

Open Theism and Beyond A Challenge to Evangelicalism¹

Sylvie Avakian

KEY WORDS

| Open Theism | Evangelicalism | Christian Theology |
| Free Will vs. Predestination | Orthodox Theology | Divine Love |

ABSTRACT

On the topic of Open Theism, which is a theological stand within Evangelicalism, this article presents first its major themes, in contrast to the position of Classical Theism, some indications of the present discussions on the topic will follow. Then, some critical remarks and finally concluding statements toward a possible movement from a conservative and classical position to a more open and free theological stand within Evangelicalism, will conclude the article.

The article argues mainly that since Evangelicalism, throughout history and by the nature of its reality, has not insisted on the metaphysical and speculative dimension in theology and has not been the victim of institutionalized systems; Evangelicalism remains a potential field for reception of the open views on God and the Christian faith. In this sense Open Theism persists as a challenge within Evangelicalism, and for it, in order that it might move beyond all constraint and limitation.

INTRODUCTION: EVANGELICALISM AND OPEN THEISM

It is possible to trace back the history of Evangelicalism in Europe and North America to the 18-19th centuries and even earlier, if one considers a general definition of Evangelicalism. Evangelicalism is often used as a synonym to 'Protestantism' and particularly to 'Lutheranism'. In some more particular sense Evangelicalism refers to pietistic and revivalist reforms in the 18-19th centuries. In the late 19th century fundamentalism became a distinguishing element of some evangelical theologians, known as the Princeton theologians,² who led a revolt against the so-called 'theological liberalism'. Further, Evangelicalism refers to a

conservative protestant coalition which emerged in the 1940s, rejecting fundamentalism, and having many reformed theologians, and also Arminians, as its leaders, thus forming the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), the Evangelical Theological Society and other organizations. It is intriguing, however, to explore the changes in Evangelical theology, in the more particular sense of the term, and the new possibilities to move from a conservative-pietistic position toward more critical revisions and endorsement of open views on God and Christian faith.³

Biblicism, personal conversion and evangelism have been characteristics of Evangelicalism throughout centuries. However, and since Evangelicalism has not insisted on

¹ This article was originally presented as a lecture at the *Freie Theologische Hochschule Giessen* on October 28, 2013.

² Some of the Princeton theologians are: Charles Hodge (1797-1878), Archibald Alexander Hodge (1823-1886), Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (1851-1921) and John Gresham Machen (1881-1937).

³ See: R. E. Olson, "Confessions of an Arminian Evangelical" in *Salvation in Christ: Comparative Christian Views*, R. R. Keller & R. L. Millet (eds.), (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2005), 183-203. Accessed online: <http://rsc.byu.edu/archived/salvation-christ-comparative-christian-views/9-confessions-arminian-evangelical>

metaphysical or speculative theology, which treats in abstract-intellectual form some theoretical truths of Christian faith, thus, it has not been bound to certain propositions and theories and also has not been the victim of institutionalized religious systems, Evangelicalism remains a potential field for the reception of the open views on God and Christian belief. The present article perceives such an attempt in Open Theism, which has been a movement, within Evangelicalism, from conservative toward more critical reconsideration of the theological claims, maintaining the need to revise and reexamine the Christian theological heritage. Throughout the article I will refer to Open Theism (also Free-will Theism or Relational Theism) in contrast to Classical Theism.⁴ Classical Theism designates the traditional view of God as it was shaped throughout centuries in the West through the works of Aquinas, Anselm, Augustine, Calvin and others, and it was adopted in most circles of Evangelicalism. On the Other hand, Open Theism addresses Classical Theism and through it the conservative Evangelical position.

In this paper I aim at presenting the essential arguments and themes of Open Theism, in contrast to the position of Classical Theism. Some indications toward the contemporary discussions and some critical remarks, concerning Open Theism as it presents a critical revision of the Evangelical heritage, will follow. I close the article with concluding observations.

4 See: A. Rhoda, "The Philosophical Case for Open Theism" in *Philosophia* (2007) 35, 301-311, where Rhoda defends Open Theism vis-à-vis its two opponents, what he calls "theological determinism and the various forms of non-open free-will theism, such as Molinism and Ockhamism."

THE MAJOR THEMES OF OPEN THEISM

In its description of divine attributes Classical Theism has most of the times started with metaphysical considerations of divine being, concentrating on the abstract attributes such as divine omnipotence, omnipresence, immutability and omniscience. Thus, God has been perceived as absolute perfection, immutable substance and pure actuality (pure act, *actus purus*) with no possibility for any potentiality or being concerned or troubled by the world.⁵ On the other hand Open Theism, based on the biblical statement "God is love", perceives God as the God who enters into relationship of love with the human subject and awaits for his/her response, so that it would be possible for the human being to have a collaborative, interactive relationship with God. Accordingly, God, in Open Theism, accompanies the human being and even suffers with his/her suffering. In this sense it is possible to speak of Open Theism in terms of relational theology. By this, Open Theism has been an attempt to depart from the Augustinian position concerning the questions of original sin, grace and predestination.

