

Divine Action

Divine Action

EXAMINING GOD'S ROLE
IN AN OPEN AND
EMERGENT UNIVERSE

Keith Ward

TEMPLETON FOUNDATION PRESS
PHILADELPHIA AND LONDON

The logo for Templeton Foundation Press, featuring a stylized, calligraphic letter 'T' in a light gray color, positioned behind the text.

TEMPLETON FOUNDATION PRESS • 300 Conshohocken State Road, Suite 670
West Conshohocken, PA 19428 • www.templetonpress.org

2007 Templeton Foundation Press Edition
First edition published by Flame, 1990
Preface © 2007 by Keith Ward
© 1990 by Keith Ward

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the written permission of Templeton Foundation Press.

This book is an expanded version of the Teape Lectures, given at St. Stephen's College, Delhi, Bishop's College, Calcutta; and the United Theological College, Bangalore, in 1989. I am very grateful to the Teape Committee of the University of Cambridge for its invitation to deliver these lectures.

Templeton Foundation Press helps intellectual leaders and others learn about science research on aspects of realities, invisible and intangible. Spiritual realities include unlimited love, accelerating creativity, worship, and the benefits of purpose in persons and in the cosmos.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ward, Keith, 1938-

Divine action : examining God's role in an open and emergent universe / Keith Ward.
p. cm.

Originally published: Great Britain : Flame, 1990. With new pref. by the author.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-59947-130-3 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-59947-130-2 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Apologetics. 2. Providence and government of God. 3. God (Christianity) I. Title.

BT1103.W37 2007

231.7—dc22

2007018640

Printed in the United States of America

07 08 09 10 11 12 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Preface to the 2007 Edition	vii
1. The Abyss of Reason	1
2. Divine Freedom and Necessity	18
3. The Origins of Suffering	38
4. The Integral Web	57
5. The Death of the Closed Universe	74
6. The Enfolding Spirit	103
7. The Constraints of Creation	119
8. The Particularity of Providence	134
9. Prayer as Participation in Divine Action	154
10. Miracles as Epiphanies of the Spirit	170
11. Pictures of the Divine	190
12. Divine Nature and Human Nature	211
13. The Witness of the Past	231
14. The Redemption of Time	253
Reference Bibliography	271
Further Reading	275
Index	279

Preface to the 2007 Edition

It has been twenty years since I wrote this book, which fell victim (after four days!) to a publishing takeover. Its subject remains the most central and difficult question for thoughtful Christians who are aware of the findings of modern science. What do Christians mean by saying that God acts in the world, and how do Christian accounts of God's acts fit in with the scientific worldview?

Since I wrote this book, there has been a surprising growth in antireligious thought. Books like Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* have attacked belief in God as incoherent and incompatible with a scientific outlook. Underlying such attacks is the claim that materialism is proved by science and that it is irrational to speak of a nonphysical God causing events in the world.

Some theologians have even claimed that Christians now have to adopt physicalism and reject dualism. There is, they say, only one reality, and it is physical in nature. Talk of non-physical or supernatural realities must go. If that is so, then the idea of God as a purely spiritual reality, Creator of the physical cosmos, must go too—though theologians are understandably slow to draw this conclusion.

This book is a defense of a strongly supernaturalist idea of God as a purely spiritual creator of and personal agent in the cosmos, who was incarnate in the person of Jesus, who answers prayers and performs miracles. I aim to show that this idea of God is not only philosophically coherent and wholly compatible with the findings of modern science but that it provides a more plausible account of the nature of the cosmos than does materialism.

Chapter one defends the view that God exists by necessity and is the most adequate ultimate explanation of the universe.

I argue that this stance provides a definitive answer to the misinformed question “Who made God?,” that it is a coherent and plausible view and is part of ancient Christian tradition.

Chapter two adds that God is contingent and temporal in some respects, creation adding new temporal values and relationships to God. This argument gives a positive reason for the existence of a created universe. A correction is needed to my argument on page 29, where I say that “it is possible that any, but not all, of worlds a–n exists.” I should have said that God could create any or all possible worlds, though some apparently possible worlds are rendered uncreatable because they are incompatible with God’s perfection. It remains true that, if God creates a contingent world or worlds, then God is contingent in some respect.

Chapters three to seven deal with the problem of evil, pointing to the constraints on spiritual action in a law-like, entangled, and partly indeterministic physical order. I argue that physics constructs abstract models of universal mathematically storable laws for closed systems that can be observationally verified in experimentally controlled situations. But there are also immeasurable unique, emergent, and creative events (personal and purposive actions) that are not predictable by science. A general model for Divine action is the constant pressure of Divine purpose, manifesting at key points in the interconnected causal web of history. Such acts would not form part of any scientific explanation, as God, by definition, cannot be physically detected or become subject to controlled experiment. But Divine acts must normally be constrained by the intelligible and law-like structure of the universe and also by the free actions of finite agents, which may and do impede the Divine purpose.

