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DOES CLASSICAL THEISM DENY GOD'S IMMANENCE?

C. Fred Smith

THE CONCEPT OF THE OPENNESS OF GOD has recently gained a foothold among some evangelical thinkers. Others who have sought to refute this view have done so by emphasizing God's transcendent qualities. This article examines the criticism of classical theism by advocates of open theism and seeks to demonstrate that they portray classical theism inaccurately and that they have accepted a false understanding of God.

OVERVIEW OF OPEN THEISM

The movement's foundational text is *The Openness of God*, published in 1994.[1] Most of what open theists have said since then amounts to a reiteration of arguments made in that book. Basic to open theism is the idea that God's being is analogous to that of humans, and so God experiences reality in ways similar to the experiences of human beings. As evidence of this point Rice cites the fact that humankind is created in the image of God.[2] In addition

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1 Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994). Other writings include Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000); John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998); and Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).

Books written in response to open theism include Norman L. Geisler et al., *The Battle for God: Responding to the Challenge of Neotheism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001); Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001); Douglas Wilson, ed., *Bound Only Once: The Failure of Open Theism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001); and John M. France, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2001).

2 Richard Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," in *The Openness of God*, 39.

Rice asserts that the incarnation of Jesus Christ shows that "God's experience has something in common with certain aspects of human experience."[3] This commonality is continuous in God's experience both before and after the Incarnation.

A number of implications follow from this. God has intentions; He makes plans and sets goals for Himself and for His creation. These goals He "pursues over time and in different ways."[4] For example He has often revealed in the Bible the plans and intentions He has for Israel.

In carrying out His plans and intentions, God reacts to His creation. In Genesis 6:6 God wished He had not made humankind, and Scripture elsewhere speaks of God repenting of certain of His actions or intentions.[5] This understanding, Rice asserts, makes prayer intelligible, for "intercession can influence God's actions."[6]

Rice contends, again based on the analogy of human experience, that if God acts, as Scripture so often asserts, then God must change, for "act involves change."[7] Since any act human beings perform requires motion, and motion requires change, if only of position in space and time, then any analogous act that God might perform also requires change.

Also God is similar to humans in that He has feelings. He approves of things (Gen. 1), He becomes angry, jealous, joyful, and is filled with despair or hope. More importantly, according to Rice, God loves.[8] God is "deeply sensitive to the ones He loves."[9] Love involves having feelings. People's feelings are transient; their emotions come and go; they change. So, open theists reason, God's experience must be the same.

In addition, according to the openness view, God lacks full knowledge. Open theists are fond of citing Genesis 22:12 in this regard, which records that God said to Abraham, "Now I know that

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3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., 37.

5 Clark Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," in *The Openness of God,* 117.

6 Rice, 29.

7 Ibid., 36.

8 Ibid., 18.

9 Ibid., 22. Rice overstates the case, however, when he says, "Love is what it means to be God" (ibid., 19). He makes this attribute foundational to his understanding of God. However, there is no reason for exalting love to this level of preeminence. One might as easily say that another of God's attributes, such as holiness or justice, is what it means to be God. It is preferable, however, to recognize that no one attribute fully represents God's character.

you fear God." Again in Deuteronomy 13:3 God said He would test Israel to know whether they actually loved Him.[10] In Jeremiah 32:35 God said, "Nor had it entered My mind that they should do this abomination." The implication here, according to open theism, is that God had no knowledge of what the people would do until they in fact did it. According to Jeremiah 26:3 and Ezekiel 12:3, open theists say God is ignorant of what people will do and He speculates on it.[11]

Sanders, an open theist, charges that classical theists have adopted a "philosophical vocabulary" to conceptualize God, rather than allowing the Bible to determine their understanding.[12] Open theists claim, on the other hand, that they are responsive to the God of the Bible.[13] They seem to suggest they have discovered something new, that the perspective they bring to theology is one that has been there all along, but that classical theism has been too myopic to see it.