Open Theism further aspires to replace

5 This notion goes back to Aristotle's claim that according to the metaphysical order the two highest principles are actuality *ενδελεχεια* and potentiality *δυναμις*. Actuality is perfection and fullness of Being, while potentiality is imperfection and incompleteness. The former is the determining, the latter the determinable principle. Actuality precedes potentiality since there is no potency in things existing from eternity in relation to their own existence. Both principles are found in all beings, with the exception of the Supreme Cause, in whom there is no imperfection, and therefore no potentiality. God is pure actuality [*Actus Purus*] the Greek term [*energeia*] *ενεργεια* refers to this pure act that refers to the First Mover [*proton kinowon*] *πρωτον κινων*, who is unchanging and everlasting, while all other beings are composed of actuality and potentiality. See: D. Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 29; D. Allen, *Philosophy For Understanding Theology*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 127, 131; F. Copleston. *A History of Philosophy*. Vol.1, (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 315- 316.

conservatism with a deeper sense of the evangelical Protestant reality in the twenty-first century, and aims at entering into dialogue with contemporary theological positions and with sciences rather than maintaining polemics against them. In its endeavor to endorse more open views on God and Christian Faith Open Theism comes close to the theology of the Church Fathers and Orthodox Theology, particularly as it emphasizes love and freedom as they are procured through divine grace, the work of the Holy Spirit and the image of God given to the human being from creation. Hence love and freedom bring the human being to participation in God and to the final union of all things in God.⁶

I. GOD'S COMMUNAL NATURE VS. GOD AS STATIC BEING

In his essay "God Everlasting" Nicolas Wolterstorff maintains the personal and relational nature of God. Wolterstorff speaks of God as everlasting rather than God as eternal.⁷ He explains that the notion of God's eternity implies God's timeless reality, that is to say that God is outside of time and that God views all events of history, past, present and future simultaneously or at once. Contrary to this, the Biblical image of God as everlasting implies that God exists and acts within history, i.e. through all of time, however without having a beginning or an end. In this second sense it is possible to speak of God as temporal, maintaining that God does not know the future. Wolterstorff concludes

that "God's life and existence is itself temporal", incorporating "changeful succession",⁸ as God is involved through redeeming acts in history.

Since the mid-1970s open theists have challenged Classical Theism's perception of God as static perfect being.⁹ They maintained that Western Classical theology has most of the times missed the point of God's relational and communal nature. Some theologians, who are the proponents of the so-called Open Theism,¹⁰ such as Clark Pinnock (1937-2010), William Hasker (1935-), John E. Sanders (1956-) and Gregory A. Boyd (1957-), have called for reform and reconsideration of the traditional notion of God.¹¹ Pinnock criticized the dominance of rational, propositional and fundamentalist approach in evangelical theology as being a 'distorted mode' which has exaggerated the

8 N. Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting" in N. Wolterstorff & T. Cuneo, *Inquiring About God*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 155.

9 It is possible to trace the beginnings of Open Theism to mid-1970s, with the publication of several articles, which has challenged classical theism's perception of God as static perfect being. Later, in 1994 Clark Pinnock and four other open theists published *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*. See: C. Pinnock, R. Rice, J. Sanders, W. Hasker & D. Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

10 Most of these theologians come either from the classic Arminianism (also called the Remonstrants, who were condemned at the Synod of Dort [1619] as they objected to the Belgic Confession and Calvin's teachings, claiming divine election on the basis of foreseen faith, universal atonement and resistible grace. Thus, rejecting the doctrine of total depravity and the perseverance of the saints) or the pietistic Evangelicalism of the 18th century (John Wesley). Some of them are also called postconservative evangelicals (the term is from Roger Olson). In their attempts to reexamine some aspects of the traditional doctrine of God, postconservative evangelical theologians expressed God's personal nature through different emphases: Open theism, the social God project of Stanley J. Grenz, and Miroslav Volf's notion of God as reconciling love. See: R. E. Olson, 2007, 218-219.

11 R. E. Olson, *Reformed and Always Reforming: The Postconservative Approach to Evangelical Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing group, 2007), 226. Also: R. D. Moore, "Leftward to Scofield: The Eclipse of the Kingdom in Post-Conservative Evangelical Theology", *JETS* 47/3 (September 2004), 424.

6 See on this: T. J. Oord, B. Montgomery & K. Winslow (eds.), *Relational Theology: A Contemporary Introduction*, Point Loma Press, 2012, 11, 18-23, 28-30.

