

## A.S. Antombikums

Dr. A.S. Antombikums,  
Research Associate,  
Department of Systematic  
and Historical Theology,  
Faculty of Theology and  
Religion, University of Pretoria,  
South Africa.

E-mail: antombikums@gmail.  
com

ORCID: [https://orcid.org/  
0000-0002-2173-0497](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2173-0497)

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.38140/  
at.v44i1.7777](https://doi.org/10.38140/at.v44i1.7777)

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

**Acta Theologica 2024**  
44(1):32-50

**Date received:**  
26 November 2023

**Date accepted:**  
14 April 2024

**Date published:**  
28 June 2024

# The problem of evil: Does Open Theism have a better response?<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*Open theism argues that traditional responses to the problem of evil fail to provide comfort amidst suffering because of their notion of metaphysical determinism and over-dependence on Greek philosophy. Open theists argue that the best solution to the problem of evil lies in our understanding of the nature of God's power, which has been relinquished due to his love, the open nature of creation, and the creatures' inherent powers. This study argues that the open-theistic notion of divine power is reductionistic because it does not consider coercive power as part of divine power. Further, the open theistic logic-of-love defence propagates a loveless God who respects his covenant with the beloved more than the beloved. Finally, the study argues that the open theists' notions of divine omniscience and divine power are not viable; they raised many questions and objections and, therefore, created room for despair rather than comfort in adversity.*



Published by the UFS

<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at>

© Creative Commons

With Attribution (CC-BY)



<sup>1</sup> This article is based on my doctoral dissertation at Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam (Antombikums 2022).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then He is not omnipotent. Is He able, but not willing? Then He is malevolent. Is He both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is He neither able nor willing? Then why call Him God? (Epicurus).<sup>2</sup>

The trilemma of the problem of evil is an existential worry that confronts human beings, including animals. This trilemma has divided Christian philosophers and theologians into camps. Many postulations have been put forward to provide viable and relevant responses to the problem of evil. However, given evil's continual and persistent existence, new responses are postulated, as the problem takes a new dimension, due to technological advancements (nuclear weapons have caused genocidal and horrendous evils), and persistent natural disasters. This study examines the open theistic (hereafter, OT) response to the problem of evil, and explores whether the OT alternative is internally coherent and practically relevant to the demands of life in the face of evil.

## 2. WHAT DOES OPEN THEISM PRESENT?

Open theists believe that the classical view of God and his relationship with the creatures does not fully represent the Bible. To OT, this view does not resonate with Christians' devotional lives. It also fails in providing guidance, comfort, and counselling to Christians amidst suffering because Scripture is not foundational to its formulation. Instead, an abstract entity of perfection of Greek philosophy is the prototype upon which classical theism has patterned the God of the Bible.<sup>3</sup> To the open theists, the theodist who will provide a viable response to the problem of evil needs to consider several aspects, including the nature of the creation, divine knowledge, the nature of divine control, and divine love. This article carefully examines how the above informs how OT formulates its response to the problem of evil.

### 2.1 The nature of the creation

Open theism argues that the creation is an open project with open routes. Because the future is not settled, we, together with God, decide how the future should be. Sanders argues that creation is not a "one-time event" that occurred in the past, after which God continually preserves it. It was, however, the beginning of the divine project with a "dynamic structure" that provides

---

2 This quote has been traditionally attributed to Epicurus. Hume (1990) regarded it as Epicurus' old questions. However, rigorous scrutiny reveals that this trilemma likely belongs to Lactantius, a 3<sup>rd</sup>-century Berber theologian (see Lactantius 1886).

3 See Pinnock *et al.* (1994).

the basis for the creatures to “produce new beings, events, and relations” (Sanders 2010:141-142). This openness of the creation and the ability to “produce new beings, events and relations” point to why a theodicy, arguing that evil has a purpose due to a divine plan, does not make sense to OT. Sanders argues that God never intended the creation to remain completely unchanged. On the contrary, it was meant to evolve, including going contrary to the will of God. As far as human freedom is involved in the divine project, God cannot guarantee that everything will turn out as he desires (Sanders 2007a:198). However, classical theists have always upheld the notion of human freedom. The apparent distinction between how classical theists and open theists defend human freedom is that classical theism (hereafter, CT) upholds a compatibilistic view, whereas OT holds a libertarian notion.

Hasker elucidates that the nature of the world determines the nature of the model of providence God adopts in his dealings with the creation. He notes that the world’s existence is the first step toward formulating a theodicy. Secondly, “it is good that there should be a complex, multileveled natural world” (Hasker 2008:123; 2011:358). By complex, Hasker means that the world should contain different entities exhibiting different degrees of complexity. Not only this, but the world should be natural.

