

Wernher von Braun

Knowing science and religion

INSIGHT

Editor's Note: "Crossroads" asked Fr. Bradley to discuss in his Insight column his reflections on the late Wernher von Braun.

Some years ago in Washington, D. C., I was working on two interesting publishing projects. One was the preparation of a 10-volume set of books which aimed at presenting Catholic teaching in the light of the Second Vatican Council. For this project I recruited some 200 scholars in Europe and in the United States. The completed work was titled *The Catholic Layman's Library*, published by Good Will Publishers, Inc., of Gastonia, North Carolina. The other project was the compilation of a book of some 20,000 quotations titled *The International Dictionary of Thoughts*, which was published by J. G. Ferguson Publishing Company, of Chicago, a subsidiary of Doubleday in New York. Both were large and challenging projects, and the fact that they were eventually completed after seven years' work was due in large measure to the help of a small but competent staff.

One of the most rewarding experiences of this work was the opportunity it afforded me of meeting and working with many able and interesting people here and in Europe. Indirectly, and to me also surprisingly, it was the occasion for my meeting with and getting to know the late Dr. Wernher von Braun. This came about through a mutual good friend, Dr. Carsbie Adams, who arranged for me to meet with von Braun and some of his friends. Dr. Adams, who is incidentally an honorary alumnus of the College, had written a number of books, one of which he had co-authored with Dr. von Braun, and he was also very interested in the U. S. space project. I looked forward to such a meeting, for, like everyone else, I was fascinated with the space program and Dr. von Braun was, of course, at that time at the very center of it. We met in Dr. Adams' home and two other associates of Dr. von Braun, who worked with him in the space program, Dr. Fred Ordway and Dr. Fred Singer, joined us for what turned out to be an informal and most enjoyable evening.

I had expected to be regaled with first-hand experiences and inside information about the space program, and though this did enter into our conversation to some extent, it turned out that they really wanted to talk to me because of my involvement in the 10-volume

theological project in which I was then engaged. All three - Dr. von Braun, Dr. Ordway and Dr. Singer - were very interested in religion; incidentally von Braun was a Lutheran, Ordway is an Episcopalian, and Singer is Jewish. Their religious interest, however, in their talks with me did not deal with denominational affiliations but focused on the existence of a transcendent God. It certainly was a delightful experience for me to find these three first-rate scientists so anxious to discuss for many hours the notion of a Supreme Being, who could only be reached by ways that were outside the normal methodology of empirical science.

In this connection, I remember discussing one time with Dr. von Braun the difficulties scientists must have in talking about the existence of God, since we postulate that God is a Being in no way empirically verifiable. Von Braun looked at me and said, "We only know electricity by its effects. And scientists accept the existence of electricity, don't they? That's what I mean when I talk about God; we know Him from His effects." Thanks to the good offices of Dr. Adams, I met with Dr. von Braun, Dr. Ordway and Dr. Singer many times after that first meeting. When I became President of the College and moved here from Washington, Dr. Adams and Dr. von Braun visited the College a number of times.

Dr. Ordway, who is now working in the Federal Government energy program, and Dr. Singer, now a professor of Physics at the University of Virginia, also visited us here at the College over the years. During one of these visits, when Dr. von Braun came to see me here at the College, he agreed that if I could raise sufficient funds to establish as an adjunct of the College an Institute of Science and Religion, he would gladly serve as its Director. Unfortunately, the financial needs of the College in the areas of our normal operation were such then (as they still are alas) that I had to conclude that whatever money could be raised should be applied to these needs rather than to establishing an Institute of Science and Religion, helpful as such an Institute would be to the College. Nevertheless, Dr. von Braun continued to visit the College from time to time, and on three occasions spoke to large groups in Charlotte. I

remember asking him, before one of these talks, to include in his speech what he had often told me in our conversations, because hearing this from him would have a great impact on his audience. What I asked him to say publicly was this: "The more years I spend in space science, the more am I convinced of a divine intent throughout the universe." He did so, and this, together with the rest of his speech, did indeed greatly impress his audience.

I found Dr. von Braun to be a fascinating man: good company, full of humor, and enormously well versed in fields well beyond his own discipline. His dedication to space science has a message for so many people today for whom money seems to be the ultimate criteria. For many years he was paid about \$30,000 a year by N.A.S.A. All during that time he resisted the efforts of large firms who wanted to hire him at more than \$200,000 a year. He eventually left N.A.S.A., his work a success, when he was about sixty years old, to take a position with Fairchild Industries so that he could make financial provisions for his wife and his still young family. Those of us who knew him are sad that he did not have more time to enjoy his laurels, but this sadness is relieved by the conviction that he now has the happiness of seeing "face to face" that "divine intent throughout the universe" which he spoke of so often while he was with us here on earth. Belmont Abbey College is proud that he prized the honorary doctorate he received from the College in 1972, and we mourn his passing.