7 Christian theology, as the result of the influence of Greek philosophy and particularly Neoplatonism which considered the highest form of reality as an eternal being, has perceived God as eternal being who exists perfectly and changelessly.

legal dimension of salvation at the expense of divine grace.¹² These theologians attempted to depart from classical Aristotelian metaphysics, moving toward relational metaphysics. They have presented, what they call, biblically faithful revisions of the claimed doctrines,¹³ emphasizing that the biblical description of God speaks of a God who exists within time, who is passionately involved in human history and is always responsive to the incidents of the world. Sanders argues that there is a “shared context between God and the creation.”¹⁴ Through creation God enters the context of the created order and communicates with the human being by means which are not strange to human history, language and spatiotemporal reality. Consequently any attempt to speak of a god who is beyond creation and human-worldly reality is senseless and futile. Of course this would not mean that God does not exist apart from the world, yet, whatever the human being knows of God, that is because of God’s relationship to the world. Sanders quotes Hebblethwaite’s words: “If God creates a temporally structured universe, then, whatever his own eternal being may be, he must relate himself to his creation in a manner appropriate to its given nature, i.e. temporality.”¹⁵ Sanders also refers to the

12 C. Pinnock & R. C. Brow, *Unbounded Love: A Good News Theology for the 21st Century*, (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2000), 8. Pinnock criticizes mainly Augustine and Calvin in this regard. (The same reference p. 9)

13 R. E. Olsen, *The Westminster Handbook to Evangelical Theology* (Louisville, London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 127. By this, Open Theism attempts to depart from classical Aristotelian metaphysics, moving toward relational metaphysics.

14 J. Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 24. Open theists maintain that their theological paradigm has greater fidelity to the Bible and to the true divine nature and it answers more profoundly the questions of faith-application in the lives of the believers. See: J. Sanders, 1998, 19.

15 B. Hebblethwaite, “Some Reflections on Predestination, Providence and Divine Foreknowledge” in *Religious Studies* 15, no.4 (1979), 436.

Cappadocians, who have maintained God’s dynamic and responsive characteristics in relation to human beings. God’s responsive nature implies God’s affectedness by the human position; however this is only made possible through God’s freedom.¹⁶ Richard Rice writes:

[Open theists perceive] “God’s relation to the world in dynamic rather than static terms. This conclusion has important consequences. For one thing, it means that God interacts with his creatures. Not only does he influence them, but they also exert an influence on him. As a result, the course of history is not the product of divine action alone. God’s will is not the ultimate explanation for everything that happens; human decisions and actions make an important contribution too. Thus history is the combined result of what God and his creatures decide to do.”¹⁷

Referring to a statement from the Church Fathers: “God became man, that man might become God,”¹⁸ Pinnock explains that God, through the Son and the Spirit, came down to the depth of the human reality, making the human ascent to God possible.¹⁹ In his *Flame of Love* Pinnock refers many times to Irenaeus (a 2nd century Church Father) who claimed that the divine call and the human response shape together a divine-human unity which is the final purpose of the whole creation. The final human-divine union, however, is to be fully attained only through death. “Death is the moment of our return to God,”²⁰ says Pinnock. Thus, death is the culmination of the union, “the moment of fulfillment” and the end of the journey toward God.

16 J. Sanders, 1998, 146-147.

17 R. Rice, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective”, in C. Pinnock, R. Rice, J. Sanders, W. Hasker & D. Basinger, 1994 15-16.

18 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.19.1; Athanasius *On the Incarnation* 2.54.

19 C. Pinnock, 1996, 151.

20 *Ibid.*, 182.

II. DIVINE SELF-RESTRAINT VS. PREDESTINATION

Classical Theism argued that because of the Fall human nature suffers corruption and thus it is the slave of sin. Therefore, any human-divine co-operation or synergism is not possible, since it would compromise the element of grace in relation to salvation, making it both human and divine achievement.²¹ Augustine repudiated any possible change in God's will and maintained divine immunity to all relationships with creation. For Augustine every event is decreed by God, even the death of a child, claiming that God must have good reasons for that. Augustine's theology has shaped most Western Classical Theology throughout centuries, particularly the Middle Ages.²² Aquinas claimed that God is pure actuality, with no potential, since God is eternally actualized. Hence, there is no 'becoming' in God.²³ At the time of Reformation, though Martin Luther's theology of the cross has affirmed the relational nature and will of God, however, on the other hand, Luther also described the hidden and the 'inscrutable' will of God, by which God has predestined the salvation of some while damning the rest.²⁴ Luther claimed that God "does not will the death of a sinner, according to his word; but he wills it according to that inscrutable will of his."²⁵ Similarly Calvin has followed Augustine in claiming divine

predestination of some to eternal damnation.²⁶ Most Reformed churches, following Luther and Calvin, considered their position as the only authoritative orthodox teaching on the question of predestination and free will. However, not all evangelical churches adhered to this doctrine. Those churches, with Arminian-Methodist background rejected it, and they had leading roles in forming Evangelicalism as we know it today. Later on, in the twentieth century, open theists have reaffirmed their rejection of the traditional reformed doctrine of predestination, moving even beyond classical Arminianism.²⁷ Open theists maintained that through creating free human beings God has limited Godself and God's foreknowledge.

