

Open Theism: Its Nature, History, and Limitations

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I. Introduction

This issue of the *WRS Journal* has for its theme “open theism,” in some ways a novel ideology that has occasioned widespread controversy in the evangelical world. In the following, we hope to supply background to the other articles in this issue by explaining, first, what open theism is; second, how it became a controversial subject in the contemporary church; and, third, why open theism implicitly conflicts with at least one Christian doctrine accepted by open theists themselves.

II. What is Open Theism?

Introduction.—In the widely publicized manifesto of open theists, *The Openness of God*,¹ David Basinger identifies five claims about God as integral to open theism:

1. God not only created this world *ex nihilo*, but can (and at times does) intervene unilaterally in earthly affairs.
2. God chose to create us with incompatibilistic (libertarian) freedom—freedom over which he cannot exercise total control.
3. God so values freedom—the moral integrity of free creatures and a world in which such integrity is possible—that he does not normally override such freedom, even if he sees that it is producing undesirable results.
4. God always desires our highest good, both individually and corporately, and thus is affected by what happens in our lives.
5. God does not possess exhaustive knowledge of exactly how we will utilize our freedom although he may at times be able to predict with great accuracy the choices we will freely make.²

Incompatibilistic freedom.—Basinger’s second, fourth, and fifth claims require clarification. When Basinger ascribes “incompatibilistic” freedom to human beings in his second claim, he means to say that human actions are free in the sense that it is always within the power of human beings not to perform any action that they actually perform. Such freedom is “incompatibilistic,” because it is incompatible with divine causation of everything that occurs.

It is important to note that those who deny Basinger’s second claim do not, as a rule, consider human freedom illusory. Rather, they ascribe “compatibilistic” freedom to human beings, i.e., the freedom to do whatever one wants. Freedom of this sort can coexist with divine

¹ Downers Grove and Carlisle: InterVarsity and Paternoster, 1994.

² Ibid. 156.

omnicausality, because it entails neither that human behavior can deviate from God's eternal plan nor that the future is in any sense indeterminate. According to the compatibilist perspective, human beings can do what they want, but what they want is determined by God in advance. Freedom of this sort is not hollow, because a being who enjoys compatibilistic freedom never suffers divine compulsion to act in a manner contrary to his desires.

Divine mutability.—In Basinger's fourth claim, he asserts that God's wishes may be frustrated by the decisions of human beings and that human beings, consequently, can effect changes in God. Human beings, according to open theism, possess the power to inflict suffering on God or to give him pleasure. While such a view may seem to allow for a fuller presence of the intrinsically valuable aspects of emotion in God, it is important to note that, at least according to the perspective of classical theism, the view that creatures can give God pain or pleasure actually implies a diminution of God's quasi-emotional actuality.³

While open theists envision a God whose joy increases and diminishes with the ebb and flow of human obedience, classical theists view God as fully actual at all times. A creature cannot increase God's happiness, according to classical theism, because he is always as happy as he possibly could be. A creature, likewise, cannot increase God's rage; for God is eternally aflame with a hatred of sin so intense that it admits of no supplement. It is true that classical theism, the perspective on the doctrine of God advanced in the Westminster Confession, does not ascribe grief to God and, in this respect, falls short of open theism in its ascription to God of intense quasi-emotions. It is doubtful, however, whether ascription of grief to God is a virtue. While the idea of a suffering God may prove comforting to persons suffering themselves, it could hardly bring delight to the saints in heaven.

Divine nescience.—In Basinger's fifth claim, he asserts that God lacks exhaustive foreknowledge of human actions and can, at best, accurately predict a great number of them. This claim has a number of disturbing implications for the doctrines of Scripture's inerrancy and authority, as open theism's opponents have not failed to note. First, Basinger's affirmation of divine ignorance implies that God's expectations may at times be mistaken. If this is so, then God's prophesying that an event will occur in Scripture constitutes no guarantee of the event's eventual occurrence. "We may not like to admit it," writes open theist Clark Pinnock, "but prophecies often go unfulfilled. Despite the Baptist, Jesus did not cast the wicked into the fire; contrary to Paul, the second coming was not just around the corner...; despite Jesus, in the destruction of the temple, some stones were left one on another."⁴

Open theists claim that sentiments like Pinnock's cohere with the doctrine of Scriptural inerrancy, because statements about the future lack truth value. Since statements about the future are not even intended to correspond with a reality existing at the time of the statement, the open theist argument goes, one cannot reasonably pronounce them true, i.e., in accord with presently existing reality, or false, i.e., inaccurate in their representation of presently existing reality. Since

³ For the senses in which it is and is not legitimate to ascribe quasi-emotional states to God, cf. Aquinas' *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1.89-90.

