

A Panoramic Critical Review of Open Theism Theological Perspectives

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Introduction

The world is constantly in flux. The dynamic times scarcely allow a person to synthesise or analyse issues objectively, if such a tenet holds today. The environment and context in which these changes are taking place offer a good catalyst for such changes. What was once considered true and unquestionable in times past is now in the dock if not declared wrong or altogether rejected today. What modernism prized is systematically and ferociously opposed by post modernism as being archaic, rigid and incorrect. The saint has to contend with these disparities and far much more as they traverse this terrestrial ball. This discourse therefore focuses on one of these problem areas, which in real terms, has emerged in recent years, Open, free-will or relational theism which, in real terms, has been arrayed against classical theism. The nature of God, man and salvation are clearly in question here. If God is not what He has been portrayed to be, then the entire picture changes altogether. In treating this subject, we commence by stating what each position teaches and holds before offering some thoughts related to them. By that token, this is by no means an exhaustive treatment of the subject under consideration but highlights the key areas needing attention today and into the future. As earlier hinted at, we thus first define terms, set the ground definitions, before delving into some deeper level of analysis prior to drawing some key take home lessons. We think this sufficiently clears the way for our treatment of this subject. Here goes!

Classical theism

This is the view advanced by the early church, later and up to the present day. It holds that God is the most wise and all powerful God that is self-existent and yet interacts with His creation. The ancient one is both immanent and transcendent in the same breath. Classical theism holds that God is omniscient, knowing all things having planned them from all eternity which no one can thwart or alter unless *Yahweh* so pleases (Pink 2006; Channock 1996; Watson 1992). God is said to know all things, past, present, future and contingent possessing one will expressed in different ways. Nothing ever catches God by surprise and whatever happens does so at His bidding and allowance. Further, we may assert that the

perfections of God describe who He is and attempt to demonstrate or describe His essential nature. Being the Most high God, he has power to work within nature, outside the realms of nature, he regenerates and ensures that the atonement takes effect as people are saved, having repented of their sins. This means that God is the sovereign ruler of the skies, the ever gracious and wise one working wonders to achieve His good and perfect ends. John Ryland's hymn comes to mind here. That said, we may further state that God allows what may appear to be evil to the human mind and yet is never the author of sin. How this is explainable in human terms is beyond frail mortal comprehension, and yet true, because scripture seems to suggest so. While Open theism abhors this apparent incompatible truth preferring to be humanly logical, scripture states that God can and will allow certain things to take place so that He alone may be glorified. Admittedly, some evil acts are committed by men in the process, God remains exonerated and holy. Men are responsible and culpable for their sinful decisions and will have to pay for their sins when the right time comes. Champions of this classical view are scattered all over the corridors of history. In the present age, Robert Pyne and Stephen Spencer number among the leading proponents.

Free will or relational theism

Free Will or Open theism on the other hand attempts to demonstrate that God is relational, seeks relationships with His creation and yet is limited in some respects because humans are liberated and free to do as they please. While God may want something, He is limited by His knowledge and in some cases, ability, avoiding any interference to the created order that He has set in motion. The ancient of days is deistic in some sense. God is said to be self-limiting in other instances and does not exercise His power because his creatures are rational beings endowed with free will to chart their own destiny and course. Free Will theism also posits that God is not the all wise one as portrayed by classical theism because evidence from scripture seems to suggest that God changes His mind, is grieved and or even frustrated because His will is not fixed in stone and subject to change as things evolve. Thus, God is said to change His mind or can be manipulated by certain acts of piety or obedience. But a careful look and analysis of the Biblical passages so adduced will reveal that these have to do with conditional situations as relates to obedience or not, blessings and cursing. None the less, free will theism holds that *Jehovah* is forever planning, scheming and in a sense "fire fighting" because He is limited in knowing the future. God must needs be on His toes at all times to ensure nothing disastrous happens that may derail His divine plans. As already asserted, the God of Open Theism is deistic, detached from his creation and stands around as an observer, hoping for the best outcomes from humanity or chance events.

It may be further said that Open theism claims that the future is open in the sense that no one knows what will or may come to pass because not even God has a controlling hand on things. In a sense, "open theism" also suggests that the

future is open in the sense that it can be changed contingent on what cards that each party plays. It is a Chess game of sorts. Additionally, open theism advocates for a simple straight forward interpretation of scripture in its natural context. Words must be taken at face value and given literal meaning irrespective of scenario or context. For instance, where God expresses grief or even regret, let it be taken in natural human terms rather than using any philosophical reasoning (such as anthropomorphic rationalizations) or other scriptures which may not be directly relevant to what is happening in that particular verse or set of verses. The increasing colony of leaders attributed to Open theistic theology, according to Payne & Spencer (2001), include Pinnock & John Sanders, some of who largely built their theological perspectives after some hind personal experiences, tragic or good.