Richard Rice explains saying:

"As an aspect of his experience, God's knowledge of the world is also dynamic rather than static. Instead of perceiving the entire course of human existence in one timeless moment, God comes to know events as they take place. He learns something from what transpires. We call this position the "open view of God" because it regards God as receptive to new experiences and as flexible in the way he works toward his objectives in the world."²⁸

21 R. E. Olson, 2004, 187.

22 J. Sanders, 1998, 147-149.

23 *Ibid.*, 152.

24 M. Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 33, Career of the Reformer*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 138-140. See also: M. Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1976), 73.

25 M. Luther, 1972, 140. See Luther's discussion of Rom. 8:28 in M. Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel, 1976), 127-132. J. Sanders, 1998, 153-154.

26 J. Sanders, 1998, 155-156.

27 Though defending human free will, James Arminius (1560-1609), the Dutch theologian who protested against the Calvinistic doctrines, nevertheless had maintained high view of divine providence, which is not comparable to the position of Open Theism. According to Arminius God performs the good while permits evil. On the other hand Open Theists deny that God "specifically permits every evil act"; rather they maintain that there are accidental events within creation. See: J. M. Hicks, "Classical Arminianism and Open Theism: A Substantial Difference in their Theologies of Providence", in *Trinity Journal* 33, No. 1 (Spring 2012), 8, 14. Concerning the relationship of Open Theism to Arminianism see: S. M. Studebaker, "The Mode of Divine Knowledge in Reformation Arminianism and Open Theism", in *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 47, No. 3, (Summer 2004), 469-480.

28 R. Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective" in C. Pinnock, R. Rice, J. Sanders, W. Hasker & D. Basinger, 1994, 16.

Thus, God is involved in historical activities, where there are no guarantees for success.²⁹ Further, divine self-restraint is out of love. God voluntarily has decided to create free human beings who can make free choices as they respond to the creative loving act of God. God desires that we freely respond to God's love and choose to enter into a dynamic relationship with God. Thus, human beings have the freedom either to accept or to reject the love of God, namely to act according to divine will or against it. Only through such freedom the human being will be responsible for his/her decisions. This is the risk God takes through creation, as many people might reject God's love and live in opposition to it.³⁰ In his *The God Who Risks* Sanders explains that God not only shares existence with the human being but also power. Human beings are God's "co-creators such as we are to collaborate with God in the achievement of the divine project."³¹ He continues to explain that God has not intended an unchanging creation. Thus, challenging God and even God's wisdom is not impossible for the human subject. God, however, continues to care for the human being and even modifies the situation in order to provide for him/her.³²

III. HUMAN FREEDOM: AN ELEMENT OF DIVINE IMAGE

Contrary to the traditional position of Classical Theism which claimed that God resolves whether to give grace or to withhold it from the sinner and thus whether the sinner will be saved

29 C. Pinnock, R. Rice, J. Sanders, W. Hasker & D. Basinger, 1994, 88-89.

30 C. Pinnock, "Constrained by Love: Divine Self-Restraint According to Open Theism", in *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 34, No. 2 (Summer 2007), 149-150.

31 J. Sanders, 1998, 44.

32 Ibid., 47-49.

or damned, Open Theism enhances the human responsibility, freedom and the capability to accept the divine work of salvation. Open theists argue that genuine love is free; it can never be compelled or predestined. Human beings are given the freedom and the responsibility to care for God's creation and for the neighbor. Pinnock explains that any relationship which lacks the dignity of freedom to reject divine grace and to choose not to love the Other would lack the basic elements of love. In our loving response to God, God does not determine our actions. God does neither decide for us nor dictate on us the way we should follow. If human beings are granted free will, then free decisions and acts could not be foreknown. God wants free partners who freely accept God's love and respond to it. The human response to God matters only when the response is free rather than an already determined one. In case the human subject had no freedom of will to react in relation to God's salvific work, such a response would never matter. That would have meant that God previously had determined who of us would respond positively to the call of God and who would reject and deserve a final damnation.³³

Sanders refers to Gregory of Nyssa (a 4th century Church Father), who had maintained that the human being can freely determine him/herself, without necessarily being the slave of any worldly bondage.³⁴ Pinnock also drew on the position of Eastern theology, as it views freedom as an essential element of the image of God, according to which human beings are created. Thus, divine grace does not contradict human freedom. Grace is already given to all human beings; however the human subject has to participate freely in accepting divine grace in

33 C. Pinnock, 1996, 158-161.

34 J. Sanders, 1998, 146.

one's life in order to experience its efficacy and enter into fellowship with God.³⁵