They imply that classical theists have not treated the matter of God's relationship with His creation honestly. Classical theists, Rice says, have truncated the understanding of God's love and have given the world a concept of God that makes prayer incoherent and that stifles the possibility of a rich and dynamic relationship with God. Classical theists, according to Rice, want to "safeguard God's transcendence by denying divine sensitivity."[14]

Classical Theism

However, the credibility of open theists' criticisms of classical theism does not hold up when one examines a representative sample of traditional theologians. Classical orthodox theology has always recognized that transcendence and immanence are both aspects of God's being and of His relationship to creation. In doing so, Carl Henry directly replies to the idea that the God of traditional orthodoxy is captive to ideas that come from Greek philosophy. He states that God, as transcendent, is above and beyond His creation,[15] and "both transcends the created universe and is pervasively immanent

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10 Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," 121–22.

11 Ibid., 122–23.

12 John Sanders, "Historical Considerations," in *The Openness of God,* 72.

13 Ibid., 59, 100.

14 Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," 42–43.

15 Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* (Waco, TX: Word, 1984), 6:35.

in it."[16] He notes that "biblical characterizations of divine transcendence are in no sense vague or conjectural, but clearly and concretely depict God's activity and relationships as creator, preserver and governor of the cosmos and man. . . . No exposition of divine transcendence and immanence is therefore to proceed on the basis of data sealed within nature and man, for its decisive content must issue from what God discloses about himself, about his own character and deeds."[17]

Neoorthodox theologian Karl Barth refers to God as transcendent over creation, while also recognizing the fact of divine immanence. With a little more subtlety than Henry, Barth asserts that "God's works are bound to Him but He is not bound to them."[18] Donald Bloesch, like Henry, refuted the idea that classical theism's concept of God is derived from Greek thought. He denies that God is the unmoved and "unmovable" God of Greek philosophy, but in the same context he rejects the idea of "a God who is ever changing."[19] Bloesch asserts that God is not the unmoved Mover of Greek thinking, and that God is not some "ideal of pure reason."[20] Instead God is actively involved in creating and ordering His universe, while at the same time He is immutable.[21]

Classical theism sees God as both transcendent and immanent. In no way can it be upheld that traditional theology has removed God from involvement with His creation. At the same time classical theism strongly affirms divine transcendence, including omniscience, in the traditional sense. Some theologians treat these matters as pure mystery, while others attempt to reconcile transcendence and immanence.

Theologians in different time periods and in different theological traditions have long accepted both the transcendent and immanent aspects of God's being. Augustine recognized the tensions between the two aspects, but he suggested that God's emotions are a

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[16] Ibid., 36–37.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of God*, vol. 2 of *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1957), 26.

[19] Donald Bloesch, *God, Authority, and Salvation*, vol. 1 of *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), 28. Bloesch is responding to Hartshorne here, but it is interesting how his words anticipate the charge of open theists a few years later.

[20] Ibid., 25.

[21] Ibid., 27.

matter of anthropomorphism.[22] In a similar vein John Wesley recognized that biblical references to God's actions in the world, such as "repenting" and "intending," are "expressions after the manner of men, and must be understood so as not to reflect upon God's immutability or felicity. . . . The change was in men, not in God."[23]

In the nineteenth century a number of theologians from different perspectives addressed these concerns. Charles G. Finney, for example, strongly affirmed the foreknowledge of God. "He must foreknow all events by a law of necessity."[24] God knows these things "necessarily and eternally"[25] because the concept of omniscience, Finney said, entails foreknowledge. Hasker, however, challenges this point by arguing that God's omniscience does not include His knowledge of the future,[26] for it would disallow human freedom. But Finney recognized that people have significant freedom, and that because of His immanence a dynamic relationship between humans and God is possible.

Charles Hodge wrote that God is "infinite in his being and perfections" in the same context in which he asserted that God is "capable of fellowship with man."[27] Holding these two concepts in tension was no problem for Hodge, nor did he ignore the fact that God interacts with His creation.

