

New book by Thomas Jay Oord coming out in early December.

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

A theodicy grounded in God's steadfast love

### Summary

For all who are interested in really examining their position on providence, and especially their theodicy, the exercise of following this book's arguments to their final destination will be beneficial. The book is clearly written and easy to understand. The author has obviously thought and prayed about all of this long and hard, and it is clear that the ideas have been tested many times against very able opposition. This surely accounts for the refreshing clarity of the presentation. There is no obfuscation or failure to directly confront hard issues. This is extremely important in a subject area that is typically full of fog, inconsistency, hedging, avoidance and handwaving when the crunch comes. Thomas Jay Oord rejects neither mystery nor miracles. He does insist on seeking answers at points where many seem more or less content with mystery or paradox. In general, he challenges us to be very reluctant in playing the mystery card. To the

believing scientist, and many others, this approach is comfortable and familiar. One may choose not to go as far as Oord goes, but many will appreciate that he is willing to go as far as he does. On the other hand, many followers of Christian theology will not be at all comfortable with where Oord ends up on his journey. Long-held positions and much tradition would suffer for many conservatives and post-conservatives to fully embrace Oord's essential kenosis model and its utter dependence on God's perfect love to locate the full source of God's ultimate ability to bring matters to their full flowering in his creation, and his Kingdom. In short, he pushes us to consider the possibility that God uses love, perfect love, alone to accomplish his ends. God's love combined with our loving response to that love, in the power of the Holy Spirit, comprise the toolkit for the fulfillment of ongoing creation and new-creation - no coercion (total control) necessary or even possible. In the postscript, Oord offers a one-sentence summary of his key concept which he calls "essential kenosis". "The distinguishing feature of essential kenosis is its claim that God cannot deny his own nature of self-giving love." The book explores how this guiding conviction plays out for relational/open theologies when considering creation, good and evil, miracles and other central issues for twenty-first century post-conservative Christian thought. Oord calls this an adventure model of providence. Anyone up for a

theological adventure will not be disappointed, but will almost certainly be challenged.

## Full Review

In this envelope-pushing book Thomas Jay Oord tackles the question that many say is the most difficult for those who cannot believe in a good God. It is also the most difficult for Christian apologists. There has never been a broadly accepted answer to this question, so the search goes on. The question, of course, is some version of “What about evil?” or “How can we reconcile truly horrible things, genuine evil, with the providential will of God?” The first five chapters set the stage and consider numerous alternative approaches to place his own model of providence in context. Chapters six through eight develop the essential kenosis model fully using a variety of approaches. The bulk of this review comprise observations made while reading through a proof copy of the manuscript sent to me by the author. They reflect my impressions up to that point for each chapter. The above summary is provided for those who don’t have the time or desire to read all of this review.

At the beginning of Chapter 1 Oord makes it clear that his proposals will not perpetuate many time-honoured ‘easy answers’ such as “evil must exist for us to recognize the

good.” To paraphrase, the equation on this explanation just does not balance - do we really need this much horror to be able to understand goodness? One might add, does God really need this much horror to be fully glorified? Early on he gives fair warning that his proposals will not allow us to accept horrors as ‘acts of God’ nor even as ‘things permitted by God.’ If you are tired of these kinds of explanations, you may be ready for this book. If you more or less accept these well established approaches, this book will be a mighty challenge. In short, this book may well question your theology, what you believe about God - not whether you believe, but how you think about God.

Chapter two takes on basic definitions for related concepts that are often poorly understood, namely randomness, chance and accident, which are synonyms in Oord’s arguments. Determinists, both the atheistic and the theistic variety, are challenged head on here. He begins with a utilitarian, pragmatic approach to everyday randomness before heading off into the science and philosophy of the subject. After a thumbnail sketch of how far many of us have come from a Newtonian deterministic view, with illustrations from both the quantum world and evolutionary biology, he briefly touches on the pragmatic philosophy of C.S. Peirce. A provocative conclusion is offered at this point “We cannot make progress in understanding our world if we ignore

randomness.” At the beginning of the next section on regularity Oord uses predictability to throw a light on randomness “...if not for regularity, we would not call some events random.” Oord then turns to regularity and provides a very succinct argument as to why we must hold both randomness and regularity in tension if we are to have any hope of understanding the real world.

