

tions and influences that do not appear compatible with scientific models and because it touches upon the dark or shadow side of human nature, Dossey succeeds in this book. It has sufficient scholarly depth of historical and scientific research to satisfy or at least competently address the intellectual resistance against acknowledging that there is a legitimate question here. In addition, and with both facility and humility, he reveals and treats the emotional reactions (“I was simultaneously deeply moved and horrified.”) that keep the topic of toxic prayer and negative intentions buried away from inspection.

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Be Careful What You Pray For... You Just Might Get It. What We Can Do About the Unintentional Effects of Our Thoughts, Prayers, and Wishes by Larry Dossey, M.D. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1997. 256 pages. Hardcover \$22.00. ISBN 0-06-251433-4.

Prayer is part of our mental and emotional landscapes. “Say one for me, Rabbi;” “I’ll keep you in my prayers;” “I’ll remember you at Mass”—these are just a few familiar ways that believers (and sometimes, bet-hedging non-believers) bridge the gap between the material and spiritual realms. But can thoughts, feelings, intentions, and desires — in short, our subjective states — actually have an effect on God? And when other people are the focus of our invocations, where is the dividing line between intercession and imprecation?

This book’s catchy-yet-elaborate title and subtitle tip the author’s hand as to his philosophical position. Physician Larry Dossey believes that there is a connection between the “spiritual” and “material” worlds, existing within the human person and extending beyond to society and to God. Quite naturally, this leads to the question: What to do about it?

Dossey is also the author of *Healing Words* (1993). In the Introduction to *Be Careful...* he explains that this book is a response to some vehement condemnatory letters he received in response to *Healing Words*. Apparently, some readers charged that the experiments Dossey had done on the efficacy of prayer were heretical, blasphemous, and sinful. Given the contemporary cultural ambivalence toward organized religion, big science, and the corporate-culture of health care, this is a book that was begging to be written.

For the most part, Dossey succeeds in untangling some popular culture, ancient rituals, arcane theological data, scientific research, and old wives’ tales concerning these matters. He writes clearly and with common sense. The possibility of “negative” prayer, and its implications for the pray-er and effect on the pray-ee, also fall within the scope of this book. The lines between prayers and wishful thinking, positive thoughts and blessings, certain psalms and hexes can sometimes be blurry. What really complicates matters is when

prayers, especially “negative” ones, appear to “work.” Dossey gives ample evidence that the answer is “yes,” negative prayers can work.

Be Careful... is divided into five parts, and outlines how our ancestors, contemporary thinkers, physicians, and others grapple with prayer, especially “negative” prayer. For me, the most satisfying section was the last, wherein Dossey looks back over the mountain of “evidence,” stories, anecdotes, scientific papers, or as he calls it, “data,” and seems to relax. I mean, it’s an awful lot of material he’s assembled. I recalled that it only took Anselm one sentence to prove the existence of God (the “greater than I am able to think” business), and here there is a paper trace a mile long to prove... what? That prayer “works?”

Personally, I believe that it does, but Dossey does not “prove” it, any more than Anselm or Aquinas “proved” the existence of God — at least not to people who do not want to believe it. For faith is, after all, faith, not knowledge.

In the final analysis, Dossey successfully defends himself against detractors, which he started out to do; he also demonstrates his sanity. As a matter of fact, he sounds serene at the book’s end.

I have one reservation: the author covers so much ground that sometimes one is left with the contradictory feeling that the book is both too long and too short. To cite just one example: just when he gets going on one topic, *i.e.*, the understanding of the dark side of man’s soul as propounded by Augustine in genetic terms (“The Urge to curse: our genetic shadow,” p. 137), he drops it and moves on. But that is a danger of such studies that strive to be both scholarly and popular. Fortunately, Dossey’s extensive bibliography offers ample extra reading for those inclined to dig deeper.

At the conclusion, the reader is left holding a handy reference and a compendium of insights and questions about the inevitable conflicts associated with the human condition. Some readers may even grow in wisdom about that oft-crowded corner of human existence where we hope to “wrest the will of God to ours.” In addressing all seekers after power and/or truth, however, this book suggests to me that the most profound, and, ultimately, fulfilling prayer that a human being can ever utter is that of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Not my will, but Thine, be done.”

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Einstein, History, and Other Passions by Gerald Holton. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996, xii + 240 pp., \$19.95 (p) ISBN 0201 407167.

Since the Enlightenment, there has been a general belief that science and technology are, on balance, positive forces. More recently, however, there has been what Gerald Holton calls a “Romantic rebellion” against science, a ten-