Evidently, Open theism appears simpler and more straight forward than what has been the traditional approach to scripture reading, understanding and interpretation.

Key tenets of Free will theism

Open theism holds several core tenets as given below:

- God desires a relationship with humans based on free will.
- God does not interfere in the world and thus not party to any evil acts. The question of evil is thus evaded because God is equally fighting for survival, recognition, control over and with the forces of darkness.
- God's knowledge and power is limited and therefore no one knows for sure what will or may happen in future.
- God is not the absolutely sovereign one as portrayed by the classical theist but is one whole has intentionally limited Himself while respecting human dignity and free will.
- Open theism is inclusive and 'post-mortem conversion' in its essential nature.
- This view is in sync with post modernism in the sense that it allows for broader views on matters related to the faith, where even the view of God is not static but porously fluid. Context, times, experience and preference dictate the adopted understanding subjectively by the individual. Granted, not all Free-willers subscribe to this latter attribution but in essence, that is what their view amounts to in the final analysis.

Implications of free will theism

The implications of open theism, as it is sometimes dubbed, are enormous and grave. For one thing, God is said to be limited, a weak frail and helpless deity waiting for humans to respond, hopefully in His favour. For another thing, Open theism goes against the grain of scripture. Though it may appear to restore the dignity of man, it actually undermines the purposes, power and will of God resulting into a humanistic kind of theology, where salvation by works may be the order of the day. Finally, it basically kills vital Christianity because it reduces Christianity to mere human inventions of ingenuity. The heart and marrow of true religion is removed and hurled away.

Why free will theism is increasingly popular today among unsuspecting evangelicals

Free Will theism has been garnering increasing clout in recent years. How or why it is so can only be explained by one taking a spiritual inventory as well as the times in which things happen. The post-modern context has its challenges of being dynamic, fluid and abhorring absolutes. Some of the catalysts of its popularity include the following points:

- It resonates with the natural mind, humanistic in nature.
- It appears less complicated than reading a whole mountain of scripture.
- Man is apparently 'empowered' because God is driven out of the picture from an active immanent being to one that is of deistic status or one that pleads to have chance to express Himself.
- God is viewed as one that has freely chosen to limit Himself and not interfere with what happens in nature. They (i.e. Free-will pundits) claim that this view is consistent with His sovereignty and nature.
- Man is free to do as he pleases without any fear of anything.
- God is exonerated from having a hand in evil or good acts because things happen randomly without God's input, interference or control.
- God is said to be busy fighting evil in order to regain or establish His righteous reign. Only in the final analysis will he triumph and overcome sin. For now, He contents Himself with self-limitation.
- God's knowledge is said to be limited and thus He does not know what will or may come to pass. At best, He merely predicts by probability calculations what will come to pass and thus positions Himself so as to achieve His ends. Nothing is in God's control and at times God appears

surprised and disappointed at the outcomes of some events hence the “repenting” or “regret” expressed in scripture (e.g. Genesis 6:6). This view exonerates God from planning a fixed decree from all eternity, any accusation of sin or any other such charge to be raised against Him. He is as equally spooked when a sudden occurrence takes place because He is as limited as the rest of us except that he has better intuition than us!

Clearly, we can see that Free Will theism is poised to grab more followers in ensuing years because it attempts to run away from traditional theism that posits God as being the absolute monarch bereft of any emotions, random and uncaring. As has been demonstrated, this is an incorrect picture, given the wider revelation of scripture.

