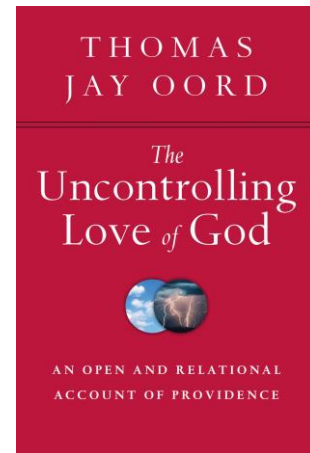


A Review of:

Thomas Jay Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015).

Reviewed by Rob Fringer

Bringing together the often-separated worlds of science, philosophy, theology, and personal experience, Oord explores the complexities of God and God's action in the world. This means tackling the concept of providence, a word widely used in Christian circles but often misunderstood and rarely unpacked. Oord defines providence as "the ways God acts to promote our well-being and the well-being of the whole" (16). Thus, from the start, Oord makes clear that his understanding of God and God's providence function within a relational system, a concept developed at length as the book progresses.



Oord begins (Chapter 1) by highlighting real-life events which evidence the presence of randomness and evil in our world and then articulates a few of the standard Christian responses to such events. Some believe evil is God-intended or God-allowed, other see everything as part of God's divine plan, others believe God is hands-off, others see God as using these horrific events to discipline.

Oord then moves (Chapter 2) to the more technical task of articulating the concepts of randomness and regularities and how important it is for people to understand how both of these exist in the world God has created. Contrary to the conviction of many Christians, Oord argues "We cannot make progress in understanding our world if we ignore randomness" (41). In other words, chance or randomness is not an indictment on the providence or sovereignty of God. Furthermore, Oord argues "Without regularities, the universe would fly into utter chaos" (42). "Absolute randomness is a myth. But absolute determinism is too" (49). The complexities of our world should help us to recognise the complexities of God. Could it be our easy answers are not enough and moreover they are not actually benefiting anyone?

Oord also explores (Chapter 3) "Agency and Freedom in a world of Good and Evil." While the problem of evil is a common subject for many, Oord also looks at the very real problem of good. While the former is a problem for believers in their defence of God, the latter is a problem for unbelievers in their denial of God. "Believing that God is the source of goodness provides an overall framework for affirming the work of theology, science and metaphysics. It

affirms theology's claim that God exists, does good and is the ultimate source of goodness. It affirms scientific research pointing to creaturely altruism, cooperation and self-sacrifice. And it provides an overall metaphysical basis that accounts for the value we find expressed by God and creatures. In sum, belief in a good God is the best solution to the problem of good" (78). This defence of God provides a foundation for laying out various models of God's providence in Chapter 4.

Oord articulates seven models for understanding God's providence: (1) God is the omnicause; (2) God empowers and overpowers; (3) God is voluntarily self-limited; (4) God is essentially kenotic; (5) God sustains as impersonal force; (6) God is initial creator and current observer; and (7) God's ways are not our ways. If you have read Oord before, then you probably already know his model is #4, essential kenosis. However, this should not deter anyone from reading this chapter. Oord does an excellent job of succinctly outlining each of these models and brings clarity to some of the small differences, which are actually not very small. Of special note is the differences between #3 and #4. Although I have read many of Oord's books, I think his explanation of his kenotic model in this book is one of his clearest. This is worth quoting at length:

The model of God as essentially kenotic says God's eternal 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, and 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)

Oord continues (Chapter 5) with another familiar note, namely, a defence of Open and Relational Theology. Oord explores four pathways to Open Theism: Scripture, Theology, Philosophy, and Science. For those unfamiliar with this construct, Oord gives a good introduction to the history, theological foundations, and major proponents. If I had one complaint about this chapter, it would be that Oord spends little time presenting Classical Theism's arguments against Open Theism and the pros and cons of each model.

This introduction to Open Theism leads Oord into a deeper exploration of how Open Theism fits with his Essential Kenosis model of God's providence (Chapter 6). This chapter is a dialogue with well-known Open theologian John Sanders, and especially his work *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence*, which highlights areas of agreement and

disagreement. The most notable difference is that Sanders believes “God can momentarily suspend the processes, conditions and laws of the universe to prevent evil” (143). Oord, however, believes this does not solve the problem of evil and actually puts God’s sovereignty above God’s love. For Oord this latter point is a significant theological problem, especially from a Wesleyan standpoint. For Oord, love is so central to God’s nature that it “requires God to create a world with creatures God cannot control” (146).

This last point is the crux of Oord’s kenosis model as well as the heart of his understanding of Open Theism. In Chapter 7, Oord begins by bringing greater clarity between two of the models for divine providence outlined in Chapter 4, namely #3 (God is voluntarily self-limited) and #4 (God is essentially kenotic). Oord interprets the kenosis language of the New Testament showing how it reveals the very nature of God as “self-giving, others-empowering love” (not self-emptying, self-withdrawing, or self-limitation). Thus, argues Oord, “God must love. . . . God cannot not love. . . . God loves necessarily” (161). Additionally, Oord’s belief in an open future in which God cannot fully know until things occur means “God freely chooses how to love in each emerging moment” (162). Therefore, God’s love is personal and active; “Divine love is tailor-made for each creature in each instant” (166). This kind of divine love cannot “withdraw, override or fail to provide the freedom, agency, self-organizing and lawlike regularity God gives. Divine love limits divine power” (169). When all this is taken together, Oord believes it solves the problem of evil. God must always give freedom because this is part of divine love and this means giving freedom even to those who do evil. Therefore “God is not culpable for failing to prevent the dastardly deeds free creatures do” because “God cannot prevent genuine evil” (170).

This chapter has much more to offer, as does the whole book, but you will have to read it yourself to find out. Oord also includes a chapter on miracles in light of his definition of God’s providence (Chapter 8) and then concludes with a Postscript, which summarise and ties the book together.

Throughout this book, Oord presents a picture of God, which is not only plausible, but moreover, it is good, loving, helpful, hope-filled, and provides the possibility for genuine relationship between humanity and God as well as providing possible answers to many of life’s most difficult questions. While I think there are many questions still unanswered, as one would expect with such a short book and such a complex topic, nevertheless, Oord continues an important discussion which I believe is vital to the church universal and to our continued witness and impact in our world. After all, it is our understanding of God and his action in the world that defines our own being and doing in this world. While I would not agree with many of the conclusions that Oord reaches, I still believe it is an important read as it moves us

beyond easy answers and forces us to wrestle with questions of theodicy, God's nature, and God's action in the world.

About the Reviewer

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