To say that the world is natural is to say that the entities act, and interact, in accordance with their inherent causal powers, as opposed to being manipulated by some other, presumably ‘higher’, being (Hasker 2008:123).

Due to the creation and the creatures’ inherent power, God adopted a general policy in governing the world, with freedom at the top of the list (Hasker 2014:328).

## 2.2 Divine omniscience

Traditionally, God is believed to be all-knowing; however, how much God knows has always been debated. In dealing with Genesis 22:2, where God tested Abraham, Sanders contends that there would be no need for the test, if God knew its outcome. But because he did not know beforehand, he genuinely learnt that Abraham feared him (Sanders 2007:50a).

Sanders (2007a:15) elucidates that OT holds a dynamic view of omniscience because God exhaustively knows the past and present but knows the future as partly definite (closed) and partly indefinite (open). In line with Sanders, Pinnock states that God knows all things, especially those that can be known. Ignorance on the side of God, especially of those things he needs to know in order to govern the universe, would be an unwarranted limitation on him.

However, Omniscience need not mean exhaustive foreknowledge of all future events. If that were its meaning, the future would be fixed and determined, much as is the past. Total knowledge of the future would imply fixity of events. Nothing in the future would need to be decided. It also would imply that human freedom is an illusion, that we make no difference and are not responsible (Pinnock 1994:121).

According to Hasker (1994:136), divine omniscience means that “at any time God knows all propositions such that God’s knowing them at that time is logically possible”. Logically speaking, God does not know that Clarence will have a cheese omelette for breakfast because it denudes Clarence of his freedom. However, God’s inability to know that Clarence will have a cheese omelette for breakfast does not suggest that God is less omniscient. This is because it is not yet a reality. But as soon as it becomes a fact, God will be the first to know.

Hasker (2004:101) explains that, even though free actions logically are unknown to God, God knows the probabilities of what human beings will freely do because of his vast knowledge. God could create a world where everything is perfectly known to him. However, such a world is less desirable to God because he loves human freedom.

Pinnock (1994:123-124) states that God enjoys learning. Rice (1994:15) extrapolates that God grows in knowledge because

God’s knowledge of the world is also dynamic rather than static. Instead of perceiving the entire course of the universe in one timeless moment, God comes to know events as they take place. He learns something from what transpires.

Sanders mentions that many biblical passages show that God does not know the future exhaustively, due to the nature of the creation. For instance, in Genesis 6:6, God is grieved with human beings because their thoughts are continually sinful (Sanders 2007b:34-50, 39).<sup>4</sup> Sanders (2007b:39) contends that there will be no reason for the Bible to state that God was grieved because human beings repeatedly sinned.

---

4 In his response to Sanders, Wood (2010:42-66, 64) states that the denial of divine foreknowledge has negative pastoral implications on the lives of Christians. He argues that open theism equivocates time in its allusion that God “looks ahead”. On the contrary, God does not look ahead; he simply “looks”, as understood in the Boethian view of eternity. OT’s suggestion that God has limited knowledge of the future to the point that he mistakenly believes adds a cause of worry and despair. It does not encourage one to trust in God. On the contrary, Isaiah declares that God knows the end from the beginning, including those things that have not yet happened.

Why would God grieve if God always knew exactly what humans were going to do? It makes no sense to say that a timeless being experiences grief.

Bible writers used words such as “perhaps” and “maybe” in describing God’s responses to human beings in Ezekiel 12:1-3 and Jeremiah 26:2-3. God asked Ezekiel to pack his belongings and go into exile and ended the statement with

*Perhaps* they will understand, though they are a rebellious people ...  
Such ‘if’ language – the invitation to change – is not genuine if God already knew they would not repent (Sanders 2007b:39).

Sanders rejects the classical concept of divine omniscience. After all, it adds no value to divine providence because it is contradictory for a person to hold that God can know that an event will occur and simultaneously be able to prevent the said event from happening (Sanders 2010:79). Hasker (1994:152) argues that, although God knows that evils will occur, he has not explicitly decreed or incorporated them into his plan. God’s governance of the world adopts general strategies for the good of the creation, but God does not foresee or ordain the details.<sup>5</sup>

### 2.3 The nature of divine control

Hasker argues that the theodocist does not have to insist that the reasons for the existence of evil are the actual reasons why evil exists. Hasker opines that this is unwise and unnecessary. It may not be the case that the reasons given really are why God allows or permits evil (Hasker 1994:152). How should a theodicy be formulated? Hasker clarifies that our concept of theodicy is grounded on our conception of divine providence. The person who holds onto a risk-free concept of divine providence will inevitably insist that there are good reasons why God permits evil. However, in holding the contrary as does OT, the struggles to show how a good, powerful, and loving God permits evil will be eradicated (Hasker 2011:351).