At the end of the nineteenth century A. H. Strong was quite explicit in delineating the twin aspects of transcendence and immanence. God's absolute attributes, he said, pertain to "the inner being of God," and His transitive or relative attributes "are involved in God's relations to the creation."[28] God, he affirmed, is immutable; the "nature, attributes and will of God are exempt from all change."[29] For Strong, as for many others, this is true because of God's perfection.

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22 Augustine, *Enchiridion*, in *Books for the Ages Software Library*, Discovery Edition, version 2.0 (Albany, OR: Ages Digital Library, 1996), 10.33.

23 John Wesley, *Notes on the Whole Bible*, in *Books for the Ages Software Library*, Discovery Edition, version 2.0 (Albany, OR: Ages Digital Library, 1996), 55.

24 Charles G. Finney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, ed. J. H. Fairchild (1878; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 526.

25 Ibid., 542.

26 William Hasker, "A Philosophical Perspective," in *The Openness of God,* 151.

27 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (1811; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 1:380.

28 Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publishing Society, 1907), 247.

29 Ibid., 257.

Strong dealt directly with a matter that is often implicit in open theism, though it is sometimes expressed directly, namely, the relationship of God to time.[30] Strong affirmed that God's attribute of eternity means that He is "free from all succession of time," and that God's eternity "contains in itself the cause of time."[31] God, Strong asserted, is not in time, but time is in God. Regarding God's having plans and intentions, Strong anticipated this argument by stating that "while there is logical succession in God's thoughts there is no chronological succession."[32] God "sees past and future as vividly as he sees the present."[33]

For Strong, God's apprehension of the future is a part of His knowledge. Like His other attributes, God's knowledge is "free from all imperfections." Since this is true, "God's knowledge is immediate . . . simultaneous . . . distinct . . . true . . . [and] eternal."[34]

Strong dealt realistically with the scriptural teachings that ascribe change to God. He explained them in three ways. Some, he said, are "illustrations of the varied methods in which God manifests his immutable truth and wisdom in creation." Others are "anthropomorphic representations of the revelation of God's unchanging attributes," and still others are "executions in time of purposes eternally existing in the mind of God."[35]

While affirming God's transcendence, Strong also taught that God is involved with creation, interacts with it, and has with it an ongoing relationship that is every bit as strong as that delineated by open-theism proponents. Strong saw transcendence and immanence as two aspects of God's nature that are in tension. God "is in no way limited to the universe or confined to the universe; he is transcendent as well as immanent."[36]

Another theologian who bridges the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is E. Y. Mullins. He emphasized the role of religious experience as a basis for authenticating the truth of Christianity. Thus he believed that God interacts with His creation. However,

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[30] Pinnock explicitly says that God experiences time in the same way humans do ("Systematic Theology," 120). Many open theists leave this as something of an unexpressed outcome or implication of their thinking.

[31] Strong, *Systematic Theology,* 275.

[32] Ibid., 276.

[33] Ibid., 277.

[34] Ibid., 283.

[35] Ibid., 258.

[36] Ibid., 254.

Mullins pointed out that God is immutable and yet not "immobile."[37]

Mullins spoke of God's natural attributes—immutability, omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, and eternity—as those that relate to His unchanging character. God's moral attributes—love, holiness, truth, and righteousness—are the ones by which He relates to His creation.[38]

In the doctrine of election God's natural attribute of omniscience and His moral attribute of love come together. In His omniscience He foresees the future in exact detail,[39] and His election is based on His foreknowledge.[40] God's motivation in election is love. He wants everyone to repent, but He knows who will and who will not. Thus God's moral and natural attributes are seen together.[41]

In the twentieth century, theologians have treated the matter of God's relationship to creation similarly. Louis Berkhof recognized that "there are many passages of Scripture which seem to ascribe change to God."[42] When Scripture speaks of God "repenting, changing His intention and altering His relation to sinners when they repent," Berkhof wrote, "we should remember that this is only an anthropopathic way of speaking."[43] Berkhof insisted that while there is change around God, and changes in the relationships other beings might have with God, "there is no change in His Being, His attributes, His purpose, His motives of action or His promises."[44] Berkhof did not ignore the Scriptures that are so important to open theists. He willingly and seriously considered them, without abandoning classical theism. One difference may be that, unlike Mullins and Strong, Berkhof did seek to resolve the problem.

