

Synopsis by David Matthew of

# THE UNCONTROLLING LOVE OF GOD

An Open and Relational Account of Providence

by Thomas Jay Oord

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*[Introductory note by D. Matthew:*

How God relates to the world that he has made has traditionally been viewed in two main ways, represented by Calvinism and Arminianism. In Calvinistic thought, God's primary attribute is *control* (or sovereignty); he not only permits all that happens, but actually causes it. On that basis, we are automatons. Arminians, by contrast, hold that God has given us at least a degree of free will. Both schemes throw up problems in light of the evil in the world.

More recently, a third alternative has emerged and gained rapidly in popularity. This is the 'open' view of God, or of providence, in which God is seen as being in active relationship with his creatures and, to some extent at least, dependent on them and their choices. Oord's work is in this tradition. He is a multi-disciplinary scholar, qualified in theology, philosophy and science.

His book sets out his approach to divine providence in detail. Its purpose is 'to make sense of randomness and evil in light of my conviction that a loving and powerful God exists and acts providentially' (10). It is aimed at the intelligent reader, published as it is by IVP Academic. More recently, Oord has produced a book for a more popular readership, covering the same basic ground but in simpler and more practical style: *God Can't: How to believe in God and love after tragedy, abuse, and other evils* (SacraSage, 2019).]

Numbers in brackets are page numbers.

## Chapter 1: Tragedy Needs Explanation

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We all seek answers to the big questions of life and existence. Random happenings take place, and we wonder why. Evil is an ever-present reality. We wonder how God fits into the picture. We ask about *providence*, which is 'the way God acts to promote our well-being and the well-being of the whole' (16). It is easy to reconcile purpose, beauty, goodness and love with belief in God, but the negatives are a problem for us.

Our wondering comes down to two basic questions: [1] If a loving and powerful God exists, why doesn't this God prevent genuinely evil events? And [2] How can a loving and powerful God be providential if random and chance events occur? This book seeks to address both questions, looking to theology, science, philosophy and Scripture.

Four true events will serve to illustrate the reality of *randomness and evil*:

1. The religiously-motivated terrorist bombings at the finishing line of the Boston marathon in April 2013. Three people died and over 250 were injured, many requiring amputations. Some Christians explained it by saying we need contrast: we can't appreciate joy without the contrast of pain and heartache. Others focused more on the conviction that God is present with all who are enduring suffering, but wondered whether he allows such pain just so that he can do so. If he is all-powerful, is this the best way to express it? And did he pick the victims in advance, under the guise of randomness?

2. A Canadian family were driving home from holiday. A rock flew out from the wheels of a passing truck, went through the windscreen and killed the mother instantly. It had apparently been lodged between the double tyres of the truck and shot out from there just as the car was passing. Investigators categorised it as 'an act of God'. How do we reconcile such random events with divine providence?
3. A couple's second child, a daughter, was born six weeks early, needing major heart surgery. They had named her Eliana Tova, meaning 'God answered with good'. A month later, her kidneys failed; she would require dialysis twelve hours a day for several years, in the hope of a transplant as she got older. She also had another rare medical condition. Was all this 'meant to be'? Was it somehow God's plan? Why did it happen to this family rather than to some other?
4. Zamuda was a young Congolese woman. Rebels came to her village, murdered her father and two siblings, then seven of them took turns in raping her, including forcing a rifle into her vagina, and left her for dead. She had two operations to repair some of the damage but is permanently scarred and in pain, with obvious psychological scars, too. Some say God allows evil to build up our character. Does that apply here? Surely not. And what of the children whom the rebels killed? The dead can't be toughened up by suffering.

## Chapter 2: The Randomness and Regularities of Life

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When such grim things happen, we can say, 'I just trust God.' But, deep down, we long for answers. In order to find them, we need first to define some of the key terms, like randomness, the regularities of life, free will, evil and goodness. We address the first two in this chapter, and the other three in Chapter 3.

### Randomness

This is 'the idea that an event or set of circumstances had no intended purpose, was not part of someone's plan, did not follow a pattern or may not have occurred as it did' (28). We sometimes say 'chance' or 'accident'.

Some believe randomness to be an illusion, a way of saying, 'We don't know why'. Our knowledge is limited. This is the view of philosopher-scientist Pierre Simon de Laplace. Some Christians say that God knows and, more than that, actually brings about 'random' events, so nothing is in reality accidental at all (the Heidelberg Catechism, Augustine, Calvin, Sproul). They can produce supporting Bible passages like Num 26:52-65; Lev 16:9; Josh 18:6; Judg 20:28; 1 Sam 10:21; Prov 16:33; Jon 1:7; Acts 1:26. But other passages affirm chance (Luke 13:25; John 9:2-3). Some scientists (e.g. Einstein, Hawking) also believe randomness to be an illusion; to them, events are fully determined by the laws of physics and chemistry.

But many scholars now believe that some events, at least, are genuinely random. And all of us, as realists, in fact act as if that is the case. It affects how we think about accountability: we judge people on whether we think they acted intentionally or not. Arson is different from an accidental fire. We toss a coin at the start of a game; we roll a dice. The lottery winner got lucky. The golfer struck by lightning was unlucky. Companies conduct random polls in the belief that they will provide useful data.

