

## Open Creation and New Creation

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**Abstract:** The eschatological dimension is a key question to bring to open and relational theologies from a Christian perspective. How do such theologies respond to themes of new creation, transformation, resurrection, parousia and judgement? In particular how do these theologies relate to questions of the scientific futurity of the future of the Universe, the biblical material which affirms the sovereignty of God and the doctrine of hope.

This paper will explore scientific work on the future of the Universe including environmental damage, terrestrial mass extinctions, the end of the Sun and an accelerating Universe. It will use these insights to pose questions to the theme of hope within open theologies. However it will argue that the biblical material and especially a focus on new creation provides a way of holding together process and event, responding and initiating, freedom and fulfillment in the work of God in the physical Universe.

The paper picks up some of the neglected questions in open and relational theologies - eschatology, the future of the physical Universe as opposed to just human salvation, scientific predictions of the long term future. It will also argue that the use of biblical material in open theologies has selectively ignored crucial themes of new creation and the wider implications of the resurrection.

### Introduction

My background is as a theoretical astrophysicist who came to open theologies from the recognition that quantum theory at the sub atomic level and chaos theory at the everyday level undermined the simplistic predictability of the clockwork Universe of Newton. Certain systems in the Universe are inherently unpredictable and the consequences of this simple observation are far reaching. First, God's knowledge of the future is limited; second, God's interaction with the Universe is more subtle than we think; and third, God has granted a degree of freedom to the physical Universe in its own development which is exercised in interaction with the faithfulness of the physical laws, human freedom and God's own freedom to act.

As a theologian I have recognized the resonances of this picture with the biblical material and my own Wesleyan tradition, and have been happy to work with this in the doctrines of creation and providence<sup>1</sup>. Yet much of the general discussion of open and relational theologies has had little interaction with eschatology.

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<sup>1</sup> Wilkinson, D. (2004), 'The Activity of God: A Methodist Perspective', in *In Unmasking Methodist Theology* Marsh, C., Beck, B., Shier-Jones, A. and Wareing, H., Continuum, London, pp. 142-154.

This is in contrast with a fascination about the future in pop culture, pop religion, theology and science. The environmental crisis has been championed by Al Gore in film and worldwide rock concerts, Bruce Willis has saved the Earth from *Armageddon*, and the *Left Behind* series of books has sold over 40 million copies. Indeed, it has been said that millennial speculations have become ‘America’s favourite pastime’<sup>2</sup> or the ‘doom-boom’<sup>3</sup>. Meanwhile in von Balthasar’s famous dictum, eschatology has recently been working overtime since its office was shut down in the nineteenth century, highlighted by the theologians of hope, Moltmann and Pannenberg. While these theologians have interacted with science and environmental concerns they have had little to say on the future of the physical Universe itself. Yet the future of the physical Universe has been of major interest to the scientific community, and has been characterized by a great deal of pessimism.

### **The pessimism of scientific predictions**

While of course science still engenders optimism about our control of the future stemming from the myth of human progress which saw science and technology as the way to achieve Utopia<sup>4</sup>, the witness of the last century has replaced the dream with nightmare. Today, some areas of science gaze forward with pessimism rather than optimism. It is important to note that even in a world of quantum and complex systems it is still possible to make predictions of the future of the Universe. An ‘open’ view of the world does not mean that everything is unpredictable. Some popular presentations paint a choice between a mechanistic Universe and a Universe which is completely open. In fact, due to the admixture of simple and complex systems in the Universe and the way that broad patterns emerge out of apparent randomness, the Universe has only limited openness.

First, we know that the environmental crisis is growing worse and will have profound effects on the future of the planet. We see the overuse of non renewable resources, the pollution of land and sea alongside the effect of global warming. The Scientific Assessment Group of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concluded that if the current situation of the emission of greenhouse gases continues then models predict an average increase in temperature for the Earth of between 1.5 and 6 degrees in the next century<sup>5</sup>. The implications of this for sea-level changes, eco-systems, population movement and world economic health are severe. While it is possible through dramatically reducing the emission of greenhouses gases to stabilize the effect, it is no longer possible to prevent the climate change that will take place over the next two to three decades<sup>6</sup>. Second, comet or asteroid impact leading to mass extinction events may occur on the Earth every 100-250 million years. Indeed some 2000 asteroids have orbits which cross the orbit of the earth, and therefore potentially could cause catastrophic

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<sup>2</sup> Wojcik, D. (1997) *The End of the World As We Know It: Faith, Fatalism and Apocalypse in America*, New York University Press, New York, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Jewitt, R. (1984), ‘Coming to Terms with the Doom Boom’, *Quarterly Review*, 4, 9-22.

