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## Richard Rice, THE FUTURE OF OPEN THEISM: FROM ANTECEDENTS TO OPPORTUNITIES

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*The Future of Open Theism: From Antecedents to Opportunities*, by Richard Rice. InterVarsity Press, 2020. Pp. x + 254. \$26.00 (paperback).

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In *The Future of Open Theism*, Loma Linda University Professor of Religion Richard Rice summarizes the historical roots of a theological movement he was instrumental in founding, going on to describe ways that the distinctive open theist paradigm can be fruitfully applied to contemporary discussion in several loci of systematic theology. Here, “open theist” refers to the view that God does not know, prior to the future, everything that will in fact happen in the future, and to the view that God’s providential planning involves him “taking risks”—he decides on plans without knowing how free creatures will in fact respond to the decisions he (or anyone else) makes. On Rice’s view, these distinctives are themselves the consistent outworking of an even more fundamental conviction—that “God’s essential nature is love,” and such love led God to choose “to bring into existence a world containing creatures endowed with the capacity to love him in return” (1).

Rice carefully argues that since open theism has emerged intact from the vigorous, passionate debates which characterized its early reception, it is now mature enough as a theological perspective that it can repeatedly offer hitherto unknown (or at least underappreciated) insight on vital Christian doctrines. In the author’s reckoning, open theism has long-since earned a place at the table of serious evangelical theological discussion, and as in natural science, so in the queen of the sciences: it is time for the tumultuous revolutionary period to be succeeded by the “normal” work of straightforwardly applying the open theist paradigm to just about any theological question of significance to us.

The allusion to Thomas Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is no accident. Rice explicitly draws a comparison between what Kuhn says about paradigm shifts in the history of science, and how battles over open theism unfolded in the history of late twentieth-century theology (4–7). “What I suggest here is that we treat the openness of God as a paradigm in the sense that Kuhn describes it—as a new way of looking at things, one that changes many previously accepted explanations” (6). Accordingly, we are to read the book armed with a “guiding question”: “What do the elements of Christian faith look like from the perspective that open theism provides” (7)?

Part I of the book considers “The Origins and Development of Open Theism,” using chapter 1 to trace its historical antecedents back to Jacobus



Arminius, Adam Clarke, Lorenzo McCabe, Jules Lequyer, Gordon C. Olson, and Howard Roy Elseth. Rice then surveys in chapter 2 the more readily recognizable formulations of open theism from the mid-1990s that are found in Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, William Hasker, David Basinger, Gregory Boyd, and—of course—himself. (Since Rice's book *The Openness of God* dates to 1980, I think he is rightly labelled the "father" of this movement.) Rice then summarizes in chapter 3 the critics and conflicts provoked by this movement, including especially the controversy over whether open theism had a place within the Evangelical Theological Society. (For what it's worth, in the year of the crucial membership vote, I urged the President of that Society to consider that their current doctrinal statement simply wasn't detailed enough to exclude open theists from membership, and more harm than good would be done by pretending otherwise.) Two further aspects of the development of open theism are noted in this first Part of the book: its stimulation of *philosophical* discussion (about foreknowledge, providence, and risk-taking; see chapter 4), and its allowance for *diversity* within the open theist fold (with different open theists taking different positions on the problem of evil, the nature of cosmic conflict, the source of natural evil, and how God/world relations impact creation and the nature of divine love as "kenotic"; see chapter 5).

Having looked back in Part I, Rice now looks forward in Part II by considering the "Themes of Open Theism," with separate chapters examining the doctrines of God, humanity, salvation, the church, and last things. In this Part, Rice comes into his own as a systematic theologian. Repeatedly, I was impressed by his extended arguments from Scripture for the relational aspects of Trinitarian life, the significant impact of sin on our freedom and on the nature of salvation, Christ's aiming of his earthly life at both the glory of the Father and ministry to others, the deep challenge of spiritual individualism to the church as community, and the defense of eternal life as a future state both exciting and deeply worthwhile. (Here Rice occasionally adapts practical theological material that he has previously published in other venues.) More than once, I found Rice's treatment to be superior to what is often found in non-open theist writers on these topics. As an example, in chapter 8 Rice offers several memorable descriptions of the depravity of the human condition. I found myself moved by his depiction of how difficult it is for people to live together in companionship, and of the "conflicts and rivalries" that characterize our societies. The tragedy of who we are, given human sin, is not eclipsed within Rice's account! For all these reasons, readers should be grateful for Rice's theological reflections in these latter chapters of the book.

