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## What Astronomy Says About Religion

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It's a recurrent experience that never fails to perplex me: Random people will seek my advice on questions of religion. Rather than posing queries about *how* the cosmos works, they want me to enlighten them on *why*.

This sometimes occurs in the most unlikely of venues. A few years ago, when I was on the set as science adviser for the remake of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, two of the actors cornered me to ask, "Seth, we're here for a reason, right?" My response, aside from offering a glib (and undoubtedly disappointing) answer, was to wonder why they were asking *me*? This was theology, and my insights were guaranteed to be as impoverished as any proclamations I might make on fiscal policy or divorce rates in Borneo.

**HUFFPOST**

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Presumably, the folks who solicit my thoughts on the larger meaning of existence do so because astronomers deal with the whole cosmos — or at least that fraction of it that telescopes and the finite time since the Big Bang allow us to see. We routinely observe, and think about, stuff that's very far, very big, and very old. Given the tendency of many to picture God's realm as somewhere high above Earth — an idea that sounds suspiciously like the Greek stories of deities perched on inaccessible mountain tops — it may seem plausible to assume that astronomers have special insight.

Well, of course they don't. Measuring the strength of synchrotron radiation belched out of a quasar a few billion light-years distant doesn't say much about why human beings behave badly or suffer even when they don't. The *Astrophysical Journal* contains precious little data that would aid anyone preparing a Sunday morning homily.

But there is this: Astronomy may help to define the scope of theological inquiry.

This thought flickered through my brain a few weeks ago as I sat in the darkened theater of the Fiske Planetarium on the Colorado University campus in Boulder. Doug Duncan, the planetarium's director, was giving me a demonstration of the facility's new high-definition, all-dome video projectors.

At one point, he ran a short clip of a computer simulation showing how galaxies condensed out of the stringy clouds of dark matter that loop through the universe. In enormously sped-up time lapse, I could see clumps within these clouds brighten as they collapsed into stars. Massive clusters swirled and swarmed above my head, and large galaxies near their centers grew fat as they cannibalized the suns of their smaller nest mates.

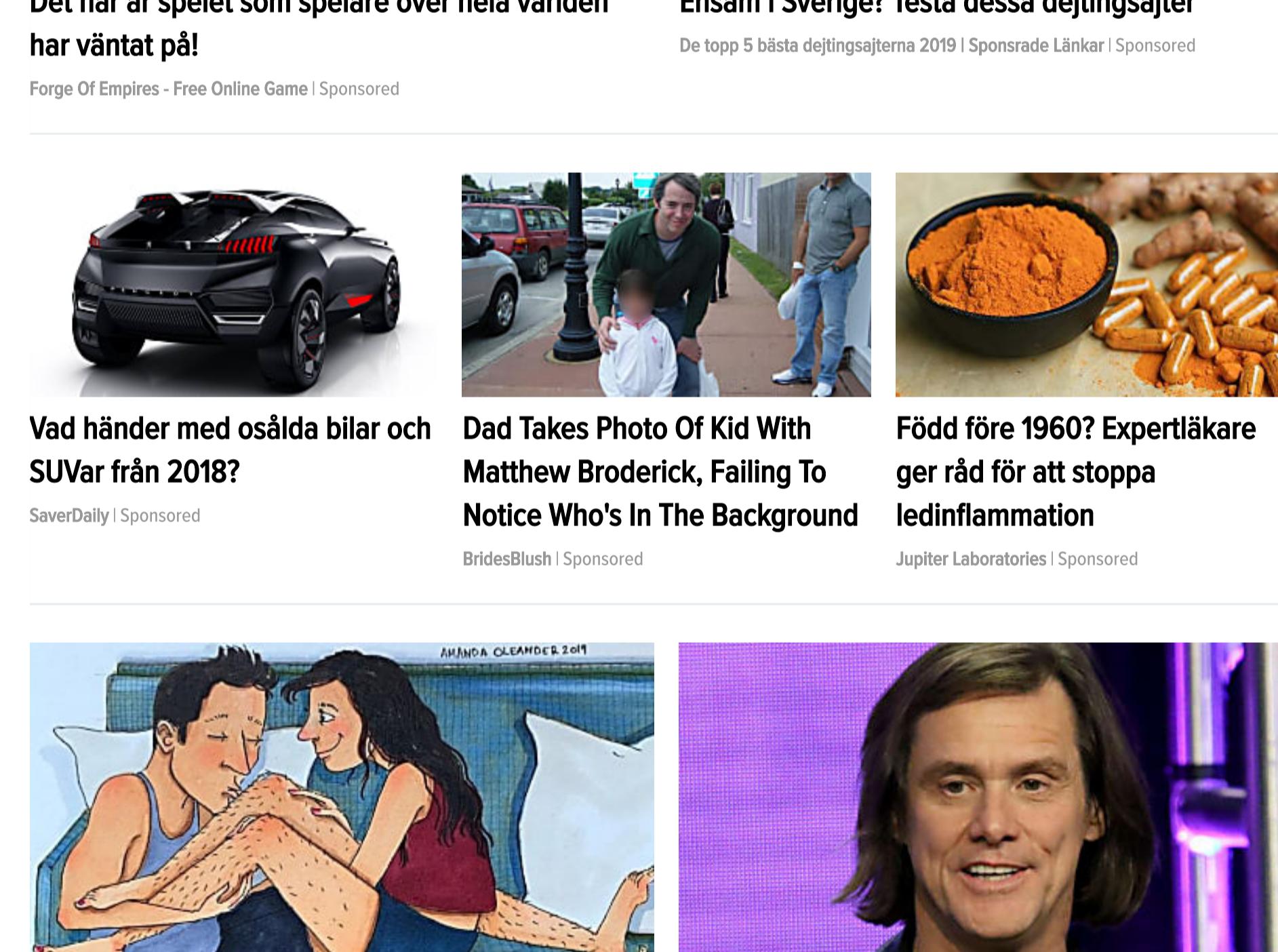
Nothing particularly revelatory there. It's all stuff you can read about in any astronomy textbook. But to see the scale of this process played out in sped-up, high resolution imagery gave me an appreciation for the enormous size and detail of this process that no written words can convey. I kept thinking that the Earth and Sun were all contained in far, far less than one unresolved pixel on that dome. Indeed, the entire Milky Way galaxy was undetectable at this scale. And of course this was a visualization of just a small section of our universe. In reality, there could be other universes — possibly an infinite number.