<sup>4</sup> Bauckham, R. and Hart, T. (1999) *Hope Against Hope Christian Eschatology in Contemporary Context*, DLT, London.

<sup>5</sup> Houghton, J. T. (Ed.) (2001) *Climate Change 2001: The Scientific Basis*, The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, CUP, Cambridge.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/independent\\_reviews/stern\\_review\\_economics\\_climate\\_change/stern\\_review\\_report.cfm](http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/independent_reviews/stern_review_economics_climate_change/stern_review_report.cfm)

environmental conditions for human beings<sup>7</sup>. Third, in 4.5 billion years the Sun will run out of its available hydrogen fuel and will swell beyond the orbit of the Earth, consuming the planet and indeed much of the Solar System.

While these scenarios are pessimistic, science offers solutions in the hope of new energy sources, technological protection from the threat of asteroids and ultimately inter-stellar travel away from a dying Sun. All can be achieved, it is hoped, through the dream of human ingenuity, with no reference to God. Yet they are a reminder of the fragility of the Earth environment for the development and continuance of life and that God's purposes cannot be tied to the Earth for eternity. In addition they do raise some interesting ethical questions. Would it be only the rich who enjoy the new possibilities of technological development and is humankind destined to travel from one habitable planet to another leaving a trail of environmental destruction in its wake?<sup>8</sup> Open and relational theologies can give us helpful insights into these scenarios, recognizing the gift of freedom and responsibility given to human beings to shape their own environment in an unpredictable Universe in partnership with God. Yet no interaction between God and the physical Universe is needed to avoid these scenarios of doom.

However, there is a much more serious cause of scientific pessimism. In 1998 the Supernova Cosmology Project of Saul Perlmutter and the High-Z Supernovae Search which was headed by Brian Schmidt and Adam Riess discovered, quite unexpectedly, that the Universe is accelerating in its rate of expansion due to some unknown type of force, the so called 'dark energy'<sup>9</sup>. In fact such an interpretation has been confirmed by more recent results from the Wilkinson Microwave Anisotropy Probe (WMAP)<sup>10</sup>. While many scientific questions remain, the bleak future of such a Universe is an accelerated heat death. When the Universe is  $10^{12}$  years old, stars cease to form, as there is no hydrogen left. At this stage all massive stars have now turned into neutron stars and black holes. At  $10^{14}$  years, small stars become white dwarfs. The Universe becomes a cold and uninteresting place composed of dead stars and black holes.

As might be expected science has attempted to provide some optimism and indeed salvation for human life. Some have pointed to the possibility that this Universe may be one of many and therefore the demise of this Universe needs to be seen in the context of the 'endless fertility' of new universes. However Polkinghorne comments that such a scenario presents 'a scene of occasional islands of meaningfulness erupting within an ocean of absurdity'<sup>11</sup>. Alternatively, Dyson and Tipler are struck by the ability of

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<sup>7</sup> Belton, M. J. S. (Ed.) (2003) *Report of the Workshop on Scientific Requirements for Mitigation of Hazardous Comets and Asteroids*, National Optical Astronomy Observatory.

<sup>8</sup> McKay, C. P. (1990), 'Does Mars Have Rights? An Approach to the Environmental Ethics of Planetary Engineering', in *Moral Expertise* ed. MacGiven, D. Routledge, London, pp. 184-197.