This book is a useful introduction to the best ideas and arguments to be found in open theist writers over the past 25–30 years, bringing readers up to date on many recent developments. Rice offers clear and accessible summaries of various positions held by open theists. How does Alan Rhoda differ from Gregory Boyd on providence? How does Boyd differ from William Hasker on theodicy and the problem of evil? Are there open

theists who accept creation *ex nihilo* and others who don't? Is Thomas Jay Oord's theory of God's noncoercive and uncontrolling action so radical that it deserves a pushback from his fellow open theists? Rice answers all these questions and more, and he is obviously sanguine about this diversity within the open theist camp (perhaps because for him it speaks to the maturity of the movement).

While I'm not an open theist, despite thinking rather strenuously about it for thirty years, I respect its usefulness as a genuine and robust alternative to classical Augustinian theism, something I can't say about other purported alternatives (such as Molinism or even Arminianism). It offers me a truly interesting choice among theological perspectives. But as I read Rice's book, some of the points and argumentative strategies struck me as either implausible or at least puzzling, despite the merits listed above. Space permits only a few evaluative comments.

First, I don't think the Kuhnian comparison is flattering to open theism and may in fact undermine the serious argumentative case Rice wants to make on its behalf. Compared to the traditional doctrine of God, open theism is "a significantly different approach," "a revolution," and "a radical large-scale transformation in the way people look at things," such that there is "no smooth transition from the 'traditional' view of God to the open view" (4). But if there is "incommensurability between the old and new paradigms" (4), then we cannot *compare* the two paradigms to see which better captures biblical teaching, for incommensurability implies that not even the meaning of key terms remains constant across paradigms. While both traditionalists and open theists think the other group "denies important things to God," the Kuhnian analogy seems to deprive us of any opportunity to adjudicate this dispute, for we each "work in a different world" (4).

Even worse, the "Kuhnian paradigm" analogy may backfire by appearing to prove too much, making one think that open theism is a different *religion*, and not merely an option *within* the Christian faith! Consider what it means to say that open theism is "a sweeping vision that places everything we might say about God in a new light" (6). (Everything?) Even as Aristotelian physics looks like a "different religion" to Newtonians, which in turn looks qualitatively different from the contemporary physics of relativity and quantum mechanics, so also for "revolutionary," "radical," and "sweeping" revisions to all of systematic theology. For many readers, it's a frightfully worrying thing to be asked to accept the idea that just about *everyone* who preceded you in serious Christian theology got *essential* Christian theology wrong, such that their mistake affected *everything* we hold dear. For the sake of retaining persuasive power and Christian legitimacy, I'd advise Rice to drop the Kuhnian analogy.

Second, and related to the point just made, Rice seems surprised at the vehemence of the early evangelical opposition to open theism. He repeatedly says things like "we [open theists] were taken aback at the intensity of the criticism and the price certain open theists were forced to pay" (2).

Or, again, “Not that long after it appeared, *The Openness of God* set off something of a firestorm in conservative Christian circles—much to the surprise of its authors” (51). Rice quotes Clark Pinnock’s remarks in 2001 that “I did not for a moment imagine in 1994 that our book . . . would create such interest and provoke such controversy, particularly in the evangelical community” (51). He quotes Pinnock’s remarks in *Most Moved Mover* about “the harsh and angry responses open theism encountered in evangelical circles” (71). But why is such vehement criticism at all surprising, given Rice’s own characterization of open theism as a radical paradigm shift? Rice, Pinnock, Boyd, Sanders et al. were reformulating what by Rice’s admission “is the beginning and end of all theological thought” (2, quoting Paul Tillich), something “so important that it affects the entire range of Christian beliefs” (2). Should anyone really expect a low-key, shoulder-shrugging, non-consequential response to an attempt to redefine the very essence of God? Imagine insisting to traditional evangelicals and Roman Catholics that God is essentially corporeal—a view taken by no one in history who wasn’t pagan or Mormon—and then puzzling over the vehement reaction. And yet the Scriptural language about the body of God (his eyes, ears, nose, arms, hands, legs, feet, face, and backside) is far more pervasive than the occasional language about divine ignorance and repentance!

The book frequently lacks clarity on whether open theism is a modest or radical movement, and this ambiguity undermines the coherence of the overall argument. On the one hand, “open theists themselves viewed [their doctrines] as a modest revision in the traditional view of God” (3). On the other hand, since open theism is like a Kuhnian scientific revolution or paradigm shift, there is “no smooth transition from the ‘traditional’ view of God to the open view” (4). Well, which is it? Is Pinnock just your average Bible teacher who merely wants “to take the Bible seriously, think more profoundly, and address important questions about our relationship with God” (71)? Or is he asserting the existence of pervasive and fundamental errors which have left “the broad stream of Christian thought, from the church fathers, through Augustine, Aquinas, and the Reformers, to most contemporary evangelicals, with a view of God that lacks the ability for genuine personal relationship” (32)?