Lewis Sperry Chafer dealt with similar matters as well. He

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[37] E. Y. Mullins, *The Christian Religion in Its Doctrinal Expression* (Philadelphia: Roger Williams, 1917), 223.

[38] Ibid., 222–43.

[39] Ibid., 225.

[40] Ibid., 343. Mullins also emphasizes human free will in salvation, and he recognizes the role of human witness in evangelism. He does not try to reconcile this with God's foreknowledge, being content to hold these in tension.

[41] Ibid., 265–76.

[42] L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), 59. He cites Exodus 32:10–14; Psalm 18:25–26; Proverbs 11:20; 12:22; and Jonah 3:10.

[43] Ibid., 59.

[44] Ibid.

asserted the traditional understanding of God as "immutable" in that He can neither increase nor decrease in any capacity. Growth, change, or improvement of any kind are foreign to the nature of God.[45] His knowledge of the future is not simply knowledge of contingencies or possibilities, for to God "things of the future are as real as though past."[46]

Chafer recognized the tension inherent in divine foreknowledge and human free will, a subject of great importance to open theists. He asserted, however, that God's knowledge "implies no element of necessity or determinism, though it does imply certainty."[47] Human actions are still free and uncoerced.[48] Such an understanding of the problem, he pointed out, is both rational and biblical.

Chafer dealt with those Scriptures that say that God repented or changed His mind about things. Chafer believed these statements must be interpreted in light of others that say that God does not change His mind (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29). Chafer stated that "God, though immutable, is not immobile."[49] God deals differently with the righteous than with the wicked, and yet He is unchanging. "The sun is not fickle or partial because it melts the wax but hardens the clay—the change is not in the sun but in the objects it shines upon."[50]

Here transcendence and immanence are brought together. God "repents" only in that the harm He would have done to the wicked is stayed because *they* repented. In this regard Chafer cited the case of Jonah and the Ninevites, a favorite of open theists.[51] Chafer saw this as evidence not that God changes, but that God knew what would happen. God's foreknowledge is the basis of His actions. Transcendent, God knows future events. Immanent, He used this knowledge in His call to Jonah, in moving the fish to swallow him, and in moving the hearts of the Ninevites to lead them to repentance. For Chafer, as for other evangelical theologians, God's immanence and transcendence are parallel and neither one threat-

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[45] Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary, 1948; reprint, 8 vols. in 4, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1993), 1:217.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid., 1:194.

[48] Ibid., 1:196.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid., 1:218.

[51] Ibid., 1:219.

ens the other. Also God's gift of human free will is not abrogated by the seeming tensions between these aspects of God's nature.

Neoorthodox theologians have discussed this problem too. Emil Brunner recognized that God is transcendent in that He "is infinitely high, above all the limitations of space," and yet He may be "near" or "far." Such language of nearness and distance, Brunner asserts, describes God's "real presence" even though God is not limited by space.[52] God, according to Brunner, "involves himself in the temporal," and yet He is unchangeable.[53]

In discussing God's relationship to time, Brunner wrote that "God's nature is not eternity, but God's nature is sovereignty, which as such is not related to time. The eternity of God—this simply means His lordship over the time which He has created."[54] This prevents any notion that God is changeable. "The idea of a 'God who becomes' is a mythological and unreal idea . . . everything would founder in the morass of relativism. We can measure nothing by changing standards; changeable norms are no norms at all. . . . The God of the Bible is eternally unchangeable."[55]

In discussing God's "repenting" Brunner acknowledged, as do open theists, that this reveals that God interacts with the world, but Brunner asserted that this does not mean His basic essence changes.[56]

Brunner was willing to live with mystery. "The biblical revelation confronts us with this tension, namely: that we may say of God that He is the Sovereign Lord, from whose will all proceeds, and also, that He is the merciful God who hears prayer."[57] As noted earlier, this is a long way from the static unmoved Mover of Greek philosophy, which the open theists accuse many evangelicals of believing. Such a picture is a caricature of what classical theism has always taught.

