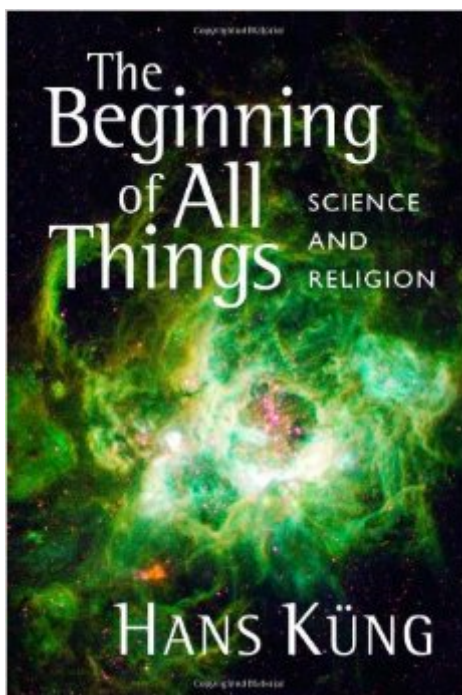


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The Beginning Of All Things: Science And Religion



Synopsis

Translated by John Bowden In an age when faith and science seem constantly to clash, can theologians and scientists come to a meeting of minds? Yes, maintains the intrepid Hans Kung, as he brilliantly argues here that religion and science are not mutually exclusive but complementary. Focusing on beginnings -- beginnings of time, of the world, of man, of human will -- Kung deals with an array of scientific precepts and teachings. From a unified field theory to quantum physics to the Big Bang to the theory of relativity -- even superstring and chaos theories -- he examines all of the theories regarding the beginning of the universe and life (of all kinds) in that universe. Kung seeks to reconcile theology with the latest scientific insights, holding that "a confrontational model for the relationship between science and theology is out of date, whether put forward by fundamentalist believers and theologians or by rationalistic scientists and philosophers." While accepting evolution as scientists generally describe it, he still maintains a role for God in founding the laws of nature by which life evolved and in facilitating the adventure of creation. Exhibiting little patience for scientists who do not see beyond the limits of their discipline or for believers who try to tell experts how things must have been, Kung challenges readers to think more deeply about the beginnings in order to facilitate a new beginning in dialogue and understanding.

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Customer Reviews

Hans Kung has been a formidable intellect in theology for many years having written over 50 books. His writing is characterized by breadth of learning. His book *Infallible? An Enquiry* (1978) led to loss

of his license to teach theology in Roman Catholic schools but did not discourage him from pushing the theological envelope. For those who regard it as important, Kung's views were never found to be heretical. Now retired from his professorship at Tübingen University, Kung turns his attention in this volume to the question whether science and religion can coexist. His answer is that they do more than coexist; they are complimentary. Kung defines complementarity as a state "between science and religion in which the distinctive spheres are preserved, all illegitimate transitions are avoided and all absolutizations are rejected, but in which in mutual questioning and enrichment people attempt to do justice to reality in all its dimensions." Kung immediately engages the skeptic's question whether he argues for an unenlightened biblical belief in a being that created the world in six days. Kung replies: "Certainly not! I want to take the Bible seriously, but that doesn't mean I want to take it literally." Kung begins with an engaging and clear tour through cosmology. He leaves nothing out from Copernicus to Newton, Einstein, Big Bang theory, Heisenberg's indeterminacy and Gödel's incompleteness. Kung's point is, not surprisingly, that science cannot account for everything. Kung draws us back to the fundamental questions about the origin of the first structures in the universe. Science may be able to explain the fine tuning of the first structures but the question remains: where did the minimal structure that already existed at the Big Bang come from? Why isn't there nothing? Kung offers God as a reasonable hypothesis that can provide intellectual answers to the questions of the beginning. In succeeding chapters Kung takes up the debate between creationism and evolution, life in the universe and the development of human beings. He includes discussion of the brain and the mind, the limits of brain research and the beginning of human ethics. Having started with the beginning of all things, his epilogue deals with the end of all things - hypotheses of the end of the universe and apocalyptic visions of the end. Kung does not set out new theories of science or religion and does not insist on one or the other as the final arbiter of reality (his term). Discussion today, like so much else, tends to polarize between those who view God as irrelevant versus the creationists and the left-behinders. Kung proposes to raise the level of discussion by invoking serious scientists and philosophers. *The Beginning of All Things* is a good starting point for clear and dispassionate descriptions of the interplay between serious science and serious philosophy/theology about the most intriguing and still unsolved mysteries of the universe and humanity.

