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Exploring our existence

Scholar turns to science to explain humanity

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Robert Lawrence Kuhn, 63, at his Pasadena home. His TV series, *Closer To Truth*, this season explores the cosmos, consciousness and God. Kuhn invites scientists, scholars and artists on the show to discuss such issues. He is the father of three and a 40-year resident of Pasadena. (Sarah Reingewirtz / Staff)

Questions of human existence, multiple universes and the meaning of God have fascinated and plagued Robert Lawrence Kuhn for most of his life.

It all started from one thought when he was just 12 years old: the question of why anything exists at all.

"Wouldn't it be easier, simpler, more logical, to have nothing rather than something?" he recounted in an article he wrote for *Skeptic Magazine* in 2007.

Kuhn not only wants to find answers for himself, but is passionate about getting others to think about these mysteries, too.

And to accomplish that, he is reaching audiences in 43 states through his television series, "Closer to Truth" for Public Television stations and affiliates. He hosts, writes and narrates his own material. The fourth season, "Cosmos, Consciousness and God," began airing in May.

"These topics are universal," said Kuhn, 63. "Humanity is well-served if we collectively think about these bigger topics, rather than the topics that divide us."

According to Kuhn, the topics of the Cosmos, consciousness and God are crucial to all of human existence.

Cosmos explores fundamental physics, multiple universes, and how and why the universe was made.

Consciousness touches on subjects of alien intelligence, personal identity, parapsychology, the afterlife and the latest breakthroughs in mind and brain research.

Discussions on God focus on the theological future, the proof for or against the existence of a God and arguments from both theists and atheists.

To gather conversations about these issues for the TV series, Kuhn travels all over the world to discuss these topics with leading philosophers, cosmologists and physicists.

He'll go wherever they agree to meet with him, taking along the camera and sound equipment. He has recorded conversations in their homes, offices or churches. He even spoke to one guest who was taking in the waters of a hot spring in Ireland.

Wendy Freedman, director of the Carnegie Observatories in Pasadena, was one of 128 guests featured on "Closer to Truth" this season. More than a decade of her work has focused on the rate of the universe's expansion. Using the Hubble Space Telescope, Freedman and a group of her colleagues determined that the earth was 13.7 billion years old.

She shared the results of their work, including supporting evidence of the Big Bang Theory, on two episodes of "Closer to Truth" — "How the universe was made" and "When will the universe end?"

"I find (Kuhn's) way of looking at things intriguing," Freedman said. "I think he's really interested in the big questions. He has a particularly unusual perspective, and we don't see a lot of that on television."

Kuhn said his aim is not necessarily to find a single conclusion to these complex questions but, as the name of the series goes, to get one step closer to truth.

"In one sense, there's no hope of knowing the final answer, but there's no avoiding dealing with the questions," he said.

Kuhn seeks information from every angle. Many of the people he interviews have conflicting theories, providing the audience with varying points of view.

"What we wanted to do was create something in a half-hour format that had the look and feel of a documentary," said "Closer to Truth" Executive Producer Andrew Walworth.

According to Alan Foster, president of Executive Program Services, Kuhn's distributor, "Closer to Truth" was meant for public television.

"The show is beautifully made, visually stunning and the content has just the sort of big ideas and smart stuff that PBS stations are on the Earth to broadcast," Foster said.

Foster's company handles only the shows that are "intellectually stimulating." But that doesn't mean "Closer to Truth" is difficult to understand. One of Kuhn's goals was to make this very complex information accessible. He said 80 to 90 percent of the material can be understood by those who may not have a college degree. To make this possible, he asks his guests questions as if he knew a limited amount on the subject.

In reality, he spends many months researching the great minds and their theories. He admits he is a little intimidated by the people on his show.

"And yet, when you get with them, it's very engaging," he said. "They're very appreciative that you're interested in their work and that you take it very seriously."

"This current series is really the culmination of everything I wanted to do in my life, focusing on cosmos, consciousness and God and having the very best people in the world (speak) on each topic," he said.

All 39 episodes of the current season are shot on location in high definition. According to Kuhn's spokesman Kevin Creamer, the cost of production for the fourth season ran \$4 million, funded by Kuhn's own foundation.

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ON TV KOCE Channel 50: 11:30 p.m. Tuesday July 21: "How Are Brains Structured?"

KCVR Channel 24: 11:30 p.m. tonight july 17: "Does God Make Sense?" 11:30 p.m. July 24: "How Vast Is the Cosmos?" 11:30 p.m. July 31: "Why is Consciousness so Mysterious?"

KCET Channel 28: "Closer to the Truth" is not scheduled to air this month.