---

5 Contrary to this conclusion by Hasker, Basinger (2005:5-6), another open theist, in reviewing Hasker’s book *Providence, evil and the openness of God*, finds the idea that God knows that evil will occur, but has not done anything about it appalling. He uses the story of a woman who is aware that her husband is sexually abusing their 13-year-old daughter, but she did nothing about it until she became pregnant before the woman sought justice. The man was evicted, leaving her with the daughter and grandchild. The woman concludes that they are now living the best of their lives. Basinger views this as a folly, arguing that they may be living a fulfilled life. However, the fact cannot be denied that what the woman did is not justifiable. On moral grounds, she should have stopped the abuse, even if she knew they would live a better life in the end.

According to Hasker, there are two types of theodicies: one relies on the general policy or strategies God adopted in governing the divine project of creation. The other is theodicy of “a specific benefit”. The former justifies why God permits all kinds of evils (Hasker 1992:102). Hasker calls the former a “risk-taking” model of divine providence, while he calls the latter a “risk-free” model. The former is the model championed by open theism, while the latter is the traditional/classical model of divine providence (Hasker 1992:102).

Since God chose to create the type of world in which we live and not others, though sovereign, God has voluntarily limited his ability of total control.

For God to say yes to creating this particular world means that God had to say no (we think) to other possibilities. A single positive choice implies a self-chosen limitation with the negation of other options (Sanders 2007a:40).

God takes risks if He makes decisions that depend for their outcomes on the responses of free creatures in which the decisions themselves are not informed by knowledge of the outcomes ... God is a risk-taker if He endows His creatures with libertarian freedom; otherwise not (Hasker 2004:125).

Open theism argues that we need not conclude, when someone’s earthly life is terminated, that God “took him/her home” for the best.

...rather, that God is often disappointed as we are that someone’s earthly existence has ended at an early age or that someone is experiencing severe depression or that someone is being tortured (Basinger 1994:170).

Even if good emerged from a tragedy, as in the case of Job, we need not conclude that God allowed or caused such evil as a means to such supposed good.

Contrary to classical theism, where God controls everything, Hasker (2004:111) states that

[a]ny agent who freely and knowingly sets up a deterministic process with a certain outcome must be responsible for that outcome.

The argument is that, as understood in CT, God predetermined many actions before the occurrence of such actions. Since God determines specific actions with their possible outcome from the inception, he must be responsible for the said action. For instance, if God predetermined the raping of an innocent

woman or girl, the killing of an aged man, and the destruction of lives and properties, he must be responsible for the outcome of such actions (Hasker 2004:111).

## 2.4 Divine love

For OT, love is the interpretive centre for theology. To illustrate how the love of God is essential and the interpretive centre for construing the concept of God, Sanders explicates that the characteristics of the love of God include:

- It is limitless, precarious and vulnerable. It knows boundaries, yet it does not compel. At times, the beloved is more powerful than the lover.
- The love of God is wisdom. God has what it takes to accomplish the project, despite all odds. God's foolishness is wiser than the wisdom of human beings (1 Cor. 1:25). In the incarnation and the death of Jesus, God proves himself to be immensely resourceful in accomplishing his projects. An omnipotent being who has fixed the details of all that will happen in the future from the beginning may probably retire or die. Because God is wise, he has not chosen to do so (Sanders 2007a:178-184).
- The love of God is that of faithfulness and freedom. God created everything freely. God has enjoyed a life of communion in his triune nature and needed no creation to make him happy or share his love. But because he has freely chosen to invite human beings to be part of the divine project, he remains faithful thereto by granting his associates the freedom with which he freely created them (Sanders 2007a:185-187).
- Almightiness: God's nature should be conceived from the dimension of power and weakness (Sanders 2007a:188-193, 252).

As a result of love, God refrains from, rather than exercises power as understood in CT. The power of God is brought back to him, due to his love. In executing the divine project, God initiates the plans as a lover does to the beloved, and the beloved responds in either the affirmative or the negative. Because of love, God decided that some of his decisions would be contingent upon human responses. Since God is love, love does not force its way (1 Cor. 13:4-7). If it does, it will cease to be love (Sanders 2007b:34-35). Omnipotence does not mean that God can do everything. Instead,

[t]he Bible presents us with a God who makes Himself vulnerable by creating creatures who have the freedom to reject Him (Sanders 1992:12).

God is finite; the limitations in God are not limitations conferred on God by others than himself; they are self-inflicted limitations, in other words, “divine self-limitation” (Sanders 2007a:242). Like Sanders, Hasker (2004:101) states,

According to the open view, God is strictly omnipotent in that He is able to do anything which is logically possible and consistent with God’s morally perfect nature. It is worth stressing that God as so conceived is in no way deficient in power as compared with God as viewed in Calvinism.

