

# Good example of essay on james burke: the day the universe changed

[Religion](#), [God](#)



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There have been events in history during which knowledge was advanced because people questioned the status quo. Historically, much of science and technology was formed and based on religious perspectives. Governments and the church crafted institutions that fit with the prevalent and accepted attitudes of the time. However, sometimes those attitudes changed forever because of a new discovery.

## **Part I Augustine's The City of God**

Augustine wrote his massive tome titled The City of God in response to the claim by Romans that Christians did not properly support the Roman government because Christians were preoccupied worshipping God. Also at issue with the Romans was the Christian notion of forgiveness. Because Rome was suffering at the hands of her enemies, it did not appear to Roman officials that the Christian God was doing a very good job caretaking the great state of Rome (O'Daly, 1999). Augustine's The City of God defended Christians against accusations that they were responsible for Rome's problems. Augustine claimed paganism was to blame for Rome's ills. Furthermore, it was due to Christian influences that Rome still stood at all.

The rest of The City of God was devoted to chronicling history according to the Bible. Hell and paradise on earth and in heaven were discussed, and Augustine explained how people could find peace and happiness in this life as well as in the next (O'Daly, 1999). To Augustine's way of thinking, Neo-Platonist philosophy dovetailed nicely with his knowledge that God had created all of existence. Augustine explained how there were two cities of Rome, one on earth and one in heaven. They existed in these two spheres. Augustine's philosophical explanation derived from the Neo-Platonist influence on Christianity at the time. Things were divided into the tangible and the ideal. Augustine claimed that there were four parts to understanding in The City of God. Those parts were the state and the church, and the City of the World and the City of Heaven (O'Daly, 1999). In James Burke's The Day the Universe Changed, he discusses Augustine's reliance on Plato's concept of the "distinction between reality and appearance as well as between opinion and knowledge. The everyday world of senses was worthless because it was a shadow of reality, a product of opinion. True knowledge lay in the mind and consisted of the pure, ideal forms or 'ideas' of observed things" (Burke, 1985, p 20). The reassurance given to Christians that the suffering they experienced on a daily basis was temporary due to it being a product of a shadow dimension on earth was comforting. Similarly, Augustine offered comfort to Christians throughout the fall of Roman rule in Africa and into the Dark Ages with his doctrine, *credo ut intelligam* meaning, "understanding comes through belief" (Burke, 1985, p 20). This encouraged Christians to stand firm in their beliefs and put their faith in God.

## **Part II: Geometry, cartography, and world history**

Ptolemy was attached to the Alexandria Library and wrote about mathematics, science, geometry, and geography. Contrary to popular misunderstanding, Greeks and Romans had known that the earth was round. Ptolemy worked toward advances in cartography that could more accurately represent a round earth on a flat surface. He used a grid system and developed maps and mapping techniques that applied grids to locations around the globe. Ptolemy is responsible for developing the cartographic convention of due north used on maps today (Harley and Laxton, 2001). According to Burke interest in expanding cartography was “stimulated at the beginning of the century when the group of businessmen to whom Chrysoloras has original taught Greek, who had been on a tour to Constantinople in search of culture and classical texts, had returned in 1400, after shipwreck and adventure, with a copy of the greatest cartographical text of antiquity, Ptolemy’s Geographica” (Burke, 1985, p 85). Ptolemy’s work was thought lost and did not resurface for a thousand years. It was not until the 1600s that Ptolemy’s study on cartography was available in Latin. Once it had been published in a language many people could read, Geographica became extremely popular with educated people. It is estimated that there were forty different editions of Geographica printed in the 1600s and 1700s (Harley and Laxton, 2001). Geographica created a sensation among scholars because it extensively expanded their understanding of geography and mapped the entire known world. Because Geographica used a grid system that standardized latitude and longitude it was possible to map unknown locations. Burke goes on to discuss the

contributions of Toscanelli, who used geometry to give his maps metric coordinates using the grid system. This provided navigational directions to assist sailors in finding the African Gold Coast and the Spice Islands. Burke's point in detailing the works of people like Ptolemy and Toscanelli is to apprise readers of how the many things modern society accepts as givens were not always scientific facts. *The Day the Universe Changed* is Burke's effort to remind people that everything they deal with daily and take for granted in terms of technology and knowledge was generated by inquiries and discoveries thousands of years ago. The idea that all of this accumulated knowledge and science is available to students and others to study is a result of technology that is based in ancient times. Some of these discoveries literally changed everything and others were adapted to conform to the beliefs and values of the period. At times people's perception was altered immediately and at other times, it took a thousand years for a discovery to become accepted as fact.

## References

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