

## Keith Ward

I wish I could say that I developed a deep affection for Keith Ward as I put this talk together, or even that I warmed to him ever so slightly. Not that I don't think he is an admirable person: it's just that he is obviously so very intellectually able that I find it rather frightening. I have a horrible feeling that if I were on the receiving end of a tutorial or seminar from him, I would rapidly be reduced to a quivering wreck and have to seek solace in the nearest pub afterwards.

He does have one strong point in his favour, however: he is a north-easterner, having been born at Hexham in 1938. I don't know if he is still fondly remembered there but he did disappear off to the University of Wales to take his first degree (he has collected a long list of subsequent degrees which I won't bore you with). He went to be a Lecturer in Logic at Glasgow University in 1964, then to lecture in Philosophy at the University of St Andrews, and subsequently held various posts at London and Cambridge. He was Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford from 1991 to 2004, and Professor of Divinity at Gresham College, London until 2008. As he says himself, he is 'an academic, with all the shortcomings that implies ... interested in intellectual problems, in arguments and theories ... [dependent] on other people for finding out facts.'<sup>1</sup> He is also a priest in the Church of England, ordained in 1972 and being made a canon of Christ Church, Oxford in 1991.

He is a fairly prolific writer, so please forgive me for not having quite got round to reading all his books in preparation for this talk. His Wikipedia entry<sup>2</sup> lists over 20, including a five volume series of systematic theology but also more 'popular' works aimed at a non-academic audience - although I think you would need to have a fairly good level of intelligence and general knowledge to get to grips with them. He says that he writes in part to correct popular misconceptions and other people's mistakes<sup>3</sup>, which might seem a little arrogant, but he does also say his books are a way of working out what he thinks himself<sup>4</sup>.

He is both a philosopher and a theologian - which perhaps makes him

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.keithward.org.uk/about> visited 30/4/2014

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keith\\_Ward](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keith_Ward) visited 30/4/2014

<sup>3</sup> *God and the Philosophers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009) p.1

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.keithward.org.uk/about> visited 30/4/2014

doubly incomprehensible and, in some people's eyes at least, doubly irrelevant. But he does manage to make them both interesting, and, at times, quite entertaining: I did quite warm to some of the chapter titles one of his books, *'God and the Philosophers'*, which includes such delights as 'Why Plato Was Not A World-Hating Totalitarian', 'Why David Hume Is Odder than You Think' and 'Why Does Everybody Hate Cartesian Dualism?' The book as a whole does give a lively and deeply knowledgeable account of how a number of Western philosophers, from Plato through to Nietzsche, have supported the idea of God as a non-material reality that underlies the material world. This idea is at the root of Ward's own philosophical approach, the concept of the universe as an expression of the mind of a supreme-being that is spirit or mind - we are all thoughts in the mind of God - but there is no radical division between the physical and non-physical world. Both are expressions of the same underlying reality, with an intelligent consciousness as the basis for the universe which human beings share in.<sup>5</sup>

Not all of his books are on such unashamedly academic subjects. The area where I first encountered him is that of what you might call popular Christian apologetics - or, to put it more bluntly, letting Richard Dawkins have it with both barrels. But he still brings the same strict academic discipline to bear in this field. In *'Is Religion Dangerous?'*, he begins by asking the very necessary question as to what we mean by religion and he recounts the story of how he was asked by a lawyer to provide a definition of 'religion'<sup>6</sup> - not for academic purposes, as you might guess by the fact that it was a lawyer asking the question, but because religions can claim exemption from various taxes and so the state needs to be able to draw the line somewhere. He explains, at great length, why there isn't a simple way of defining religion. To some extent, he accepts the charge of the atheists that we are projecting our fantasies onto the external world, saying: 'Ideas of God are imaginative projections. An idea of God ... is a construct of the imagination, not a perceived object in the external world ... because it is trying to form some image of a reality that is beyond all images. The only question is whether it is a construct that has no basis in reality, or whether it is striving to depict some sort of objective reality.' '... the roots of religious belief do not lie in attempts to explain why things happen ... [they] refer to experiences of a transcendent power and

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<sup>5</sup> Ward, K., *God and the Philosophers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009) p.40

value.'<sup>7</sup>

You will have already guessed that, having discussed what we mean by religion, the next question is what do we mean by dangerous. This may sound frivolous but it leads some interesting discussion, taking the extremes of attitudes towards the use of violence that we see in Islamist terrorism and Quaker pacifism, he demonstrates that whether these are helpful or harmful is not quite as clear cut as you might imagine. As he says, 'good and harm do not stand as self-evident and agreed truths'<sup>8</sup>. But he does also set out strong arguments against the claims of the harm caused by religion, not by ignoring where it - or rather, our interpretations of it - has caused damage to society but by arguing clearly for where it has been a force for good in the world and for the benefits it brings to individuals. He concludes 'At best, religion, the search for supreme goodness, a life lived for the sake of good alone, will help to promote the welfare of all sentient beings. Some danger is unavoidable in any human enterprise. But religion is a main driving force for wisdom and compassion in a world that would be bleak and cruel without it.'<sup>9</sup>

