

## Review

David Wilkinson, *When I Pray What Does God Do?* Oxford: Lion Hudson PLC, 2015. 222 pp. (Pbk). ISBN: 978-0-85721-6-045, £8.99.

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The pace at which scientific discoveries are being made, and the technological uses that are made of them, has done nothing but accelerate. Unfortunately, theology – almost by definition done by persons who are members of a most conservative institution not known for being an “early adopter” of novelty – has failed to keep pace in its own development. Professor Wilkinson's book provides some needed correction to this disparity in two ways. First, he presents some of the new science and reflects on it theologically. Second, aware that there remains much we do not understand about our world and how it operates, he models a posture of humility rather than rushing in with certainty.

In fact, persons expecting to find “The Answer” to the question posed by the book's title are likely to come away disappointed. Professor Wilkinson presents a two-fold offering instead. First, this book is a very personal account of how he has wrestled with this question. Second, he posits instead that the prior question that needs to be addressed is not, “What does God do when I pray?” but rather, “Who is the God I am praying to?” and “Given what I've experienced of life on this Earth, how do I expect God to respond to my prayer?” It is very easy to gloss over these questions, especially in the face of one's own unanswered prayer and the needs that drive it. Yet these prior questions are absolutely critical to resolve before attempting to describe what God does when we pray. Chaplains with clinical experience will have any number of encounters with persons who decided God does nothing in response to their prayers and who failed to take the time to work through their images of “God” and perhaps develop a new image of God in light of experience.

The first chapter presents the early part of Professor Wilkinson's spiritual journey: how to be a whole, integrated person, a theoretical astrophysicist

who is a Christian. The second chapter presents seven images of God in popular Christianity and suggests some of the ways in which they are unhelpful or inconsistent with the biblical account of God. Chapter three offers his interpretation of several biblical passages and how God responds to the pleas of the people. Chapter four moves through definitions, defining and distinguishing terms such as, “laws of science”, “miracle” and “sign”. Attention is paid to how miracles are to be understood – as biblical stories to be taken seriously held in tension with what science offers as a description of the way the world around us works. Here Professor Wilkinson begins to delve more deeply into the question of who God is, and reflects briefly on the contributions of process theology and pantheism to that topic. Much of the forgoing is based mostly, if not entirely on a Newtonian world view (or even pre-Newtonian). Chapter five begins to bring the quantum science and chaos theory into the conversation with “openness theology”. Openness theology, Wilkinson argues, offers a way to simultaneously take seriously the Bible, the latest science, and the reality of evil and suffering. Chapter six begins to delve into questions of how we might pray in light of our faith and science, using the Lord’s Prayer as a way to structure his thoughts. The final chapter offers Professor Wilkinson’s reflections of his own spiritual quest for an answer to the question, “When I pray, what does God do?” Rather than provide simplistic answers, he provides “cautionary” guideposts to be aware of so that prayer remains grounded in Christian biblical faith and allows us full use of our God-given minds.

Professor Wilkinson is writing at a level for thoughtful people who do not possess doctoral degrees in the sciences. This is a vital niche to fill, yet presenting the science in greater depth would have enhanced some of his points without moving it out of the intellectual grasp of most people in the pews. There is more to quantum theory than saying it focuses on electrons, neutrons and protons, and that it’s impossible to simultaneously know both where a particle is and how fast it travels. While this uncertainty allows him to wonder if God’s activity takes place in this uncertainty, one wonders what more the science of the very small might also have in theological implications. Likewise, it is difficult to do justice to the theological ideas present in a few pages. Process theology, for example, is dealt with in three short paragraphs and dismissed as a philosophy rather than a theology in the next chapter. Yet process theology is in many aspects one of the friendliest approaches to science – and his presentation of openness theology as an alternative is not sufficient to really engage its tenets without reading additional works by other authors. Despite these shortcomings, this book makes a solid contribution to the conversation between faith and science. Healthcare chaplains, who have their feet firmly in the world of medical

science and their faith groups, and who face questions about the reality of evil and unanswered prayer, are in a prime place to facilitate the dialogue between faith and science. This volume would be suitable for group discussion within a congregation, or in a clergy group, for example, facilitated by a chaplain. It may also provide a needed framework for chaplains who find themselves engaged by a health care professional or perhaps a patient who wonders about the relationship between faith and science. When the territory is unfamiliar, it helps to have a map, or at least a description, by someone who has travelled the route before. Whether one agrees with how he reaches a conclusion to his initial question or not, Professor Wilkinson provides a model for engaging the question, and a model of maintaining a level of humility and willingness to live in the tension between the quest for knowledge and what remains a mystery. These models alone are a significant contribution to the conversation.