's remark that to comprehend what we see in the sky we should look at our feet, while to comprehend what lies at our feet we should look in the sky. This is of course as true as it ever has been. There are chapters on astronomy in ancient China and India, and on the impact of astronomy on the development of Western science. Other chapters include reviews of the position and major questions in astronomy and cosmology (as of 20 years ago), the origin and evolution of life, and the anthropic principle. A full chapter is devoted to astrology, examining the evidence, and ruminating as to why it has somehow survived and still remains popular long after science had shown its central premises to be fundamentally misguided and wrong. There is also a chapter on the relationship between astronomy and science fiction. There are chapters by Hoyle and Narlikar on frontiers in astronomy, and on whether the universe originated in a big bang, respectively. I expected they would just be period pieces, but they are not. They are thoughtful, forward-looking, and imaginative, written in a context more than 20 years after the discovery of the cosmic background radiation.

Despite the huge developments in cosmology over the last two decades, and the torrent of relevant data arriving from satellite observations, it is surprising how little the underlying issues have changed. *Cosmic Perspectives* still seems almost as fresh and vital as it did when first published.

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