Chapters eight to ten deal with providence, prayer, and miracles, respectively. I defend a strong view of radical human freedom and of God’s action in history as responsive to human acts in an alienated world. Responses to prayer and miracles—extraordinary events transcending the natural powers of objects, usually mediated by saints and prophets—are natural and reasonable implications of such a general view.

Chapters eleven to fourteen deal specifically with Christian beliefs. I examine the idea of revelation as a specific sort of

Divine act (chapter eleven) and defend the coherence of the Christian idea of a unique Divine incarnation in Jesus (chapter twelve). I also examine the relationship between historical testimony and faith (chapter thirteen) and conclude by examining Christian views of the ultimate cosmic future (chapter fourteen).

I argue that the uniqueness of Jesus is best seen as a crucial point in the development of the cultural tradition of ethical monotheism within the history of Israel and Judah. His life became a unique historical paradigm for understanding the universal nature of Divine action, which aims at human fulfillment. In addition, I defend a “high” view of the incarnation, seeing Jesus as ontologically unique in being fully and indissolubly united to God from the first moment of his life.

In the course of this argument, I defend the general reliability of the Gospels and of the orthodox creeds and argue that the truth of the incarnation demands the continuing action of the Spirit in the Church as the normative sphere in which God’s action to fulfill all human lives in the Divine love can be implemented in new generations and cultures.

Reading the text again after so many years, I still think it makes a cogent intellectual case for a creator God who acts in particular ways in the world. The first ten chapters could be agreed upon by theists within Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism, as well as by Christians. The final four chapters belong to Christian theology proper. Richard Dawkins says there is no such subject. I believe I have at least demonstrated that there are fascinating and complex intellectual issues to discuss, logical connections to be made and inferences to be drawn, and an intelligible worldview to explore that is quite different from any form of naturalism or materialism.

I feel confident that materialism gives a radically inadequate account of the rich and complex world in which we live. I think, slightly less confidently, that an account that makes Spirit primary and that gives a purposive explanation for the cosmos and for many events within it is the most convincing overall worldview that we have.

I have vacillated over the “high” doctrine of the incarnation that I give here. In my book *A Vision to Pursue* (1991), I expressed doubt that Jesus infallibly said what the Gospels

infallibly recorded. I viewed Jesus as an exceptional person who was indwelt by God and mediated a particular vision of God to the world. I denied that he was identical with God from the first moment of his life, while affirming that he became, though his Spirit-filled life of obedience to the Divine will, a uniquely inspiring image of God.

This vacillation was partly because I wished to allow full rein to modern critical study of the Bible and partly because I did not wish to make Christian claims exclude the spiritual insights of non-Christians. Just for the record, I still think it important to encourage critical biblical study and to see God working, often in unexpected ways, in many different parts of human history and culture. But I now think I was mistaken in thinking this required a rejection of the “classical view” of the incarnation. What it requires is rather a more sophisticated treatment of the classical view, together with the recognition that there is more than one way of interpreting Jesus’ incarnation and that the options are not quite as stark as I made them. My present view is outlined in *Re-Thinking Christianity* (2007), chapter four, which does not repeat, but complements, the discussion in the present book.

In addition to my recent publications, there have been numerous other books that amplify the main themes of each chapter. I have listed these in the “Further Reading” section at the conclusion of this book.

I hope this book establishes that Christian belief is far from being a matter of blind or unreasoned faith. It is primarily a response to an encounter with the spiritual reality of God. It requires, at least of those who are capable of it, a sustained intellectual inquiry into the coherence and plausibility of the view of God that such personal encounter suggests.

That inquiry raises many problems concerning the nature of Divine action, especially at a time when some are claiming that science somehow rules out the possibility of such intervention. Those problems, however, are much less severe, and at least as interesting, as the problems raised by recent over-ambitious attempts to say that science—or even more improbably, some part of science like the theory of evolution—can explain everything about the world.

This book tackles those problems. It does not pretend to

Preface to the 2007 Edition

offer final solutions. I am more confident of some of my suggestions than of others, and I am keenly aware of how changeable and uncertain most views on these matters are. On the whole, though, I think that belief in a God who acts in history and who specifically is incarnate in the person of Jesus can be seen to be a belief as rational, coherent, and intelligible as any other. It also happens, of course, that I think the belief is true.

Keith Ward
Christ Church, Oxford
2007