

EXCERPT

IVP Books

Can a Scientist Believe in Miracles?

An MIT Professor Answers Questions on God and Science

September 11, 2018 | \$20, 288 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-4547-7

Plasma physicist Ian Hutchinson has been asked hundreds of questions about faith and science: Is God's existence a scientific question? Is the Bible consistent with the modern scientific understanding of the universe? Are there scientific reasons to believe in God? In this comprehensive volume, Hutchinson answers a full range of inquiries with sound scientific insights and measured Christian perspective.

A Spiritual Journey of God and Science

I have not found Christianity and science to be contradictory communities. And I have not found valuing of revelation and experiment to be mutually exclusive. Because their dogmas are obviously different, and because they sometimes engage in topics in which the opinions and commitments of both are important, there are puzzles and challenges. And as I grew in my understanding of both communities, I encountered these puzzles and tried to work out thoughtful and considered positions whereby the commitments of both of the communities are honored simultaneously. This process involves a kind of intellectual wrestling: wondering about the principles widely recognized within my communities, and their interpretation and application; trying to see ways in which the different dogmas interact so as to produce a fuller and more persuasive explanation of important questions; examining areas of apparent, or real, conflict and trying to develop pathways that lead to peaceful cooperation, rather than angry denunciation. Within the communities of Christianity and science there are people who hold to dogmas that *are indeed* incompatible. There are Christians who think that an essential part of the faith is that the world is just a few thousand years old. Similarly, there are scientists who think that reductive materialism is an essential part of science. I think both groups are mistaken, and I take appropriate opportunities to explain to each group why I think so.

This process of integration and reconciliation led me to yet broader appreciation of human learning. Being a Christian has engendered in me a greater interest in intellectual matters I might not otherwise have taken seriously. History is no longer for me the torture it was as a schoolboy. And that is in part because I see the significance and relevance of history in my Christian faith. A deeper knowledge of the history and philosophy of science, beyond the logic of the disciplines themselves, I find fascinating and of enormous help in better understanding the relationships between the communities.

Although I have never had a deep crisis of faith—strongly suspecting that Christianity is all a terrible mistake—I regularly have doubts. I can with the greatest of ease muse upon the possibility that Christianity is false, as an intellectual exercise. I can and do think about *what if* questions that propose alternative explanations for both the historical evidence and my own personal experiences. What if the witnesses made it up? What if Christians down the ages have been kidding themselves? What if I was imagining the sense I had of God's call? Doubts like these are part of thinking: evaluating and comparing different possible hypotheses to explain the events of the world and of our experience. What is more, *critical thinking* is the attempt to evaluate questions objectively, recognizing the interests at stake and the predispositions, both my own and other peoples', and trying to set them aside or compensate for them. Faith is the partner of critical thinking, maybe even its result, not its enemy. True faith is bred by thinking through the possibilities, wondering what makes most sense. I have thought through a lot of questions about my Christian beliefs over the years by this process, with help from writers and others who have gone before me. And I have come to a stable place in what I believe. I understand the issues and I can rest in equilibrium and act on the basis of it. The same can be said of the science I know and hold true. And the equilibrium, in both scientific and religious matters, can justifiably be called faith.

As I was steadily growing to understand better the relationships between science and Christianity, and working out my own integration of their truths, I found that other people around me were interested in and exercised by the same questions.

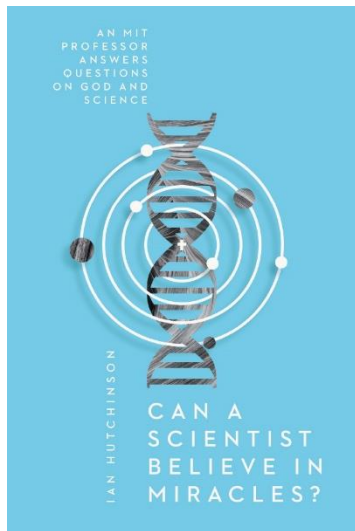


Alisse Wissman, print publicity
800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or awissman@ivpress.com

Krista Clayton, broadcast and online publicity
800.846.4587 ext. 4013 or kclayton@ivpress.com

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Written by some of academia's brightest scholars, **Veritas Books** provide thoughtful, joyful Christian engagement with particular academic debates as well as broad issues of culture and faith. Embodying the values and mission of The Veritas Forum, Veritas Books provide academically engaging, culturally relevant and distinctively Christian points of view about world-shaping ideas, moving readers toward a clearer understanding of truth and restoring the centrality of Christ to both academic and vocational pursuits. See ivpress.com/veritas-books.

