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## Book Review: The Openness Of God

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*The Openness of God*, by Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994. Pp. 202.

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The five authors of this book each contribute a chapter in defense of what they call the "openness of God". They aim to present this view to a broader audience "beyond the confines of professional theologians and philosophers" (9). Accordingly, they give less attention to detail and to developed argument than one would expect in a volume addressed primarily to philosophers. Thus, for example, the view in question is summarized simply as: "God grants humans significant freedom to cooperate with or work against God's will for their lives, and he enters into dynamic, give-and-take relationships with us" (7). Behind this simple formulation, however, lies a complex web of theological and philosophical claims. First, the authors deny that God has the traditional attributes of simplicity, impassibility, immutability, and eternity. Second, they hold that God is omniscient, but only in an attenuated sense. In particular, God's knowledge of the future extends only to what is causally determined by present conditions and to what God knows that he himself will do: God does not have foreknowledge of what free agents other than he will do. And divine omniscience does not include middle knowledge or knowledge of what free creatures would do in various alternative circumstances. Third, God has created human beings with libertarian free will, and he has a "commitment to the welfare of his creatures" and a "profound sensitivity to their experiences" (58), but he does not ordinarily "override" their freedom (156).

Put thus starkly, these theses sound like ones that have been endorsed by many other writers. The authors of this volume, however, are prepared to embrace such particulars as that God is surprised by what happens (94), that creatures can have an *effect* on God (22), and that he comes to regret those of his actions that turn out to be mistaken or wrong (27, 117). Having made this departure from the traditional view of God, they are forced to make adjustments in other areas of theology. Thus they hold that election is "a summons to service, not a guarantee of salvation" (57), that all prophecy regarding future free acts of creatures, including Jesus' prophecy of Peter's denial (Matt 26:34), is *conditional* (55, 153)<sup>1</sup>, that since things can turn out differently than God envisioned, following God's will can turn out badly (165), and that God permits evil to happen to us even though it is not required either for bringing about a greater good or for avoiding a worse evil (152).

In Chapter 1, in contrast to the traditional view of God, which “emphasizes God’s sovereignty, majesty, and glory” (11), Richard Rice attempts to marshal biblical evidence for “an interactive view of God’s relation to the world [according to which] what happens [in the world] affects God somehow—by evoking a certain emotion, a change in attitude, a change in plans” (18). Among Old Testament passages, Rice give particular prominence to texts that describe God as repenting, for example, “The LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart” (Gen. 6:6 NRSV), and “The LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel” (1 Sam. 15:35). In the New Testament Rice draws conclusions about the nature of God from the life and ministry of Jesus, justifying this move, in part, by claiming that “the fact that God chose to express himself through the medium of a human life suggests that God’s experience has something in common with certain aspects of human experience” (39). (Rice does not say what may be deduced about the nature of God’s experience from the obvious, parallel reasoning that God also chose to express himself through the written word.)

In Chapter 2 John Sanders asks how the “prima facie meaning of the texts cited in favor of the openness of God is commonly overturned in favor of another interpretation” (59). His answer is that Christian theology was Hellenized. To support this interpretation, Sanders first gives a brief summary of Greek philosophy and of Philo of Alexandria, and then he presents a history of Christian theology. The latter runs from the fathers through Augustine, pauses briefly for the Middle Ages and the Reformation, and then leaps to the twentieth century. Sanders protests that, throughout this history, theologians, under the influence of Greek ideas of divinity, resisted interpreting the Bible in a straightforward way, that, for example, “biblical texts that suggest that God changed his mind, was surprised by human action[,] or suffered are explained as anthropomorphisms” (94); the resulting theology Sanders describes as “the biblical-classical synthesis.”