<sup>9</sup> Riess, A., et.al. (1998), 'Observational Evidence from Supernovae for an Accelerating Universe and a Cosmological Constant', *Astron. J.*, **116**, 1009; Perlmutter, S., et.al. (1999), 'Measurements of Omega and Lambda from 42 High-Redshift Supernovae', *Astrophys. J.*, **517**, 565; Riess, A. G., et.al., (2001), 'The Farthest Known Supernova: Support for an Accelerating Universe and a Glimpse of the Epoch of Deceleration', *Astrophys. J.*, **560**, 49-71; Perlmutter, S. (2003), 'Supernovae, Dark Energy, and the Accelerating Universe', *Physics Today*, **April 2003**, 53-60;

<sup>10</sup> Peiris, H. V., et.al., (2003), 'First Year Wilkinson Microwave Anisotropy Probe (WMAP) Observations: Implications for Inflation', *Astrophys.J.Suppl.*, **148**, 213; Spergel, D. N., et. al. (2003), 'First Year Wilkinson Microwave Anisotropy Probe (WMAP) Observations: Determination of Cosmological Parameters', *Astrophys.J.Suppl.*, **148**, 175; Boughn, S. and Crittenden, R. (2004), 'A correlation between the cosmic microwave background and large-scale structure in the universe', *Nature*, **427**, 45.

<sup>11</sup> Polkinghorne, J. C. (2002) *The God of Hope and the End of the World*, SPCK, London, p. 27.

humans in manipulating the environment of the Earth and wonder if this could be extrapolated forward. Dyson suggested that biological life would adapt first through genetic engineering to redesign organisms that could cope in such a Universe. Then consciousness would be transferred to new kinds of hardware that would be able to cope with the ultra low temperatures of a heat death Universe, including for example a complex dust cloud. In this way 'life and intelligence are potentially immortal'<sup>12</sup>. Tipler sees consciousness transferred to computers which expand across space. He argues that it is possible on such a model that a point will be reached when an infinite or maximum amount of information will have been processed, and 'life' has expanded everywhere in the Universe<sup>13</sup>. However, both Dyson and Tipler's models cannot cope with an accelerating Universe. Science cannot change the prediction that the future of the Universe itself is futility.

Paul Davies suggests that an 'almost empty universe growing steadily more cold and dark for all eternity is profoundly depressing'<sup>14</sup>. A similar lament is voiced by Nobel Prize winner, Steven Weinberg:

'The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless. But if there is no solace in the fruits of research, there is at least some consolation in the research itself. ....The effort to understand the universe is one of the very few things that lifts human life above the level of farce, and gives it some of the grace of tragedy.'<sup>15</sup>

### **The Hope of New Creation**

The end of the Universe, while a long time in the future, nevertheless stands as a major theological issue. It points to a future of futility for the physical and with it the end of the survival of intelligent life within the Universe. It raises the question of how the end can be understood within a theology of creation. Some theologians will say that this is so far in the future that it is irrelevant, while others have concentrated their thinking about the future on the future of the Earth, the individual believer or the church.

However, there have been others who have taken seriously God's purposes for the physical creation. Wesley, interested in the science of his day and controlled by New Testament themes came to see new creation as of key importance<sup>16</sup>. His thinking led him to argue in his 1781 sermon 'The General Deliverance' which used Romans 8:19-22 as its text that a range of animals would be present in this renewed creation.

If we follow a similar approach and bring biblical themes into dialogue with scientific insights about the future, what might be the consequences or questions for open and relational theologies?

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<sup>12</sup> Dyson, F. (1988) *Infinite in All Directions*, Harper & Row, New York.

<sup>13</sup> Tipler, F. J. (1994) *The Physics of Immortality*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London.

<sup>14</sup> Davies, P. (2002), 'Eternity: Who Needs It?' in *The Far Future Universe: Eschatology from a Cosmic Perspective* ed. Ellis, G. F. R., Templeton Foundation Press, Radnor, p. 48.

<sup>15</sup> Weinberg, S. (1977) *The First Three Minutes*, Basic Books, New York, p. 144.

<sup>16</sup> Maddox, R. (2004), 'Nurturing The New Creation: Reflections On A Wesleyan Trajectory', in *Wesleyan Perspectives on the New Creation* ed. Meeks, M. D. Kingswood Books.

First we note the importance of the theme of new creation within a range of biblical genres. In Revelation the vision is of ‘a new heaven and a new earth’ (Rev 21:1). This is not about some other worldly existence which has no connection with the physical Universe. It is about God doing something with the totality of existence, a point which Wesley noted in speculating about the future of animals as well as men and women. At the same time it is about something new, not about keeping this creation alive for as long as possible which is the hope of the ‘eschatological scientists’ such as Dyson and Tipler.