We need to accept that randomness is real. Science backs this up. Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Newtonian physics held that all that happens is in a causal chain, and Calvinistic theology echoed this with its view of divine sovereignty. But quantum theory has overturned that now: the universe is an open system, not a determined machine. Chaos theory agrees. There is *some* causality, but it is not absolute; unpredictability is real. In biology, evolution involves randomness at various levels. Most genetic mutations appear to occur randomly.

Philosophers are in agreement about the reality of randomness. C.S. Peirce, a century ago, reached this conclusion, and others more recently take the same view.

### Regularities

We take life's regularities for granted. Without them, in fact, 'random' has no meaning. Without them, too, all would descend into chaos.

Evolutionary theory requires lawlike regularity as well as randomness. The combination is essential. God creates in and with both, and Christians should embrace that.

Some regularities are so consistent that they get called 'laws', like 'laws of nature'—gravity etc. Because of them, science is possible. Philosophers ask, 'Do the regularities of life conform to universal and eternal laws of nature? Or do we merely call these regularities laws based on their repetition?' (44). The former are called *necessitarians* and the latter are *regularists*. Most theologians favour the former, with God calling the shots.

Whether or not God created the 'laws of nature' governs how we see his relation to morality. Euthyphro's dilemma: 'Are some deeds good simply because God declares them so? Or does God declare them good because they fundamentally are good?' (46). If the former, maybe genocide is OK for him, but not for us. Bible scholar Tremper Longman III holds this view. We sense that this is unsatisfactory. But there are also problems with the alternative view, which implies that standards of morality exist outside of God. Most thinking atheists take this view.

We can take two similar views regarding the laws of nature: did God arbitrarily create them, or do they exist apart from any divine decree? Most Christians incline to the former view, and maintain that he is free to interrupt or suspend them at will. But if so, why doesn't he do that more often to prevent gross evils? If we take the alternative view, we can't blame God for failing to override the natural laws because he must obey them. But where do they then come from?

My proposal is different: 'The standards of morality and regularities of existence derive from God's loving nature' (48), and I will develop this idea later. Meanwhile, we can conclude that absolute randomness is a myth, and so is absolute determinism. Both randomness and regularity persist side-by-side in the universe.

### Chapter 3: Agency and Freedom in a World of Good and Evil

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In this chapter we address the nature of free will, especially what is called *libertarian* free will, and the problems of both evil and good.

#### Agency and Freedom

We start with science and metaphysics. Self-organisation seems to be a reality at various levels of existence. For simple entities this is not a conscious activity. At some point in the evolutionary process, a threshold was crossed where agency became a possibility, then a reality. Insects, fish, reptiles etc. display a degree of agency and self-organisation. Elephants, cats, dolphins and chimpanzees express it to a more advanced degree, including apparently making free choices.

Alternatively, we can start at the other end of the chain, with ourselves as humans. We sense intuitively that we have free will, at least to an extent. And looking down the chain, we see elements of it in other creatures at different levels, evident as an aspect of consciousness in more advanced creatures, and as what Barbour calls 'interiority' at lower levels.

But some deny free will altogether. They see regularities in the behaviour patterns of animals, for example, and cannot reconcile that with freedom of will. They would apply the same approach to human beings. Do some people, for instance, make a free choice to marry? They would say no: statistics, averages and patterns dictate it. But is that not to put 'the regularity cart before the free-will horse'? (56).

Sceptics like Richard Dawkins reject free will on the ground that we are governed by both nature's randomness and its regularities. Many neuroscientists agree. But 'sceptics tend to believe that we have to decide between believing in unlimited freedom or in no freedom at all' (57). This is a mistake. We can't choose to visit the moon this afternoon, or change into a toad. But in lots of areas of life we can make real choices. We have *limited* but *genuine* freedom.

Philosophers use the term 'libertarian free will'. This means a genuine freedom that can't be reconciled with being fully determined to act in a certain way. 'Libertarian free will supporters are *incompatibilists* because they believe we cannot be simultaneously free and entirely determined by other forces. In other words, free will and complete

determinism are incompatible' (58). There are two dimensions to libertarian free will. One is *self-determination*: the agent has the power to choose. The other is the need for *various possibilities to be available*: a free being is an agent who chooses among options. We instinctively believe ourselves to be free in this way, and we presuppose it when we hold ourselves and others accountable for their actions. In fact, being morally responsible is impossible if free will is an illusion. 'Free will is an experiential non-negotiable' (61).

## Good and evil

'*Value* is a conceptual umbrella under which reside categories such as truth, aesthetics and morality. Making sense of values is essential to making sense of life' (62). We believe that some ways of living, or events in the world, are better than others. It is another experiential non-negotiable.

We don't always agree on specifics; people take different views on abortion or polygamy, for example. But we do all agree that morality matters; we are all morally aware. Believers in God typically see him as the source of values. He is the source of goodness, and promotes it, and he opposes evil. We should imitate him in that.

