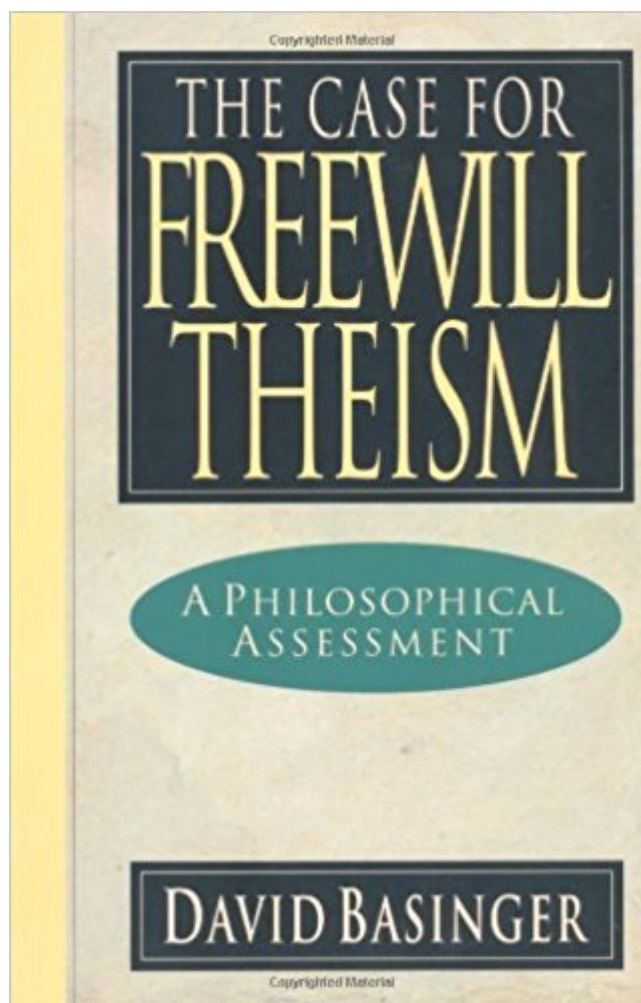


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The Case For Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment



Synopsis

Can God intervene in this world? If so, to what extent can he intervene? If God intervenes, can we initiate such intervention by prayer? And if God can intervene, why is evil so persistent? Taking up such practical and profound questions, David Basinger (a coauthor of the much-discussed book *The Openness of God*) offers a probing philosophical examination of freewill theism. This controversial view, put forward most prominently by Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker and Basinger, argues that the God of Christianity desires "responsive relationship" with his creatures. Freewill theism, or the "open view" of God, rejects process theology, but calls for a reassessment of such classical doctrines as God's immutability, impassibility and foreknowledge. In *The Case for Freewill Theism* Basinger continues the debate by focusing attention especially on divine omniscience, theodicy and petitionary prayer from the freewill perspective. His careful, precise and compelling argument contributes to a growing and important discussion among orthodox Christian philosophers and theologians.

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Customer Reviews

At the time he wrote this 1996 book, David Basinger was professor of Philosophy at Roberts Wesleyan College in New York. He has also written or edited *Predestination & Free Will* and *Divine Power in Process Theism: A Philosophical Critique* (SUNY Series in Philosophy), as well as one of the essays in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*. He states in the Preface, "If God can and does intervene in our world, what should we say when a child is born with physical or mental abnormality, when a volcano kills over twenty thousand people, or when starvation takes the lives of millions? Are these occurrences part of God's will? Or does God, as much as we, wish that such things did not occur? The primary purpose of this book is to outline the manner in which proponents of one important theological perspective, which I label 'freewill theism,' conceive of the relationship between God and the world and thus respond (or at least attempt to respond) to questions such as these." Here are some quotations from the book: "God is never SURPRISED. Nor need he ever rely on LUCK or take any RISKS. God, rather, can unilaterally guarantee that all and only that which he has determined should occur in our world will in fact come about. Freely chosen human activities simply function as desired building blocks in God's preordained creative plan." (Pg. 29) "Consequently, it should not be surprising that, unlike theological determinists and limited compatibilists, freewill theists maintain that to the extent that God grants individuals freedom, he gives up complete control over the decisions that are made." (Pg. 33) "Hence, in order to allow us to consider some important issues on which there does remain much to be said, I am also going to assume that there is no necessary incompatibility between divine foreknowledge and human freedom." (Pg. 42) "(Freewill theists) deny that such (prophetic) utterance requires that God have such knowledge. They maintain, rather, that all prophetic utterances can be interpreted as one of the following: an announcement ahead of time that what God intends to ensure will occur, conditional prophecies that leave the outcome open or predictions based on God's exhaustive knowledge of the past and present." (Pg. 51) "Unlike theological determinists, freewill theists do NOT believe that God can unilaterally ensure that all and only that which he desires to come about will in fact occur in our world. They maintain, rather, that since God has chosen to create a world in which we possess significant freedom and since we can be significantly free only if he does not unilaterally control how this freedom is utilized, God voluntarily forfeits total control over earthly affairs in those cases where he allows us to exercise freedom of choice." (Pg. 107-108)

David Basinger offers his readers an incisive and well-argued defense of basic freewill theism, generally, and open theism more specifically. He cogently argues that if human beings possess

libertarian freedom, then God's providential activity in the world must be risky. He goes on to show that advocates of simple foreknowledge, middle knowledge, and present knowledge all share a common commitment to an understanding of God's relationship to the world that is more dynamic and responsive than what one finds with theological determinism while avoiding the excesses of process theism. But not all varieties of freewill theism are equally promising. Basinger shows that advocates of simple foreknowledge must admit that such a view of omniscience is providentially useless. Basinger suggests that a rejection of foreknowledge in favor of present knowledge is more promising for those who want to make adequate room for God's providential activity in the world. No less controversial is his argument to the effect that those who hold to middle knowledge (Molinists) must accept that God does take risks. Against both William Hasker (who is also an open theist) and William Craig (a Molinist) Basinger argues that if God has middle knowledge, then when using it God cannot ensure that a given outcome will occur in a given possible world that God chooses. This follows because of the nature of libertarian freedom. Basinger also has stimulating chapters on the problem of evil, divine benevolence, and petitionary prayer. This is probably the best work on this topic that is accessible to those new to the debate over divine and human action. But it will also be of great interest to intermediate and advanced readers. (For a more detailed review of Basinger's work, see my review of it published in *Philosophia Christi*, vol. 20:2 (Winter 1997)).

I would not recommend this book for anyone who is looking for philosophical reasoning for free-will theism. Furthermore, I would not recommend this book for anyone who is looking for Biblical reasoning for free-will theism. I believe the book is incorrectly titled as it does not present the case for free-will theism, giving no apologetic reasoning for free-will. Rather, this book highlights different philosophical and theological positions concerning free-will theism. Basinger identifies various free-will positions, describing their logical possibilities, and their various interpretations of theological ideas (i.e. God's foreknowledge). I would recommend this book for anyone who is interested in understanding the thinking behind a free-will theist. Basinger finds a way to slither out of orthodoxy by describing logically alternative ways to interpret scripture. Basinger left me with a notion that truth is somewhat arbitrary and can be selected based on your particular bent. I found Basinger to give no direction for truth, only justification that each view is plausible. My interpretation of Basinger is that we choose our position based on its logical appeal, then interpret the Bible under the context of that appeal, each view equal to the next. I would highly recommend Martin Luther's "The Bondage of the Will" for anyone interested in the debate. Luther's style and content is diametrically opposite of Basinger's and should be a good counter to whatever Basinger has to say.

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