IV. THE OPEN FUTURE

In contrast to the Westminster Confession which declares that “[i]n [God’s] his sight all things are open and manifest; his knowledge is infinite, infallible, and independent upon the creature; so as nothing to him is contingent or uncertain”,³⁶ Sanders maintains that the future is open for both God and the creatures.³⁷ According to Pinnock “[h]uman beings are unique among creatures in their openness to new possibilities. They are free to move beyond present situations ...”³⁸ God knows all that can be known, however, God cannot know the contingent future; since the future is open for different possibilities. In this perspective, the future is not pre-determined. Thus, the main argument of Open Theism concerning the future is about its nature. Though God knows all the future possibilities for the universe, yet God does not know the one choice, at every incident, toward which the world will proceed, since future contains genuine possibilities, rather than settled facts.³⁹

Further, and contrary to the Arminians’ claim that God “previews” all of history, meaning that God simply “sees” all of history, past, present and future, timelessly, without necessarily determining or causing it, contrary to this, open theists maintain the improbability

of divine foreknowledge. Open theists claim that God’s foreknowledge is incompatible with human free will. In several works Pinnock argues that God limits God’s knowledge and chooses to leave the future open so that there is more space left for human free will.⁴⁰ Further, they argue that, if we presume God’s foreknowledge of all the history, namely of all the choices to be made, this would not assume any providential care of God for the universe, since God would be unable to intervene in history or act in a way different than what God already knows in advance. This contradicts with the notion of God accompanying the people, guiding them and preventing from them all harms, since God would be unable to change already foreknown events, rather whatever is foreknown would surely happen. As a result a God who foreknows everything can do nothing to change of whatever is going to occur. Hence, open theists maintain that only through conceiving the future as open prayers make sense, since then God would be free to act in ways different than their regular course and will be able to guide and advice those who ask for God’s guidance and advice. God kindles within the human being and persuades him/her to respond to God and thus, both God and the human subject decide about the future. Therefore the works, of both God and human beings, matter. They together shape the future. God reacts to the human works accordingly.

V. THE UNIVERSALITY AND FINALITY OF DIVINE LOVE

In contrast to the classical notion of sovereign grace, and the doctrine of predestination and double predestination (Westminster Confession 3.3), Pinnock maintains that God’s

35 C. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 160.

36 “The Westminster Confession of Faith” in Philip Schaff (ed.), *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1990), 3: 607.

37 J. Sanders, 1998, 75.

38 C. Pinnock, 1996, 75.

39 G. A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2001), 17.

40 C. Pinnock, “God Limits His Knowledge” in D. Basinger & R. Basinger (eds.) *Predestination and Free Will*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986).

creative love embraces all humanity and that God “desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4). Even though the human response to divine love is distorted by sin, God’s love never fully vanishes or fades away. Thus, God is to be perceived as a parent rather than a judge, who aims at reconciliation and takes initiative in calling humanity to a restored relationship with Godself.⁴¹ Pinnock explains that the God of the Scripture is merciful to both Jews and Gentiles (Rom 11:32). “The nations will be gathered—Assyria and Egypt alongside Israel will constitute the people of God in that day (Is 19:25).”⁴² The history of religions is the ongoing history of competition, apologetics and wars. However, the love of God is for all. The good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection does not discriminate, it does not condemn (John 3:18), it brings hope to the forgotten, righteousness to the impious, comfort to the wicked, life to the dead (Rom 15:13).⁴³

Thus, Pinnock argues for the universality of God’s love. He says: “I myself think it more biblical to speak of God loving rather than electing the world, and retaining the term “election” to refer to a choosing of some on behalf of the many.”⁴⁴ Speaking of God’s universal love does not invalidate “the uniqueness and the finality of Jesus Christ”. “Jesus is the only way to God the Father, to God who is boundless love.”⁴⁵ However, God’s love is given to all, who lived before and after Christ, through grace. Thus, all who accept divine grace and love and the salvific work of the Savior, though implicitly, are given

the possibility of salvation. All who live lives of faith and love reflect the light and the love of God that is given to them freely.⁴⁶

VI. RESPONSIVE LOVE AS DIVINE REALITY

Richard Rice claims that “From a Christian perspective, love is the first and last word in the biblical portrait of God. 1 John 4:8 makes it clear that “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.” Rice continues: “the statement God is love is as close as the Bible comes to giving us a definition of the divine reality.”⁴⁷ Thus, maintaining that love “discloses God’s inner reality” and that it “is the very essence of the divine nature.”⁴⁸

As maintained earlier, the nature of the future is an essential question for Open Theism; however, what really is controversial about the position of Open Theism is its claim that God responds to human beings and thus God is affected by the human response and therefore undergoes change. And by this Open Theism departs from the metaphysical approach that Classical Theism has long defended. Love is a primary attribute of God, while other attributes such as holiness and justice are elements of divine love. Pinnock maintains that the divine attribute of love is prior to the attribute of wrath. He says: “We must say that God *is* love; we cannot say in the same way that he *is* wrath.”⁴⁹ God evokes our free response and Godself gets influenced by our responses and works and responds to us accordingly. “God enters into reciprocal, give-and-take relations