⁴ *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids and Carlisle: Baker and Paternoster, 2001), 51, n. 66.

prophecies are neither true nor false, the open theists maintain, one cannot reasonably attribute error to Scripture even if Scripture's predictions about the future are wildly inaccurate.

If prophecies are neither true nor false, however, then Jesus certainly errs when he states of all Scripture, prophetic passages not excepted, "Your word is truth" (John 17:17). In any event, regardless of how one resolves the issue of whether truth and falsehood are properties of statements about the future, the open theist position allows for the possibility that segments of Scripture may prove less than trustworthy. Whereas Jesus states unequivocally that "Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35), open theism implies that perhaps it can.

Conclusion.—Open theism, therefore, constitutes a system of thought diametrically opposed to the classical theism of the Westminster Confession. One ought not, however, to confuse open theism with process theology, a form of panentheism influential in some theological circles to which open theism bears some affinities. Whereas process theologians consider God dependent on the world for his very existence, open theists affirm the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. Whereas process theologians, likewise, consider God congenitally incapable of altering earthly states of affairs, open theists insist that God has intervened in his creation throughout salvation history and especially in the Incarnation of the Logos. Whereas process theologians, finally, typically give scant attention to the Bible, open theists typically view the Bible as normative for Christian thought and life and regard their position as grounded in the Bible. Open theism, therefore, is not a non-Christian, philosophical paradigm masquerading as a form of evangelical theology. It is rather an uneasy compromise between contemporary forms of thought and biblical Christianity forged by persons who, not without some right, consider themselves evangelicals.

III. The History of Open Theism

Introduction.—In the present section, we should like, first, briefly to discuss the historical antecedents of open theism; second, to discuss the formative period of open theism, roughly from 1980 until 1994; and, third, to supply some information about what we shall call the period of controversy: the era of heated debate over open theism, which began with the publication of *The Openness of God* in 1994 and continues today.

Historical antecedents.—Any theological tendency that minimizes God's absolute immutability or sovereignty constitutes, in some sense, an antecedent of open theism. Open theist theologians and philosophers do, on the whole, seem principally concerned to vindicate two doctrines: (a) that the destiny of human beings in time and eternity depends principally, if not entirely, on their own, autonomous decisions; and (b) that God voluntarily renders himself vulnerable to his creation so that human beings can affect him for better or worse and collaborate with him in determining creation's future.

The first doctrine, of course, has claimed the allegiance of countless theologians throughout the past two millennia, although it has also faced opposition from some of Christendom's most distinguished thinkers: e.g., Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. However, before the time of G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831), perhaps history's

most influential advocate of divine mutability, defenders of the second doctrine have appeared relatively rarely. Prescinding from isolated individuals, in fact, only three schools of thought seem to have emerged within professing Christendom before the Hegelian revolution that expressly denied the doctrine of divine immutability: the Audians, the Socinians, and the Arminians.

The first group, the Audians, derived their name from Audius, the fourth-century Syrian monk who founded the sect. The Audians, also known as Anthropomorphites, were inclined to interpret passages about God's walking, speaking, learning, forgetting, etc., in a crudely literal fashion and so, naturally, denied God's comprehensive knowledge of the future. This sect gained the allegiance of only a small number of ignorant folk and soon disappeared.

The second group, the Socinians, derived their name from Faustus Socinus (1539-1604), the philosopher/theologian whose teaching the sect believed and propagated. Although the Socinians accepted the accuracy of Scripture generally, they nonetheless taught that Christ was a mere man and that he died on the cross only to afford God the opportunity of demonstrating the immortality of the soul by raising him from the dead. The Socinians, moreover, specifically denied God's simplicity, his immutability, and his comprehensive foreknowledge of the future for the purpose, among other things, of securing a maximum of human autonomy. After flourishing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Socinians gradually disappeared, their adherents either becoming non-religious altogether or forming Unitarian congregations that professed no particular system of doctrine.

