

The Physics of Immortality

Frank Tipler, Professor of Physics at Tulane University. New York: Doubleday, 1994, 528 pp.

Frank Tipler, Professor of Physics at Tulane University and co-author with John Barrow of the classic *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle* (Oxford, 1986), argues that “theology must ultimately become a branch of physics,” and that, in this book, he has done so. On display in the window of this first Theological Branch Office of Physics is the following thesis:

This book is a description of the Omega Point Theory, which is a testable physical theory for an omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent God who will one day in the far future resurrect every single one of us to live forever in an abode which is in all essentials the Judeo-Christian Heaven.

The Omega Point Theory, developed at great length and with interesting sidelines (e.g., details of the actual physical mechanism of resurrection), has not thus far been well-received. Reviews in the mainstream science literature have accused Tipler of indulging himself in an elaborate joke, by

presenting a theory he does not himself believe (see George Ellis, “Piety in the sky,” *Nature* 371 [8 September 1994]: 115), or of conferring “much-craved scientific respectability on what we have always wanted to believe” (*Science* 267 [17 February 1995]: 1042-43). Tipler has also been accused of gutting theology while proposing to take it seriously, or of subtle equivocations: his discussions of theology, physicist (and theologian) John Polkinghorne notes, “often seem to trade upon verbal parallels which require much more careful evaluation” (*New Scientist*, 4 February 1995, p. 41), and fellow cosmologist George Ellis complains that Tipler’s God “does not correspond in any serious sense to what the word ‘God’ is normally taken to refer to.”

Well-received or not, the Omega Point Theory is certainly audacious. Tipler provides six testable predictions from the theory, although it is difficult to imagine that many theists will abandon their scriptures to wait for the confirmation (or disproof) of the predictions. *The Physics of Immortality* is noteworthy as the first major flowering of the postmodern sensibility in science: truth is whatever your colleagues will let you get

away with. Tipler's colleagues thus far seem ill-disposed, however, to let him get away with this book. Read it for yourself, but be prepared: this isn't Sunday School theology, where "the Bible tells me so." Here, the equations tell you so, and where they and the Bible disagree, argues Tipler, the equations must be accepted. Physics, in other words, is the main office; theology is the remote branch taking orders. Those who want their theology to keep its autonomy should be ready to argue with this book.