And I began to be invited to share with different sorts of groups, Christians and non-Christians, the ways that I think about things. This encouraged me to devote more attention to the questions, and a positive feedback loop developed. Because I was a very active scientist, having during most of my career taken on demanding leadership and administrative roles, thinking about science and the Christian faith was for me, in effect, a hobby. But it was a hobby that became more than merely personal, as I increasingly was invited to speak on the subject to university audiences and the public.

A particular type of venue that appeals to me arose through what are called Veritas Forums. These are a type of event generally organized by students on their local campus, where the *big questions* of life are addressed in the context of the academy in a way that is sadly uncommon as part of the regular academic curriculum today. The various Christian groups who are interested in these questions generally constitute a nucleus and invite other types of groups, such as the local secular or atheist organizations, to participate in engaging with spiritual, religious, or ethical questions in respectful dialogue. The invited speakers, like me, give some context and lay out ideas, often representing opposing (e.g., religious and secular) viewpoints, and then lots of questions are addressed. There is a relatively small central Veritas Forum national organization that coordinates with the local forum organizers and helps the students with logistics, speaker referrals, advice on best practices, and so on. The organization recently celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary, and the events it sponsors have gathered amazing momentum during the past ten years or so. Altogether about one hundred forums are held each year, with scores of different speakers. Many of these forums have audiences of more than a thousand people.

Over the years, I have participated in dozens of forums. I find that the most interesting part of the forum is usually the audience questions. The questions from one dialogue partner to the other are also fascinating. The questions are sometimes truly informational, people genuinely simply wondering how one can make sense of a puzzle in anticipation that there might be a good answer. Sometimes the questions are polemic, asked from a belief that they do not have a good answer, and that that fact argues against the opinion the speaker represents. My hope is that both the questions and my answers will help you to think more deeply and clearly about these vitally important matters.

—Taken from chapter one, “A Spiritual Journey”

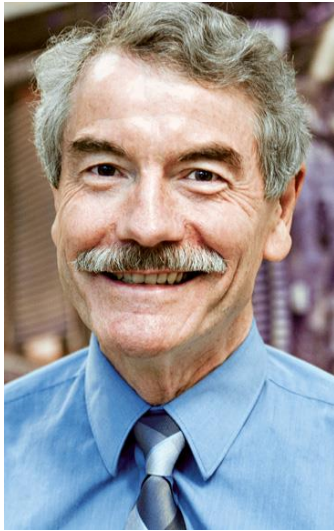


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Ian Hutchinson is a plasma physicist and professor of nuclear science and engineering at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He was born in England, educated at Cambridge University, and received his doctorate from Australian National University. His research group explores the confinement of plasmas hotter than the sun's center, aimed at producing practical energy from nuclear fusion reactions, the energy source of the stars. A frequent Veritas Forum presenter, Ian has written and spoken widely on the relationship between science and Christianity.

Real Questions About God and Science

Why are these questions about God and science so important today?

Ian Hutchinson: This book addresses the questions that today's students actually ask about the relationship between the Christian faith and science. There is a desperate need for orthodox, evangelical Christians to understand what science does and does not show about the world, and for them to come to peace with science. There is an equally desperate need for young people with no religious commitments to hear a scientist explain the limits of science and the relevance of Christianity to help them take Jesus seriously.

What is the thesis for *Can a Scientist Believe in Miracles?*

Ian: This book gives respect both to the compelling evidence that supports the claims of orthodox Christianity and to the established description of the natural world that science has developed. Emphasizing that science is *not all* the knowledge there is, it explains both the similarities and differences between science and Christian belief. And it argues that the presumed contradiction and warfare between them is based on a myth.

What is unique about the way this book is laid out?

Ian: The distinctiveness, beyond the specifics of the answers, lies in structuring the book around questions actually asked by the audience in forums on this topic. The result is a kind of dialogue that enables the audience to identify with the questions.

What do you hope readers will take away from your book?

Ian:

- Science gives powerful, true knowledge, but there is much to know beyond it.
- Christian belief is reasonable and supported by evidence, but the evidence is mostly not scientific, in that respect, it is like many other disciplines.
- Christianity for centuries was a strong partner and supporter of natural science, in contrast to the myth of warfare so often accepted by both sides of the science-religion debate.
- There are good intellectual answers to the questions and puzzles that surround the relationship between Christianity and science.
- Given that, one ought to take Christianity seriously on its own terms.



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