The third and final significant religious movement, before Hegel, to deny divine immutability was that of the Arminians. This group takes its name from James Arminius, the Leiden theologian who famously protested the Calvinistic doctrines of the Dutch national church and thereby provoked the civil authorities of the Netherlands to convoke the Synod of Dordt. Arminians held then, as well as today, that Christ atoned for the sins of every human being; that the grace of regeneration is resistible; that unregenerate human beings are capable of exercising saving faith by their own volition; that human beings can fall away from a state of grace; and that election to salvation is conditional upon foreseen faith and obedience.

The last conviction, it is important to note, distinguishes classical Arminianism from open theism. The traditional Arminian joins the open theist in considering God dependent on creation for his knowledge of creation; unlike the open theist, however, the classical Arminian believes that God foreknows every future event without exception. Arminianism lives on today in the very few Remonstrant churches remaining in the Netherlands, in churches of Wesleyan vintage, and in numerous Pentecostal and charismatic churches throughout the world.

The formative period.—The willingness of open theists to conceive of God in less majestic terms than classical theists, therefore, is by no means without precedent even in the pre-Hegelian era. In the post-Hegelian era, denials of divine immutability and impassibility became common. Relatively few theologians and philosophers of religion in the period 1831-1980, however, publicly advocated open theism's most distinctive and controversial claim: that God lacks comprehensive knowledge of the future. In the English-speaking world, in fact, the only

persons of whom we are aware who advocated in book-length works⁵ divine ignorance of the future (excluding process theists, finite-Godists, and other impersonal theists) before the work of Richard Rice in 1980 are L. D. McCabe in his *Divine Nescience of Future Contingencies a Necessity* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1882) and *The Foreknowledge of God* (Cincinnati: Cranston & Stowe, 1887); Gordon Olson in his *The Foreknowledge of God* (Arlington Heights: Bible Research Corporation, 1941) and *The Omniscience of the Godhead* (Arlington Heights: Bible Research Corporation, 1972); J. R. Lucas in his *The Freedom of the Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970); Peter Geach in his *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); and Richard Swinburne in his *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).⁶

Support for full-fledged open theism, however, became relatively common after the publication by Richard Rice, the pioneer of contemporary evangelical open theism, of *The Openness of God: The Relationship of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will* (Nashville: Review & Herald, 1980).⁷ In the time between the first appearance of Rice's book and the beginning of significant controversy over open theism in 1994, six figures emerged as prominent advocates of open theism within evangelical theological circles: Rice himself, Clark Pinnock, William Hasker, David Basinger, Gregory Boyd, and John Sanders. During this period, the six wrote numerous essays and three books in support of open theism. One of the books, moreover, gained significant critical acclaim: Hasker's *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989). During this period, nonetheless, the evangelical public, with the exception of some vigilant philosophers and theologians, was largely unaware of open theism.

The period of controversy.—Open theism emerged from its obscurity, however, in 1994 with the publication of *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, a volume of essays by Rice, Sanders, Pinnock, Hasker, and Basinger. This work, published by InterVarsity Press in the United States and Paternoster Press in Britain, was designed, in its authors' words, to bring open theism to "a broader public, one beyond the confines of professional philosophers and theologians";⁸ and at this the work was an extraordinary success.

The Openness of God ignited a firestorm of controversy, provoking numerous hostile articles in academic and popular publications and at least one book-length criticism: R. K. McGregor Wright's *No Place for Sovereignty: What's Wrong with Freewill Theism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996). In the same year that Wright's work appeared, however, another apologia for open theism, David Basinger's *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996) was published. In 1997

⁵ We do not mean to suggest that the works by J. R. Lucas, Peter Geach, and Richard Swinburne listed below are devoted entirely or even primarily to establishing divine nescience of the future; they are not. We are indebted for the references in this paragraph to John Sanders, "Historical Considerations" in *Openness*, 59-100 and 182-91 at 189, n. 60; and William Hasker, "A Philosophical Perspective" in *Openness*, 126-54 and 194-9 at 198, n. 48.

⁶ Informed readers will recognize Geach and Swinburne as two of the most distinguished philosophers of religion of the twentieth century.