His writings include a number of books on science and religion. His book '*The Big Questions in Science and Religion*' does what it says on the tin, so to speak, in looking at how religion needs to be reformulated in the light of scientific discovery. What really amazed me about this book was how Ward, who is not a scientist, is able to understand subjects such as cosmology and quantum physics enough to speak about them coherently from a theological perspective - although in the introduction, he does admit to having had to check the science with the experts<sup>10</sup>. The book covers the usual subject matter such as evolution and miracles - in the latter, the question of definition again comes into play, as Ward rejects David Hume's definition of them as something outside the laws of nature, preferring to see them as expressions of the presence and power of God in the world<sup>11</sup>. Another discussion is around whether religious experience can count as 'evidence' in understanding the world, whether only what is publicly

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<sup>6</sup> *Is Religion Dangerous?* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2006) p.8

<sup>7</sup> *ibid* p.16 ff.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid* p.27ff.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* p.200

<sup>10</sup> Ward, K., *The Big Questions in Science and Religion* (Pennsylvania: Templeton Foundation Press, 2008) p.5

observable can count as 'fact' and whether science itself is value-free in how it engages with the world. He also concludes that modern cosmology could be seen as supportive of the idea of an underlying cosmic intelligence<sup>12</sup>, and here we are back to the idea of God as the mind of the universe. I think he concludes that, although religion has plenty to say to science, science does not have quite so much to say to religion, as 'science concerns itself with the publicly testable, measurable and repeatable. ... On the question of whether there are non-physical, spiritual realities that can be known by direct apprehension, the natural sciences have little to say, and, at that point, the claims of particular religious traditions need to be patiently investigated.'<sup>13</sup>

This leads us into another major area of interest for Ward: that of comparative religion: it would probably be true to say that wherever he talks about faith or religion, he does not just mean Christianity. Although a committed Christian, speaking of a definite conversion experience<sup>14</sup>, he served as Joint President of the World Congress of Faiths from 1992 to 2001 and is deeply concerned with understanding the teachings of all religious traditions and how they speak to one another, and can perhaps be seen as different paths to the same truth. In 'Concepts of God', he looks at how five major religious traditions - Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism all reveal common ideas of God as the ultimate reality we are all searching for but can never truly know in full, and how an examination of the ideas of others about God can illuminate our own, particularly if we look at those very different from our own, such as Hinduism and Buddhism. This is not a simplistic view that all faiths are the same thing really: as he says in the chapter on Buddhism, 'A Christian should not say to a Buddhist 'Ah, you are looking for God, though you do not realise it' ... But he might say' My quest for God and your search for nirvana have very deep similarities ... From my perspective ... I can fairly represent what you are doing as a quest for God, as long as I am careful to qualify my understanding of God suitably. You can represent what I am doing as

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<sup>11</sup> *The Big Questions in Science and Religion* (Pennsylvania: Templeton Foundation Press, 2008) p.87

<sup>12</sup> *The Big Questions in Science and Religion* (Pennsylvania: Templeton Foundation Press, 2008) p.216ff.

<sup>13</sup> *The Big Questions in Science and Religion* (Pennsylvania: Templeton Foundation Press, 2008) p.270

<sup>14</sup> Ward, K., *What the Bible Really Teaches: A Challenge for Fundamentalists* (London: SPCK, 2004) quoted on [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keith\\_Ward](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keith_Ward) visited 30/4/2014

a quest for nirvana. From there the discussion can proceed.'<sup>15</sup> He also recognises the inadequacy of any human thinking about God and the necessity of the use of symbols to try to find a way of expressing the inexpressible 'In their untranslatability, metaphors give us symbols, appropriate for us, of something beyond human imagining; and their clear literal falsity and lack of literal translation expresses the incapacity of the human mind to penetrate the divine reality in its essential nature.'<sup>16</sup>

Keith Ward is certainly an academic through and through, and a very gifted one, but, oddly enough, it was in a couple of his lectures that are available on the Gresham College website that I found what I, at least, thought was some real vision for the church as it seeks to proclaim the gospel in today's world. In '*Faith in a Post-Modern World*' he says (quoting Karl Marx, of all people) '... persons can only be free in relationship, so that they cannot be considered as isolated inward units.' and he goes on: 'That was, after all, true of Hebrew thought, for which any talk of individual salvation hardly makes sense. [Jesus] called people to live by the laws of justice. ... the church as the body of Christ has the vocation of making the physical and social world .. transparent to the divine presence and purpose. ... it must seek to embody ... a society committed to the rule of the divine law of love'<sup>17</sup>. And in '*Religion and the Scientific World View*', commenting on how scientific discovery has removed humanity from the centre of the universe, he says 'we are tiny parts of creation ... the universe was not created just to serve us, maybe ... we were created to serve the universe by enjoying, conserving and shaping it to actualise some of its possibilities. ... One of the purposes of human ...existence may be to extend the divine perspective itself, to be part of a new form of self-realisation of a cosmic consciousness ... which adds new significance to the Psalmist's affirmation that 'the heavens declare the glory of God.'<sup>18</sup>

This is probably a very superficial skimming of someone whose thought is both wide-ranging and of great profundity, tackling the fundamental questions of existence with humour, passion and enthusiasm as well as disciplined thinking and a real willingness to get out into the world to

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<sup>15</sup> *Concepts of God: Images of the Divine in Five Religious Traditions* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1998) p. 75

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* p.97

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.gresham.ac.uk/print/1928> visited 30/4/2014

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.gresham.ac.uk/print/1971> visited 30/4/2014

engage in popular debate. Perhaps one day I will have time to really get my brain around his work and can come back to you with a talk on 'Why Keith Ward is really not so frightening once you get to know him properly.'

### **Bibliography**

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