
Denying Omniscience

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A review article considering how the divine attributes are redefined in two recent books by evangelicals.

The Openness of God

Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker and David Basinger, IVP (US) / Paternoster, 202 pages, 1994, £9.99.

Is God Helpless?

Peter Cotterell, Triangle, 96 pages, 1996, £5.99

In the debate between Arminians and Calvinists about divine sovereignty the key assumption held in common by both parties is that God is omniscient, and what has been debated is whether such omniscience is compatible with human freedom. Arminians have usually held that it is compatible only with libertarian freedom, and so have denied predestination, Calvinists have usually held that it is compatible with some form of determinism, or have appealed to divine incomprehensibility.

The key assumption of each of these books is that God is not omniscient, and in particular that he does not know everything about what is future to us, and future to him too, for it is part of the conception of an “open” God that God is in time. The reason why God does not know everything about the future is that such knowledge would be inconsistent with free human action; he either cannot know, or in the interests of preserving freedom he has chosen not to know. Because the divine attributes are so interconnected, to deny divine omniscience is to deny divine omnipotence, since God cannot control what he is ignorant of, and to deny divine changelessness. Omnipotence becomes the power of God to deal with any situation that arises, immutability his complete trustworthiness. “God has rivals, and has to struggle with them” (*The Openness of God* p. 114).

Any reader of the Bible must be struck by two sorts of language about God to be found there. There is the language that states that God does not and cannot change, that he is from everlasting to everlasting, that he works all things after the counsel of his own will, that nothing is hidden from him but that he knows the end from the beginning. The Bible enforces such language with metaphor and simile; the Lord is a potter, a rock, he has a piercing eye, he sits in the heavens. Let us call this the non-reactive language. Then there is language that is altogether more human-like; the Lord comes down to his people, he remembers them, he changes his mind, and then changes his mind again. He acts in response to prayer, and so on. He is sad and angry and joyful and jealous. Let us call this the reactive language.

The Bible interpreter, and whoever wishes to draw his Christian theology from the Bible, has a decision to make at this point. Which type of language has priority; which controls which? Because God cannot be both reactive and non-reactive. The mainstream

classical tradition of Christian theology has been that the reactive language is controlled by the non-reactive; the non-reactive is metaphorical or analogical language, not to be taken literally. Or, as John Calvin put the point, the Lord, in using such language (the language of repentance about himself, say) accommodates himself to human cognitive capacities, lisping like a nurse.

But there is nothing in logic to stop the biblical interpreter claiming that the reactive language of the Bible should control the non-reactive, and this is (in a measure) what the authors of *The Openness of God* do. But it is a difficult task to carry this programme through consistently, and the end result is not very plausible or attractive. For the end result is a concept of God which is wholly anthropomorphic and anthropopathic; a God with a human shape, and with a cognitive and affective life like ours; ignorant and unstable. Wisely, however, the authors of *The Openness of God* do not opt for total anthropomorphism about God.

The reactive language about God is admirably surveyed in Chapter 1 of *The Openness of God*, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective". But unfortunately, its author, Richard Rice, does not survey all the evidence but, by an incomplete enumeration, suggests that all the biblical evidence about God is reactive in character. It is unsatisfactory to appeal to the "spirit of the biblical message" or "the broad sweep of biblical testimony", (p. 15) for there is no such thing. Unfortunately, Professor Rice does not tell us how he would interpret those biblical passages, such as Romans 9, or Ephesians 2, which express the divine sovereignty in unmistakable terms, except that he revealingly says that God experiences frustration when his predestining purposes fail (p. 56). And it is unfair to try to hijack the idea of the love of God in favour of his own account of the divine open-ness. He notes that the view he rejects has the "apparent support of many biblical passages." Why does he not subject these passages to careful analysis? Nor, in writing about God's open-ness, does he explain how all the other divine attributes are derived from divine love (p. 21).

The chapter on the history of debate on the concept of God in the Christian Church has many wise and valuable things to say, but the impression that it gives, that the tradition of emphasising non-reactive language about God has been in an unholy alliance with Greek philosophy, while the authors of *The Openness of God* have escaped this "virus" (p. 9), is quite misleading. There is no such thing as a worked-out doctrine of God which can avoid philosophy, and particularly metaphysics, and philosophy and in particular metaphysics began with the Greeks, who (no doubt unknowingly) have set the agenda of all subsequent discussion. The only question for the Christian theologian is which metaphysical concepts do justice to those divine realities communicated to us in Scripture. Christian theologians can no more avoid the influence of metaphysics than they can jump out of their skins.

On the "open" conception of God, once he has created a universe in which there are creatures possessing free will, then he must await the unfolding of events. This for these authors is a positive point about their view. God is primarily a God of love, and love involves being sensitive and responsive, and God wishes above all things to enter into loving personal relations with his free creatures; this is the paramount value. Only occasionally does he steer the ship of the universe by intervening to prevent the consequences of human free actions; more typically, he reacts to human actions as we human beings react to the actions of our fellows. As a consequence he experiences frustration, sorrow and anger, as well as pleasure and joy.

