

THOMAS JAY OORD. THE UNCONTROLLING LOVE OF GOD: AN OPEN AND RELATIONAL ACCOUNT OF PROVIDENCE. DOWNERS GROVE, IL: IVP ACADEMIC, 2015: 225 PAGES. [REVIEWED BY REM B. EDWARDS, 8709 LONGMEADE DRIVE, KNOXVILLE, TN 37923. E-MAIL: REMB1@COMCAST.NET]

In *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence*, Tom Oord develops a very persuasive and highly original process account of how God's love, power, and providence relate to matters of human freedom, randomness in nature and history, natural laws, miracles, and evil. He carefully explains that and why most theists have failed to provide a convincing account of why a providential God does not act to prevent the horrible evils so prevalent in our world. He promises to do better (in the latter part of his book) and to explain "randomness and evil in light of God's providence." He defines "providence" as "the ways God acts to promote our well-being and the well-being of the whole" (16). So God does act, but how?

His first chapter gives an engaging account of four horrible evils, some caused by human beings, others by natural processes. His second chapter describes our world as one in which both randomness and regularities are very real and abundant. Random happenings have "no intended purpose," are "not a part of someone's plan," and do "not follow a pattern" (28). In this world, many *specific* things happen that do not express God's purposes, are not a part of God's plan, and are not foreseeable by God. Because of real randomness in nature and history and real freedom in human and other creatures, and because the future does not yet exist, God knows in advance only what might happen but never precisely what will happen. Oord rejects the idea that everything happens as a part of "a master plan" (29) and that all horrible evils express "God's will." (30-31). A loving God would make a place for regularities in the form of statistical natural laws (41-45, 49), but Oord rejects pre-quantum scientific and philosophical mechanism, determinism, and predestination, God or no God (34-41).

In his third chapter, Oord reviews the richness of evolved varieties of life and defends the universality of self-originated but

progressively more complex spontaneity, self-organization, or freedom throughout nature, from particles to people, with limited but genuine human free will, (55-62). He recognizes that values are all pervasive and affirms their ultimate source in God (62-64, 71, 78). Real values extend beyond selfishness and reciprocal altruism to include genuine “goodness, love, compassion, generosity and cooperation,” with “necessary roles for both creatures and the Creator (78).

His fourth chapter concentrates on a key concept in his book title—providence. He identifies seven important models of divine providence and effectively critiques six of these, promising to defend the seventh, his own kenotic model, in later chapters. His six rejected models are: God causes and purposes everything, including evils (83-86); God sometimes permits but sometimes prevents evils (86-89); God voluntarily self-limits God’s power out of love (89-94) so “Nothing but divine choice prevents God from stopping genuine evil” (92); God is impersonal and doesn’t really care (95-98); God created and currently observes the universe but otherwise does nothing (98-101); and God’s ways are not our ways, so it’s all a mystery (101-105). Oord clearly thinks we can do much better than any of these.

His fifth chapter defines what is common to all open and relational theologies, specifically that “God is relational,” “The future is open,” and “Love matters most” (107). In this chapter, especially in his footnotes, Oord displays an exception mastery of what diverse open and relational theologians have been saying about “the reality of randomness and regularity, freedom and necessity, good and evil” and “that God acts objectively and responsively in the world” (107). Mainline process theologians and philosophers from Whitehead and Hartshorne to Cobb, Griffin, Bracken, Clayton, Hasker, and many others, are included in this chapter under the broad rubric of open and relational theologians (119-131).

Oord’s concluding chapters explain his own novel “essential kenosis” approach to divine providence, so they warrant more attention. Chapters Six and Seven concentrate on another key concept in his book title—love. His sixth chapter begins with love as understood by the “voluntary self-limitation” position on divine providence (89-94) as developed, for example, by theologian John Sanders (133ff). This position affirms, “God could be all-controlling and prevent all evils, but God usually chooses not to control entirely” (90). God has the power to create *ex nihilo* and to prevent evils by working miracles that suspend

the laws of nature. Yet, out of love, says this position, God freely and voluntarily chooses not to exercise this power most of the time and promises not to do—in order to share power with free and partly self-creative creatures.

Oord's critique of the "voluntary self-limitation" theodicy defended by Sanders and others is very telling. As he points out, loving parents who have the power to prevent harms to their children actually do so whenever they can, but the voluntary self-limitation model says that God has the power but still does nothing (138). This God has the power to exercise absolute control over others and to prevent all harms by working miracles that violate natural laws (139-144). God sometimes does and sometimes does not prevent harms. This implies, Oord argues, that "sovereignty logically precedes love in God's nature" (139, n. 34, 144-146), and that neither love nor anything else "constrains God's decisions" (145). The "voluntary self-restraint" theodicy does not really explain why a loving God with the power to do so does not prevent *all* evils. This God's love is clearly a *controlling* love (144-146). At his point, Oord introduces his own original contribution to the theodicy/sovereignty debate: God's love is *uncontrolling* love (146-149), as his book title suggests.