The old dilemma of Euthyphro is next given close attention *viz.* are good things good because God does them or does God do good things because they are good. I like the way he handles this by giving equal time to both sides and providing very useful references. He then teases us with a third approach which is promised later. Basically, I think he will be arguing that this is not really a dilemma with particularly fearsome horns. It’s more a matter of how we ask the question and the presuppositions we make. The following quote gives a hint to what we might expect in later chapters. "Absolute randomness is a myth. But absolute determinism is too. Forces we cannot see regulate all things, animate and inanimate. Chance and law-like regularity characterize our world. If chance reigned absolutely, chaos would ensue. If law reigned absolutely, order would eliminate creativity. Both randomness and regularity persist in the universe.”

Chapter 3 is the free will chapter. After first recognizing that agency, free will and ultimate causation are not hard-science topics, if they are science at all, Oord brings science to the argument with what might be called a phenomenology approach - we observe things that seem as if they might have purpose. He does this by bringing up one of the most important of scientific observations, self-assembly. This reaches from the beginning of complex matter in the star-based production of elements, to the evolution of the most complex life processes and life forms. While careful to point out that self-assembly (a kind of emergence, I would say) does not get us to agency and certainly not to free-will, it is the most reasonable place to found our thinking. I agree. He then uses the concept of emergence to describe the appearance of free-will at some stage, without pretending to know how or when this occurs.

At this point he takes on the deniers of free will from the agnostic/atheistic side by arguing that they insist on a false dichotomy - unlimited freedom or no freedom. Our experience clearly points to a more middling position. As Oord expresses it, "freedom, yes, limited and genuine." He then offers a clear defence of libertarian freedom, the version of free will he prefers. He admits it is first and foremost experientially based and points out that "Although some people deny free will, the way they inevitably act betrays that denial." He sees free will as

an “experiential non-negotiable” and later “We cannot understand life if we ignore free will.” While on the subject of experiential non-negotiables, Oord next briefly addresses values, our moral awareness, before again taking up evil for another brief look.

Here he carefully points out that he is speaking of gratuitous evil and he sees no hope in a position that claims it to be God’s good work on the basis that God is the author of everything. He is also unwilling to accept the broadly accepted middle position that while God may not author evil, he nevertheless permits it. Oord will no longer accept this spin on the problem, though it is what many of us who grew up in the Arminian wing of the faith were taught. He states his opposition clearly “If God loves perfectly, God must not cause evil nor be culpable for failing to prevent it.”

To close this chapter Oord takes a perhaps unexpected turn for a book on theodicy by asking about our explanation for goodness. This is directed to both the believing apologist and the non-believer. Indeed, is there a non-divine explanation for all of the goodness we see? Here he primarily discuss the materialist position, which is basically a dismissal of goodness, and finds it wanting for much the same reason that he finds the denial of free will wanting - it doesn’t match up with the way we all think and act “Philosophical materialism doesn’t fit

with how we all live.” He concludes this section by accepting that a good God is our best explanation for the goodness that we feel and experience. But, given the plethora of theologies, this clearly cannot be the end of the story. We need, says Oord, “a more plausible model of providence.”