Kung is one of the clearest theologians thinkers writing today. There are a glut of books out there promising to weigh in on some pressing issue that concerns the science/ religion controversy. I personally believe that it is a bogus issue largely fed by the publishing industry. That said, I think

Kung's book is one of the few on the subject worth reading. I have read Dawkins and Hitchens and am generally sympathetic with their views. But Kung points out that while science (and history) may have much to say about human beings and perhaps what drives religious movements, it has absolutely nothing to say about God. Kung reminds us of the often forgotten distinction between religious experience and religious organizations. This book lays out the fundamental issue more clearly than any I have encountered.

This was the first Hans Kung book that I have read, and I must say, I am rather impressed with his level of scholarship, clarity of thought, and vast scope of learning. His treatment of the interaction of science and theology was not bad, though I must confess that I did not think he was quite as good at it as Polkinghorne. However, I found that I was very disappointed with many of the conclusions that Kung reached. In the majority of issues he discusses, he ends up reconciling science and Christianity by having Christianity give up any claims it has in any area that science touches. Now, I am not advocating a literal six-day creation, or suggesting that we believe that the earth is flat, but I do think he has gone a bit far in denying that miracles happen. Whenever he perceives that Christianity and science can even potentially come into conflict, he always decides that (what he understands to be) science wins. For example, Scripture claims that Jesus performed miracles. Science tells us (according to Kung) that miracles cannot happen. What should we conclude? Well, according to Kung, we should conclude that the miracles did not happen. You would think that this would effectively undermine Christianity, but Kung tries to defend this position by making the absurd claim that the miracle stories in both the Old and New Testaments were not meant by the authors to be taken literally. It may be that Kung does not take them literally, but it is absolutely absurd to claim that the persons who wrote them, and the persons who originally received them, did not think they were to be taken literally. I found his section on miracles (pg. 151ff.) to be absolutely appalling, not because of his denial of miracles (though I do disagree with that), but because he actually tried to claim that this denial was in line with the thinking of the ancient people's who wrote and received the Scriptures. He could at least be honest and face up to the fact that his understanding of the historicity of Scripture is not the same as that of the authors of Scripture. Further, in his effort to avoid conflict, he banishes Christianity to the sphere of personal preference. He explicitly says that "no religion can dispute with others their way to salvation. Rather it is important in recognition of human freedom, especially the real freedom of faith, for each to respect its own path of faith" (p. 197). Christian teaching is no longer objectively true, but is instead a subjective understanding of the "other," which can neither come into conflict with science and history nor even competing (and

logically incompatible) religions. I think his approach to the topic is well summed up in his conclusions about the resurrection, which is central to Christianity. He says that "I do not believe in the later legendary elaborations of the New Testament message of the resurrection but in its original core: that this Jesus of Nazareth did not die into nothingness, but into God" (p. 205). In short, Kung has a lot of good things to say about the compatibility of science and theism in general. He does a very good job of showing that science has not been, nor can ever be, the cause of the death of God. However, his sections of the relationship of science and Christianity are relatively useless for someone who holds to orthodox Christianity, as he promotes harmony by demolishing the claims of Christianity so that they cannot oppose what he understands to be science. I am emphatically NOT saying that we should use Scripture as a science textbook, but I think denying both miracles and the historicity of the gospels amounts to denying the truthfulness of anything resembling historical Christianity. It may seem that I have had little good to say about a book I gave four stars. Let me emphasize that a good portion of this book is actually quite helpful. Those parts have already been written about in the previous reviews here. I simply wished to focus on the parts which previous reviewers have not. This is not a terrible book, as long as you understand what understanding of Christianity Kung is bringing to the table with him. If you disagree (as I do) with his liberal Christianity, then parts of it (the parts which I have mentioned) will be relatively useless and probably aggravating to you, but there is still a significant amount of good, well thought out work to be had in it. Overall grade: B.

Hans Kung happens to be my favorite theologian. He writes very readable books, epitomizes a huge amount of scholarship, and offers brief and perceptive summaries of points of view hostile to his own. I think this is one of his best books. For all who labor in the vineyards of the conflicts between science and religion, this will be not only a very helpful book, but a very enjoyable one to read.

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