Book Reviews

"Miracles-true stories of how God acts today" by Geoff and Hope Price
Published in 1995 by Macmillan
ISBN 0 333 62683 4
Reviewed by Kevin de Berg, Avondale College, 1999.

If you are at all sceptical about modern miracles this is a book you must read. Written by two people involved in Christian Ministry in the United Kingdom, the book records a variety of extraordinary things that have happened to people in a variety of settings. The book examines miracles in the Family, in the Bible, during War, in Holy Places, in History, in Relationships, in the Local Church, in Business, in Creation, and also considers how one should relate to a situation when a miracle doesn't happen. One of the strengths of the book, in my view, is that it focusses not on the miracle itself but on how the Holy Spirit nurtures spiritual growth in the lives of those affected by the presence or absence of miracles. One gets the impression from reading the book that miracles are not an odd event in the life of a Christian. They, in a sense, flood the life of a Christian. This view, however, is balanced by a chapter that deals with the situation when miracles don't happen. Probably the content of the book can be summarised in one small paragraph at the end of Chapter 2:"We cannot understand why God chooses to act in some circumstances and not in others. We must leave that question to Him. However, what can be recorded is that when God does act, it brings joy and life to people living ordinary lives." This is a book worth reading because it challenges the view that 'miracles' are not for the contemporary church.

"Science and Providence, God's Interaction with the World" by John Polkinghorne
Published by SPCK in 1989
ISBN 0-281-04398-1
Reviewed by Lynden Rogers, Avondale College, 1999.

This book completes the SPCK trilogy introduced by "One world" (1986) and "Science and Creation" (1988), and is the first of Polkinghorne's books to apply the modern understanding of the physical world, particularly insights from quantum mechanics and chaotic dynamics, to what have been the exclusively religious domains of Divine Providence and human volition. That this association is a fruitful one is attested by the many interesting

constructions generated along the way, including a model for petitionary prayer which offers new insights on the old chestnut: What is the use of praying if God knows your needs and those of everybody else better than you do, particularly if He wants the best for all anyway and has absolute power with which to accomplish it? Is prayer just a divine soliloquy as C.S. Lewis once attested?

Polkinghorne maintains that there is genuine ontological (not just epistemological) freedom in our universe, some of which may be expressed through the fundamental indeterminacy now noted by physics at both the microscopic and macroscopic levels. According to the argument developed, ours is a multi-layered universe where different causalities interact. At the bottom level is the ultimately statistical causality with which nature was initially endowed by a variety loving Originator. It is with this realm that science has been largely concerned. Above this, yet in harmony with it, is human causality, a gift of such significance that a freedom loving Creator would Himself die to preserve it. Higher yet is the ultimate causality, that of God's own action, which Polkinghorne maintains to be one of constant "interaction" with His universe rather that periodic "intervention" in order to produce what are often called "miracles". (Polkinghorne does not see much use for the traditional categories of "natural" and "supernatural"). The interaction of these causalities will generally be difficult to trace, particularly for non-linear systems where the slightest perturbation can produce a disproportionately large result. Polkinghorne suggests that perhaps one purpose of Scripture is to enable us to see God at work in this way where we might otherwise find his footprints hard to discern.

This book displays the customary mastery of language and clear thought which makes reading or listening to Polkinghorne a pleasure, even if one has to pause once in a while to let it all sink in. The author is a Fellow of the Royal Society, a former professor of Mathematical Physics at Cambridge, and at time of writing was President of Queens' College at the same university. At 100 pages this is a short, but a very well worthwhile read, particularly for science students who may have wondered how all of this counter-intuitive theory could possibly have anything to do with the problems in their lives. It may just turn out to have a quite a lot to do with them!