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SETBACK FOR BRAVE NEW WORLD

The universe was not sucked into a black hole on 10 September 2008 as the result of a particle physics experiment in Switzerland, in spite of regular BBC reports in the run up to the key moment that there was a very slight chance that this would happen.

The BBC was attacked for the vast amount of coverage it had given to the experiment, and for allegedly over-hyping its significance. One columnist, Stephen Glover, writing in the *Daily Mail*, described the BBC's coverage as 'barmy' and 'utterly preposterous' and its claims as 'ludicrously inflated.' His own newspaper, however, was equally culpable, entitling one article *Are we all going to die next Wednesday?*

While guilty of a classic example of media hype, the BBC could justly claim that it was simply reflecting publicity being put out by the European Organisation for Nuclear Research (CERN) where the experiment was being carried out in a tunnel beneath the Jura and the Alps on the Franco-Swiss border near Geneva.

With an over-hyping extravagance no doubt influenced by the need to justify research costs and attract ongoing funding, CERN's own web site boasted in grandiose terms of the advance in knowledge which the experiment would bring about:

'Our understanding of the universe is about to change...'

'It (the Large Hadron Collider [LHC], the scientific instrument in which the experiment was conducted) will revolutionise our understanding, from the minuscule world deep within atoms to the vastness of the Universe.'

'What's for sure is that a brave new world of physics will emerge from the new accelerator...'

Having made itself a hostage to fortune by these statements, CERN had to issue an embarrassing press release only 10 days after the experiment, announcing that the whole project had been brought to a halt by a helium leak, probably caused by a faulty electrical connection between two

magnets, and that the LHC would be out of action for two months. The brave new world was on hold.

Although we can regret the lack of humility exhibited by scientists, the significance of the LHC experiment as a technical achievement, and as a potential gateway to new discoveries, must be acknowledged. It may prove to be as unique in its own context as Neil Armstrong's 'one small step for man' onto the surface of the moon in 1969.

What was accomplished on 10 September was the steering of the first beam round the full 27 kilometres of the LHC. For more than 20 years, physicists had been painstakingly attempting to create the conditions essential to this experiment's success. Not only had they achieved the essential conditions, but the experiment itself was a success.

Project leader Lyn Evans described the achievement as a 'fantastic moment,' adding: 'We can now look forward to a new era of understanding about the origins and evolution of the universe.'

Wait a minute – there are still significant hurdles to be overcome. Timings need to be synchronised to under a billionth of a second, and beams finer than a human hair have to be brought into head-on collision. How long it will take to achieve these targets, after the Collider is running again, is anyone's guess, but they will need to be achieved before the promised new knowledge is obtained about the 'workings of the universe' and the 'fundamental laws of nature.'

If and when that moment does come, the discoveries made will be of enormous interest to man. Although the present assumptions of the scientific establishment regarding origins are wrong, this will not invalidate any factual findings of the new experiments. What will be learned has the potential to illuminate truth, and to discredit falsehood.

Evangelicals will welcome this, not only because we know that anything truly learned will inevitably be consistent with the biblical explanation of God's creation, but because we also believe in the rightness of man's pursuit of truth and of knowledge of his world, since this is likely to make the human race more aware of the works and ways of God, and to have to adjust to the implications of those realisations.

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