

**The Uncontrolling Love of God:
An Open and Relational Account of Providence**

by

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Introduction

Not too long ago we didn't have many choices regarding models or concepts of God. Classical theology with its understanding of God as a timeless unmoved Mover, being both impassible and immutable, was about all the options there were. This kind of God was removed from the temporal flux of creation, and was conceived of as being essentially non-relational. The future was seen as closed in all respects, having been exhaustively predetermined by God in a manner that was both coercive and unilateral. At least that was how sovereignty was interpreted. God was the consummate micro-manger, controlling everything in the universe. Reformed author R. C. Sproul went so far as to assert that if even one electron was out from under God's sovereign hand then God was no longer sovereign. The result was that everything that happens in the universe, for good or for evil, was irresistibly caused by a God whose ways are beyond our understanding. Theodicy was shrouded in mystery as how a loving and powerful God could cause or allow evil acts to take place. Classical theology was blueprint theology and was the main if not only choice in theological articulation of the Christian Faith. It was regarded as simply *Christian Simpliciter*.

In the postwar years evangelicals began to question some of their theological assumptions about God. The biblical witness of a God who genuinely interacts with His creatures, is affected by their obedience or disobedience, who grieves and repents, became increasingly at odds with conventional theology replete with its divine "attributes." First the writings of Alfred North Whitehead, and then Charles Hartshorne, later John Cobb, Schubert Ogden and others began to give shape to philosophical and theological concepts of God which was far more patient with the living and dynamic portrait of the God of Scripture, and less patient with classical interpretations of certain divine attributes. Evangelicals such as myself were being exposed to alternative models of God, and it truly made a difference.

In my seminary in the late 1970's we as students had the following choices: classical or neoclassical, liberation or Barthian theology. At least the options were growing! Interestingly enough the Athanasian Theological Society, a Theological Students Fellowship (TSF) outlet of Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship, which I along with other students helped create while at Perkins School of Theology, invited Clark Pinnock to speak on our campus. We asked Pinnock to address the topic of what it meant being an evangelical student on a mainline seminary campus. Even more interesting, however, was that Pinnock, while visiting at Perkins, spent time

conversing with Schubert Ogden, the content of which I can only speculate. Little did we know at that time that Pinnock's theological journey was about to take a new direction. Not long after that meeting, in the decade of the 1980's, publications began to emerge, articulating alternate or hybrid theological concepts, settling in the theological neighborhood somewhere between classical theology and process theology. Open and relational alternatives were suddenly emerging! With the publications of Richard Rice, Clark Pinnock, William Hasker, John Sanders, Gregory Boyd and others, many were given a new set of lens through which to see Holy Scripture and Christian experience. Open and relational theology (s) was now on the table offering fresh ways of interpreting the Christian faith.

Open and Relational Theology

Open and relational theologies share common commitments to theological method which, while being Christian and evangelical, seek to develop concepts of God which are both biblical and dynamic. This includes seeing evil as genuine and not merely apparent. Human freedom likewise is understood to be genuine or libertarian, and the future was understood to be open, at least in some ways. No doubt process theology had been employed in the open theology project. As Clark Pinnock said, open or free-will theism adapts process theology without adopting it. Serious reconsideration and reconstruction has been given to doctrines of creation *ex nihilo*, timelessness, foreknowledge, immutability, and the like. Like a discussion that has grown fertile between two groups of friends, meaning process theologians and free-will evangelical theologians, both streams of thought have been blessed and have grown through such discussions. In fact new perspectives are emerging between process and open theism or theology.

Tom Oord clearly is one who drinks from the wells of Holy Scripture and Christian theology in its classical, neoclassical and open expressions. In *The Uncontrolling Love of God* Oord sets forth a model of providence which sufficiently addresses the issues of life as we know it: randomness, regularity, and the problem of evil, i.e., existential fit.¹ Like Terrence Thiesen's eleven models of God found in *Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World*, Oord devotes the first half of his book building up to the examination of seven models of God, with his model own being called "God is Essentially Kenotic." This model is contrasted most with its next-door neighbor, the model Oord calls "God is Voluntarily Self-Limited," a position held by Thomas Tracy, John Polkinghorne, Philip Clayton, and John Sanders. Both options here fall under the "Open and Relational Alternative" umbrella. Oord notes that open and relational theology embraces the reality of randomness, and regularity, freedom and necessity, good and evil. It asserts that God exists and that God acts objectively and responsively in the world."²

All varieties of open and relational theologies share in common the following:

¹ See also Oord, *The Nature of Love: A Theology*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2010), and *Defining Love: A Philosophical, Scientific, and Theological Engagement*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010).

² Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, p. 107.

1. God and creatures relate to each other. God makes a real difference to creation, and creation makes a real difference to God. God is relational.
2. The future is not set because it has not yet been determined. Neither God nor creatures know with certainty all that will actually occur.
3. Love is God's chief attribute. Love is the primary lens through which we best understand God's relation with creatures and the relations creatures should have with God and others. Love matters most.³

Essential Kenosis

Essential kenosis, the model which Oord proposes, is one version of open and relational theology. In fact the author's overarching aim in writing this book is to offer the best way to believe God acts providentially in a world of regularities and randomness, freedom and agency, good and evil.⁴ Where Oord differs from some proponents of open theology is that while some believe God's relationship to the world to be contingent, (Pinnock), Oord believes such a relationship to be necessary. Whereas some believe God's kenosis to be a voluntary self-limitation which is reversible, (Polkinghorne), Oord believes in contrast that essential kenosis to be an involuntary divine self-limitation.⁵ God's eternal nature includes God's essential love for creatures, meaning that God necessarily gives agency, freedom, value, and relationship.

In advocating that God is essentially kenotic, Oord states: "The model of God as essentially kenotic says God's eternal nature is uncontrolling love. Because of love, God necessarily provides freedom/agency to creatures, and God works by empowering and inspiring creation toward well-being. God also necessarily upholds the regularities of the universe because those regularities derive from God's eternal nature of love. Randomness in the world and creaturely free will are genuine, and God is not a dictator mysteriously pulling the strings. *God never controls others*. But God sometimes acts miraculously, in noncoercive ways. God providentially guides and calls all creation toward love and beauty."⁶ Defining *kenosis* as self-giving, others-empowering love, Oord states that "Essential kenosis considers the self-giving, others-empowering love of God revealed in Jesus Christ to be logically primary in God's eternal essence."⁷ Oord goes on to say that God must love, indeed cannot *not* love. Kenotic love is an essential attribute of God's eternal nature. God expresses kenosis inevitably.⁸ Because God must act like God, God must love. Though Oord doesn't say so explicitly, it seems to me that essential kenosis is how the author describes God's immutability. Call it primordial, but this pole or aspect

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. p.81.

⁵ Oord, *The Nature of Love*, p. 125.

⁶ Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, p. 94.

⁷ Ibid. p.160.

⁸ Ibid. p.161.

of the divine nature does not change, indeed it cannot. God's loving goodness is not voluntary on God's part, but instead is necessary to His unchanging nature.

Essential kenosis as a model of providence explains why creatures are free: God giving freedom is part of His steadfast love. God cannot override or fail to provide freedom, even when such freedom is abused. We therefore cannot blame God when creatures misuse their freedom. It is the creatures and not God who are culpable. Essential kenosis also explains why God doesn't prevent evil that creatures cause. God's love gives both agency and self-organization, and being love God cannot withdraw or override or fail to provide such gifts. Agency and self-organization are given necessarily by a loving God, and such gifts are irrevocable. For God to prevent random evil, God would have to withdraw lawlike regularities which are also irrevocable. God cannot override the order that emerges. Divine love compels God to act in ways that generate lawlike regularity.⁹ God is also essentially temporal, God existing in all moments of time, being time-full, not timeless. God's knowledge of future events is much like our own, by way of anticipation, since the future does not yet exist to be known. God is omnipresent, spiritually present in all place, but with no localized body. Therefore God cannot prevent evil in the way a localized body can. God can and does, however, seek to persuade those with localized bodies to make a difference, in other words, to love.

Conclusion

It is refreshing to hear about God's providence after a long and quiet absence, or as one author puts it, "This doctrine has fallen on hard times."¹⁰ Denying its existence nor ignoring divine providence is not an acceptable answer, particularly when the doctrine of providence deals with human history from a theological perspective. It is also encouraging and stimulating to hear about divine providence from a theological perspective which is open and relational. Tom Oord seeks to address issues of theodicy, regularity and randomness from the perspective he calls Essential Kenosis. Essential kenosis takes the time-full reality of God's temporality as crucial for understanding why God cannot or foreknow or prevent evil acts that occur. Oord's approach seeks to make sense of life as it is lived. God's loving nature requires He create a world with creatures that He cannot control. Such a relational God collaborates rather than seeks to control His creatures. Such love is logically pre-eminent in God who loves both necessarily and eternally.

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⁹ Ibid. p.175.

¹⁰ Charles M. Wood, *The Question of Providence*. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2008), p.xi.