Toxic Dangers of Free Will Theism

Open theism appears attractive, sensible and better to the unschooled, untrained and unsuspecting eye. It comes enshrouded and coated in truth as it appears to interact with the scriptures but in actual fact a deadly error, if not heresy. The danger in this view lies in the following though not exhaustive:

- Open theism attempts to understand or treat God in human terms. God is said to be the one that desperately seeks a relationship with man rather than the all sufficient and sovereign God that relates with His creation in love, covenant and justice (Watson 1992).
- Free-will theism is far more different from even arminianism because it pushes the will of man to another extreme where man is in the control seat and God the observer, one hoping to get the best outcome, using his intuition, prediction or probability. God is reduced to a helpless beggar while man elevated to a position of power and liberty. Clearly, sin, depravity and other related facts are ignored.
- Open Theism finally ends up in post-mortem conversion and inclusivism, allowing room for people to be converted post death. This is foreign to scripture.
- The straight forward approach to scripture (in the sense advanced by Free Will open Theism) is to be rejected with the contempt that it deserves because it does not match up to the word of God. It may appear plausible and “empowering” to the mere mortal but in effect it rejects the very nature of God as revealed in the scriptures. Although the straight forward approach may have some positive side (especially if held and understood in the proper standard evangelical hermeneutical sense; Klein et al, 2017), it is largely dangerous if taken to another extreme because it tends to

ignore the context and any other teaching of scripture as shown by the wider campus of the entire Bible.

The above points sufficiently highlight the dangers and venom subtly hidden in Free-will theory. Any theologian worth their salt will have their hairs stand on end when they encounter such dangerous teaching.

Which Theological view is true and more consistent with scripture?

From the investigation hewn from both scripture and historical evidence i.e., the writings of the fathers, it is evident that Classical theism is closer to scripture comparatively. Viewed from a modern perspective and true hermeneutic, Open Theism can be classified as a deadly error, closer to heresy because it harbours toxic poison coated within its covers. Several points could be advanced as to why classical theism is true and the other false.

What others have said about classical and free will theism

Although not directly responding to Free-will theists per se, many systematic theologians like Berkhof, Boyce, Grudem, Barvink and others (e.g. Arthur W Pink, Stephen Charnock, Gresham Machen & Oscar Boyd and Thomas Watson etc.), have explicitly held that God's attributes, characteristics or perfections are communicable or incommunicable. These are part of God's essential nature and being as revealed right across scripture. God's 'omni' characteristics hold true as ever because God is both transcendent and yet immanent. He has emotions and perfectly knows all things, the end from the beginning. Passages like Psalm 139 or Isaiah 45 & 46 come to mind, where God declares that His purposes will stand, knowing all things and thus no one will thwart His plans. He is the omnipotent God, with infinite power able and willing to do as He pleases and yet for the good of God's children. Though God appears relatively more directly relational or interactive in the Old Testament than in the New, He none the less is the same throughout (Machen & Boyd 1922). Though He may apparently appear to change His mind, He remains the same in His essential nature and being. We do not attempt a detailed exegetical investigation of scripture passages in this paper but we can confidently say that one needs to read the wider campus of scripture to appreciate what is true.

Lessons Gleaned From This Consideration

Ploughing through and reviewing several key sources or materials, several things are brought to our attention that have increasingly been ignored or even shoved to the terraces, by many a theologian despite being deleteriously toxic. Toleration and ecumenism is increasingly the currency of the times. People, at times, needlessly prize diversity and "mature accommodation" even over clear biblical

truth. The obvious now stands in question, as a result, in some troubling instances. Below are some of the key points that a thoughtful interaction with trending thoughts and conversations yields after reading or researching on this critical topic, on many scores, threatening the very foundations and nature of God, soteriology and, may we say, anthropology:

- Clear scriptural injunctions and facts traditionally unquestionably held by the Church from ancient times are under increasing review, and in some cases rejection. The post- modern mind abhors absolutes and interprets things differently. The classical theologian needs to take heed.
- Terms that once meant something definite have either been invaded with other (foreign attached) meanings or rejected altogether. Like parasites, these new errors or heresies ride on the back of truth with the single motive of over throwing what is true.
- It is important to be alert and equipped with error detectors. The best equipping and training is to know a wide campus of scripture so that if error or heresy shows up in what-ever form, dress or nature, it can easily be detected. This is perhaps the greatest need of the times.
- The problem of evil in relation to a loving and all caring God working through providence has generated much difficulty for people to reconcile, hence the desire to attempt to explain theological concepts differently. Revisionist pundits are therefore not surprising to encounter today. Authorial intent or the quest to correctly hermeneutically understand scripture is not the primary goal lacing several of today's average Theologian, let alone the person in the pew.
- Philosophical thinking is key because some of the arguments advanced today (whether healthy or hazardous) comes along riding on philosophical slippers. If the saint is not so trained and equipped to handle such an approach, chances are that they will be side tracked, over whelmed, lost or ineffective in their attempted defence of the faith.
- Although fine sounding, some hermeneutic approaches appear to be authentic, plausible and progressive and yet they rear a serpent in their bosom. The straight forward approach to scripture interpretation as advanced by the open theists is one such an example. It holds that scripture must be interpreted at face value and literary (which is right and ok if the right rules of interpretation are followed) but its greatest weakness is the insistence that each passage must be interpreted independent of the other. For instance, God is said to "repent" or change His mind probably because He was not sure what the out-come would be. This interpretation is flawed in at least one sense. It does not take into account the fact that the broader campus of scripture must be brought to bear on the unclear passage. Secondly, scripture was written in every day