Third, some theses advertised as philosophically rigorous and theologically attractive strike me as neither. To mention just one, consider the “risk model of providence,” which John Sanders argues “is an expression of the love that God is, a love that seeks genuine relationship with creatures and therefore requires reciprocity, or genuine interaction” (36). While this model is indeed central to open theism, why exactly is God’s “risk-taking” lauded as praiseworthy and loving? Whatever “risk” *God* takes in providence is not worthy to be compared with the involuntary and far greater risk to which he exposes his *creatures*. Yes, God risks feelings of sadness and disappointment if humans reject him. But unlike humans, he is not subject to involuntary, tortuous pain for years on end. Unlike humans, he

cannot perish due to lack of food, water, shelter, and good health. Unlike humans, he cannot make a series of bad decisions in life and thereby consign himself to an eternity of suffering. Unlike humans, who may reject God for eternity, the eternal loving fellowship within the Trinity is never at risk within the open theist's scheme, while every possible friendship humans can have is at risk. So what, actually, is the "risk" that God is taking by embarking on the human project? He's surely causing all of *his creatures* to live in a risky environment, one fraught with danger and suffering *for them*. But God is subject to none of it. Indeed, if things go really badly God can just destroy the world and that is that, but humans don't have that option. Ordinarily it is regarded as callous and indifferent, not loving, to involuntarily subject others to risks far worse than the risks you are willing to endure. I think open theists need to put more work into disambiguating the kinds of risk which are said to exist on the divine and human sides of providence, and reassessing the character of God in light of this. In open theism, God is making *us* risk terribly while suffering next to *no* risk himself! Rice's exposition completely hides this point, though it seems of supreme ethical relevance to evaluating open theism on its own terms. (A risk-free theory of providence might strike many readers as superior on this score.)

Fourth, while Part II of the book presents many edifying reflections on a variety of topics, displaying Rice's giftedness as a theologian, I couldn't see why the vast majority of these were presented as distinctive themes or applications of *open theism*. Most of what Rice says under these loci of systematic theology could be said by non-open theists. Whether or not a "relational" view of the Trinity is cogent or valuable (ch. 7) doesn't seem connected to open theism. (William Hasker has written one of the best defenses of moderate social Trinitarianism in recent years, and he appeals to no distinctive open theist theses to make his case [*Metaphysics and the Tri-Personal God* (Oxford University Press, 2013)]. Whether or not we are "significantly free," and whether sin's impact on our freedom is significant but limited (ch. 8) doesn't automatically favor open theism, since there are Arminian and Molinist defenders of libertarian freedom and human depravity. Whether or not Jesus was peccable, or had a twofold ministry directed to the Father and to his fellow man (ch. 9) doesn't seem obviously related to open theism. Neither is Paul's focus on our participating in community relationships (ch. 10), nor the fact that everlasting life is temporal *for us* (ch. 11).

Couldn't traditional Arminians, who eschew both divine ignorance of future events and divine risk-taking in providential planning, nevertheless agree with the theses developed in these chapters? More generally, couldn't traditionalists about the doctrine of God accept most of these points since they are supported by Scripture? Why would I have to accept open theism if I am to receive the twofold ministry of Christ, or Paul's focus on community relationships? (On the latter point, it's as if Rice has been stung by the criticism that, since open theists value *individual*

libertarian freedom so much, they must be opposed to church *community*. But if Rice is responding to such anti-open theist criticisms here, he doesn't cite any.) It's not clear why being an open theist would lead you to any particular views on these topics, much less to the views Rice articulates and defends. Since Part II was billed as the "themes of open theism," I was expecting scholarship to be cited about how open theists make a unique contribution to these respective views in systematic theology, contributions that deserve further development. But that kind of contextualization and rationale was not present, and as a result the book seems to lose some of its open theist focus in Part II.

In conclusion, Rice's book serves an important purpose in documenting the chronology and breadth of the open theist movement. It contains an important critique of Thomas Jay Oord, showing that open theists can rise to the challenge of policing their own. As to whether the open theist revolution should be retained or resisted, I've already shown my cards. But as in politics so in theology, the existence of a viable opposition party is vital to the health of the republic. While not persuaded by many of the book's arguments, I find myself thankful for Rice's serious contribution to the conversation. (Let me also congratulate him on recently celebrating his fiftieth wedding anniversary (233n38), a stupendous and joyful achievement indeed!)