41 C. Pinnock & R. C. Brow, 2000, 8-9.

42 C. Pinnock, 1996, 189.

43 Ibid., 188-189

44 C. Pinnock, *Wideness in God’s Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 25.

45 Ibid., 101.

46 Ibid.

47 R. Rice, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective”, 18.

48 Ibid., 19.

49 C. Pinnock & R. C. Brow, 2000, 9.

with creatures.”⁵⁰ “That God changes in some respects implies that God is temporal, working with us in time ... God is everlasting through time rather than timelessly eternal.”⁵¹

Love presumes a lover who loves in freedom and a beloved who accepts love in freedom. Thus, as Sanders says: “love is given freely and is received freely ... God not only gives, he receives. God freely chooses to be affected by his creatures—there is contingency in God’s relation with creation.”⁵² God freely allows us to become God’s lovers and partners. Love, in the words of Pinnock, is “the very nature of God and therefore the environment of eternity.”⁵³ God as responsive love is a God who condescends to the human reality endowing it with genuine free will and responsibility to respond to God through free decisions and acts. God as responsive love is a God of unconditional love and reconciliation, who gives up “God’s self in order not to give up on humanity.”⁵⁴

Hence Christianity, from the perspective of Open Theism, is not about a metaphysical abstract perception concerning divine power and might, predestining some for salvation and

others for damnation.⁵⁵ God also does not desire to plan every detail of the future, rather, apart from all this; God longs for the free response of love of the human subject and for his/her participation in God’s work. In this sense Open Theism claims to be faithful to the Reformed Evangelical tradition, considering the Gospel as the foundation of Christian faith, knowing that the heart of the Gospel is the message of divine steadfast love and mercy given to all.

SOME CRITICAL REMARKS

Throughout this article it was not my purpose to defend Open Theism as being bereft of philosophical or theological inconsistencies.⁵⁶ Similar to most theological systems Open Theism has its shortcomings and deficiencies, most of which are the outcome of the attempt to adjust some older theological assertions and literal interpretation of biblical Christianity in order to conform to that which is more modern, namely the contemporary manners of thought. Hence, a major inconsistency in the theological framework of Open Theism arises from its partial agreement with Process Theology, while, on the other hand, holding fast several classical or traditional theological positions, such as the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, divine freedom to overcome human freedom, divine intervention in order to prevent evil and divine necessity

50 J. Sanders, 1998, 75.

51 Ibid., 8. Some open theists argue that there was no other path possible for God the Father and the Son, while the cross has become inevitable. They explain that before Jesus’ crucifixion Jesus prays three times: “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want” (Mt 26:39). Jesus does not want to drink from the cup of death, as if he shows some hesitancy and asks for the removal of death rather than for strength to make the journey. This indicates that the path of the cross has emerged as the result of God’s interaction with human history. See: J. Sanders, 1998, 100-102. On the other hand R. Rice and G. Boyd argue that the cross was in the divine plan from the beginning. See: G. A. Boyd, 2001, 45. See also J. Carson, “The Suffering God and Cross in Open Theism: Theodicy or Atonement?” in *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 37, No. 3, (Fall 2010), 324.

52 J. Sanders, 1998, 169.

53 C. Pinnock, 1996, 151.

54 M. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 126.

55 Open Theism shares with Process theology the notion that God works with the human being by means of persuasion. However, the ontological presuppositions of each of the two differ from the other. God in Open Theism is perceived as a personal God, who chooses freely to relate to the human being and it is not imposed on God, as Process Theology implies. Also, another difference concerns the doctrine of creation. Evangelicals claim creation out of nothing, rejecting pantheism, while process theologians deny creation out of nothing and are pantheists (the interdependence of God and the world).

56 For a reference to the criticisms of Open Theism see: D. M. Woodruff, “Examining Problems and Assumptions: An Update on Criticisms of Open Theism” in *Dialog*, 2008, 47, Issue 1, 53-63.

apart from the world.⁵⁷ Open theologians succeed to avoid biblical inerrancy, nevertheless conflicts arise from the fact that Open Theism, or Relational Theism, remains a compromise between upholding the primacy of the Bible as authoritative for theological method and the more liberal positions in Christian Theology, and hence, it oscillates between typical conservative and liberal epithets.

Open Theism further faces the question of how time is perceived within its particular philosophical framework. If God has created time, which is somehow implied in the belief in *creatio ex nihilo*, doesn't this assume that God is outside time? How can the claim that God exists apart from the world correspond to God's working and relating to human beings within time? The tension is then between God's "eternal being" and God's claimed "temporality". To say that God creates, and yet, enters the created order and works throughout its time and history, and also Sander's statement that "God is everlasting through time rather than timelessly eternal" would need more expansion.