Chapter 4 addresses models of providence. He begins by resisting the temptation to tie a definition of providence (God’s activity) to any particular theology, implying that it is too often framed this way. Oord briefly outlines six models of providence that he considers the most often appealed to, and gives us a glimpse of his model which he calls ‘essential kenosis’. The six models found insufficient are: God as omnicause; God who empowers and overpowers; the voluntarily self-limited God; God as sustaining, impersonal force; the initial creator, current observer God; the totally inscrutable God. All six models appeal to mystery at some stage, some so early on in the process that they essentially come across as faux pious ways of giving up. All, according to Oord, fail to explain important aspects of what we experience as reality. He refuses to yield to any limit on the questions that may be asked, and promises a solution that will depend entirely on what perfect love may be able to accomplish. The reader is challenged in this chapter to at least clarify where she is comfortable playing the mystery card, or where he is uncomfortable asking any further questions.

Oord's ultimate proposal, his model of providence, depends on an open view of the future, commonly referred to as open theology, a strong branch of relational theology. In Chapter 5, as background for his later argument, he provides a 24 page summary of the open future view. More accurately stated this chapter is a good bibliographic summary, in which we hear numerous voices. The reader is introduced to the people and their writings who have been influential in the open theology movement. It begins by introducing us to two writers (Pinnock and Fretheim) who see the open view as the most likely, primarily based on a careful reading and exegesis of Scripture. He then offers similar sketches of several people who come to the open/relational view via thinking through the lens of their own theological traditions. Wesleyans, Anabaptists, Baptists, Pentecostals, are included here. Next comes a look backward to 19th and early 20th century writers to reveal Catholics, Lutherans, Restorationists, Methodists and Adventists who have come to favour an open view. All of these thumbnail biographies are referenced so that interested readers have an easy introduction to the pertinent literature. He ends this survey by briefly referring to recent process theologians who also agree with the relational/open model. This chapter has a final section that is a more extended discussion of how numerous philosophers have come to adopt the open view.

Chapter 6 is devoted to a conversation with John Sanders whom Oord (and many others) regard as the author of “one of the most thorough and best-known theologies of providence written from an open and relational perspective” namely “The God Who Risks”. Herein Oord outlines the many areas of agreement between his thought and Sanders’, and most importantly, shows how his own ‘essential kenosis’ view goes further than Sanders seems willing to go. The most important point of disagreement involves how God’s kenotic love and his power are related; what do we mean by the power of God’s love? The great importance of this question lies in how our answer to it necessarily influences our theodicy - God’s relation to what Oord calls “genuine evil”. According to Sanders, quoted by Oord “Some evil is simply pointless because it does not serve any greater good” These are “horrible events.....that God did not want to occur.” These two quotes are similar to what Oord means by “genuine evil”. Oord himself summarizes it like this “Genuine evils are events that, all things considered, make the world worse than it might have otherwise been. Accepting such evil as something nevertheless permitted (certainly not willed) by God is where Oord parts company with Sanders. Oord is most pointed in his critique of Sanders’ view when he says “This God sounds more like a project manager and less like a personal Lover who cares for each creature.” In

the end he argues that Sanders does not really recognize anything as genuine evil, since God permits it. The free-process defence offered by Sanders is found wanting fundamentally because it fails to solve the problem of evil.

As a personal take on this dividing point - permitting or not permitting genuine evil - and as a Christian biologist interested in how to best think about creation, an analogy comes to mind. In Genesis we read that creation was from a situation of formlessness, emptiness, purposelessness and chaos to a well-formed situation full of wonderful things and creatures and replete with purpose - but clearly not perfect. To celebrate the good and very good creation that Genesis reveals, we usually don't think it necessary or good to say that God permitted the chaos, purposelessness etc. that came before. Rather, we rightly celebrate the good that replaces it. If we further think of creation as a continuous process, we can see and acknowledge ongoing purposelessness (genuine evil) and rightly celebrate whenever such horrors are overcome. Why do we feel the urge to see these more recent horrors as permitted by God, and not feel the same about original purposelessness? From our experience, it seems obvious that creation is a work in progress. From the beginning, "when God began to create" (Tanakh), God appears to have been working against things he neither wills nor permits - so he is always doing something about

the situation. Perhaps genuine evil (à la Oord) falls into this category of what we might call unfinished business. To entertain this argument we need to have a firm conviction regarding creation as continuous. Denis Edwards, who Oord cites and Jon Levenson, who he somehow misses, have much to say that will help the interested reader better understand this line of thought - see references at the end.