This definition implies that God cannot do anything logically contradictory; he cannot perform actions incongruent with his nature, such as climbing a mountain or doing any amoral action. Hasker explains that God’s power does not determine everything, despite being all-powerful, because there are things he has entrusted to the creatures and, therefore, does not need to do them. God’s duty is not to over-rule and eradicate evil, but that which sustains despite all odds and manages the world to prevent chaos. Hasker adds that persuasive power is more essential than coercive power. However, experience has shown that persuasion alone does not get all things done. Hasker (2000:41, 171) states that even our children and other fellow human beings have become so obstinate that persuasion may not get them to do the needful in all situations.

Pinnock (1994:113) argues that

in a world reflecting a triune community, God does not monopolize the power. Were He to do so, there could be no created order, certainly not a dynamic one with free agents, and not one producing love and communion. To achieve that kind of creation, God needs to deploy his power in more subtle ways.

The OT understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, especially from social Trinitarianism, informs its version of the divine-human relationship and its implication for divine providence. The risk-taker model of God is contingent upon the give-and-take relationship expressed in the Trinity and to human beings. Although God’s power is ultimate, he does not have all the powers. His power works within limits.

God’s power means that He is *omnicompetent* and can deal wisely with any circumstance that arises; ... Let us not confuse God’s Lordship with the excessive omnipotence of tyranny that sets God’s power in opposition to the very creatures He rules over (Pinnock 2001:91).



Sanders concludes that the logic-of-love defence shows how suffering exists in the divine project unintended by God.

The structure of love coupled with general sovereignty yields the conclusion that there is gratuitous evil. Horrible events happen that God did not want to occur. This means that our lament over tragedies and disasters is entirely appropriate. They are not God's judgement on us (Sanders 2007a:276).

### 3. POSSIBLE OBJECTIONS TO THE OPEN-THEISTIC ALTERNATIVE

Deducing from the foregoing, it is clear that, in its desire to revise CT, OT first revised biblical passages that give credence to CT. In my estimation, its revision is not always accurate.<sup>6</sup> This revision has a second motif, namely to exalt libertarianism after knocking down determinism and compatibility. In what follows, the article shows these implications, by evaluating the implication of OT's libertarianism as an interpretive centre for responding to the problem of evil. I will do this by arguing that, although OT rejects determinism to favour libertarianism, its arguments raise many objections. It is not always a consistent argument in OT that divine foreknowledge undermines libertarianism and has no providential relevance. Ultimately, divine self-limitation and the logic-of-love defence, culminating in an authentic response to the problem of evil, also raise many questions and objections.

#### 3.1 OT's notion of creation is rigid, with unbroken structures that tilt towards determinism

Although OT strives hard to avoid theological determinism, its notion of creation contradicts its efforts. As noted earlier, OT insists that God would not break his covenant with the creation by denuding the creatures of their inherent powers. This willingness to remain faithful to the structure of the divine project is why God may not intervene – for instance, removing the suffering caused by human freedom, such as terrorism in Africa. In that case, the structure of God's covenant with the creation that he is unwilling to break means that his responses to human beings' free choices are predetermined. It contradicts OT's (for instance, Hasker and Sanders) criticism of CT's view that evil is not pointless and that God may have a reason for permitting evil.

---

6 For an elaborate assessment of OT's hermeneutics, see Antombikums (2022). In that study, I argued that OT is not only sometimes reductionistic in its hermeneutics but indulges in hermeneutical manoeuvre, selectivity, and isolationism.

It follows that the existence of evil also has a purpose in OT: to preserve God's covenant with the creation. OT may argue that this conclusion is not logically justified, given that it is the possibility of evil's existence that has a theodicean motif, namely, a precondition for human freedom to freely execute good actions and moral evil instead of actualising it. However, the fact that it has a precondition purpose for human freedom nevertheless means that it is not pointless. Another consequence of OT's notion of creation as lacking a definitive blueprint goal raises questions and objections about the success of such a project.<sup>7</sup> However, in OT, the divine project aims to make people like Christ. On the contrary, life in Christ is not arbitrary; every Christian has stages and requirements for his/her new nature in Christ. They ought to bear fruits in keeping with their repentance. Sanctification is both definitive and progressive, and every believer in Christ should mortify the flesh and vivify the Spirit, take up his/her cross, and love his/her enemies. In other words, there is a definitive blueprint.

Further, if there are no maximum divine plans for the project, human freedom could jeopardise the entire creation. Suppose we accept that God has adopted a general strategy in governing creation due to libertarianism, it seems that divine providence will still not be risky to God, given his ingenuity and omniscience, as argued by open theism. The continual physical survival of humanity depends on mother earth, just as humanity has the role of a steward in the constant preservation of the earth (Chingota 2003:10).

