# The Big Questions in Science and Religion

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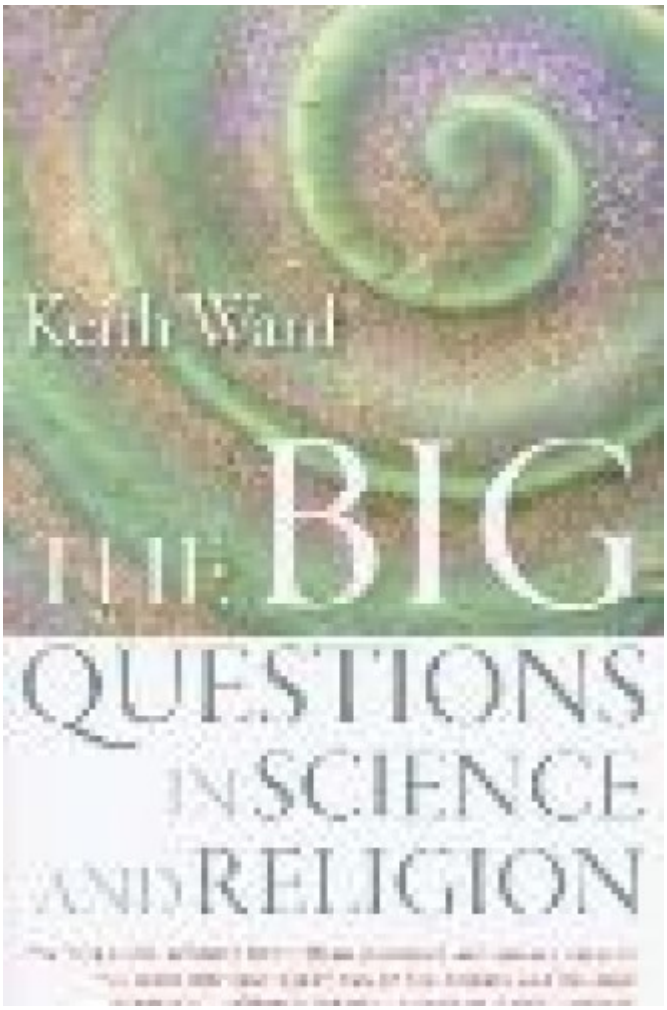
## In Review




### The Big Questions in Science and Religion

Keith Ward
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Science matters. It matters to people in our local assemblies, to people in hospitals and businesses, to students and faculty in schools and colleges: science is important. Yet religious faith has long been central to humans as well, giving meaning to billions of people. No matter how far back we go in history or how far we look around the globe, there is no known culture without a religious element. Can these two central institutions get along? Is there something at stake for faith itself in the conversation and conflict between scientific and religious ways of thinking?

Keith Ward brings a deep knowledge of world religions to this readable discussion of key issues in the dialogue between science and faith—something lacking in many other works on religion and science. As the Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford, he engaged with Oxford scientists, especially Peter Atkins and Richard Dawkins, who tout atheism in the name of science. Ward put the counterarguments he developed during those debates into book form, writing several works for a broad intellectual readership, including *God*, *Chance and Necessity* (1996).

*The Big Questions in Science and Religion* is different from Ward's earlier works. Rather than defending religious insights and issues over against scientific materialism, Ward addresses ten major questions from the perspective of a variety of religions. He covers some old ground, like evolution and miracles, but readers will find newer themes as well, such as the question of how the universe will end and issues of purpose that arise from modern scientific perspectives. His knowledge of natural science is also considerable for a nonscientist, showing that he has put many years into thinking with and listening to his fellow scholars who are natural scientists.

Readers who are unused to philosophy may find Ward's arguments too abstract or overly condensed, but the effort of working through one of the big questions with Ward pays the reward of clearer understanding of both the scientific and religious sides of the issue.

Ward's discussion of miracles is a case in point. He asserts that while it is necessary to be critical of claims about miraculous events, affirming the possibility of miracles is not the same as buying into superstition or the literal truth of mythological tales. A core question in the chapter on miracles is whether the laws of nature are absolute. David Hume argued some 300 years ago that if everything can be explained in term

of natural causes, then miracles violate scientific reason. Ward is rightly critical of Hume's account, including his biased definition of a miracle as a transgression of the laws of nature by an invisible agent. Such a definition is tendentious and already assumes a world that is determined by natural law except for the work of some hidden transgressor. It presupposes at the very least a deistic worldview.

Ward's definition, on the other hand, is much more in keeping with biblical religion and religious wisdom in general. He sees miracles as extraordinary manifestations of spiritual power, which may or may not be in accord with the known laws of nature. It is then quite proper to point out that the laws of nature understood in the light of modern science are not all-determining structures or ordering principles that some highly unlikely event could violate. Quantum theory—and, I would add, thermodynamics, chaos theory and evolutionary theory—insist that some events will be indeterminate and not controlled by initial conditions plus natural law. Modern science just does not fit the older mechanistic worldview of Hume and the deists. A broader understanding of miracles and a deeper grasp of modern scientific theory helps us see that miracles are possible and that belief in a miraculous event that is well confirmed is not contrary to scientific thinking.

Ward's learned overview is a valuable new contribution to a helpful dialogue between theology and science—a good antidote to the acrimonious debate between people of faith who are wary of science and people who oppose faith in the name of science.