

HAWKING MISREPRESENTS POPE JOHN PAUL II

On June 15, astrophysicist Stephen Hawking said that Pope John Paul II once told scientists that “It’s OK to study the universe and where it began. But we should not inquire into the beginning itself because that was the moment of creation and the work of God.”

The news story said that Hawking did not say when the pope allegedly made this remark. That didn’t stop us from tracking it down, and what we found doesn’t speak well for Hawking.

Hawking, in his book *A Brief History of Time*, states on page 120 that at a 1981 Vatican conference on cosmology Pope John Paul II said that “it was all right to study the evolution of the universe after the Big Bang, but we should not inquire into the Big Bang itself because that was the moment of Creation and therefore the work of God.” Importantly, there are no quotation marks around those words and no citation is offered. Ergo, this is Hawking’s impression of what the pope said.

Here is what the pope actually said: “Every scientific hypothesis about the origin of the world, such as the one that says that there is a basic atom from which the whole of the physical universe is derived, leaves unanswered the problem concerning the beginning of the universe. By itself science cannot resolve such a question: it requires human knowledge which rises above the physical, the astrophysical, what we call the metaphysical; what is required above all is the knowledge which comes from the revelation of God.”

The pope then quoted Pope Pius XII as saying, “We would wait in vain for an answer from the natural sciences which declare, on the contrary, that they honestly find themselves faced with

an insoluble enigma.”

In 1988, John Paul said that “Science can purify religion from error and superstition; religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes.” We quoted this statement to the media, and then added that “Hawking, who claims—without any evidence—that space and time have no beginning and no end, would be wise to refrain from positing false absolutes and learn to realize when he’s out of his league. Most important, he should stop distorting the words of the pope.”

Hawking got away with his little stunt because he’s the darling of the media. They treat him as if he’s some sort of saintly scientist who can do no wrong. Indeed, the same media outlets that ran with Hawking’s erroneous account of what the pope said at the conference failed to do a follow-up story after we exposed his botched rendering of the facts.

In any event, there is a monumental difference between saying that there are certain questions that science cannot answer—which is what the pope said—and authoritarian pronouncements warning scientists to back off. Hawking should get his facts straight and refrain from putting words into people’s mouths.