

*Einstein and Religion*, by Max Jammer

reviewed by [Greg Peterson](#) in the [May 3, 2000](#) issue

As a symbol of scientific genius, Albert Einstein the public icon has had as great an effect on 20th-century thought as his theories have had on modern science. Einstein is famous not only because he developed a new theory of gravity, but also because he was a Jewish refugee who fled Nazi Germany and a pacifist who nevertheless felt compelled to write the fateful letter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt advocating research into making an atomic bomb.

Both Einstein the scientist and Einstein the public icon are the subject of Max Jammer's *Einstein and Religion*. As a onetime colleague of Einstein and emeritus professor of physics at Bar-Ilan University in Israel, Jammer is an excellent guide to the religious impact of Einstein's life and thought. The book's three long, overlapping essays explore Einstein's personal development and beliefs, his public remarks and writings on religion, and the potential theological implications of his scientific work and its impact on theology and the philosophy of religion.

The story of Einstein's childhood and religious development makes fascinating reading. Born to nonobservant Jewish parents, Einstein was influenced by Catholic school catechism lessons occasionally counterbalanced by instruction in the Jewish faith. As a teenager, Einstein read popular science books as well as the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. These generated in him a period of religious skepticism and "freethinking," eventually answered by Spinoza's religious philosophy. Einstein found the greatest religious inspiration in music, an art form that profoundly influenced him throughout his life.

As Einstein's fame spread and his reputation for genius grew, his opinion increasingly was sought on the subject of religion. The interaction between Einstein and the American public provides a fascinating glimpse of American culture up to and through the cold-war period. Jammer makes clear, however, that Einstein's comments on religion frequently satisfied no one and that his creed was too individualistic and nonconformist to fit into the prearranged battle lines of Western culture. Rejecting both atheism and traditional forms of Christianity and Judaism, Einstein saw God as an impersonal designer who was the source of beauty and

intelligibility in a completely deterministic universe.

Jammer carefully unpacks many of Einstein's famous epigrams. Einstein's comment that "science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind" and his statement that "God doesn't play dice with the universe" are, Jammer argues, not simple quips but deeply revealing commentaries. While such statements could easily be reconciled with traditional Christian and Jewish theism, Einstein's denial of a personal God, an afterlife and any link between religion and ethics often provoked negative reactions. Jammer carefully documents these reactions, ranging from those of prominent theologians like Paul Tillich to ordinary people writing letters to newspapers.

Einstein's scientific work has also elicited theological reflection. His relativizing of simultaneity, for instance, has called into question ideas of human free will and divine foreknowledge. His contributions to cosmology, quantum mechanics and field theory have spurred theological discussion. Unfortunately, Jammer's detailed analyses of these subjects sacrifice clarity for precision. The discussion becomes too technical for those without a background in physics or philosophy.

By the end, the book makes clear both how much and how little Einstein said about religion. It is indeed remarkable that the leading physicist of our time spoke so frequently about religion and felt so competent to do so. At the same time, Einstein's convictions changed and developed little during the course of his life. He recited the same minimalist creed at 50 that he had at 25. One sees here the limits of genius, capable of great insight across several disciplines but sometimes lacking in nuance and development. But as Jammer demonstrates, the story of religion in the 20th century is incomplete without considering the views of the century's greatest scientist.