

Book review

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Scott A. Davison *Petitionary Prayer: A Philosophical Investigation*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Pp. 208. £50.00 (Hbk). ISBN 978 0 19 875774 0.

Scott Davison is Professor of Philosophy at Morehead State University in the United States. This book deals with a number of philosophical puzzles concerning petitionary prayer and does so with the philosophical tools employed in the kind of analytical philosophy of religion flourishing today, especially in the United States. In writing this book, Davison not only discusses the current analytical literature on the subject, but also profits from extensive correspondence with fellow American analytical philosophers of religion who have dealt with the issues he wants to address.

The main question addressed in the book is hypothetical: ‘Assuming that the God of traditional theism exists, is it reasonable to think that God answers specific petitionary prayers?’ (5). In the first two chapters Davison describes the theoretical framework within which he aims to deal with this question. He sets out the limits within which he wants to deal with it and the key conceptual distinctions that play a role in his argument.

‘One of the primary purposes of petitionary prayer, according to those who practice it, is to influence God’s action in the world, and that purpose is the focus of attention in this book’ (7). Davison admits that petitionary prayer can also serve other purposes, some of which he touches on in chapter 9, but the main focus of the book is on this one.

In order for an event to count as an answer to petitionary prayer, this prayer must provide God with a conclusive reason to bring about the event rather than not doing so. God could also have various additional reasons for bringing about the event, but the prayer must provide the conclusive reason without which God would not have brought about the event. The prayer must as it were ‘tip the scales’ in making God decide to bring about the event rather than not doing so. The main part of the book is devoted to a detailed discussion of a number of challenges to the claim that petitionary prayer can in this way provide a conclusive reason for God to bring about an event rather than not doing so. Davison focuses

on three such challenges and the various ways in which philosophers have tried to respond to them: (1) a challenge connected with God's freedom and rationality (chapter 3); (2) a challenge connected with some epistemological considerations (chapters 4–5); and (3) a challenge connected with divine goodness (chapter 6). Chapters 7–9 discuss some further defences of petitionary prayer and chapter 10 summarizes the conclusions of Davison's argument.

The first challenge has to do with the relation between divine freedom and rationality. According to Davison there are 'impressive reasons for traditional theists to be strong libertarians with regard to divine freedom with regard to some actions' (48). Does God have such libertarian freedom in deciding whether or not to answer our petitionary prayers? According to Davison God, unlike us, is essentially rational and is therefore not free to refrain from actions when he has conclusive reasons for performing them. If our prayers provide God with such conclusive reasons, he cannot refrain from answering them. This means that God does not have libertarian freedom with regard to answering our prayers.

The second challenge is epistemological. If God brings about an event for which we have prayed, we can never know whether he did so because of our prayers or for reasons unrelated to our prayers. Since God does not inform us about his reasons for bringing about specific events, we remain agnostic about God's mind and therefore we can never know whether our prayers have been answered by God.

The third challenge has to do with intercessory prayers. In such prayers God's goodness does not allow him to make his helping one person depend on the prayers of another. Davison explains this as follows.

Suppose that person P suffers from an illness, that S offers petitionary prayers for P's recovery, and that God answers S's prayers by healing P. Would God have healed P even if nobody had prayed for this? Surely God knew about P's situation, and cared about P more than anyone else did, and knew that it would be good for P to be healed. . . . But if God would have healed P even if nobody had prayed for this, then S's prayer made no difference, and hence was not answered after all. (97)

This brief summary provides some indication of the main issues dealt with in the book but hardly does justice to Davison's detailed analysis of these challenges and his critical appraisal of the various attempts to answer them. In the end Davison concludes that 'nearly all of these defences face serious if not crippling obstacles' (23). The book is clearly written, well-argued, and could usefully serve as a textbook for an undergraduate seminar in the philosophy of religion.

I do, however, have a major difficulty with Davison's concept of divine agency. He admits that 'there is concurrence, which refers to God's cooperating with the activities of every created thing' (12). However, he fails to draw the consequences of this for his account of divine agency in answering our prayers. He seems to treat God as a causal agent on the same level as human agents, rather than as a primary

cause who always acts through secondary causes. In other words, God does not heal the sick directly. He does so indirectly by enabling and motivating (or inspiring) the doctor to do so. In this sense our petitioning God to heal someone is not on a par with our asking the doctor to do so. Furthermore, as Davison correctly argues, we cannot 'know' that God healed the sick in answer to our prayers in the way we can know that the doctor healed the sick in answer to our request. Nevertheless believers can and do with the eyes of faith interpret the healing as a gracious act of God in answer to their prayers: if God had not enabled and inspired the doctor, the patient would never have been healed. Therefore thanks be to God for answering our prayers!

Here especially Davison is correct in recognizing 'that my main question is a philosopher's question, divorced from the specific beliefs and practices of most people who pray regularly in a petitionary way' (5).

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