anthropomorphic language so that humans could understand. It may further be said that God has emotions, though not in the sense that humans understand it to be. In carefully reading scripture, we learn that there is need to be wary and careful with whom or what we interact with.

- Sadly, there is an increasing number of people accepting and believing erroneous positions like Open theism today because it appears in sync with the post-modern age, novel and more humanistic.
- Often, error seems plausible, easy to catch and costs nothing to the person so captivated. Moreover, it seems to immediately answer some nagging questions while apparently running away from difficulties, in effect, they do not solve, but probably create newer or other problems. This partly explains why many unsuspecting people are continuously being led astray.
- People react differently to truth or error. For instance, Yancy, Joni Erickson Tada, John Sanders or Pinnock all react completely differently to circumstances life throws at them and us, in relation to Biblical truth. Some are drawn to a correct position while others veer to another extreme, far from what the entire body of scripture teaches, they abandon authorial intent and thus become humanistic and final arbiter of truth.
- The classical position to scripture interpretation, especially as relates to the nature and attributes of God is closer to scripture, more consistent and comprehensively addresses many issues. While classical theism may not be entirely full proof, it certainly has many advocates both past and present (e.g. in the ecumenical creeds etc.) which the newer novel ideas have to contend with as they seek to uproot the ancient boundaries.

There are clearly other lessons to be learnt but the ones presented above should suffice.

Significance of this consideration

This study is most relevantly interesting because it tackles a matter very much with us in our day. Open Theistic theology swims well in the contemporary setting along side orthodox truth, with some of its imbibers unaware of its deleterious effects. Its long term effect and far reaching impact cannot be underestimated. Open free will theology threatens the very foundations of Evangelical Christianity, with potential to a re-interpretation of time held Biblical truths. The Christian Church therefore needs to awake to this subtle but venomous error lest succeeding generations be misled. This error is extremely subtle in that it hides behind orthodox teaching, uses standard theological terms but deceptively attaches other meanings, rejects anthropomorphic understanding of the text (where legitimately called for), rides on authentic literal scripture interpretation

but leads in other directions and distorts the nature of the Divinely revealed nature of God. These are extremely sensitive terrains not to be tempered or trifled with. With the contemporary compromises or sleepy churches, this error can and will potentially find a safe haven among saints and Theologians. If we are not careful, truth will be replaced with humanistic thinking, rational interpretations or even a total rejection of orthodoxy. Often, in the quest to correct an error or problem, we often create other problems. These and other reasons explain the awful need of this subject consideration. It further needs to be said that as post-modern thinking spreads far and wide, Open theism in its various forms finds fertile ground to grow, flourish and invade the world. It has already done that in the world's leading academia, learning institutions and now crept into theological seminaries. There is no stopping its damaging advance, unless the Christian is properly trained long before this diseased kind of thinking arrives.

Conclusion

Reading through some of the positions imbibed and taught today by some so-called evangelicals can both be shocking and surprising. What is clearly stated and held in scripture is increasingly under fire and in some cases, outright rejection. The Open, Free will or indeed the relational theism is one such example. Viewed from a sound Biblical premise and hermeneutic, this school of thought (i.e. Open theism) is just another heresy in a post-modern garb. It is very subtle and appealing to the mind but hardly passes the test of scripture. This calls for discernment and an alert mind. Some errors like arminianism (although erroneous still) are even better in the sense that they are more biblically based (i.e. closer to scripture) as relates to their soteriology, focusing on the atonement, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as pivotal to salvation and expression of Divine love, which Free-will theism does not hold or subscribe to. In the quest to be simple and literal, this heresy has veered into another erroneous, of may we say, heretical extreme which builds a doctrine on a small selected island of verses at the expense and rejection of the entire tenor of scripture. The Church needs to urgently wake up to yet another deviation eating away at the vitality of Evangelical Christianity. The best is that it has been detected, identified and quarantined. What now needs to be done is to follow through with administering the right remedy. It may be bitter and long in application but certainly can be won.

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