‘I’m not religious, but …’: The Artemis II space mission stirs something deep inside us.

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It’s been some weeks since Artemis II splashed back down to earth, but the reels are still doing the rounds on social media — especially one from a post-mission press conference where Commander Reid Wiseman said ten days in space had stirred something in his soul. Describing his overwhelm at seeing the sun eclipsed by the moon, Wiseman recounted how, back on earth, he asked to see a chaplain and promptly burst into tears at seeing the cross on his collar.

“I don’t think humanity has evolved to comprehend what we’re looking at right now”, he said. “It was otherworldly, it was amazing.”

“I’m not religious, but …” is how Wiseman prefaced his comments. It’s the exact phrase for the moment, in the wash-up of the Artemis mission, for it surfaces the internal wrestle between religious and scientific ways of knowing I suspect we all feel. We’d do well to dwell on this fix we’re in. Think of it as one small step for agnostic man, but a giant leap for spiritually curious humankind.

This isn’t to say Wiseman’s reaction was unexpected. The “overview effect” is well-documented, describing the overwhelming feelings experienced by astronauts at seeing the Earth suspended in the inky blackness of space. Space tourists feel it too, with William Shatner (of Star Trek fame) confessing to feeling grief during his 2021 space flight with Blue Origin. “I discovered that the beauty isn’t out there, it’s down here, with all of us”, he wrote later in his memoir. A sense of the Earth’s fragile splendour and its singular status as our only home compounds the remorse people feel at ecological destruction.

Such reactions aren’t necessarily religious. But the overview effect presses on dormant nerves — desensitised, say, by a pervasive scientism that claims that the scientific method is the only route to knowledge and truth. Further, people’s often spiritual reactions to seeing the Earth in its entirety are even more extraordinary, given that that extra-planetary perspective is only possible through incredible feats of scientific and

technological advancement. No wonder the overview effect prompts people to express the “I’m not religious, but …” caveat. In plenty of people’s minds, if science enabled the likes of Artemis II to slingshot around the Moon, then no divine intervention is needed — in space or anywhere on earth.

But another conclusion is possible: even if science offers up capital-t “Truth”, perhaps it’s more withholding when it comes to the whole truth. That is, science may be able to send us into space but, even so, it can only get us so far in our understanding — a perspective that can leave room for spiritual and transcendent claims.

Maybe it’s greedy to want the best of both worlds — to merge the two realms, the religious and the scientific. But what if the existential overwhelm of the overview effect betrays something about who and what we are? The overview effect often prompts people to reflect on the Earth, and the fundamental connectedness of all life upon it. But if we reverse our gaze, we might find that the “otherworldly” sense Wiseman encountered in space isn’t just found out there. It’s in us as well.

On this point, the contributions of religion and science orbit, if you like, around each other in curious ways.

In the Bible’s creation narrative, humanity is fashioned by God from the dust of the ground, making us indigenous to this good earth. “Human” derives from humus or soil, an understanding only enriched by the findings of the Human Microbiome Project — that hundreds of trillions of bacteria found in any given patch of dirt also reside within each of us.

“Dust” is our origin story, then, according to that poetic biblical account, which is different — and yet continuous with — scientific consensus that we are made of stardust. “Every atom in your body came from a star that exploded and the atoms in your left hand probably came from a different star than your right hand”, atheist physicist Lawrence Krauss writes in A Universe from Nothing. (A few lines on, Krauss can’t resist a cheeky dig: “So, forget Jesus. The stars died so that you could be here today.”)

The religious and scientific accounts suggest, in a sense, that we're the point at which Heaven and Earth meet. A mix of the earthly and unearthly.

The biblical account, however, goes further than the science will allow, by claiming that while every living thing has God's breath of life in it, humans alone bear his image and thus the special responsibility of representing God to everything else. This is the genesis of Shakespearian odes to humankind being the "paragon of animals" or, alternatively, claims of "species arrogance" that reserve for humanity alone unique perks and privileges.

On this point, science — as is said of God in biblical idiom — both giveth and taketh away. The evolutionary account of our origins grants us a peek into our own beginnings but it's one that winds up demoting human life, if attributed solely to blind, natural forces. In that case, man and woman, made in God's image, are no longer the pinnacle of creation, as in the biblical account. Instead, we're unlikely, upright apes left to create our own meaning in a meaningless universe, left to wrestle with the difficulty of reconciling what we know to be true and all that we feel about that truth.

Which is where Reid Wiseman and many of us are right about now.

Our current spiritual predicament could use some devotional material. I would opt for Samantha Harvey's Booker Prize winning Orbital, in which the "I'm not religious, but ..." moment is given novel-length treatment. In it, six astronauts on board the International Space Station continually orbit the earth and feel their love and reverence for our mother planet grow and grow.

In one scene, Harvey grapples with the strange way the overview effect casts doubt on doubt. She depicts the astronauts' reluctant belief in the insignificance of the Earth, seen from above: "Sometimes they look at the earth and could be tempted to roll back all they know to be true, and to believe that it sits, this planet, at the centre of everything."

For Harvey, the diminished status of the Earth, no longer the centre in a Copernican universe, parallels an increasing sense of our own human insignificance. Yet this heavenly body is still a stunner.

“It’s not peripheral and it’s not the centre; it’s not everything and it’s not nothing”, Harvey writes, “but it seems much more than something.”

Much more than something. The same might be said of human life too — that, to invoke the Bard again, there are more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamt of in scientism’s philosophy.

How else to explain the desires of Earth-bound creatures, the descendants of long-ago stars, to boldly go where no one has gone before. Our heads are always in the clouds, even as our feet are planted on the ground. It’s no wonder, really. If we’re embodied souls, a mingling of the physical and the metaphysical, why wouldn’t our spirits rise above the earth.

Justine Toh is Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Public Christianity and an occasional guest-presenter on ABC Radio National’s God Forbid.