

Open Theism—A Review of the Issues

Kwabena Donkor, BRI

One of the controversies that have created a bit of a stir in evangelical theological circles in recent times is the debate over what has come to be called, among others, “open theism.”¹ The term “open theism” is noted to have been introduced in 1980 with the publication of Seventh-day Adventist theologian Richard Rice’s *Openness of God*. The issue was not broadly discussed, however, until 1994 when five essays were published by five Evangelical scholars, including Rice, under the title *The Openness of God*.²

The complexity of the subject compels us to limit our presentation in a manner that can be concise and still helpful. Only an overview may be attempted here, and even then this discussion intends to touch mainly on the key issues at stake in the controversy.

I. What Is It?

What is open theism? As the label implies open theism is a view of God and His relationship to reality that is characterized by openness. What does it mean for God to be open to reality? The critical issue is what is entailed in the caption “open” or “openness.” Gregory Boyd, a key advocate of this view describes the openness in this way: “Open view theists believe that the future exists partly as actualities (future events that God sovereignly determines to bring about) and partly as possibilities (aspects of the future which God sovereignly allows his creatures to bring about).”³ David Basinger, however, more specifically characterizes the openness in the following terms: “(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 well at times be able to predict with great accuracy the choices we will freely make.”⁴

Open theism then represents a new way of framing God’s relation to reality in an open way that is ‘supposed’ to be different from the two main existing paradigms: classical and process.⁵

II. Why Pave a New Way?

Looking at the way open theists frame the notion of openness, one detects an effort, on the one hand, to somewhat restrict God’s sovereign rule and, on the other hand, a desire to enhance human freedom. But what motivates this move on the part of open theists? Keeping in mind that the central issue in the controversy is the interface between divine sovereignty and human freedom, open theism has come to the conclusion that traditional theism does not make room for true human freedom. In other words, traditional theism is regarded as unable to integrate real, open, historical free human choices. Human freedom is at the center of this controversy. For open theists true freedom is *libertarian* freedom which is the power “to choose to perform action A or choose not to perform action A. Both A and not A could occur; which will actually occur *has not yet been determined*” (emphasis supplied).⁶ Libertarian freedom is a powerful

concept because it means that when a deed is carried out “agents themselves are the *ultimate explanations* of their own free activity . . . We thus need not assume that there is also a divine reason explaining its occurrence.”⁷ For open theists, then, “libertarian freedom is *incompatible* with the claim that God’s will is the ultimate explanation for someone’s choosing as he did.”⁸

In sum, open theists are paving a new way because they feel that *compatibilistic* freedom (the classic view) is not genuine freedom. Compatibilistic freedom says that one can harmonize the view that God is the final explanation of everything that happens while at the same time holding people responsible for their *free* actions. But on what is the critique by open theists based?

III. Why the Classical View of Freedom is Critiqued

The classical view of human freedom is challenged as being *unreal* because of the understanding of the nature of God that is held by classical theists. The God of classical theism, according to open theists, is static, insensitive, and unresponsive. Since such a view of God can only permit an “I-IT relation,” it would mean that God has not given humans the “room to be genuine.”⁹ The classical view of God, open theists allege, has its source in Greek philosophy rather than in the Bible.¹⁰ Richard Rice provides a summary of the essence of classical theism and contends that it “does not reflect faithfully the spirit of the biblical message, in spite of the fact that it appeals to numerous biblical statements.”¹¹

To summarize, the open view places a high premium on freedom which is premised on a give-and-take relationship between divinity and reality. The God of classical theism cannot truly facilitate a dynamic relationship and hence needs to be criticized. This is not only so because classical theism simply does not meet the requirements of open theism, but also primarily because according to open theists classical theism is Hellenistic and unbiblical.

IV. Why Classical Theists Are Concerned

Classical theists are concerned about what they perceive as open theists’ revisionism for several reasons. First, they raise the counter charge that it is rather open theism that is unfaithful to Scripture and dependent on an *unhelpful* philosophy, specifically the process thought of Alfred North Whitehead.¹² In particular the following redefinitions of classical theism by open theism are noted as problematic: God is vulnerable and open to the failure of some of His intentions; God is sometimes mistaken in His beliefs about what will happen; God is not omnipotent in the traditional sense, and His efforts are sometimes defeated.¹³ Second, classical theists are concerned about the immense theological ramifications that the above revisions of God will have:¹⁴ (1) on the doctrine of God—since Christ as God incarnate is the fullest revelation of God, and the attributes of Christ on earth reflect the *ultimate* character of God himself; (2) on soteriology—since God did not foresee the fall of mankind, God had not planned for Christ to die for the sins of mankind; furthermore, the cross is not a penal offering; (3) on pneumatology—since God’s work is often thwarted by free agents, and the Holy Spirit’s ability to work is affected etc. In short a finite God, as classical theists see it, is a risky proposition for evangelical theology.

V. Are There Difficulties with Both Positions?

The truly remarkable phenomenon is how both classical theism and open theism are able to amass biblical data to buttress their respective views of God.¹⁵ This phenomenon points us to the underlying

philosophy in both positions. Geisler is correct in noting that both views are based on different philosophies, although open theists deny their dependence on process philosophy. Be that as it may, the problem with both positions seems to be that there appears to be some incoherence between the respective views of God and doctrines that are developed. It is difficult to reconcile a Platonic view of God with such biblical doctrines as Christ's atonement, human freedom, and revelation-inspiration (classical view). On the other hand, it is not easy to define a biblical doctrine of human freedom and the other issues that are of interest to open theists without a clearly defined *ontology* on which their doctrine of God rests.¹⁶ This is why the charge of dependence on process philosophy seems plausible against open theists. So where do we go from here?