The concluding part of this chapter is perhaps the most important. Here we find expressed, in the clearest terms possible, the power/love dilemma. Some might dismiss the problem as a kind of chicken-egg thing. Others will be unable to put anything but power (sovereignty) at the top of the list of their view of God (Sanders' problem according to Oord). In many theologies there comes a point where, to continue the logic to its full extent, we begin to lose followers. Calvinism loses many when sovereignty is pushed to its logical limits, and most theologies, even those claiming to be calvinistic will not go to the logical limits. On the other end of the spectrum, if we put love at the centre, seeing love as what God is in his very being, we may wish to either take this to its logical limits, or not. Thomas Jay Oord says we should take the love precedes power idea to its logical conclusion. Many relational/open theologians, just like many Calvinists may not want to accept the logical ends

of their chosen systems. The future will tell. Mystery is also real and logic pushed too far can lead us astray.

In the next chapter Oord promises to tell us how he thinks our theodicy can be improved by accepting that love is the centre of God's nature (rather than something he only sovereignly chooses to do). In fact, we can't get to a workable theodicy if we put anything ahead of God's love, even his sovereignty, says Oord.

In Chapter 7 we come to the heart of Oord's proposal toward a better theodicy and from what we learn at the end of Chapter 6, this will most likely be where traditionalists who have come this far with the argument will begin to be very uneasy. Consider this warning from the end of Chapter 6 "God's loving nature requires God to create a world with creatures that God cannot control."

After a brief review of his critique so far, Oord launches into a discussion of the meaning of kenosis. He uses a text from Paul's letter to the church at Philippi, Phil 2:4-13. He begins by explaining why he finds unhelpful the time-honoured approach of trying to understand what was left after the emptying that kenosis seems to demand, then he agrees that another currently quite common approach is an improvement. This approach involves trying to clarify what the Incarnation and Jesus' life and death, in particular, tell us about God. Since Jesus is the exact

representation of (God's) nature (Heb 1:3), this seems to be a most reasonable approach, and many agree. Yet, Oord is not fully satisfied with the translations of kenosis on offer including self-emptying, self-withdrawing, self-limiting or self-giving from authors like Jürgen Moltmann, Jeff Pool, Vincent Brümmer and John Polkinghorne. His concern is essentially the same as with related views critiqued earlier in the book, namely, the problem of evil is left unresolved. Of the above list, Oord chooses self-giving as the best starting point and quickly expands it to 'self-giving, others empowering love'. He sees this as the main message of the Philippians passage. With this approach we see something very important about God (through Christ) and something really important about what Christ expects of us.

The bottom line is captured with these words "Essential kenosis considers the self giving, others-empowering love of God revealed in Jesus Christ to be logically primary in God's eternal essence." Or even more clearly "God must love." and elsewhere "God's attributes - especially power - are best understood in the light of love." This chapter continues by fleshing out what Oord means by all of this with arguments philosophical, traditional and scriptural. The primary question he asks, in my paraphrase, is; if an essentially all powerful God chooses to love, could such a being also choose not to love? Logically, the answer has to be yes. As Oord points out, here is a great place to play

a mystery card, and many do. Oord does not, however, and cites none other than Jacob Arminius to help support his case quoting that often ignored great reformer thus “if God be freely good he can be or can be made not good.” This is not a typo, we probably need to think about it.

After bringing us to what may seem to some the edge of a precipice, if not over, we are introduced to the idea of an essentially loving God choosing “how to express love at each moment”. (Be assured this is not the same as saying God redefines the nature of love as he goes along - the voluntarist position of Zwingli and followers. It’s essentially the opposite). This part of the argument requires especially careful reading and each reader will have to engage it directly. I will only say here that the kind of love envisaged is very broad-ranging and dynamic.