⁷ We owe this reference and the references in the following five paragraphs to Glenn R. Wittig, "Open Theism: A Selected and Annotated Bibliography," *Criswell Theological Review* NS 1 (2004): 215-38.

⁸ "Preface," *Openness*, 7-10 at 9.

the opponents of open theism responded with Norman Geisler's *Creating God in the Image of Man?* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1997). Yet Gregory Boyd in the same year generated another book on behalf of open theism, *God at War: The Bible & Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), in which he made open theism the centerpiece of an attractive theodicy.

Next, in 1998, Gerald Bray responded to open theism with the brief work, *The Personal God* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998) only to be answered by John Sanders' substantial defense of open theism, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998). In 2000 Clark Pinnock produced another apology for open theism, his *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids and Carlisle: Baker and Paternoster, 2000), while Gregory Boyd published his *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000). In the same year, however, Bruce Ware published what is surely the most influential critique of open theism, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2000).

In 2001, the tide of the debate seemed to turn somewhat in favor of classical theism. While Gregory Boyd did publish a sequel to his *God at War* this year, viz., *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), two book-length criticisms of open theism also appeared: John Frame's *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburgh: P & R, 2001) and Norman Geisler, Wayne House, and Max Herrera's *The Battle for God: Responding to the Challenge of Neotheism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001). At the Evangelical Theological Society's annual convention in 2001, moreover, the Society's members approved the following resolution by a wide margin: "Be it resolved that: We believe the Bible clearly teaches that God has complete, accurate and infallible knowledge of all events past, present and future including all future decisions and actions of free moral agents."⁹

In 2002-2003 the literary struggle continued with the publication of two volumes of essays critical of open theism: Douglas Huffman and Eric Johnson, eds., *God under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002) and John Piper, Justin Taylor, and Paul Helseth, eds., *Beyond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003). Only one book-length defense of open theism appeared in 2002-2004: Gregory Boyd's *Is God to Blame? Beyond Pat Answers to the Problem of Evil* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), a popularization of Boyd's *Satan and the Problem of Evil*.

At the Evangelical Theological Society's annual meeting in 2002, Roger Nicole accused Clark Pinnock and John Sanders of contradicting the doctrine of biblical inerrancy in their writings in support of open theism, an offense for which one can be expelled from the Society. The membership at this meeting voted, in accordance with the rules laid down in the Society's constitution, to refer the charges to the Society's Executive Committee. Several months later the Executive Committee examined Pinnock and Sanders privately to determine the soundness of their views. As a result of these proceedings, the Executive Committee recommended by a vote

⁹ Further information concerning the events of 2001 and the succeeding conflicts over open theism in the Evangelical Theological Society can be obtained at the Society's website, www.etsjets.org.

of 9-0 that the Society acquit Pinnock of the charges and 7-2 that the Society convict Sanders. Although all of the committee members agreed that Sanders' understanding of scriptural inerrancy was incompatible with that of the founders of the Society, two argued that since the Society had not officially defined inerrancy, it was unfair to expel a member simply because he adopted an idiosyncratic interpretation.

This issue loomed large at the 2003 annual convention of the Society, where the merits of the charges against Pinnock and Sanders were debated extensively. Since Pinnock had rescinded certain of his published statements, the membership by a two-to-one margin acquitted him of the charge of denying inerrancy, in accordance with the Executive Committee's recommendation. The status of Sanders in the Society, however, proved much more controversial. After a protracted debate on Sanders's case, much of which centered on the propriety of expelling someone for contradicting the doctrine of scriptural inerrancy when the Society had not defined precisely what this doctrine was, 62.7% of the membership voted to expel Sanders, slightly fewer than the two thirds majority required to dismiss a member.

As one might expect, this outcome occasioned considerable disgruntlement on the part of the majority of the Society's members; one past President of the Society, Norman Geisler, even resigned in frustration over the outcome. At the final business meeting of the 2003 convention, however, L. Russ Bush of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary proposed that the Executive Committee take steps to clarify the Society's understanding of inerrancy so as to avoid similar confusion in the future. Bush's proposal was approved by an overwhelming majority of the members, and the Executive Committee, accordingly, met in August of 2004 to consider means of clarifying the Society's position. The Committee determined to propose the following resolution to Society's membership at the annual convention in November of 2004:

For the purpose of advising members regarding the intent and meaning of the reference to biblical inerrancy in the ETS Doctrinal Basis, the Society refers members to the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978). The case for biblical inerrancy rests on the absolute trustworthiness of God and Scripture's testimony to itself. A proper understanding of inerrancy takes into account the language, genres, and intent of Scripture. We reject approaches to Scripture that deny that biblical truth claims are grounded in reality.