Clark Pinnock takes up, in Chapter 3, the task of proposing “a more biblical and coherent doctrine of God” (101). Like Sanders he deplors the “excessive Hellenization” of traditional theology, and like Rice he takes the Bible to teach that God reacts to the world and changes his plans, that, for example, “when God saw the extent of human wickedness on the earth, he was sorry that he had made humankind” (117). Occasionally Pinnock seems especially extravagant, as when, for example, he says that “to speak more of God’s power than of weakness...[is] a theological distortion” (105) or when he says that according to social trinitarianism (which he accepts) “God is the perfection of love and communion, *the very antithesis of self-sufficiency* [emphasis added]” (108).

In Chapter 4 William Hasker, as befits a regular contributor to this journal, offers a philosophical defense of the open view of God. Hasker delineates five theories about God’s knowledge of and relation to the world: theological determinism (which he unfortunately calls “Calvinism”<sup>2</sup>), Molinism (the doctrine that God has middle knowledge), the theory of simple foreknowledge, the open view, and process theology. Hasker argues that the open view is superior to the others on this

list. In particular, he claims that the open view provides the best account of our relationship with God and the best response to the problem of evil. I shall discuss these contentions below.

In the final chapter David Basinger draws out applications of the open view for petitionary prayer, divine guidance, human suffering, and social and evangelistic responsibility.

In the space that remains I want to comment critically on some of the issues William Hasker raises. To a considerable extent Hasker's reasons in favor of the open view depend upon positions he has written about extensively elsewhere, in particular, his insistence that divine foreknowledge is incompatible with human free action and his contention that God does not have middle knowledge.<sup>3</sup> I think that these positions have been adequately disputed elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> and so I will not address them here. Instead, I will focus on two advantages Hasker claims for the open view against its leading competitors. First, Hasker maintains that the open view provides for an "appealing" or "attractive" conception of "our personal relationship with God" (150-1). Hasker claims that theological determinism, in contrast, makes the relation between God and people like that of "a puppet-master controlling a puppet, or a ventriloquist having a 'conversation' with his dummy" (142), which evidently does not make for a meaningful relationship. Molinism does not fare much better. Here God is an "archmanipulator," like a "cyberneticist" who completely understands his robot's program, even if he did not write all of the code (145-146).

Let us focus on just the comparison with Molinism. Hasker apparently thinks that if I realize that God has taken into account his knowledge of how I would react in various circumstances in planning which situations in which to place me—all with the aim of drawing me closer to him as well as furthering his plan for others—I may reasonably feel manipulated, a feeling which will damage my relationship with God. I will question in a moment whether this is an appropriate response. If it is, however, the open view seems no better. On this view, God has taken into account his knowledge of how I am *likely* to react in various circumstances in planning what situations to place me in—and he has at his disposal vast knowledge and power—again with the aim of drawing me close to him as well as furthering his plan for others. If feeling manipulated was appropriate in the first instance, it would seem to be equally appropriate in this case. In fact, on the open view, why should I not feel not only manipulated but placed at risk, since on the open view God does not know that his action will turn out well? And if I think that God is not only manipulating me but taking chances with me, as well, that is no less likely to interfere with my relationship with him. So the open view does not seem to be an improvement, on this score, over the Molinist alternative.

I should add, however, that I do not really think that feeling manipulated is the appropriate reaction to God's providence. When I reflect on God's goodness and care for me, "[g]ratitude of mind for the favorable outcome of things, patience in adversity, and also incredible freedom from worry about the future will necessarily follow upon this knowl-

edge.”<sup>5</sup> The phrase is Calvin’s, who adds that “[c]ertainty about God’s providence puts joyous trust toward God in our hearts.”<sup>6</sup> An attitude of gratitude, joyous trust, and, we could add, willing obedience, would seem to permit a pretty good relationship with God. If it is not unreasonable for an adherent of a robust doctrine of providence to adopt it, then such a view needs no improvement on this count.

