

The AAR, Sat Nov 22, 11:00 - 1:00

The "Open and Relational Theologies" Group

Relational Theology among the Evangelicals

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It will be interesting to see who and how many identify themselves theologically under this rubric. As an open theist, I do.

The version of relational theism called "open theism" is a theology in pursuit of a personal God, who is dynamically related to the world. As we have written, "God by grace has granted humans significant freedom to cooperate with or work against God's will for us and enters into dynamic give and take relationships with us. It also espouses the belief that the future is not settled in every respect. And that God knows what will be and what might be.

It is critical of abstract categories used of the divine nature as popularized in classical theism and of deterministic modes of thought. In the history of theology, we identify with the work of John Wesley, whatever our denomination. For example, I may be Baptist but Wesley is definitely my reformer.

In the contemporary setting, we are indebted to the Methodist tradition, the renewal of trinitarian theology, including Barth's understanding of God who acts in freedom. We also appreciate some of Hartshorne's work on the attributes of God and before that the Boston personalists.

We market open theism to the evangelicals since that is who we are and there are a lot of them. We present it as a biblical theology and one that is in sync with our own relational piety. In spite of some fierce opposition, mostly from paleo-Calvinist strongholds, we are getting the message out. Our advantage is that it's hard to find an evangelical who doesn't believe in a relational God who genuinely relates to us and experiences change. Talking about issues like prayer is usually a good place to start. I think that critics who denounce us fiercely are sensing their vulnerability.

Sometimes sowing the seed among evangelicals feels like sowing it among thorns but we are still doing it. We encounter a lot of opposition but we still think it is worthwhile. I figure that if we can get the word out in this oft-times hostile environment, other will hear about it and take note. Let's face it - we could never have received the publicity we have received if it were not for our tossing this bombshell on the evangelical playground. Do you think the Washington Post would have picked this up if we were conversing with The Presbyterian Church USA?

Insofar as open theism is innovative, we contend that, although we respect old traditions, we put scripture above them and believe more light can still shine forth from God's holy Word. See Roger Olson in *Christianity Today*, November, 2003. We are critical of Tom Oden's *Rebirth of Orthodoxy* who is inviting evangelicals to become traditionalists and not grow as hearers of the word of God.

Concerning tradition, we maintain that open theism is not as big an innovation as critics charge in order to stir up passions against us and not so untraditional. We see it as a relatively modest modification of Wesleyan/Arminianism. See Roger Olson in *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, pp. 192-96 and John Sanders' article, "Open Theism: Radical Revision or Miniscule Modification of Arminianism?" *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 38 (2003), pp 69-102.

This fledgling impulse of relational theology is off to a pretty good start, I think. More than 30,000 of the original book *The Openness of God* (1994) are in print and other titles have appeared from the openness circle, such as John Sanders' *The God Who Risks* and Gregory Boyd's, *God at War and Satan and the Problem of Evil* and my own *Most Moved Mover*. Momentum is apparent also in the appearance of other titles, including two excellent "four views books" one on the divine foreknowledge and another on God and time. But we do need others to join in, perhaps some of you here will do so.

In terms of relating to other relational theologies, a beginning has been made by conversing (for example) with process theology. John B. Cobb Jr and I issued a dialogue book *Searching for an Adequate God* which brought process and free will (or open) theists together in debate.

And (I don't know exactly what to made of this) Mormon scholars at Brigham Young University are showing interest in open theism, believing as they do in a less controlling and temporal God. A major favorable review of *The Openness of God* will appear in *BYU Studies* soon. Mormon philosopher David Paulsen wrote: "I very much want Latter Day Saints to become acquainted with your thought."

Not all evangelicals will approve of our talking to Mormon and/or process theists. Some will even jump on us and say "I told you so." But I do not believe in closing doors which God's grace may have opened. Nor do I allow myself to be governed by my fears.