Evangelical theologians of the late twentieth century have also been explicit in maintaining the tension between divine transcendence and immanence. Henry attacks the idea that if God were

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[52] Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, vol. 1 of *Dogmatics*, trans. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth, 1949), 258.

[53] Ibid., 268.

[54] Ibid., 270.

[55] Ibid., 269.

[56] Ibid., 268–69.

[57] Ibid., 269. "A God who is constantly changing is not a God whom we can worship. He is a mythological Being for whom we can only feel sorry" (ibid.).

transcendent He would be "incomprehensible or unknowable."[58]

Bloesch has also made clear that there is nothing unbiblical about saying God knows the future and also relates to His creation. "God knows the future," he says, "before it happens."[59] For Bloesch God's knowledge is a matter of His omnipotence. He cites Psalm 147:5, "His understanding is infinite."[60] Bloesch maintains that "the idea of a God of sovereign power" is an essential part of biblical Christianity.[61]

More recently James Leo Garrett Jr. has affirmed that both transcendence and immanence are essential aspects of God's relationship to creation. "God's constancy, or changelessness, is consistent," he maintains, "with biblical anthropomorphisms."[62] Garrett does not shrink from recognizing the tension inherent in the biblical revelation. "God transcends and is not limited by time, but God relates to the temporal order."[63] In addition, seeking to reconcile the tension, Garrett offers the interesting proposition that God's "nearness and distance can have non-spatial meanings. God's distance and presence can be in hiddenness and in revelation, in wrath or in grace."[64]

This too demonstrates that evangelical theologians have not replaced the God of the Bible with a static God who cannot relate to His creation. One need not choose, as open theists suggest, between a God with whom believers can relate dynamically and a God who is over all aspects of His creation.[65]

CONCLUSION

The current discussion on open theism parallels, in one way, the Christological discussions in the early church. The early church

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[58] Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority,* 39.

[59] Ibid., 29.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid., 24.

[62] James Leo Garrett Jr., *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical,* 2d ed. (North Richland Hills, TX: Bibal, 2000), 1:250.

[63] Ibid., 248.

[64] Ibid., 231.

[65] On the question of whether God "changes His mind" see Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "Does God 'Change His Mind'?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (October–December 1995): 38–99. See also Robert A. Pyne and Stephen R Spencer, "A Critique of Free-Will Theism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (July–October 2001), 275–77.

knew that the Scriptures teach that Christ was both fully human and fully God. But some believers, emphasizing His deity, said He only appeared to be human (Docetism). Others emphasized His humanity and deemphasized His deity. In answer to these and other heresies the church adopted the formula of the two natures of Christ, holding them in tension.

The church faces a similar situation today in this matter of open theism versus classical theism. Traditionally, as has been shown here, theologians have held to both the transcendence of God and His immanence. Some have tried to explain the two while others have been willing to live with the mystery. Open theism has emphasized God's immanence, to the neglect of His transcendence. As Henry points out, "one exaggeration, whether of transcendence or of immanence encourages another by way of reaction and counter-reaction."[66] Theologians who defend classical theism must be careful not to fall into this trap. As Henry adds, a "distorted emphasis on transcendence that erases all significance for God in the natural world is just as faulty as a radical divine immanence that erodes the distinction between the infinite and the finite."[67]

Just as the early church avoided the trap of asserting the deity of Christ at the expense of His humanity or vice versa, theologians today must avoid the trap of asserting transcendence at the expense of immanence. Openness theism is a morass of myopic thinking, exaggeration, false claims, and incoherence. But orthodox theologians should continue holding transcendence and immanence in tension, accepting the fact that there is an element of mystery in the Godhead, knowing that believers can and do have a living, vital dynamic relationship with the transcendent God who knows the future perfectly and yet who responds to His people in a variety of ways including answering prayer.

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[66] Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority,* 36.

[67] Ibid.

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