Creation in both the Old and the New Testaments has a beginning and a *telos*. Its ultimate goal is the salvation of humankind in the death and resurrection of our Lord. This aligns with OT's argument that God wants human beings specifically to be like Christ. In other words, the overall aim of creation is the salvation of humanity. If this is the case, then OT's overemphasis on human freedom raises the question as to how human beings will willingly want to be like Christ in all ramifications, since we have shown above that, in OT, the creation has no definitive route, yet God wants human beings to be like Christ. The Trinity has been active in creation and human history, particularly for the safe landing of this ultimate goal (Copan & Craig 2004:20). Therefore, despite some level of flexibility, the creation has a definitive goal ultimately at the eschaton.

---

7 For an extensive discussion on this subject, see Antombikums (forthcoming manuscript, *'Divine control, human agency and the problem of evil'*, which is based on the aforementioned doctoral thesis).

### 3.2 The open theistic notion of divine knowledge

Although some open theists, namely Sanders and Hasker, deny that foreknowledge has providential relevance, they claim that God can predict the future based on random probabilities, and it will turn out accurately (Hasker 1994:51). Sanders argues that Christ's knowledge of Peter's denial of the Lord did not cause Peter to deny him. He claims that Christ asked the disciples to pray for Peter to prepare him spiritually for the temptation to deny the Lord, but the disciples failed. He argues that Christ's foreknowledge of Peter's action did not lead to the actual act. It was the disciples' failure to pray for Peter (Hall & Sanders 2003:31). Two issues emerge from Hasker's and Sanders' arguments. First, divine foreknowledge is providentially relevant. If the disciples' prayers were effective and Peter overcame the temptation to deny the Lord, Christ's foreknowledge would have been more providentially relevant than a lack of knowledge of the said action. Secondly, OT argues that whatever God foreknows, it will necessarily come to pass, and for human beings to be free, their contingent actions should lack antecedence. However, in Peter's denial of the Lord, Christ's knowledge of the action did not make Peter deny the Lord. According to Sanders, it was the other disciples' failure to pray effectively for Peter. Was this an immutable divine foreknowledge? As far as Sanders is concerned, it was not. Peter voluntarily chose to deny the Lord. To make this a reality, Sanders argues,

All that need be determined by God in this case would be to have someone question Peter three times and have a rooster crow (Hall & Sanders 2003:31).

That is exactly what happened.

From the foregoing, it is clear that OT contradicts its own criteria for rejecting exhaustive divine foreknowledge on the ground that it violates human freedom. Further, Hasker's position, which argues that God can predict the future based on random probability due to God's ingenuity and that everything will turn out, accurately seems to raise a question about OT's notion of limited divine knowledge. Why not think that God, in all cases, predicts the future on random probabilities and that everything will turn out accurately? Selective ignorance is likely to be less relevant. It contradicts the biblical assertion that God knows everything in the same way that nothing is impossible with God. One of the passages OT cited for divine ignorance is the episode of the binding of Isaac. However, if it is true that it was at the time of the testing that God knew that Abraham feared him, as OT argues, then God's knowledge of Abraham's spirituality was in doubt. God doubted Abraham's relationship with him. However, the track record of God's relationship with Abraham does not show that God doubted Abraham even once. Genesis 12

and 15 substantiate this. Other scriptural passages (1 Chron. 28: 9; Ps. 139) attest that God knows the present and future of human beings' thoughts and intentions and that God knows that the future based on random probability does no good to OT's argument. It affirms that the God of OT is either deficient in knowledge or knows everything depending on the context through accurate random probability, divine decree, or past experiences.

In his response to a couple of his critics, including Hasker and Basinger, Hunt (1993:394) argues that divine foreknowledge has implications for divine providence. From the human point of view, when we know exactly what will happen in the stock market tomorrow, we will know how to prepare. Likewise with God. If God foreknows that a certain unwanted state of affairs will happen to us, he may act to avert such a state of affairs, except if it is morally beneficial to us. Contingencies do not occur because God believes they will. In other words, God's knowledge does not place any necessity on contingent actions (Hunt 2009:375-376).

In addition, since it is a willing limitation in which God chooses what to know and what not to know, God can also decide to know everything. However, God's selective ignorance in OT is not a voluntary limitation. Although open theists argue that God, out of love, voluntarily brought the creation into existence *ex nihilo*, he has endowed the creation with inherent freedom and power that he can no longer control. This inherent power and the structure of the creation have metaphysically limited God to the extent that he believes falsely. Logically speaking, it is not possible to hold the notion of libertarianism upheld in OT and simultaneously advocate for the kind of divine foreknowledge taught in some biblical passages. Since the Bible emphasises divine sovereignty and human freedom, we should recognise such within a contextual framework.