Problems arise when we consider the evil in the world, and God's relation to it. 'If God is perfectly good, God will *want* to prevent genuine evils. If God can control creatures or circumstances totally, God would be *able* to prevent genuine evils. And yet horrors occur' (63). The usual way of coping with this dilemma is to appeal to *mystery*. But that is not satisfying. We may agree it is right for us to go on trying to make the world a better place, but why try to alleviate the suffering that a supposedly omnipotent and loving God permits?

We should distinguish between *necessary* evil and *gratuitous* or *genuine* evil. The former is, for instance, putting up with the discomfort of a needle-jab for the benefit of the antibiotics being injected, or choosing to have a child, knowing that the pain of childbirth is worth it for the positives that will follow. Genuine evil refers to events that make the world worse than it might have been—better outcomes would have been possible if different choices had been made. The Holocaust is a typical example. We use the word *sin* to describe genuine evil.

Some Christians who say that God doesn't *cause* such evil still hold that he does not *prevent* it. But if God *could* prevent it and fails to do so, is he still not morally culpable? How can we still see him as a God of love?

There is a problem of *good*, as well as one of evil, for those who don't believe in God. There is a great deal of good in the world: love, compassion, generosity and beneficial co-operation. People often make genuine sacrifices in order to benefit others. Christians usually—and rightly—say that every inspiration to do good comes from God. It is hard to account for good if we dismiss God from the picture.

Sociobiology and evolutionary psychology often try to account for good by attributing it to ulterior, selfish motives. Altruism is apparent, never real, they say. Goodness is just another name for reproductive success. This stems from a *materialistic* worldview in which nature is all there is. This view says that in humans, our self-interested motives are hidden even from ourselves, and 'good' in reality means self-benefit.

But 'one major problem with materialism is that we all live as if good and evil are real' (73). True, our motivations may be mixed in many cases, but there is no denying we sometimes deliberately act in another person's interest, even at considerable personal cost.

If evolution has indeed made us self-deceived regarding good and evil, 'the critic of altruism has no grounds to think his beliefs are truer than the believer in altruism. No one can know' (74). Science needs transcendence to explain value; we need to turn to metaphysics and religion. That will not, of course, rule out legitimate scientific aspects of the picture.

We start with a God who is inherently good and who does good. But creatures often do good, too, even though they are not inherently good, as God is. When they respond to God, whether consciously or otherwise, they do good. So belief in a good God is the best solution to the 'problem of good'.

## Chapter 4: Models of God's Providence

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'Providence' means God's activity in the world. We are looking for the best way to understand how God acts providentially in a world marked by randomness and regularities, agency and freedom, good and evil.

Christians believe that, while God is transcendent, we can know at least something of who he is primarily because of the revelation brought by Jesus Christ. And if, as we believe, God is active in all of creation (Acts 17:28; Rom 1:20), we can also know about him through 'Scripture, the natural world, tradition, reason, the arts, sciences and our personal experiences' (82). But there are limits to how fully we can comprehend him, so we need to be humble in our proposals about his providence. There are seven major models of providence.

### 1. God is the Omnicause

This model, associated with Calvin and Reformed theology, holds that God causes everything. Everything that happens is by divine decree. This is absolute sovereignty—which is just another word for 'control'. Proponents say we can't know exactly how it works. We seem to act freely, but in fact God is pulling the strings. It is a mystery.

Some Scriptures can be used to proof-text this view, like Isaiah 45:7, Amos 3:6 and Proverbs 16:9. But critics argue that such passages are capable of other interpretations, and that the overall flavour of Scripture is not to present God as causing everything, especially evil events. And how can God love if he is 'the ultimate cause of every rape, torture, disease and terrorist act'? (85). This model makes little sense.

### 2. God empowers and overpowers

This model of providence is probably the most widely held among 'average' Christians. It says that God creates and sustains all of creation. He empowers humans by giving them free will, but he at times overpowers that freedom or interrupts life's regularities. His will is sometimes controlling, and at other times permissive.

A distinction is often made between *general* and *special* providence. The general kind is God's overseeing the events of history without interrupting or controlling them completely. The special kind is when he controls actions or events to guarantee an outcome. Much Arminian theology follows this line; Roger Olson, for instance, believes that God *permits* evil without willing it or causing it. The word 'intervene' is commonly used of God breaking into the natural order for specific ends, which is going further than saying that he acts *influentially* in our lives. One problem is that we can never be sure whether he has done so or not; we don't therefore know whom to blame or praise.

Proponents of this model hold that God is not the *source* of evil, but their position does not explain why he fails to act to *prevent* it. He thus remains culpable. The level of explanatory inconsistency that this model forces upon us means that we can't make sense of life.

### 3. God is voluntarily self-limited

On this view, God has the power to control everything but, at creation, voluntarily gave up that total control. Most say he did so out of love, to give humans freedom and allow randomness.

Some who hold this view think that, on certain very special occasions, God slips into the 'empowers and overpowers' mode by intervening. This, they say, may have been the case with Jesus' resurrection, and may also be required for God's victory at the end of time. So this model differs from No.2 only in degree, not in kind. Supporters often quote Phil 2:5-11, which describes Jesus' voluntary *kenosis*, or self-emptying, out of love, and thus shows us that God is like this. John Polkinghorne is a well-known advocate of this model. Another variation holds that part of God's voluntary laying down of control at creation was his decision *never* to make exceptions.