From the more conservative front, Open Theism has been criticized by some evangelical Calvinist theologians, such as Norman Geisler, Millard Erickson, John Piper, John Frame,

Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware.⁵⁸ Those theologians claimed the frailty of the position of Open Theism, maintaining the lack of piety of their representatives and also the inadequacy of their biblical loyalty. Thus, several attempts were made, particularly in the years 2002-2003, in order to expel open theists from the different evangelical circles, particularly the Evangelical Theological Society.⁵⁹ However, as mentioned earlier, open theists and the so called Postconservative Evangelicalism (first used in 1995) do not claim to depart from the Evangelical tradition but to reconsider it in the light of God's highest revelation in Jesus Christ, taking into consideration the givens of a postmodern age. In this sense, Open theists and postconservative evangelicals claim to maintain the 'hallmarks' of evangelical faith and aim at a biblical reformation.

Coming to same later developments, several of open theists have been involved in dialogue with Process Theology.⁶⁰ Dialogue between the two theological positions has been somehow a movement toward the other.⁶¹ A

57 Pinnock writes: "God not only created the world *ex nihilo* but can, and at times does, intervene unilaterally in earthly affairs." C. Pinnock, R. Rice, J. Sanders, W. Hasker & D. Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, 156. See on this: Thomas Jay Oord, *The Nature of Love: A Theology*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2010), 102-106.

Roger E. Olson describing the difference between Open Theism and Process Theology writes: "All open theists affirm *creatio ex nihilo* while process theology denies it. All open theists affirm God's omnipotence while process theology denies it. All open theists affirm the supernatural and miracles while most, if not all, process theologians deny them. Open theists all say that God limits himself; process theology represents God as essentially limited and finite." "Open Theism: A Test Case for Evangelicals", accessed online: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2010/08/open-theism-a-test-case-for-evangelicals/>

58 Some of those works are: N. Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of God?* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1997); B. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism*, (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2000), J. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism*, (Philipsburgh: P & R, 2001).

59 D. W. Jowers, "Open Theism: Its Nature, History, and Limitations" *WRS Journal* 12/1 (February 2005), 6.

60 In the reference given in the following note: *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue Between Process and Free Will Theists*, Clark H. Pinnock, William Hasker and Richard Rice are involved in dialogue with Process Theology.

61 Some of the works that considered positively the contribution of Process thought to Evangelicalism were the writings of J. Culp, "A Dialogue with the Process Theology of John B. Cobb, Jr.," in *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 17 [1980], 33-44, and his "Is Mutual Transformation Possible? The Dialogue between Process and Evangelical Theology," in *Process Studies* 37 [2008], 104-113. Also: C. Pinnock & J. B. Cobb, Jr. (eds.), *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue Between Process and Free Will Theists*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). This last work is a good reference for the dialogue between the two contemporary American theological perspectives: Process Theology and Open Theism, which demonstrates the similarities and the differences between the two positions. (E.g. on the question of divine freedom see: 62, 73, 217-218.)

CONCLUSION AND A FUTURE PROSPECT

major contemporary advocate of open views on God is Thomas Jay Oord, who recognizes Open Theism as belonging to a wider umbrella, namely Relational Theology, which incorporates Process Theology, Liberation and Feminist Theologies.⁶² Oord continues to maintain love as a primary divine characteristic, nevertheless, he takes a step beyond Open Theism toward Process Theology by rejecting *creatio ex nihilo* and maintaining that divine love of the world is not the outcome of one creative act, rather it is an essential element of divine nature.⁶³ In place of *creatio ex nihilo* Oord suggests what he calls 'essential kenosis', denoting by it divine steadfast self-giving love, which does not coerce the human being to give any positive response to it.⁶⁴ Through 'essential kenosis' Oord succeeds, to some extent, to avoid the problem of evil that emerges in most conventional theologies, even in the position of Open Theism as it defends *creatio ex nihilo*. Further he declares theology and science as dialogue partners rather than competitors, through his panentheistic position, as a substitute to the conventional position of divine interventionism.⁶⁵ However, the contributions of Open (or Relational) Theism continue to be denounced and reprimanded by the more conservative camp,⁶⁶ and the debate between open views on God and the more conventional approaches continues.

62 T. J. Oord, Brint Montgomery & Karen Winslow (eds.), *Relational Theology: A Contemporary Introduction*, 3.

63 T. J. Oord, *The Nature of Love: A Theology*, 101-106.

64 Ibid., 122-129, 132-141.

65 See: T. J. Oord (ed.), *Creation Made Free: Open Theology Engage Science*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009). Some of the other contributors to this work are: Gregory A. Boyd, Clark H. Pinnock, Richard Rice and John Sanders.