Pinnock characterizes his view of openness as ‘God’s power will not be seen as raw omnipotence but as the sovereignty of love whose strength is revealed in weakness; and God’s omniscience will not be seen as know-it-all but as a wisdom which shapes the future in dialogue with creatures’<sup>17</sup>. This is helpful, in the context of the future of the environment and even in the challenge of asteroid impact and the death of the Sun, to speak of God creating a world where the future is not yet settled and takes seriously our response. However, the futility of the end of the Universe means that we must also emphasize a God who is not dependent on the Universe and a God who is capable of bringing a definite victory over evil at the end.

Second, new creation is a possibility because of a Creator God. The new creation is continually linked to God’s original creative work, and hope for the future is built on an understanding of God as Creator (Is. 65:17-25). Whatever the circumstances, creation is not limited to its own inherent possibilities because the God of creation is still at work. This is in stark contrast to the myth of human progress. Thus the sovereignty of God in creation is the basis of hope in new creation. The key questions for open and relational theologies of what God does, chooses not to do, or cannot do as Creator provide the basis for hope for the future. A God who is not free to work in the Universe must watch the slow heat death of his creation.

Bauckham attacks models of providence that make God dependent on the Universe:

‘A God who is not the transcendent origin of all things but a way of speaking of the immanent creative possibilities of the universe itself cannot be the ground of ultimate hope for the future of creation. Where faith in God the Creator wanes, so inevitably does hope for the resurrection, let alone the new creation of all things’<sup>18</sup>.

The scientific predictions of the end of the Universe are a reminder that models of providence have to take seriously the Universe over its entire history, rather than just the present state of the Universe. Further those models, which picture the Universe as God’s body, work reasonably well with a Universe of its present structure, variety and life, but are weak when we look forward to a Universe which decays in the futility of a lifeless and unstructured heat death. Models that stress immanence too much at the expense of transcendence face a bleak future in the end of the Universe. At the extreme limit of this, models where God is a superior intelligence totally contained in the Universe, as have been developed by some scientists in a revamped natural theology, become gods who

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<sup>17</sup> Pinnock, C. H. (2001) *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness*, Baker, Grand Rapids, p. 27.

<sup>18</sup> Bauckham, R. (1993) *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, CUP, Cambridge, p. 51.

eventually will die<sup>19</sup>. Likewise, models that stress God's non-intervention in the Universe are presented with an interesting question in terms of the end of the Universe. For example, Wiles' model sees God simply sustaining the creative process of the Universe, limiting himself not to act in the world in any particular way<sup>20</sup>. The question then arises of why is God sustaining a process that will end in futility?

Third, creation and new creation are mutually interdependent and find their focus of connection in Jesus Christ (Col 1:15-20). This is a reminder of something that should be obvious but in practice is often forgotten. Creation needs to be seen in the light of new creation, and new creation needs to be seen in the light of creation. Wood has suggested that providence has been severed from creation<sup>21</sup>. He rightly sees that providence has been allocated the time 'in between' the world's creation and its consummation and has been drained of any creative significance. Therefore the emphasis in the doctrine has been on preservation, stability, order, and harmony, and that the virtues it inculcates are mainly passive. He then argues that we must recapture the unity of creation and providence in order to see the 'creative character' of the doctrine. Yet we suggest that he could go further to recognize that providence has also been severed from new creation. To recapture the unity of creation, new creation and providence strengthens all, giving providence an encouraging and challenging voice into Christian lifestyle.

A great deal of work in the dialogue of science and religion and in open and relational theologies has concentrated on the doctrine of creation with little reference to the end of the story. The suffering, frustration and decay of this world show that this creation is both necessary and points forward to a new creation (Romans 8:18-30).

Fourth, new creation is a transformation of the present creation rather than a total annihilation and beginning again. Bauckham is correct in seeing such passages as 2 Peter 3:10-13 in the context of Jewish apocalyptic. In contrast to dissolving and renewing fire of the Stoics, and the Zoroastrian view of purification, here the emphasis is on judgement. Bauckham concludes that such passages 'emphasise the radical discontinuity between the old and the new, but it is nevertheless clear that they intend to describe a renewal not an abolition of creation'<sup>22</sup>.