This model raises questions about the suffering in the world. Why did he voluntarily decide not to interfere if he knew what appalling pain and suffering would result from his decision? He could have stopped evil, but he didn't. This offers little comfort to its victims. It is hard to believe that this God loves perfectly.

Advocates respond to criticism in two ways. Some say he made a promise never (or rarely) to interfere and, because he is faithful, he sticks to it. Others say that, if he occasionally controlled others, that would interrupt the world's regularities in some negative way; natural or moral laws would become untrustworthy. The first gives greater

importance to keeping promises than to loving steadfastly. And in any case, ‘a wise God would not make a promise that love may eventually require breaking’ (92). The second does not take victims’ perspectives seriously enough; the occasional interruption would surely not throw the whole universe out of kilter?

#### 4. God is essentially kenotic

This is the best model, and we will return to it in detail later.

It says that *God’s essential 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; 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’ (94).

The difference between this and Model 3 is that, in the former, God’s self-restriction is *voluntary*. He could have chosen to act otherwise. He has the power to control, but he *chose* not to use it. Model 4, by contrast, holds that God’s self-restriction is *involuntary*; his *nature* is love, and this logically precedes his sovereign will. ‘Because God’s nature is love, God always gives freedom, agency and self-organization to creatures, and God sustains the regularities of nature’ (95).

#### 5. God sustains as an impersonal force

According to this model, God’s steady and impersonal presence never varies. He never engages in reciprocal relationships. Miracles never occur. God sustains the existing order, but natural causes explain reality.

Because, on this view, God is not personal, he is often called the Ground of Being, Pure Act, Depth, or Holy Reality. Paul Tillich held this position. He wrote that ‘it is an insult to the divine holiness to treat God as a partner with whom one collaborates or as a superior power whom one influences by rites and prayers’ (95). He is little more than a divine force field.

It is hard to reconcile this view with Scripture, or even with our own spiritual experience, which is essentially relational.

#### 6. God is initial Creator and current Observer

This is essentially 18<sup>th</sup> century *deism*. After creating the universe and setting it in motion, God lost interest and withdrew; now he just watches from a distance. He is not currently involved with the world.

Deism—sometimes called ‘natural religion’—grew out of the scientific revolution. As science developed and began to produce explanations for phenomena which, hitherto, had been attributed to God, people came to see God as being no longer in the picture. There are no empirically verified miracles, they maintain. Miracles rely on superstition rather than reason. God’s policy is fully hands-off.

This view has much in common with Model 5. But there, God is a necessary ongoing cause of all things. In this one, there is no divine causation in the present. Certainly, an uninvolved God is not to be blamed for the bad things we experience, but neither is he to be praised for the good ones. This view doesn’t explain why God would have created a world with so much evil if he is as omnipotent as this view holds. And what good is an ‘absentee landlord’ if he will not respond when his tenants need him?

#### 7. God’s ways are not our ways

This model holds that we waste our time trying to understand God and his ways. This is *apophatic theology*, which maintains that we can say only what God is *not*, and never what he is, because the whole topic is, to limited human beings, a transcendent mystery. He is ‘wholly other’. Human categories cannot be applied to him. Karl Barth leaned in this direction, at least in his early days. The deconstructive theology of Jacques Derrida is very similar. But this model, in all its variations, fails to enable us to make sense of life and suffering.



One version appeals to what Thomas Aquinas called primary and secondary causation. God is the primary cause, while secondary causes are creaturely. But advocates appeal to mystery when asked exactly *how* God acts in his role as primary cause. Divine action is totally incomprehensible, they say. And there is no clear response in this view to the problem of evil.

Next, we return to look in more detail at Model 4.

## Chapter 5: The Open and Relational Alternative

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'Open and relational theology' has emerged in recent decades. It has variations, but usually embraces the following three key ideas:

- 'God and creatures relate to one another. God makes a real difference to creation, and creation makes a real difference to God. God is relational.
- The future is not set because it has not yet been determined. Neither God nor creatures know with certainty all that will actually occur. The future is open.
- 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.' (106)

*Essential kenosis* is one version of open and relational theology, which people have arrived at by a variety of different paths. The main paths are:

### 1. Scripture

Five Bible scholars produced, in 1994, a landmark book entitled *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*. The scholars were David Basinger, William Hasker, Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice and John Sanders. Of these, Pinnock is the best-known.

Note the word 'biblical'. They were convinced that the Bible's overall message is best understood in light of the three key ideas above. Clark Pinnock, coming from a Calvinistic background, found himself compelled by Scripture itself to forsake the Reformed view of God and his providence. In the OT, he saw the covenants as expressing the relational nature of God (e.g. 2 Chron 7:14, 19-20). God addresses Israel and awaits their response. He is not sure what action they will take until they actually respond.

Pinnock also saw OT instances of God having regrets, learning, or changing his mind. In the Flood story, for instance, God regretted having made humankind (Gen 6:5-6). 'If God knows the future exhaustively, God will not have regrets' (109). In Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, God learnt the true nature of Abraham's heart (Gen 22:12). When King Hezekiah repented, God changed his plans (Isaiah 38:1-5). God changed his mind over destroying Nineveh in light of changing attitudes on the part of its inhabitants (Jonah 3:4, 9-10). Some 40 OT passages speak of God changing his mind, which suggests he doesn't know the future in its entirety.