At the following annual meeting in 2004, the members of the Evangelical Theological Society voted by a five-to-one margin to approve this resolution. However, in order for the resolution to become part of the Society's by-laws, so that it would be binding on members, it must again be approved again at the Society's annual convention in 2005.

Conclusion.—Open theism has, therefore, suffered a number of setbacks in recent years, especially within the Evangelical Theological Society. The movement, however, is by no means dead. Enthusiasm among theologians and philosophers of religion for human autonomy shows no sign of waning, and the anti-authoritarian culture of the contemporary West supplies an ideal climate for open theism's flourishing. Open theism and Arminianism in general, of which open theism is an extreme form, moreover, have a certain perennial appeal. For, as Scott Oliphant

correctly observes, “Any view that minimizes or reduces God’s ‘God-ness,’ including his absolute sovereignty over his creation, appeals directly, though subtly, to our sinful hearts.”¹⁰

IV. Limitations of Open Theism

Introduction.—It seems appropriate, in view of open theism’s perennial appeal, to offer some criticism of open theism. In order to render our critique brief and effective, we shall limit ourselves to proving that open theism implicitly undermines a belief that open theists themselves, along with all Christians, hold sacred: the belief that God “created all things” (Rev 4:11; cf. Eph 3:9; John 1:3 and Col 1:16).

Creation.—We shall argue in this section that open theism implicitly conflicts with the doctrine of the origination of all things in God, because this doctrine implies that God is simple: every aspect of his being is absolutely, albeit not necessarily relatively, identical with every other. Now, a simple being, by virtue of the identity of its characteristics with each other, cannot change any aspect of itself without changing every aspect of itself and thus becoming another being altogether. A simple being, therefore, cannot retain its identity unless it never changes.

Open theism, as we have seen, implies that God changes continually, learning what his creatures freely decide to do and responding accordingly. Unless one wishes to imply that God is a constantly metamorphosing series of beings, each of whom endures for only an instant, then, one must either deny that all things owe their existence to God or reject open theism. A proof that God’s creation of all things implies his simplicity, therefore, constitutes an indirect disproof of open theism.

That the origination of all things in God does entail divine simplicity appears from the following considerations.¹¹ If God created all things, then everything other than he must be a creature. The principle of causality dictates, moreover, that no perfection of God is a creature; just as the reader cannot pay the author a trillion dollars, because he does not possess a trillion dollars, so God could not create any perfection that he did not possess antecedently in himself. If it is the case, however, that everything other than God is a creature of God; and that no perfection of God is a creature of God; then no perfection of God is other than God. If no perfection of God is other than God, then every perfection of God is identical with God. If every perfection of God, furthermore, is identical with God, then the principle of the transitivity of identity (i.e., if $a=b$ and $b=c$, then $a=c$) dictates that every perfection of God is identical with every other perfection of God: that, in other words, God is simple. Since the doctrine of the origination of all things in God implies that God is simple, then, this doctrine at least implicitly conflicts with open theism.

¹⁰ “Most Moved Mediator,” *Themelios* 30 (2004): 39-51 at 39.

¹¹ A more sophisticated version of this argument appears in my “An Exposition and Critique of Karl Rahner’s Axiom: ‘The Economic Trinity is the Immanent Trinity and Vice Versa,’” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 15 (2004): 165-200 at 176-8. For the idea of deriving the doctrine of divine simplicity from the doctrine of creation we are indebted to Brian Leftow, “Is God an Abstract Object?” *Noûs* 24 (1990): 581-98.

Conclusion.—At least one core doctrine of the Christian faith, therefore, a doctrine accepted wholeheartedly by open theists, entails that open theism must be false; and the careful exegesis performed by many of the critics of open theism mentioned above has yielded many other arguments as cogent or more so to the same effect. May God use this literature, especially as donated to libraries or circulated privately by concerned individuals, to destroy the pernicious ideology of open theism.