Fifth, God is at work towards new creation both in the process and in the particular event. The second coming of Christ reminds us that biblical eschatology has a focus on Jesus Christ, and further the images used are suggestive of an eschatological event, which is both in space and time, and yet transcends space and time (1 Thess. 4:13-5:11). It is a reminder of the importance of the particular action of God within God's more general activity of sustaining and transforming. Thus the redemption of this creation is pictured in terms of a long process, working through contemporary structures, as well as a specific event of judgement.

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<sup>19</sup> Davies, P. (1983) *God and the New Physics*, Pelican, Harmondsworth; Hoyle, F. (1983) *The Intelligent Universe*, Michael Joseph, London; Dick, S. J. (2000), 'Cosmotheology: Theological Implications of the New Universe', in *Many Worlds: The New Universe, Extraterrestrial Life and the Theological Implications* ed. Dick, S. J. Templeton Foundation Press, Radnor, pp. 191-208.

<sup>20</sup> Wiles, M. (1986) *God's Action in the World*, SCM, London.

<sup>21</sup> Wood, C. M. (2002) 'Providence and New Creation' In *Eleventh Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies* <http://www.oxford-institute.org/pdfs/WorkingGroup4/Pap4Wood7-15-02.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> Bauckham, R. (1983) *Jude 2 Peter*, Texas, Waco, p. 326.

Sixth, the resurrection of Jesus is the model by which the continuity and discontinuity between creation and new creation is held together. Resurrection is in the words of Moltmann not only ‘a consolation in a life...doomed to die, but it is God’s contradiction of suffering and death’<sup>23</sup> If as Paul argues, the resurrection is the first-fruits of God’s transformative work, then there should be both continuity and discontinuity in the relationship of creation and new creation as there was in the relationship of Jesus before the cross and Jesus risen. The empty tomb is a sign that God’s purposes for the material world are that it should be transformed not discarded. If resurrection affirms creation, then it also points forward to new creation.

Continuity and discontinuity in the transformation of the physical Universe may be located in the nature of matter, space and time. To take time as an example, the resurrected Jesus does not seem limited by space and time. In new creation the continuity may be that time is real but the discontinuity is that time no longer limits us in the way that it does in this creation. It could be argued that the resurrection body is characterized by decay’s reversal, that is, a purposeful flourishing. In this creation time is associated with decay and growth, but in new creation might time be simply about growth? We are therefore suggesting that our experience of time in the physical Universe is a small and limited part of an ontologically real time that we might call eternity.

Seventh, the Spirit’s work both in the church and the world is transformative. Pannenberg’s conviction is that the work of the Spirit needs to be seen as dynamic and as giving priority to the whole over parts. He wants to see the Spirit as giving cohesiveness to the Universe. Indeed, the work of the Spirit could be seen as giving cohesiveness to the work of new creation. Perhaps the Spirit is the ground and the redeemer of the relationality inherent in the Universe. Can we therefore see signs of the Spirit restoring damage and progressing God’s work on to completion? This may be an area which has had a lot of attention in terms of the Spirit’s work in the life of the believer, but how do we see it in the cosmic context? In Paul’s discussion in Romans 8, that the Spirit works in the tension between creation and new creation, sharing in the ‘groaning’ of this creation and yet pointing forward to the hope of that which is to come. Yet the Spirit’s work is more than that. If the damage of sin is the breaking of relationships between Creator, creatures and creation, then is the Spirit’s work restoring of those relationships in part as a sign of the final reconciliation of a new heaven and a new earth? Restored relationships now in terms of individual forgiveness, community reconciliation, the care of animals and responsibility for the environment then become signs of God’s purposes for the whole of creation.

## **New Creation and Open Theologies**

I began this paper with a commitment to open and relational theologies from my background as a scientist, and as someone who wants to take Wesleyan theology and the biblical material seriously.

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<sup>23</sup> Moltmann, J. (1967) *Theology of Hope: On the Grounds and Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, SCM Press, London, p. 21.

Yet the scientific picture of the futility of the future of the Universe provides some difficult questions for some open theologies. These may be opportunities more than problems. The need to engage more with themes of new creation, eschatological transformation and resurrection could be very fruitful.