In the NT, Pinnock saw the life and teaching of Jesus expressing God's character of love, even for enemies, and his desire to embrace and relate to them. Jesus revealed God as a parent: Father. Pinnock thus came to reject the view of God as one who relates to us primarily as 'all-determining monarch and law-giver' and embraced his relating to us as 'parent, lover, and covenant partner' (110).

Pinnock also found Scripture assuming 'libertarian freedom when it posits personal give-and-take relationships and when it holds people responsible for their actions' (111). And that, he saw, implies that God's relationship to time is similar to ours: he 'remembers the past, savours the present, and anticipates the future' (111).

### 2. Christian theologies

Other proponents of open and relational theology came to it by following themes in their existing theological traditions, including Arminian, Lutheran, Pentecostal and others. Examples are:

- Marit Trelstad following **Lutheran** emphases on God's covenantal reaching out for relationship.

- Rod Thomas pursuing **Mennonite/Anabaptist** convictions about God's reliance on persuasion rather than exercising domination.
- Frank Tupper, a **Baptist**, following up on the believer's ability to freely choose baptism.
- Joshua D. Reichard developing **Pentecostal** beliefs about the need to listen to, and co-operate with, the Holy Spirit—a working relationship.
- William Curtis Holtzen, a **Restorationist** in the American Stone-Campbell movement, extrapolating from its emphasis on freedom in the Spirit. He wrote: 'God's real power in relational theism is not about compulsion or coercion but rather a love that lures, prompts, and leads humans to become what God desires them to become and transform into the *Imago Dei*' (114).
- Roger Olson, an **Arminian**, followed through on that tradition's insistence on the need for us to co-operate with God in embracing salvation, and its denial of individual predestination.
- Randy Maddox, a **Wesleyan** (Methodist), points out how John Wesley emphasised God's love above all, preaching that God 'strongly and sweetly influenc[es] all, and yet without destroying the liberty of his rational creatures' (116).

Most in these traditions deny that God predestines all that happens, while many hold to his *foreknowledge* of all future occurrences. Others hold that God experiences time the same way that we do. The future is full of *possibilities*, all of which he knows, being omniscient, but he doesn't know with certainty which ones will come about.

Before the Pinnock book brought open and relational theology to a wide public in 1994, many Bible scholars and theologians in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries had already been leaning that way. For example:

- Lorenzo D. McCabe, a Methodist, argued that God's omniscience does not entail exhaustive foreknowledge.
- Isaak Dorner, a Lutheran, believed that God knows creatures' future free acts as possibilities, not actualities.
- T.W. Brents, a Restorationist, believed God voluntarily chooses not to know some things.
- Jules Lequyer, a Roman Catholic, held that God has only a conjectural knowledge of the acts determined by human activity.
- Uriah Smith, an Adventist, wrote, 'God knew that humans *might* sin, but this would be a very different thing from saying he knew that humans *would* sin' (119).
- Edgar S. Brightman, along with other Methodists, rejected exhaustive foreknowledge.

In the later 20<sup>th</sup> century, various process theologians moved along similar lines in their convictions.

### 3. Philosophy

Other people have reached open and relational theology from a philosophical starting-point.

William Hasker is probably the best known. As a theology student he was unsettled with some aspects of Augustinian doctrine, especially election and reprobation. He held, however, to God's exhaustive foreknowledge. Later in life, he was introduced to the 'middle knowledge' view of God's omniscience, also known as Molinism. 'This view says God knows all the actual decisions free creatures will make before creatures make them. God also knows what free creatures would have done in any possible situation, even if the choices were never actually made' (121). He rejected that view and, in finding his way forward, came to the 'open view' of God's knowledge.

He also found the traditional view of God as 'timeless' to be implausible from a philosophical angle, seeing it as based more on neoplatonic metaphysics than on the Bible. So, he reached the view that 'God knows all possibilities and all actualities, but God cannot know which possibilities will become actual until they are actualized' (122). For



free will to be genuine, the future must be open, not settled. Along the way, together with others, Hasker questioned traditional doctrines of God's timelessness, simplicity, impassibility and immutability.

In fact, by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it seems that most biblical scholars had rejected the classic view of impassibility, believing God to be relational, affecting others and being affected by them. Richard E. Creel is a contemporary philosopher who has made that journey. As for divine immutability, Charles Hartshorne is one key thinker who rejected Aquinas's view to reach a position where, he believes, God is immutable in some respects only (his eternal nature), and mutable in others (his living experience in moment-by-moment relations with others). While God changes because of the latter, he remains perfect.

#### 4. Science

The fact that aspects of science harmonise with aspects of open and relational theology has caused some scientists to embrace it. John Polkinghorne, a particle physicist and later, an Anglican clergyman, made that journey, impelled by what he saw as the evidence.

Polkinghorne has his own slant on some aspects of open and relational theology, but holds to its fundamentals, as do other scientists like Ian Barbour, Philip Clayton, John Haughte and Arthur Peacocke.

Next, we will look at the views of the theologian John Sanders.