In many ways the most important chapter of the book is that on **systematic theology** by Clark Pinnock, which contains some surprising judgements. For example, the claim (once more) that the traditional stress on the divine sovereignty is Greek in origin. Calvinists in particular will be surprised to learn that the church has throughout history overstressed such sovereignty (p. 105). Because the triune God is a trinity of interpersonal, loving relationships, God has chosen to create a world of such relationship among his free creatures (p. 108). But the analogy is flawed. The relations that exist between the persons of the trinity are necessarily what they are. If a little Greek philosophy may be pardoned, these relationships are essential to God's being who he is. The Son cannot but exist as the Son of the Father, and likewise with the other persons of the trinity. God the Holy Spirit does not choose to love the Father and the Son, he does so necessarily. But unlike these intertrinitarian relations, the existence of the universe is the result of the voluntary creative activity of God; the universe and all that it contains might not have been. God establishes relations with his creatures, relations which might not have been, with creatures who might not have been.

It is also a serious mistake to suppose that classical Christian theism claims that God monopolises power (p. 113). He is the source of all creaturely power, but the powers of creatures are really theirs, and are distinct from his. The wicked men who crucified Jesus were the cause of his death, even though he was crucified by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God. In fact one of the sadder aspects of the book is that ignorance is displayed of the positions being attacked. For example, it is not recognised that those who hold that God ordains whatever comes to pass nevertheless make a distinction between what God causes and what he permits. The fall does not show that God does not exercise total control over all events, only that in his inscrutable purposes he decreed to permit the fall. William Hasker says that the central idea of Calvinism is quite simple: "everything that happens, with no exceptions, is efficaciously determined by God in accordance with his eternal decrees" (p. 141). But this is simply false. To say that everything is decreed by God, as Calvinists do, is not to say that everything is efficaciously determined by God. Fruitful debate can only occur when each side represents the other position accurately and fairly.

Furthermore, Hasker excoriates the Calvinist for having recourse to the distinction between the secret and the revealed will of God, not noticing that his own position requires a similar distinction, that between what God wants, and what free agents actually bring about. In the case of the distinction between the secret and the revealed will, it is the secret will of God that prevails; in the case of the distinction between what God wants, and what people choose to do, it is what people choose to do that usually prevails; and so God is angry or frustrated when they choose in a way that is at odds with his intention for them, or relieved and pleased when they do not.

Nor are the full implications of the "openness" position always noticed. For example, Clark Pinnock says that the immutability of God means that we can always rely upon God to be faithful to his promises. But if the promises of God involve people, then God cannot know beforehand whether or not those people will cooperate with him, nor does he know whether or not a person will rely on his promises until he does so, or fails to do so (p. 117). And it is no way to do Christian theology to say that the open view of God stresses the qualities of "generosity, sensitivity and vulnerability more than power and control" (p. 125). One cannot imagine greater generosity than the sovereign grace of God in Christ,

nor a greater vulnerability and sensitivity than that shown in the offering up of the God-man on the Cross of shame. But these are a different kind of generosity and vulnerability than those that depend for their exercise on the free cooperation of fallible and sinful human beings, a cooperation that might be withdrawn at any time.

Incidentally, there is something profoundly wrong about the theological approach of Pinnock, which attempts to develop theology in terms of the provision of models of God. For this suggests that all our talk of God is primarily a human construction. The classical view is that it is the reality of God, revealed in nature and Scripture, which controls our language about him, not the other way round. To suppose otherwise is, among other things, to deny the clarity of Scripture in those matters that it reveals.

Finally, let us follow the lead of the last chapter of the book and look at the **implications** of this openness view in two areas, one, petitionary prayer, which the authors make a good deal of, the other, an example of a general problem that they do not appear to have noticed at all. Biologists tell us that each human being is the product of one sperm and one ovum (except in the rare case of identical twins) and that no individual could have been that individual and been the product of another sperm and/or another ovum. Let us suppose that at least some acts of human sexual intercourse are free acts in the sense explained by the "open" theology, and that one such act is Jim's and Jane's. Then it follows that the only control that God has over which precise individuals are born is that he can prevent particular sperms and ova of Jim and Jane meeting, or he can bring it about that they meet. What he cannot do is bring it about that any of the sperm of a different father, Peter, meet with any ovum of Jane's. So the range of possible people is fixed by the range of sperm and ova produced by couples engaging in freely chosen sexual intercourse and God cannot foreknow any such acts. So God cannot foreknow which human beings will exist. He does not have control over which people inhabit planet Earth.

Petitionary prayer on the "open" theology view is prayer that really changes God. This may appear to be a real gain. God changes in response to our freely offered petitions. However, God cannot answer, say, prayer for the conversion of another; in fact God will never, or rarely, answer any prayer that will trespass on the freedom of his creatures, including the freedom of the one who prays. So the gain is not as great as may appear, for prayer can have no efficacy in situations where human free acts are involved.

Peter Cotterell, recently retired from the Principalship of London Bible College, has written a book of a different character, but one with the same doctrinal outlook (*Is God Helpless?*). It consists of racily written, short chapters on the problem of evil, in which the author avers that God is not omnipotent and never causes evil. The book gives evidence of being hastily written, having misspelt names and misprinted book titles, and some other mistakes which affect the sense. More important, there is also evidence of hasty thinking. For the author believes that to try to analyse the problem of evil using careful argument shows a corrupt mind (p. 3), but apparently that not to attempt to analyse the problem at all does not. I was reminded of what GK Chesterton said, that "man has no alternative, except between being influenced by thought that has been thought out and being influenced by thought that has not been thought out".

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