David Wilkinson


David Wilkinson is uniquely placed to write a book such as this, with a doctoral qualification in theoretical astrophysics—he is a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society—and one in theology. He is a Methodist minister and is a member of the Department of Theology and Religion in Durham University. He is also the Principal of a theological college. With a long-standing interest in the relation of science and religion, his focus in this book is on the end of the physical universe, on which he explores the possibility of a fruitful dialogue between cosmologists and theologians.

Wilkinson’s exploration is wide-ranging. The book has eight chapters, followed by a short conclusion and a very brief appendix on different kinds of millennial theology. There is a good subject index and a comprehensive index of modern authors. At the outset he declares the centrality in the discussion of bodily resurrection: not only is it fundamental to Christian theology but it is the key idea in the Christian contribution to the dialogue about the future of the physical universe. God will neither ‘fry the Universe to total annihilation’ nor ‘stand idly by as it freezes in a heat death of billions of years.’ (ix)

Chapter 1 is a statement of the author’s intention to take seriously the insights of both science and theology to the end of the universe. It is a topic that has come to preoccupy many people in a wide range of ways. Chapter 2 charts contemporary scientific thought on the subject, with its various scenarios and main lines of speculation: eventual collapse or eternal expansion of the universe. There are also other views about multi-universes and bubble universes but these ‘present a scene of occasional islands of meaningfulness erupting within an ocean of absurdity’ (17, quoting Polkinghorne).

Chapter 3 is a survey of theological responses to this set of cosmological predictions and speculations and a criticism that so few theologians have responded with any serious attention. The theologians of hope, from whom most might have been expected, have rarely attempted to think beyond God’s future for humankind. Their eschatology is either too ‘earth bound’ (29) or insufficiently aware of the detail of cosmological theories. Moltmann and Pannenberg both fail to deliver. Others, with more detailed scientific knowledge (Peacocke, Polkinghorne, Russell), disappoint at the level of theological development.

Chapter 4 looks attentively at biblical images of the future; theology worthy of the name cannot evade this responsibility. The discussion of the Parousia is especially interesting: theology has to reckon with some great future event.
occurring in space and time but transcending it, a sovereign act of God which
opens the way to new creation (66). It must be allowed that the God who in
creation gives regularity to the universe may exercise his freedom to act in ways
that go beyond those regularities (69). Wilkinson sees the ultimate future not in
terms of the universe’s destruction but in terms of new creation. New creation
is the concept on which his entire argument stands.

Chapter 5 explores the implications of the resurrection for theological spec-
culation about the future of the world. Only a view of resurrection which in-
cludes its physicality will do. Wilkinson takes the explicit New Testament pas-
sages about resurrection to imply new creation, the transformation of the ‘stuff’
of this world. In a key phrase, the relation between the creation we know and
the new creation is one of ‘tension between continuity and discontinuity’. This
chapter is the theological centre of the book, and its ideas are, to this reviewer’s
mind, of great importance.

Chapters 6 and 7 are no less interesting but more challenging for readers
whose expertise is in theology rather than cosmology or astrophysics. The
first of these deals with space-time in creation and in the new creation. In
relation to the latter, new categories of thought are needed; perhaps only
narrative, the stuff of Scripture, will suffice. In any case, our everyday notion
of cause and effect is much too simplistic. The seventh chapter is equally
stretching, but also very stimulating: about the future of matter. Quantum
theory has led to the construction of a world very different from the one of
most people’s understanding; even Dawkins gets a serve (139)! Nothing can
be understood except in relation to its environment, and the constituents of
nature have to be understood as much in terms of their relations as in their
own terms. God’s action in this universe has to be understood ‘in the context
of mass-energy-pattern-information’ (140). Wilkinson’s point is that, because of
the resurrection, ‘matter will be transformed’; ‘there is a future to the physical
Universe of atoms, photons and macro-structures’ (157).

In the final chapter, which includes an extended discussion of the biological
world and new creation, in particular animals and new creation, Wilkinson’s
drives home his conviction that this is an open universe, that new creation
is possible as an act of a sovereign God, and that this alone is truly hope-
giving.

This book is a demonstration of the possibility (and the importance) of dia-
logue between science and religion. Wilkinson rejects the other three of Bar-
bour’s models of the relation: conflict, independence and integration. Whether
scientists will be receptive to this kind of theological contribution is a moot
point, just as it remains to be seen whether theologians will generally endorse
Wilkinson’s theological presuppositions. He is right, nevertheless, to put for-