### Chapter 6: Does Love Come First?

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A key book on the theology of providence was written by open and relational theologian John Sanders. It is *The God Who Risks: a Theology of Divine Providence* (2007).

Sanders affirms all the major aspects of open and relational theology: God does not constantly control others; he has given us genuine freedom; he works with us to achieve certain goals. God's providence, he says, entails risk. God does not get everything he desires, but this is the very nature of love: it can be scorned. But love is God's primary characteristic.

To critics who say that the use of human terminology to describe God and his ways is mere anthropomorphism, Sanders replies that the biblical writers use such language often, which encourages us to do the same. And since the Bible shows God to be, in at least some respects, like us, our language can describe God as he truly is.

The clearest revelation of God comes in Jesus Christ, Sanders affirms. So, to understand providence we need to see how it operated in the life of Jesus. Jesus tells us that God opposes evil. So, 'if Jesus is the paradigm of providence, then God is fundamentally opposed to sin, evil, and suffering' (136). He does not, therefore, send suffering upon us but 'wins our hearts through the weakness of the cross and the power of the resurrection' (136). The way of God is love.

'I disagree, however, with Sanders's view of how God's love and power relate. I also disagree when Sanders says God allows or permits genuine evil' (136). He holds that, while God doesn't *send* gratuitous evil, he *permits* it, and that view means that God is ultimately responsible for evil, by not preventing it. 'The God Sanders describes fails to act like a loving human, let alone a perfectly loving God' (137).

Sanders answers that God doesn't prevent evil in specific cases because he is concerned with the bigger picture: running the universe as a whole. And if God were 'to make a habit' of vetoing specific acts, the beloved would become an automaton, and God would find himself alone. But he reserves the right to do it occasionally. We could understand if some of the victims mentioned in Chapter 1 asked, 'Why didn't God do it in my case?'

Sanders somehow believes that, for God, preventing such evils would have been worse than allowing them. Rather than opposing evil, God's primary commitment, on this view, seems to be not to tamper with the processes and structures of creation.

Sanders' view fails, therefore, to solve the problem of evil. And that is because, for him, love is not truly God's foremost and governing attribute, even though he says it is. He makes many statements that, in fact, posit

sovereignty (control) as the primary attribute; for him, God's power logically precedes his love in decision-making. Sanders rejects the idea that 'the world conditions God' absolutely. He also rejects the Calvinistic view that 'God constantly controls the world'. He prefers an option that we could summarise as 'God sovereignly, not of necessity, decided to create a world with free creatures'.

But there is a better, fourth, option: 'God's loving nature requires God to create a world with creatures God cannot control' (146). 'If love comes first and love does not force others to comply, it makes little sense to say, "God is free to sovereignly decide not to determine everything." If love comes first, God *cannot* exercise meticulous providence or determine everything' (146). Or, more simply put, 'If love doesn't force the beloved and God is love, God *can't* force the beloved' (147)—any more than a mermaid can run a marathon. 'Mermaids cannot run marathons because a mermaid's nature includes leglessness. God cannot create controllable creatures because God's nature is uncontrolling love' (147).

The view that uncontrolling love in God logically precedes control is at the heart of essential kenosis.

## Chapter 7: The Essential Kenosis Model of Providence

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The Greek word *kenosis*, in its various forms, occurs several times in the NT, the best-known being in verse 7 of the passage Philippians 2:4-13. This verse says that Jesus 'emptied himself' or 'made himself nothing' (NIV). The context is important. It shows how, in coming to reveal the Father to us, Jesus expressed other-oriented love in his diminished power and his service to others. This was shown particularly in the weakness of the cross.

In the past, interpreters focused chiefly on the phrase's relevance to Jesus' humanity and divinity, discussing which elements of divinity Jesus laid aside at the incarnation. This is still relevant, and the classic conclusion is expressed in the Chalcedonian creed.

More recently, interpreters have focused more on other aspects of the passage, like 'taking the form of a slave', 'humbled himself' and 'death on a cross', which highlight Jesus' diminished power and his service to others. Since he came to show us what God is like, we can conclude that 'God's power is essentially persuasive and vulnerable, not overpowering and aloof' (154). This is my own focus in looking at *kenosis*.

The word is hard to translate. Coming here in a poem, as it does, means it has a wider than average scope for interpretation. Most scholars now would say that the 'self-emptying' idea is not very helpful. 'Self-withdrawing,' 'self-limiting' or 'self-giving' may be nearer the mark, though Jurgen Moltmann's 'self withdrawing' of God, in order to make space for the universe he created, implies that God is no longer omnipresent. We have noted already the problems with the notion of God's *voluntary* self-limitation, primarily that it gives his control logical precedence over his love. Also, it means that while God could prevent evil, he doesn't.

Perhaps 'self-giving' is the preferable translation. It fits with the earlier part of the passage about acting for the good of others, as well as the later part where believers are encouraged to live a life of love. A helpful overall definition that gets to the heart of *kenosis* is 'self-giving, others-empowering love'. It harmonises well with its use in other passages, too, and the theme appears elsewhere in both the OT and NT, even where the word itself is not used.

*Kenosis* does not, of course, mean that the objects of God's love are turned into gods themselves. Nor does it mean that, in loving them, God somehow loses his own divine self. And self-giving love does not oppose a proper self-love; love de-centres self-interest, but does not destroy it.