VI. *Where Should Seventh-day Adventists Stand?*

We have seen that the issue of freedom is central to the controversy reviewed above. It has become quite clear that the question of freedom quickly leads to the one about the nature of God. So the main question being asked here is where Adventists should stand on the nature of human freedom. Are humans genuinely free? And what does that mean for the nature of God? Seventh-day Adventists can only build on biblical evidence; and there is substantial evidence that clearly points to a God who knows the past and the future; one who indeed knows how the future is going to unfold (Dan. 2, 7, 8; Rev. 12-14 etc.). The Adventist Great Controversy motif falls flat without presupposing this kind of God. At the same time, the Bible substantively points to human responsibility and accountability for action taken, implying that those actions were taken in freedom (Acts 5:4). Of course there are pieces of evidence that seem to point in the direction of God's overweening control of events; but it is important to take into consideration the whole picture presented in Scripture. Otherwise the biblical text is subjected to predisposing philosophical factors.

Adventists can believe in both divine, sovereign providence and genuine human freedom (as we see in the Bible, e.g., Gen. 45:5-8) without contradiction. We can do this because we are not obliged to refract the biblical God through the lens of a Greek timeless concept by virtue of which thought and action would be inseparable. Divine foreknowledge does not have to rule out human freedom; not if we preclude divine timelessness. This is the dilemma of classical theism. At the same time, we can endorse genuine, free human actions without succumbing to the seeming finite god of process thought. The biblical God does not have to be in *process* to be dynamic, sensitive, and responsive. He comes across in the Bible as both transcendent and immanent.

So where should Adventists stand? On the issues between classical theism and open theism, just as on all other issues, we should stand on the biblical foundation without any philosophical footings.

¹During the November 2002 annual convention of the Evangelical Theological Society (Toronto, Canada), a founding member of the society challenged the membership status of Drs. Clark Pinnock and John Sanders based on their open theistic views. Other labels that have been affixed to this theological proposal include the following: 'open view of God,' 'openness of God,' 'neotheism,' free will theism,' 'creative love theism,' 'relational theism,' and 'consistent Arminianism.'

²See "Open Theism" *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia* at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_theism.

³Quoted from Boyd's website in Glenn R. Wittig, "Open Theism: A Selective and Annotated Bibliography," *Criswell Theological Review* 1/2 (2004):215. Other noted key proponents of open theism include David Basinger, William Hasker, Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, and John Sanders; see *ibid.* 216.

⁴David Basinger, "Practical Implications," in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, edited by Clark Pinnock et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 156.

⁵Open theists deny that the view of God they present is shaped by the principles of process philosophy. However, to the extent that process theology, which is derived from process philosophy, is used broadly to describe any theology that emphasizes an active, ongoing, and dynamic relationship between 'God' and creation, yet limits God in one way or another, the difference between process theology and open theism seems to be blurred. Technically, however, process philosophy as pioneered by Alfred North Whitehead, employs an empirical, that is, naturalistic methodology. From this perspective, process theology may be distinguished from open theism. Open theism claims to discover God's relatedness to all reality from the Bible instead of from philosophy.

⁶David Basinger, "Middle Knowledge and Classical Christian Thought," *Religious Studies* 22 (1986), 416.

⁷Gregory Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 19.

⁸Mark R. Talbot, "True Freedom: The Liberty that Scripture Portrays as Worth Having," in *Beyond Bounds*, edited by John Piper, Justin Taylor, and Paul K. Helseth, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003), 80.

⁹*Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁰For a concise reflection on open theism's critique see Chad O. Brand, "Genetic Defects or Accidental Similarities? Orthodoxy and Open Theism and Their Connections to Western Philosophical Traditions," in *Beyond Bounds*, edited by John Piper, Justin Taylor, and Paul K. Helseth, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003), 43-73.

¹¹Richard Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, edited by Clark Pinnock et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 15. The essence of classical theism outlined by Rice includes the following: God's will is the final explanation for all that happens; His sovereign will is irresistible; nothing can thwart or hinder the accomplishment of His purposes; His relation to the world is one of mastery and control; immutability is one of His central characteristics; He is timeless, and utterly changeless in His nature, plans, and intentions; and the past, present and future appear alike before Him. *Ibid.* 12-15.

¹²Norman L. Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 21-22, observes that "Aquinas can provide a philosophical answer to the growing influence of the finite god of process theology. There is no better philosophical system capable of answering the threat raised by process theology and defending the traditional theistic and biblical view of God as eternal, unchanging and absolutely perfect Being."

¹³Robert E. Picirilli, "An Arminian Response to John Sanders' *The God Who Risks*," *JETS* 44 (2000):483.

¹⁴See A. Boyd Luter and Emily H. McGowin, "From Bad to Worse," *Criswell Theological Review* 1/2 (2004):150-166.

¹⁵For texts in support of Open Theism see Rice, 12-15; for texts in favor of Classical theism see Norman Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man? The new "Open" View of God—Neotheism's Dangerous Drift* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1997), 75-91.

¹⁶See Fernando Canale, "Evangelical Theology and Open Theism," *Journal of Adventist Theological Society* 12/2 (2001):27-30.

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