Thinking as I frequently do of men like von Braun, Ordway, and Singer, I find myself returning again and again to something that has intrigued me for many years. So many first-rate scientific minds seem to have little difficulty with belief in a Supreme Being. I am sure I could compile a long list of them, but coming immediately to mind are Einstein, Whitehead, and, of course, Wernher von Braun himself. I often think it's a pity that nowadays the young minds of students in colleges and universities are exposed all too often to lesser scientific minds - to instructors who tell students faith in God is an indication of weak intellectual equipment and a superstitious hold-over from medieval times. It's unfortunate that students and our society in general all too seldom get the opportunity to hear the viewpoints of the many first-rate scientists who find no incompatibility between their belief in a Supreme Being and their dedication to science.

ALUMNI NEWS

'54 - It was good to see Father Kieran Neilson when he came down from Richmond for the Theological Seminar in June.

'59 - It was great to see Mike Santore, his wife Mildred and daughters Lisa and Gina, when they visited the Abbey on July 22, the first time in eighteen years! Mike is a commercial artist and they live in Hicksville, New York.

'60 - Father Justin Bain was down for the Theological Seminar in June and it was good to see him. He is pastor of St. John's Catholic Church in Marion, Virginia. Richard Kovacs stayed a few days with us the last of July. We always enjoy his visits.

'62 - John Harrington is manager of Drug Fair in Vienna, Virginia.

'65 - Nancy and Tim Ford, Nina and Ted Bremekamp, Linda and Lenny Brown, and Jack Hanahan, who visited some of the alumni in New Jersey in July, had a wonderful shore dinner at the famous Sweetwater Casino near Tuckerton in South Jersey on Wednesday evening, July 15, enjoying the food and drink and reminiscing about the Abbey.

'66 - Alan Main stopped by for a short visit when he was in the area in June. He and Joy live in Atlanta where Alan is with Southern Bell.

NEWS ALUMNI

'67 - Chuck Sullivan will be Poet-in-Residence for the South Carolina Arts Commission during the next school year and will be living in Rock Hill.

'68 - Ken Wilburn is working on his Ph.D. in History at Oxford University, having received the Master's from the University of South Carolina. Does anyone know his address? We need a current one for him. Congratulations to Ed Toblason, who received the MBA from Rutgers University on June 2. James Carpenter is with Piedmont American Corp. of Gastonia. He and his wife, Katherine, have two children, Kathy, age 4, and Chris, born May 18. They live in Bessemer City.

'70 - Congratulations to Don Falato, who received his M.A. in Educational Administration from Glassboro State College on May 25 and has accepted a position as principal of Lindenwold Elementary School No. 1 in New Jersey. Thanks for sending this news, Trish, and for your kind words that "Don's success has merely been an extension of the excellent educational foundation he received at Belmont Abbey." They live in Berlin, New Jersey.

'72 - Congratulations to Ned Paul Carpenter, who received the CPA in May.

'73 - Enjoyed the letter from Mark Schulte, who is a dentist in the U.S. Navy stationed in Meridian, Miss. He and his wife Virginia are expecting a baby in January.

Congratulations to Rickey McCarver, who received the CPA in May.

'75 - Congratulations to Paul Brown, who received the M.A. in History at Niagara University. His thesis was "The CSCE Final Act: Reinstitution of the Congress System?"

'76 - Tom Gillespie has been elected to the Gaston County Board of Elections and appointed to serve on the Gaston County Democratic Executive Committee, taking office on July 1. Since Tom has a B.A. in Political Science, he is well prepared for this position. Glenn Lahti has his own business in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, called Glenn's Greenery.

'77 - Congratulations to Raymond Isley on the big article about him in the "Gastonia Gazette." Ray is with the Highway Patrol and is doing an excellent job. He represented Belmont Abbey College in Washington last year at the Center for the Study of the Presidency. Peter Vollkommer stopped by to say hello when he visited the Abbey in July. He has been working with John Harrington ('62) in Vienna, Virginia, but will be director of religious education at St. Joseph's Church in Capulan, Colorado, beginning August 5. Congratulations to Brian Rogers, who received the CPA in May.

IN MEMORIAM - George M. Howe, Class of 1935; Robert C. Miscally, Class of 1936, Joseph W. Cowhig, Jr., Class of 1960, Wernher von Braun, Class of 1962 (LHD)