Hasker also claims that the open view is superior to its rivals in its capacity to deal with the problem of evil. According to the open view

God knows that evils will occur, but he has not for the most part decreed or incorporated into his plan the individual instances of evil. Rather, God governs the world according to *general strategies*, strategies which are, as a whole, ordered for the good of the creation, but whose detailed consequences are not foreseen or intended by God prior to the decision to adopt them. As a result of this, we are able to...admit the presence in the world of particular evils God’s permission of which is not the means of bringing about any greater good or preventing any equal or greater evil. (152)

No doubt the problem of evil is a serious problem for every version of theism. And Christians of any persuasion will be hard-pressed to say, for every particular example of evil, what greater good required it. Of course, Christians who hold to a robust doctrine of providence are likely to say that *God* has his reasons, even if we are not in a position to know what they are. But Hasker apparently prefers to resort not to agnosticism about the justification of evil but to say rather that there are evils which do not serve any good purpose, which are not required by any greater good, but which occurred either because God did not anticipate them or because in his focus on “general strategies” he did not concern himself with them.

I fail to see how the open view is an improvement over its competitors on this point, either. In the first place, since God, on this view, “has a vast amount of knowledge about the *probabilities* that free choices will be made in one way rather than another” (151) and he has a similarly vast knowledge of the workings of the universe, God was certainly in a position, with respect to many of the evils that have in fact occurred, to predict that they would occur. Indeed, it seems reasonable to think that, on the open view, God would have been *justified in believing* with respect to many such evils that they would occur, unless he intervened, even if he did not know this with certainty. Furthermore, on this view God can know what people are thinking and intending in the present. Thus when he sees people with evil hearts and murderous intentions load thousands of pounds of homemade explosives into a rented truck, God is in a good position to predict that, unless he intervenes, tragedy will ensue. Why would he fail to intervene, unless he could foresee that the evil likely to ensue was required for a greater good?<sup>7</sup> But this is precisely something that on the open view God is unable to foresee. So the open view faces the same problem Hasker claims to beset traditional

Christianity but with the disadvantage that on this view God is less likely to be justified in permitting evil. In other words, the open view faces the same difficulties as traditional Christianity but with fewer resources to meet them. That does not strike me as an advantage.

Despite the laudable concern these authors have for developing a position that is both biblically sound and adequate for a rich religious life, the view they present, as I have tried to make explicit, is not only a radical departure from traditional Christianity but it is a departure not justified by the reasons they cite in its favor.

#### NOTES

1. One of the authors, William Hasker, in *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989) interprets this prophecy not as conditional but as a prediction "based on foresight drawn from existing trends and tendencies" (p. 194). Under either interpretation it is possible for the prophecy to be made but to be unfulfilled, either because the relevant condition—whatever it is—is unsatisfied or because the current trends are reversed or overridden.

2. J.T. McNeil's *The History and Character of Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954) is not primarily a history of the doctrine of theological determinism!

3. See his *God, Time and Knowledge* and "A Refutation of Middle Knowledge," *Noûs* 20 (1986): 545-57.

4. See Thomas P. Flint, "Hasker's *God, Time, and Freedom*," *Philosophical Studies* 60 (1990): 103-115 and "In Defense of Theological Compatibilism," *Faith and Philosophy* 8 (1991): 237-243, as well as Alfred J. Freddoso, "Review of William Hasker: *God, Time, and Knowledge*," *Faith and Philosophy* 10 (1993): 99-107.

5. Calvin, *Institutes*, I, xvii, 7.

6. *Ibid.* I, xvii, 11.

7. A similar claim may be made about the evils Hasker cites on p. 146.

*The Sources of Christian Ethics*, by Servais Pinckaers OP. Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995. Pp. xxi and 489. \$24.95.

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"It is difficult," Pinckaers notes, "to describe a situation while living in the midst of all its complexity..." (304) It's perhaps equally hard to identify a classic within a decade of its writing and a year of its translation for Anglophone readers. Still, Pinckaers's *Sources* is a contender.

The author, a Belgian, teaches theology at the University of Fribourg. *Sources* appeared as *Les sources de la morale chretienne* in 1985, and Pinckaers tells us he wrote it for a broad audience. His text is straightforward and ambitious. Pinckaers first defines Christian ethics and then examines its relation to the behavioral sciences, to Scripture, and to the