66 Some of the contemporary critics of the 'open' perspective are Thomas P. Flint (a leading proponent of 'Molinism') and Jonathan Kvanvig. See Kvanvig's critique of Open Theism: J. L. Kvanvig, *Destiny and Deliberation: Essays in Philosophical Theology*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011), 65-83.

The purpose of this article was not to recommend one theological position over against another. Neither was merely to approve newness and progressiveness, at the expense of the traditional and the classical, as there could be much meaning and worth in the old as in the new. Why then the search and the strive for newness, and what is special in Open Theism that deserves reading and writing about? In order to answer this question, and in order to come to a conclusion, I will have to refer back to a term that appeared in the introductory part of this article designating Open Theism, namely 'Free-will theism'. Similar to the term 'Open Theism' 'Free-will Theism' indicates the core of this particular position. Having Open Theism in mind, I contend that the notion of 'free-will' is particularly significant when considered in its three different implications. First, it indicates the free will of the human being in responding to God. As it has been maintained, Open Theism claims that God created free human beings and desires their free response. Salvation occurs when the believer responds freely to the divine call, namely he/she willingly makes space for God within one's life, lives and serves in freedom and only then one is liberated of all prejudices and convictions that he/she has inherited and which imprison him/her within an impenetrable cell of fears and worries. Second, 'free-will' involves as well the Other. This is to say that no one has the right to judge the Other as faulty and untrue, while considering the self as privileged and deserving salvation. Only by respecting the freedom of the Other that dialogue between different theological backgrounds, or even between different religions, is made possible. Open Theism maintains that the salvation

implemented through Christ embraces all humanity. All are called to give their lives back to God as their free response to the creative divine love. All are called to become the sons and the daughters of God.

Third, 'free-will' also denotes the free will of God to love God's creation, to care and provide for it in many different ways, which are beyond our understanding and grasp. This is to say that it is not possible to delineate every aspect of the divine reality and to describe every attribute of God perfectly. God is beyond human thought and theology. God is beyond our understanding and any capability of utterance. God is free, or better to say God is free Mystery. Here lies the strength of Evangelicalism in general, as it has not become the victim of speculative propositions and theories, as it has been previously explained. Theology can do harm and damage to Christian faith whenever it is perceived as the tool to control God and have ownership of God while excluding Others and eliminating divine freedom. God, in freedom, comes to the depth of the human reality, experiences suffering and even death. Jesus accepts death in freedom, and in this the possibility of complete divine-human union is to be found. "Death is the moment of our return to God" as Pinnock says. Hence, death is "the moment of fulfillment" and the end of the journey toward God.

In the light of the previous remarks, Open Theism has succeeded in making many steps forward toward open and free understanding of the self, the Other and God. Through the major themes of Open Theism it has been demonstrated that it aspires toward freedom by rejecting predestination, and it maintains the universality of divine love which embraces the Other rather than excluding all that is different from one's own self. Further, the contribution of open theists, to Evangelicalism in particular,

is their engagement in critical thinking and also their eagerness to be involved in dialogue and conversation with Orthodox theology and also with the contemporary theological positions in mainline Protestantism rather than disapproval of their positions.⁶⁷ Such attempts of reconsideration and revision, however, would require continuous work of reform and reexamination which might challenge all inviolable beliefs so that all traces of fundamentalism are surmounted and a new understanding of the Word of God is made possible.⁶⁸

Hence, the article challenges both Open Theism and Evangelicalism to move forward beyond all constraint from the past toward making a free and open response to God possible. Open Theism remains a half-way solution between what has been established and approved in the history of Western—Augustinian—tradition and what a potential 'open' reformed perspective might contribute to theology. Evangelicalism's emphasis on individual piety, rather than resorting to institutionalized faith, and its insistence on human freedom are two main elements which support and promote the move beyond fundamentalist perspectives and narrow readings of the Scripture toward a spiritual interpretation of the holy texts, which bring a deeper reformed-spiritual value to the Word of God and to the Christian experience in our contemporary times. What path could Evangelicalism take for the consideration of a forward movement for its theological perspectives is however to be resolved from within Evangelicalism itself, as it bears the potential for such a move. Finally, the search

67 R. E. Olson, "Postconservative Evangelicalism: An Update After A Decade", 7. Accessed online on 08.08.2013: www.thedivineconspiracy.org/Z5209W.pdf

68 See: R. E. Olson, 2004, 128.

and the strive for newness are necessary, and such necessity is certainly related to the apostle's commandment: "be transformed by the renewal of your mind". (Rom.12:2)

Sylvie Avakian

*Sylvie Avakian received her Master of Divinity from the Near East School of Theology in Beirut, Lebanon, and her doctorate in Systematic Theology from the Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg. Her dissertation was entitled: **The Other in Karl Rahner's Transcendental Theology and George Khodr's Spiritual Theology Within the Near Eastern Context** (Frankfurt am Main, Wien: Peter Lang, 2012). Avakian is currently a lecturer in Systematic Theology at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut.*