The Philippians passage encourages the fostering of what we might call 'the common good' by means of kenotic love, just as God himself self-gives to promote overall well-being (*shalom*).

Then there is the word 'essential' in 'essential kenosis'. This expresses the conviction that love is the primary attribute of God's essence, or being. God expresses *kenosis* inevitably. He cannot not love: 'God *is* love' (1 Jn 4:8, 16). It is his eternal nature. He is not free to choose *whether* to love because his nature *is* love, though he is free to choose *how* to express that love in any moment. Scripture is full of ways in which he expresses it creatively: kindness, forgiveness, generosity, friendship, support, partnership, creativity etc.

His love opens up similar qualities to us, too, as we respond sensitively to people and situations. His aim in it all is the promotion of *shalom*, which is the essence of the Kingdom of God.

How does 'essential kenosis' touch on the problem of evil? It asserts: 'God *cannot* unilaterally prevent genuine evil' (166).

There are limits to God's power. He can't create a square circle. He can't change the past. He can't contradict his own nature (2 Tim 2:13; Jas 1:17; Heb 6:18; Tit 1:2 etc.). He can't sin. He can't self-duplicate, etc. Also, 'because love is the preeminent and necessary attribute in God's nature, God cannot withdraw, override or fail to provide the freedom, agency, self-organizing and lawlike regularity God gives. Divine love limits divine power' (168).

His love means he cannot withdraw the freedom he gives to his creatures, even though they may misuse it for evil ends, because that gift of freedom is part of his steadfast love. 'By acting alone, God cannot thwart evil freely done by those exercising divinely derived freedom. Consequently, this model of providence allows us to say God is not culpable for failing to prevent the dastardly deeds free creatures sometimes do' (170). He could not single-handedly prevent the Boston marathon bombers or the abusers of the Congolese girl.

In the same way, he cannot prevent the acts of basic entities, which have agency and self-organisation as a result of God's love. That would apply to the couple whose child was born with serious genetic deficiencies, as well as to the results of natural disasters like earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. We can no more blame God for these than we can blame the parents of a boy who, in later life, becomes a rapist; they gave him being, yes, but they are not responsible for his actions.

'I agree with John Polkinghorne when he says that "the regularities of the mechanical aspects of nature are to be understood theologically as signs of the faithfulness of the Creator." Essential kenosis adds, however, that the Creator's faithfulness derives from that Creator's loving nature. In fact, it is in the context of the apostle Paul emphasizing divine faithfulness that we find the biblical claim about God's inherent limitations: "[God] remains faithful," because God "cannot deny himself" (2 Tim 2: 13)' (174).

But if we, as humans, sometimes step into a situation to prevent evil, why can't God? Because he is an omnipresent spirit (Jn 4:24). That means he does not have a localised body. He cannot, therefore, step between two people fighting to push them apart and prevent their injury or death. What he can do is call upon people to act on his behalf by stepping in. We therefore need to be alert to his voice. We are his hands and feet. Such creaturely co-operation is a key part of our calling as followers of Jesus.

'A controlling God of love is fictional' (180). Love, by definition, is non-coercive. 'If love is inherently uncontrolling and God loves necessarily, God is incapable of coercion' (181). Here, I am using the word 'coercion' in its metaphysical sense of 'control entirely'. Jesus illustrates this: 'Although Jesus can be angry or even exert strong force on occasion (e.g., clearing the temple), Jesus never acted coercively in the sense of controlling others entirely. The *a posteriori* evidence of the life of Jesus, whom Christians believe reveals God better than any other person, suggests that God does not coerce' (184).

Some would argue that, when a miracle takes place, God is acting coercively, so we will look at this in the next chapter.

## Chapter 8: Miracles and God's Providence

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Is God, as described in the 'essential kenosis' schema, a weak God? Does he not appear as something less than Almighty God? No. 'Although essential kenosis insists that God cannot coerce, it accounts for God as the almighty creator, sustainer and source of miracles who always acts through uncontrolling love' (188). 'Divine sovereignty always expresses the power of self-giving and uncontrolling love' (189).

We mainly use 'almighty' in describing God's *power*. He is almighty in three senses:

- **He is mightier than all others.** He has neither equals nor superiors in might.

- **He is the only one who exerts might upon all that exists.** He is the only one with influence and causal force upon everything in existence.
- **He is the ultimate source of might for all others.** Without him, no others have power.

None of these involve coercion. So how does essential kenosis account for miracles?

Some people, of course, reject miracles altogether. They see hoaxes or misunderstanding passed off as miracles, or put them down to temporary suggestibility or coincidence. Others reject them because, clearly, the majority of people who ask for miracles don't get them. Others are put off because they can't see why God, if he can do miracles, doesn't do them much more often—the big problem of 'selective miracles'.