Bottom line: We were so ordinary as to be thoroughly invisible — as would be any other worlds, together with their flora and fauna.

So while it may be disappointing, I have to confess to people who ask for my insights on the meaning of it all that astronomy doesn't provide any clearly useful data on matters of sin and souls.

But it does offer some humbling insight into the scale of the problem. It is said that God has infinite abilities to observe, monitor, and influence. An appreciation for the breathtaking banality of our circumstances suggests just how audacious this idea is.

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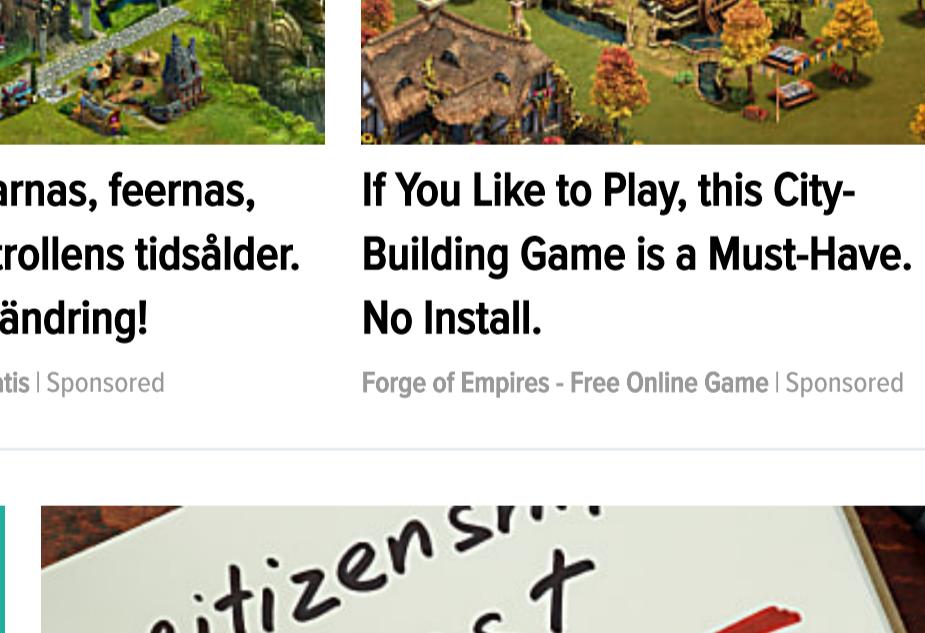
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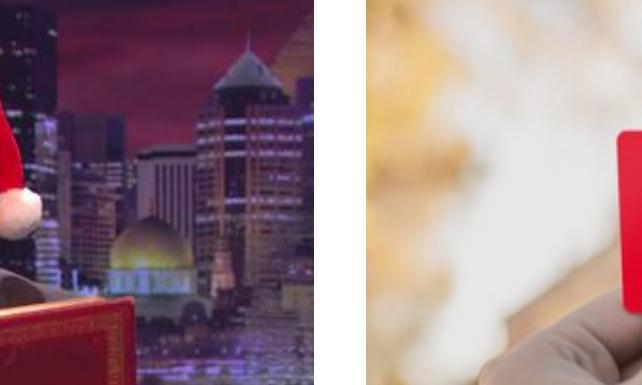
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