Another issue is the question of the "accuracy and surety" of Scripture. How can a God, who knows through probabilities, be trusted? The testimonies of the Scriptures concerning the future, "the gospel of salvation: its design and truthfulness; and ... the Christian life: its faith and hope in God" (Ware 2002:201-209), cannot be guaranteed because divine providence is not only selective but also involves risk-taking. In that case, it is possible that everything will not turn out as envisaged and the divine project might fail. However, Scripture is emphatic about the success of the divine project based on meticulous divine providence and divine power, although OT denies that God always uses coercive divine power because it undermines libertarianism.<sup>8</sup>

---

8 For a detailed explication of OT's notion of divine power, see Antombikums (forthcoming chapter: 'Divine omnipotence and love in open theism').

### 3.3 Meticulous and general providence

As noted earlier, OT insists that God's knowledge of the future is not exhaustive, due to the nature of creation and human freedom; therefore, he takes risks because everything may not turn out as he expects. After all, divine foreknowledge has no providential relevance. Even though they argue that God's lack of exhaustive knowledge of future contingencies and human freedom makes divine providence risky, OT claim that he can guide because of God's vast knowledge. However, this raises a few questions not only about the providential relevance of foreknowledge, but also about the nature of such guidance God will provide on the availability of what seems a limited knowledge of future contingencies. Ordinarily, trusting an all-knowing God is more appealing than trusting a God who does not know future contingencies. If future contingencies take God by surprise, because he does not know them, how then can he be trusted to provide accurate guidance in contingent situations?

The argument that the openness of the future, the exercise of human freedom, God's inability to know future contingencies, and the adoption of general strategies in governing creation amount to a risky version of providence is doubtful. Hasker argues that God's subsequent knowledge of future actions may affect how things will turn out in the course of creation, but the particular way in which they will turn out cannot be known in detail by God before he decides what kind of world he was to create (Hasker 2011:299-302). However, the distinction between the nature of the world God intended to create and how things will finally turn out in the future is fallacious because, since the creation, God has been acting, including bringing about some states of affairs unilaterally.

In his response to Sanders' "divine suffering", Lodahl argues that selective sovereignty, where God could unilaterally micro-manage history, but he chooses to do the contrary, raises further questions for open theologians. For instance, will a time come when God will act unilaterally without the creatures? Since God's choice to macro-manage the creation is deeply rooted in its general structure, Lodahl (2009:173) questions if there will be a time when God will "de-ordain" the present structure to allow him to act unilaterally. In other words, will God unmake or violate his very rules of the game?

### 3.4 The logic-of-love defence propagates a loveless God

As noted earlier, open theists argue that, because God loves human beings, he has chosen to allow them space to freely bring certain states of affairs into existence, even contrary to God's will. However, a few aspects are not

coherent in this view. For instance, Hasker (2000:219) argues that God is relationally dependent on human beings but can unilaterally bring about some state of affairs is self-contradictory, given the OT notion of libertarianism.

Further, because open theists situate their doctrine of the creation and the risk-taker model of God in the love of God exhibited in social Trinitarianism, as hinted earlier, one expects that the limitations open theism confers on God should reflect this distinction. For instance, limiting language can be used for the Son, due to the incarnation. But how it is appropriately communicated to the Godhead without clarifying this distinction begs an answer.

The Bible does not teach divine self-limitation advocated by open theists because it contradicts biblical teaching on divine sovereignty and the power of God. God's control and the exercise of his powers are often done in subtlety behind the scenes in weakness and ordinary and common ways and even defeats. However, God does not need to limit some of his great-making properties for divine relationality. Because the Trinity is love, God communicated this love willingly to human beings (Moltmann 1981:58).<sup>9</sup> God has been relational in the Trinity before creation. As noted earlier, OT built its risk-taker model of the divine providence around the doctrine of the Trinity. However, it is clear that, although human beings now share in divine love, the divine-human relationship is not identical to the nature of divine relationality inherent in the persons of the Trinity, due to the Creator-creature distinction. The functional aspect of the doctrine of the Trinity helps minimise the tension of divine-human relationships.

The OT understanding of divine power and love raises many questions and objections. It categorises the power of God into coercion and persuasion. However, there is more to the power of God than coercion and persuasion. After all, divine love is the power of God. Love works through both persuasion and coercion when necessary. For the sake of the love of God for Israel, he punished their enemies. The justice of God is a double-edged sword, due to the love of God. It means salvation to Israel and judgement to their enemies. Open theists make coercive power suspicious and, therefore, tyrannical but make persuasive power appealing.

