

# The Openness of God: A Compromised Position?

reviewed by George L. Goodwin

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Richard Rice, *The Openness of God: The Relationship of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will*. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1980. \$4.95 (paper).

The process theism of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne is a subject of much theological discussion and debate today. Based on Whitehead's metaphysics of becoming, this new understanding of God claims to be more logically consistent, more adequate to human experience, and more faithful to the biblical witness than the traditional Christian theological concept of divinity. In *The Openness of God*, Richard Rice attempts to integrate this revisionary theism into a fundamentally conservative Christian perspective. This book will be criticized both for having gone too far and (as in this review) for not having gone far enough. But let it be said at the outset that Rice treats a delicate project with considerable care and expertise, presenting it not as a matter of confrontation, but of synthesis.

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The central issue of the book concerns the relationship between divine foreknowledge and human free will. If God knows infallibly from eternity what I will do in the future, am I really free to do otherwise? It would seem not; for if God knows infallibly that I will do x, then I cannot do y, else God is mistaken. And if I cannot do other than x, then do I really do x freely? Not if freedom means the power to do otherwise. So how can we reconcile genuine human freedom with divine foreknowledge of the details of the future?

Rice shows in chapter one how this problem is symptomatic of a larger issue in traditional theism: the conflict between the biblical portrait of a loving God who is intimately related to creation and the Greek metaphysical understanding of a perfect being who is changeless, timeless, and self-sufficient. Both strands have been woven together to produce a concept of God that raises serious questions and presents an easy mark for contemporary atheists. How can an immutable, and therefore impassible, God really be said to love us, if love means real relatedness and sympathetic response to the beloved? Such a God, remarks Camus, is "the eternal bystander whose back is turned on the woe of the world."

In chapter two, Rice defends an "open view" of God in an attempt to resolve these

paradoxes. In this open view, derived from Whitehead and Hartshorne, the Greek interpretation of perfection — a product of human reason, not divine revelation — gives way to a neoclassical philosophical understanding, wherein God is conceived as “dipolar”: changeless in identity and yet changing in concrete manifestations or actual experience.

This open view of God is able to reconcile divine omniscience and human freedom. If God is both changeless and changing, then the quality of God’s knowledge is changeless, while the content of the divine knowledge may change in response to novel events. Thus, human freedom is no illusion: I take responsibility for my actions precisely because I can do otherwise; I have real alternatives. Before I choose, God knows perfectly all the possibilities of my choice, and as soon as I actualize one possibility, God knows it perfectly as actual. Thus, omniscience involves change because the object of divine knowledge changes from possibility to actuality. As Rice points out (p. 45), the real issue here concerns the character of the future. Omniscience simply means that God knows everything exactly as it is. If the future is not determined in all its details, then a perfect knower would know it as partially determinable, not as fully determined.

Chapters three through nine show how this open view absolves God of any responsibility for moral evil, is compatible with the biblical notions of prophecy, providence, and predestination, and articulates well the religious conviction that life makes a real difference to God.

Overall, I commend Rice for showing intelligently how the neoclassical reconciliation of divine omniscience and human freedom should pose no threat to a careful interpretation of Scripture. However, I do have a basic problem with the book. In his attempt to harmonize the viewpoints of process theology and conservative Christianity, Rice sometimes compromises the strict implications of the new theism. He argues, for instance (pp. 28-29) that God is best conceived as dipolar (absolute in existence, re-

lated in experience), and yet he asserts that God is ontologically independent of this or any world. But surely this is to take away with the right hand what the left has given. If one aspect of the divine reality is defined by real relatedness to a world, then God requires some or other world to experience. To deny relatedness as an essential feature of deity is simply to deny dipolarity.

Other manifestations of this compromise occur in the discussions of providence and predestination. Rice correctly argues that the open view of God requires a nuanced interpretation of providence, wherein genuine human freedom means that God does not have absolute coercive control over history. Indeed, a social model of omnipotence as shared creativity is an implication of human freedom. Nevertheless, Rice maintains that “the final outcome of history is a practical certainty. God’s objectives for mankind will eventually be realized, whatever the actual course of events may be” (p. 57). But if human destiny is really a matter of divine power *and* human freedom, what sense does it make to speak of a guaranteed actual outcome? Or if the outcome is indeed guaranteed, how are we to understand human freedom? Does not this recall a position that Rice seeks to avoid: that God knows a detail of the future and yet we choose freely?

A similar objection may be raised to the discussion of predestination: “A group of people will eventually be saved. . . . But the precise composition of the group awaits the personal decisions of individual human beings” (p. 75). Again there is a dilemma: either all people are free to accept or reject the divine invitation (in which case “the group” is so vague as to be uninformative) or it is in fact determined that a group will be saved (and therefore at least some persons are not free to exclude themselves).

In sum, my criticism is that Rice has unjustifiably stopped short in his adoption of process theism. I stress this point just because I do share his belief that neoclassicism is so very compatible with the biblical understanding of divinity and with our deepest religious intuitions. I applaud and recommend his project, even if I cannot agree with all his conclusions.