'But I do think Christians can and should believe God sometimes acts miraculously' (192). How one defines 'miracle' will be governed by one's view of divine providence. Schleiermacher thinks miracles are purely subjective, with no objective reality or value. Hume and others define a miracle as a violation of the laws of nature, which is problematic for four reasons:

1. 'It is difficult if not impossible to identify what laws a purported miracle violates' (193).
2. While nature exhibits regularities, many scientific scholars question the notion of 'laws of nature'.
3. This view presupposes either laws of nature that transcend God, or ones that he put in place as able to be violated at any time—which raises big questions about the problem of evil.
4. 'Defining miracles as violations of the laws of nature does not fit the vast majority of claims about miracles in Scripture, in history or today' (194)

Others prefer to talk of God's 'intervening' in life's natural processes. But this implies that he must enter into a closed system of natural causes, which contradicts the Christian belief in God's omnipresence and continual action upon creation. For Christians, 'no event—whether that event is miraculous or mundane—is fully explainable by natural causes or processes' (194).

Some prefer to say 'supernatural action' instead. But, in reality, this is just another way of saying 'mystery', as it can't be explained in the usual ways, and it also implies coercive action on God's part. If he can do that on one occasion, why doesn't he do it in the many other situations of need, danger etc.?

A better definition of miracle is: 'an unusual and good event that occurs through God's special action in relation to creation' (195). Each of the elements is important.

*Unusual:* a miracle is out of the ordinary; it is noteworthy; it exceeds the usual expectations. It produces immediate awe, astonishment, joy, worship or reverence.

*Good:* many powerful events are not good at all. A miracle is life-enhancing and beneficial.

*Special divine action.* This does not mean 'intervention'—a notion we have rejected. Instead, 'the special divine action that makes miracles possible occurs when God provides new possibilities, forms, structures or ways of being to creatures' (198). It is God opening up new possibilities to his creatures, new avenues of being or acting, into which they can choose to move, and these will vary in nature depending on the context and the creature. 'God lovingly invites creatures and creation to cooperate to enact a future in which well-being is established in surprising and positive ways. When creatures respond well to this special divine activity, miracles occur' (200).

*In relation to creation.* Miracles always occur in relation to creation: 'Miracles occur when creatures, organisms or entities of various size and complexity co-operate with God's initiating and empowering love. When creatures co-operate with their Creator, *shālôm* may unfurl in extraordinary ways' (200). This becomes apparent when we look at the biblical miracles, where 'control' is not the key: 'The Bible gives no explicit support to the view that miracles require divine control' (201).

Many healings, for instance, specifically mention the part played by faith. This may well overlap into other aspects of humanity, like psychosomatic and psychosocial elements, as well as emotions and expectations. Conversely, a lack of

faith can thwart a miracle (Mark 6:5-6; Mat 12:39 etc.). Peter walked on the water only as long as his faith held out; so it was this, rather than the divine solidifying of water molecules, that made it possible.

But creaturely co-operation does not account for 'nature miracles'. They do not involve organisms capable of response.

'An essential kenosis explanation of nature miracles requires speculating about how God acts non-coercively without relying entirely upon intentional creaturely cooperation' (207). Take the Red Sea crossing in Exodus. Some say God acted coercively to hold back the water, while others point solely to the natural feature of the violent winds that have done similar things on other occasions. Both extremes are to be avoided. 'God uses spontaneous or random events at various levels of existence, from the quantum level to those much more complex, when acting miraculously. When doing this, God responds to spontaneity and randomness at various levels of creaturely complexity by calling upon creatures to respond in good and surprising ways' (208).

'When random or spontaneous events occur and the conditions provide for it, God can act in special ways to offer forms and possibilities in relation to creation that result in miracles' (209). In addition, elements of the 'butterfly effect' may be present: 'God offers novel possibilities to intentional agents and calls them to respond in ways that subsequently affect inanimate objects and natural systems' (209). 'Just as intentional human actions affect weather patterns today (e.g., climate change research, consequences of creaturely migration, the effects farming can have on ecosystems), actions by agents long ago could also be catalysts of nature miracles through chain reactions' (209).

A third aspect 'focuses on God's calling upon free agents to act in ways that fit well with what God foreknows with high probability will occur among systems of nature or inanimate objects' (210). If we can predict weather patterns, God can do it better. He may have foreseen the likelihood of the drying winds. At the same time, Moses was open to the inner voice of God prompting him to move at the right time, and the miracle occurred.

Why do some people fail to experience, say, healing even when their faith-level is high? 'The creaturely cooperation aspect of miracles explains why many miracles do not occur despite the adequate faith of the petitioner. The organisms, body parts, organs and cells of our bodies can resist God's offer of new forms of life that involve healing. These creaturely elements and organisms have agency too, and this agency can sometimes thwart miracles. Even when we consciously say yes in faith to the divine desire for our well-being, our bodies may not cooperate with God's healing plans' (213).

Such people should not therefore feel guilty of a 'lack of faith'. Paul and others did not always receive miraculous healing when they asked for it (Gal 4:13-14; Phil 2:27; 1 Tim 5:23; 2 Tim 4:20). 'The God who loves all creation also loves those who pray for healing, even when their bodies do not or cannot cooperate with God's healing gifts. Essential kenosis shifts blame from the faith-filled victim to bodily agents, organisms, organs or entities that do not or cannot cooperate with God' (214).

And we should be quick to acknowledge that God often heals through healthcare providers!

## Postscript

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[This brief closing section summarises all the above content]

David Matthew, June 2020