Oord opines that the God of OT is not worth trusting because he is deficient in love for allowing human beings to suffer, despite having the requisite power to save them from suffering. He concludes that divine self-limitation resulting from love is not willing self-limitation but a metaphysical one. In other words, God must love and, therefore, cannot override human freedom, which implies moral evil. Oord's position is more viable than Hasker's because that is the

---

<sup>9</sup> I am aware that Moltmann believes in God's divine self-limitation due to creation. However, the notion that the Trinity was relational before creation and the incarnation negates the necessity of divine self-limitation after creation.

logical implication of the notion of divine self-limitation. It makes the power of God to be intermittent power (Oord 2005:60).

Open theists strive hard to show that the creation of human beings and the nature of the entire creation significantly limit God's control. Yet, he is not limited in knowledge and exercising divine power. As a result, God sometimes unilaterally brings about some particular state of affairs without secondary causes. This means that God can unilaterally end terrorism in Africa and Asia, but why has he chosen not to do so if he can? He can rescue all abductees of terrorists, especially in Africa, but has willingly limited himself. However, if there is any specific evil he wants to eradicate, he will unilaterally bring it about so that such evil ceases to exist. Therefore, OT's solution to the problem of evil through divine self-limitation is not better than CT's position, which it finds to be deficient.

The purpose of divine self-limitation is defeated, because either divine self-limitation is necessary or it is for the greater good. In that case, OT will be the same as CT. The function of divine self-limitation in OT is to help resolve the tension between divine sovereignty and human freedom in the context of evil. In other words, it is an attempt to free God from moral culpability, upholding his power and goodness and human freedom. However, this function fails (Highfield 2002:208). Although OT does not concede that evil has a purpose in the divine plan, by arguing that God refrains from eradicating evil in line with the structures he puts in place, it inevitably teaches that God has allowed evil for a supposed good, namely the divine-human relationship.

In my opinion, divine self-limitation, as understood in OT, is not the only way to deal with the problem of divine-human relationships. Of course, divine self-limitation is not absent in Christian thought. Divine accommodation and Christological kenosis serve the same purpose without denuding God of his great-making properties.

### 3.5 A being who willingly permits the existence of evil, despite having what it takes to eradicate the said evil, may be culpable for the existence of such an evil

The assertion that God does not will evil but permits it, as a result of love and the nature of the divine project, may not be the best solution to the problem of evil. In my opinion, there is a better way to do this than the open view. In as much as God is culpable for the existence of evil in a predetermined world, as argued by OT, he also faces the same charges in an undetermined world. Since human beings are free, we may say that they are culpable for their actions. This is true; however, we must distinguish between how Uwako is free from Uwambe and how human beings are free from God. Uwako may be

free from her husband Uwambe, to the extent that she has the right to divorce. However, although human beings may reject God, he is still accountable for their existence and sustenance. Therefore, to argue that choosing a general strategy for handling the creation frees him from being responsible for the existence of evil, despite having what it takes to eradicate it, does not solve the problem.

Further, to argue that God willingly permits evil will likely not exonerate God from being the author of evil, similar to charges levelled against CT by OT. To argue that God can deploy both persuasive and coercive powers but deploys only the former does not add up. To say that God cannot have it both ways, the exercise of divine power and relationality, while holding that he can use both but chooses not to, is contrary to the foundation of the logic-of-love defence. This means that:

God cannot accomplish his ultimate purpose without violating a significant component of that purpose. Since God can accomplish his goals only by revoking the autonomy of the will, it follows that not only is open theism's distinction between two classes of future events hopelessly conflicted, but at an even more foundational level the God of Open Theism is as well (Helseth 2001:505).

Despite rejecting the notion that evil is necessary for divine providence for the sake of certain benefits, it seems that OT cannot but accept a similar notion. Because of God's general providence, he must not intervene for the sake of the greater good that comes from his non-intervention method of handling the divine project. In other words, this means that, due to the general method of controlling the project, God will undermine this greater good: his love and granting human beings freedom, unless he permits evil (Welty 2019:143-144).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This article examined OT's response to the problem of evil. In doing so, it explored OT's notion of creation, which is the appropriate starting point for understanding other concepts in OT in discussing the problem of evil. As a result, it discussed OT's divine omnipotence and love in relation to human beings and their ability to do evil. It construed that OT's understanding of the aforementioned differs significantly from the classical notion. Open theists argue that God is not all-powerful as understood in CT because he is love; he has endowed the creation with inherent powers he controls. According to OT, this is the best explanation for the problem of evil.

However, the above analysis showed that Sanders' logic-of-love defence and Hasker's open-theistic theodicy are less beneficial to the purpose it



is formulated to address. Divine self-limitation, in particular, raises a few questions and objections. For instance, how comforting is it to know that God has willingly limited his ability to both know and intervene in the use of human freedom in the context of suffering? Instead of comfort, the open view may likely lead to dismay. The ingeniousness of the God of open theism in limiting his power while still being in control is impressive.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

ANTOMBIKUMS, A.S.