Oord's theme of *uncontrolling* love is most fully developed in his seventh chapter. Kenosis, as ascribed to Jesus by St. Paul (Phil. 2:4-13), is self-emptying, self-giving, self-limiting (153-157), but *God's self-limiting and others-empowering love is not voluntary* (157-160), Oord maintains. *Voluntary or free* decisions are optional and could be otherwise. But God's loving decision to limit his own power is *not free or voluntary*. God has no other choice. In fact, this is not a choice at all. Instead, self-limiting and others-empowering love is an absolute necessity of God's everlasting nature. It is "logically primary in God's eternal essence. In God, love comes first. Essential kenosis says God's love is a necessary and eternal attribute of God's nature" (160-161). This means, "God expresses kenosis inevitably. Doing so is part of what it means to be God" (161). God's love takes priority over God's power (162-163, 169). Comment: theologians who rank power over love *value power more than love*. Oord *values love more than power*.

God necessarily creates and/or interacts creatively with free creatures because God is love. Oord does not develop this theme, but his position differs very significantly from process thinkers like David Griffin¹ who ground human freedom in the independent *metaphysical*

necessity of creativity. Oord grounds it in the *moral necessity* of God's eternal love.

Unlike most open and relational "voluntary self-limitation" theologians, Oord affirms, not simply God's love, but God's *uncontrolling* love. They affirm that *controlling* love is a necessary attribute of God. Their God *usually* grants freedom and lawfulness to creatures but *occasionally* (not consistently) suspends both in order to protect immature, unknowing, and vulnerable creatures from harm—as any loving human parent would do (169-176). Obviously, "Love is not by definition uncontrolling" (183), Oord acknowledges, but he offers uncontrolling love as a preferable definition.

How could anyone arbitrate a dispute between necessary controlling love and necessary uncontrolling love? One might ask, which type of love is most properly attributed to a Divine Reality who is "worthy of our worship"? (162, 164) This is definitely one of Oord's serious concerns. Presumably, his reply would be that any love that could prevent evils but does not do so would not be supremely worthy of our worship. Better a love that is powerless to do so! "God cannot unilaterally prevent genuine evil" (167-176). The choice between what appears to be Divine impotence and what appears to be Divine negligence is a tough one to make! Oord's final Chapter Eight returns to this issue.

In Chapter Seven, Oord explores another explanation for why God does not suspend the laws of nature and work miracles to prevent particular cases of harm. If God is "an omnipresent spirit," (176), Oord argues, God has no body. Because spirits are incorporeal, and God is a spirit, God cannot physically cause anything locally. Of course, God can still act persuasively as one mind influencing other minds (176-180). This argument is troublesome, mainly because it presuppose something like a Neoplatonic/Cartesian mind/matter dualism applied to both God and finite subjects. We know by now that mind/matter dualism does not work for people. Why should it work for God? All of classical theology needed to answer that question. Oord might want to give this more thought. Conceiving of God as the ultimate psycho/physical field might work better.

Surprisingly, in his eighth chapter, when Oord returns to the topic of miracles, *he defends them*—but not as traditionally conceived. He wonders if the God of essential kenosis is weak, inept, and ineffective and answers that God is the necessary but not sufficient source of all

power or causation (189). Then he asks, “But can the almighty God described by essential kenosis act miraculously?” (191) Oord’s answer is, yes, but without coercion, without violating any laws of nature, and only through persuasion and uncontrolling love (191-196).

Oord rejects all traditional understandings of miracles as supernatural violations of the laws of nature (194-196). He redefines “miracle” as “an unusual and good event that occurs through God’s special action in relation to creation” (196-199). This involves no violations of anything or anyone because a divine providence of uncontrolling love works only with and through creature cooperation. Those highly unexpected events we regard as miracles occur only when enough relevant individuals—from the smallest particles and cells to the most fully conscious moral agents—are *persuaded to cooperate* (no easy task). But such miracles do happen. Oord might have indicated that statistical natural laws allow innumerable individuals to do very unexpected things, as long as large groups of them behave in statistically probable and predictable ways.

Oord contends that God’s special action “never involves total divine control” but instead “occurs when God provides new possibilities, forms, structures or ways of being to creatures” (199). He recognizes that this idea could be elucidated in many ways, one of which is by appealing to Whitehead’s notion of eternal objects (199, n. 24) (according to which God offers novel possibilities or eternal objects to existing individuals by giving them attractive “initial aims”). I could be mistaken, but I do not believe that any other process thinker makes a case for *miracles* in terms of *persuasion*. Oord applies his theory in detail to a significant number of biblical miracles (201-216) and makes the most powerful and persuasive case for persuasion that I have yet seen. Others will doubtless devote many future pages to assessing the degree of Oord’s success.

ENDNOTES

¹ David Ray Griffin, *Panentheism and Scientific Naturalism*, Claremont: Process Century Press, 2014, 90-91, 118-122, 124, and especially 255-256.