

THE PROMISE OF OPEN AND RELATIONAL THEOLOGIES:
Some Political Implications
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In the proposal for this new group Tom Oord listed many things we all agree on. Most of the agreements are related to Who God is and how God interacts with the world. For example “both creatures and God are relational beings, which means that both God and creatures are affected by others in give-and -take relationships.” This idea that God is affected by the world at all is considered radical by those who want God to remain totally untouched by what happens to any of us or to any other creature on the planet. We have abandoned God’s aseity. At the same time, we want to affirm that God is directly involved in what happens in the world. This God to whom we witness is no Deist watch maker who creates and then steps back to see what happens without being involved in a way that influences what happens. We also agree that the way God is involved in the world is not one of controlling everything that happens to each one of us. There are many things that occur in our world that God does not want to have happen. This is because human persons have the freedom to make their own decisions which can go against what God desires. Clearly this shared position goes against that part of the Christian tradition that claims that God causes everything that happens in the world to happen just as it does. Therefore, you can know the will of God by paying attention to what happens because that must be it. I frequently encounter this position in college students. They want to believe that someone, preferably a powerful someone, is driving the bus and will guide it safely to its predetermined destination so that they need not be concerned. I find this confidence frightening because God does not relate to the world in this way and we do indeed have a significant role to play in what does or does not happen. While I think we represent a minority position at this time, if we have the kind of power that is represented by the position we share, we do need to make people aware that this is reality and begin to take responsibility for decisions that significantly change our world.

Another position we agree on is that “God knows everything that can be known, but the actual future cannot be known by anyone including God.” The idea that God actually experiences time in somewhat the same way we do and therefore cannot know the future definitely puts Open and Relational theologians at odds with a tradition that claims that God is beyond time and knows everything that has ever happened (with which we agree) and everything that will ever happen (with which we do not agree.) This limitation to God’s omniscience is a key agreement since it is shared by few others. The question then is what difference do these two key agreements make in how we think about the world we live in and in how God relates to us and to our world. Certainly process thinkers would recognize these statements as compatible to their own perspective. I trust that these positions fairly represent an open position as well.

However after reading these statements again, I began to wonder if we might not be working on yet two prior sets of assumptions that precede these seemingly foundational statements. Namely that process theologians claim that these relationships that we are speaking of are internal and not external. Yet, the statements could be taken

either to mean external relationships or internal relationships. Speaking as a process theologian, the difference is critical. If the relationships are external, then God is related to the world from the outside. I am not certain how God influences the world this way. If it is by means of direct intervention, then the freedom and the responsibility of the creatures seems to be compromised. And it raises the question of when it would be appropriate for God to intervene. If God is not influencing what happens in the world then, how can God be affected by what happens here? The agreed upon statements indicate that God behaves in a certain way but neglects “how “ it is that God behaves this way. Perhaps this is something we may want to explore in more detail.

From a process perspective, God is related to the world and to each actual occasion in the world internally. As each actual occasion becomes concrete, it includes data from its own past and an initial aim from God that is the best possibility for that occasion in that instant. The occasion may respond by ignoring the initial aim and repeating the past or by accepting a range of possibilities related to the initial aim that God has provided and creating itself in the direction that God has envisioned. God provides the vision but whether that vision will be realized is up to each occasion or more complicated collections of occasions like people, who clearly also have the freedom to accept the suggestion God has provided or ignore it or adopt some in between position that partially realizes the vision of the initial aim. It is quite clear in this view that we become that limiting factor in what will be realized in the world.

I am currently fascinated by how different faith communities respond to issues in the culture. In some cases members of the same community come to diametrically opposing positions. Granted we start with the same Scriptures and with the same commitment to Jesus as the Christ of God, but we arrive at very different places because of how we interpret the Scriptures. Now I am wondering, since we open and relational types have the same starting place, and have added to that some basic ideas of who God is and how God relates to the world, will our different ways of interpreting Scriptures and our continued commitment to different faith communities trump our agreed ideas and lead us to very different positions on current issues? The big question for me is: after we have many conversations, can we agree to work together with a common vision of what we need to be about in order to make the world a better place for all of God’s creatures and for the planet as well? I am interested in theology that develops an agenda that can function in the public square.