2022. *Open theism and the problem of evil*. PhD. thesis – Research and graduation internal, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. [Online.] Retrieved from: <https://research.vu.nl/en/publications/open-theism-and-the-problem-of-evil> [5 May 2023].

Forthcoming. *Divine control, human agency and the problem of evil*.

Forthcoming. *Divine omnipotence and love in open theism*.

BASINGER, D.

1994. Practical implications. In: C. Pinnock *et al.* (eds.), *The openness of God: A biblical challenge to the traditional understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), pp. 155-176.

2005. Providence, evil and the openness of God. *Ars Disputandi* 5(1):1-6. DOI: 10.1080/15665399.2005.10819852

CHINGOTA, F.

2003. Bible study notes on creation. In: F. Moyo & M. Ott (eds.), *Christianity and the environment* (Malawi: Christian Literature Association in Malawi), pp. 10-18.

COPAN, P. & CRAIG W.L.

2004. *Creation out of nothing: A biblical, philosophical and scientific exploration*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

HALL, C. & SANDERS, J.

2003. *Does God have a future? A debate on divine providence*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

HASKER, W.

1992. Providence and evil: Three theories. *Religious Studies* 28:91-105. DOI: 10.1017/S0034412500021405

1994. A philosophical perspective. In: C. Pinnock *et al.* (eds.), *The openness of God: A biblical challenge to the traditional understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press), pp. 126-154.

2000. Adequate God. In: J.B. Cobb Jr. & C.H. Pinnock (eds.), *Searching for an adequate God: A dialogue between process and free will theists* (Grand Rapids, IL: Wm B. Eerdmans), pp. 215-245.

2004. *Providence, evil, and the openness of God*. London: Routledge.

2008. *The triumph of God over evil: Theodicy for a world of suffering*. Westmont, IL: IVP Academic.

2011. An open theist theodicy of natural evil. In: K. Perszyk (ed.), *Molinism: The contemporary debate* (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 351-377. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199590629.003.0018>

2014. Why is there so much evil? *Review and Expositor* 3:238-243. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034637314534626>

HELSETH, P.K.

2001. On divine ambivalence: Open theism and the problem of particular evil. *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 44(3):493-511.

HIGHFIELD, R.

2002. The function of divine self-limitation in open theism: Great wall or picket fence? *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 45(2):279-299.

HUME, D.

1990. *Dialogues concerning natural religion, Part X*. Edited by M. Bell. New York: Penguin.

HUNT, D.

1993. Divine providence and simple foreknowledge. *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 10(3):394-414. <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil19931036>

2009. The providential advantage of divine foreknowledge. In: D. Timpe (ed), *Arguing about religion* (New York: Routledge), pp. 374-385.

LACTANTIUS

1886. *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol 7*. Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries: Lactantius, Venantius, Asterius, Victorinus, Dionysius, Apostolic Teaching and Constitutions, Homily, and Liturgies Philip Schaff (ed.) Christian Classics Ethereal Library.

LODHALH, M.

2009. Response. In: D.S. Long & G. Kalantzis (eds), *The sovereignty of God debate* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books), pp. 172-178.

MOLTMANN, J.

1981. *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*. Translated by Margaret Kohl. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco.

OORD, T.J.

2005. *The uncontrolling love of God: An open and relational account of providence*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

## PINNOCK, C.

1994. Systematic theology. In: 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), pp. 101-125.

2001. *Most moved mover: A theology of God's openness*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

## RICE, R.

1994. Biblical support for a new perspective. In: 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), pp. 111-158.

## SANDERS, J.

1992. *No other name: An investigation into the destiny of the unevangelised*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans.

2007a. *The God who risks: A theology of divine providence*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press.

2007b. An introduction to open theism. *Reformed Review: A Theological Journal of Western Theological Seminary* 60(2):34-50.

2010. Open creation and the redemption of the environment. *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 46(4):141-149.

## WARE, B.

2002. Defining Evangelicalism's boundaries theologically: Is open theism evangelical? *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 45(2):93-212.

## WELTY, G.

2019. Open theism, risk-taking, and the problem of evil. In: B.H. Arbour (ed.), *Philosophical essays against open theism* (New York: Routledge), pp. 140-158. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315755700-10>

## WOOD, W.L.

2010. Divine omniscience: Boethius or open theism? *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 45:42-66.

## Keywords

Evil

Divine omnipotence

Love

Divine control

## Trefwoorde

Bose

Goddelike teenwoordigheid

Liefde

Goddelike beheer