We have now reached the heart of the argument pertaining to theodicy, the main burden of the work. In twenty pages that will have to be digested by each reader carefully, Oord presents a theodicy that may well be superior to anything on offer, as he believes. At least, it is a theodicy that moves the point where the mystery card is played well down the path. At the beginning of this series of three chapter sections we encounter the sentence that will create most of the discussion on this volume, which will likely last for some time to come. The sentence is this:

“God *cannot* unilaterally prevent genuine evil.” Oord puts the emphasis on ‘cannot’, but it could easily be put on ‘unilaterally’. After you have cleaned up the coffee you spilt when reading that last quote, you will have to buy the book to see what Oord means by this seemingly outrageous statement. I will say that these three sections of the book are, mostly, as easy to understand as all the rest. The second one, “God as Omnipresent Spirit” is downright inspiring, if you will pardon the pun. The third explores why the coercive God is a fiction, and is perhaps the most challenging due to its reliance on close logic. Stay calm, read carefully and you will emerge with a very good idea of what the author intends. Agreeing or disagreeing is for the reader to decide. Refuting the whole argument, once clearly understood, will take much more time and effort.

Chapter 8, the final one, might appear a sort of addendum, but it is essential to the argument. As you might guess, if you have read this far, it addresses the possibility of miracles. In this 28 page chapter the obvious suspicion that the essentially kenotic God must somehow be less than almighty is addressed head on by taking on the false dichotomy of ultimately weak God or overwhelmingly powerful God. He first takes time to carefully outline his definition of ‘almighty’, an adjective with many definitions. From there, he launches into a discussion of miracles, and makes clear, up front, that we cannot ignore

or explain away the countless reports of miracles from many corners of the Church universal. Then, as usual and necessarily, he begins with a discussion of the various meanings of ‘miracle’ proposed by theologians. He argues effectively against views like ‘miracles as pure psychology’, ‘miracles as violation of natural law’, and even ‘miracles as God’s intervention in the natural processes of life.’ This latter is close to home, and as we by now expect, the problem, as Oord sees it, is the word ‘intervention’. And, not surprising when you think about it, the solution is not to forget our commitment to continuous creation. As I mentioned earlier in this review, this admonition is a central pillar in Oord’s whole argument. As he reminds us at this point “Believers should affirm God’s omnipresence with its continual causal activity in the universe.” I read this as not your garden variety panentheism, but a God continually ‘present to’ in contrast to continually ‘present in’.

Having questioned several typical definitions of miracle, we now learn about Oord’s preferred definition. The definition has three parts: unusual event, a good thing and involving God’s special action. The first two are (should be) uncontroversial. The third takes us into the much discussed but still inadequately charted territory of divine action. How does divine, essentially kenotic Spirit act in/on/toward the material world? And, how does this work

within the framework of essential kenosis? Rather than try to put Oord's discussion in my own words here, which would be far inferior to his own presentation, I simply provide this quote "Miracles are possible when God provides good and unusual forms of existence." The careful reader will see that this is completely consistent with the idea of continuous creation mentioned above. His full explanation is also consistent, of course, with essential kenosis. As the argument develops, we get an extensive survey of biblical miracles and discussion that fits with a non-coercive, continuous creation model. The going gets roughest in the discussion of natural miracles (Red Sea parting, walking on water etc.). Others better read than I will have to let us know if they share Oord's claim that essential kenosis can handle such events well. I suspect that his explanation is as good as any on offer. A compelling feature of this view of divine action in the miraculous is that it offers a palatable explanation for the spotty, unpredictable occurrence of miracles. I highly recommend that you get the full explanation from the author himself. This is an important contribution that may point the way to a major branch of orthodox theology in the coming decades.

## References

Denis Edwards *Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit*. Maryknoll, 2004

Jon Levenson *Creation and the Persistence of Evil.*  
Princeton, 1994