Since we agree that God is related to the world in a way that recognizes human freedom and that the future is open, known to no one including God, it seems likely that we might also agree that as human beings we bear responsibility for much of what happens in our world and therefore for what the future will be. Whether we agree on what the future looks like, we surely agree that it is up to us to participate in creating that future. The first question is can we agree on what a vision might be for this future. Second question: are we willing to write and work toward creating that future? I am assuming that beyond our writing we would need to participate in other conversations within our faith communities and in the public squares where we live and be supportive of movements and candidates who support this vision. We have begun in this meeting to

create a coalition of persons who are not known for working together. We are in fact doing a new thing here. Perhaps I am jumping the gun to even ask what we might be willing to work on together in order to make the world a better place or at least not to let others who do not share our vision create a future we do not wish to see.

I have no idea precisely what we might agree on in terms of current issues we are all wrestling with in our churches and in the culture. It does seem to me that the culture is usually the source of the issues rather than the faith communities. One possibility is that we could agree on issues that confront those who are without power in this culture and find a way to make these voices heard. In some cases this will include the voices of our own faith communities. In this way can we begin to set the agenda for the issues to be raised in the public square? Then we provide the perspective that we share which may be able to create a new coalition of support. This will also make our vision available to a larger number of people, those beyond academia and our church communities. This could turnout to be a strategy for evangelism. What I am asking is are we prepared to follow our discussions on theology by recognizing their political implications?

One issue to examine is how are we to care for those in our society who are unable to work because of disability, lack of skills, education, or the movement of jobs outside of the U.S. Since 1980 the jobs for people without higher education have been reduced to part-time, no benefits and at a pay level that is below a living wage. There seems to be no move to raise the minimum wage or to require employers to provide benefits to persons who are less than full-time. In academia we employ very many adjuncts who receive no benefits and are not eligible for tenure. These are the faculty who are most concerned that lean times will come because they will be dismissed first. Related to this is healthcare for the population that has never had health insurance, who hold jobs that do not include benefits and cannot afford to purchase such insurance.

What do our agreed statements on God as a loving God who honors our freedom and who expects us to create a future have to say? If as we claim God experiences the world and has the capacity to experience every feeling that occurs here, then it stands to reason that God suffers a great deal because of decisions we make. God feels the hunger of the many people do not have adequate food and in my area the cold of those who live on the street in winter. The pain of people who do not have access to health care and the worry of those parents who cannot afford clothes or heat to keep their children warm are also felt by God. I am convinced that suffering lives in the very heart of God and is greater than necessary because of decisions we participate in.

There are always two ways to address these issues. The usual way of the churches is to give charity to people who are considered less fortunate. So those who have much are asked to give a little so that those who have little to nothing will have a little something. Providing charity is not bad in and of itself, but it will never be able to address the needs of the people. One political implication (and I trust that there are others) that seems to me to arise from our shared commitments to who God is and how God relates to the world is the need to move people away from the rugged individualism that seems to be so prevalent today in the U.S., toward notions of solidarity and the

common good. Building solidarity across socially constructed cultural divides like race, class and gender and across national boundaries is indeed a tall order but it is what we do in forming congregations of persons united in Christ. This is a model that the church can contribute to the culture in how to build community. There is also a long standing tradition in the church to care for people in need based on a commitment to the common good. What has changed is that we are now called upon to work in the political arena because the only way to help at this time is to change the systemic structures that perpetuate injustice. Now we need to be working for affordable housing as well as providing shelters for the homeless.

Solidarity and the commitment to the common good seem to be the prerequisite to making the systemic changes that are necessary to alleviate the suffering of people and by extension the suffering of God. It means a shift from thinking about charity as the way we serve our neighbor to working for justice for all people, most particularly those who are marginalized in our culture. Perhaps if we can persuade people that by minimizing the suffering of creatures, we are actually reducing suffering in God, they will be motivated to make a difference in how our culture is structured.

Based on our common understanding of God as necessarily in relationship to us in a way that God feels the world through us and the future of the world as open, unknown even to God, can we work together to move people to act on these theological commitments and bring God more joy and less suffering? I invite us to consider together the possibilities.