It might drive us to a greater engagement with scripture. Pinnock emphasizes that open theology recognizes the primacy of scripture. Yet, his presentation of scripture is often selective. For example he claims that the parable of the prodigal son (Lk. 15:11-32) 'dramatizes the truth of the open view of God'<sup>24</sup>. This is fine as long as you do not complicate the matter by noticing that Luke joins this parable with 2 other parables that 'dramatize' God as taking the initiative seeking a lost sheep and a lost coin (Lk. 15:1-10). Here God's sovereignty in salvation is in dramatic tension with the gift of freedom.

This becomes more of a problem for the openness view when it comes to eschatology. Its biblical emphasis wants to reflect eschatological closure in the victory of good over evil but it is difficult to see how this might happen. Further there is virtually no engagement with the major biblical themes of new heaven and new earth. Pinnock does use the analogy of God as the 'master chess player'. He is the consummate guide allowing both freedom to the other person involved in the game and yet able to bring about ultimate victory. But does such an analogy represent genuine openness? The struggle to find an adequate picture shows the limits of the openness view in the light of eschatological closure.

Then as a Wesleyan I want to reflect the importance of prevenient grace. Here is Wesley's understanding of God's free and generous acting in the world, which both gives responsibility to his creatures and characterizes his own responsibility as Creator and Redeemer<sup>25</sup>. In terms of personal salvation, God is active before conversion, during conversion and in the growth to holiness. God is active in both preparing this path and in active help along the way. Therefore, in terms of models of providence, Maddox is right to comment:

'While the longstanding Wesleyan commitment to God's response-ability resonates strongly with the process emphasis on God's temporal, creative, and persuasive nature, it should be no surprise that this same commitment renders many Wesleyans less happy with the apparent restriction of God's role in the ongoing process of the whole of reality to only that of "lure". Is such a God still truly response-able? Where is the basis for eschatological hope within this restriction? Is there not a place for God to engage us more actively than this, without resorting to coercion?'<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Pinnock, C. H. (2001) *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness*, Baker, Grand Rapids, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> Maddox, R. (1994) *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*, Kingswood Books, Nashville; Cobb, J. B. (1995) *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today*, Abingdon, Nashville, p. 35-41.

<sup>26</sup> Maddox, R. (2001), 'Seeking a Response-able God: The Wesleyan Tradition and Process Theology?' in *In Thy Nature and Thy Name is Love: Process and Wesleyan Theologies in Dialogue* Stone, B. and Oord, T., Kingswood Books, Nashville, p. 142.

It is interesting in this context to note a small book by Albert Outler<sup>27</sup>. Outler observes rightly that quantum theory does not allow us to construct a full model of providence, but cautions us as to the limits of science in predicting the future. For Outler, God is undeniably in charge but also this world is a place where human freedom is real if limited. Grace is seen not only as the giving of freedom to what God has created but also God's active involvement in the world. Thus because of grace 'he is truly free to allow evil as the dark shadow of corrupted good and yet sovereign to veto its final triumph'<sup>28</sup>.

Outler is interesting in that he resists the tendency within eschatology to over-emphasize continuity or discontinuity in order to attempt to produce a simple or logical philosophical picture. To hold continuity and discontinuity in the same picture is more complex and difficult.

This leads on to a further consideration. While an open future and a God who gives genuine freedom and responsibility to his creation means that our agency can make a significant difference, the goal of new creation gives our agency confidence. Advocates of openness see their position as a motivation to Christian responsibility and action, as our free human agency can make a difference. Boyd links genuine openness of the future to Christian responsibility:

'Knowing that what transpires in the future is not a foregone conclusion but is significantly up to us to decide, we will be more inclined to assume responsibility for the future.'<sup>29</sup>

While this is certainly the case, part of our motivation for Christian witness and action is not just the belief that we can make a difference, but also that the end is assured. Wesley's understanding of new creation gives confidence alongside opportunity. God's plan for new creation demonstrated in the death and resurrection of Jesus is about the eventual triumph of good over evil. We can believe that we can make a difference, but also that the end is assured. This gives confidence to Christians alongside opportunity, sustaining sacrificial action.

Finally a fruitful interaction with eschatology and open theologies is the Trinitarian dimension. A welcome move in systematic theology in recent years has been a reaffirmation of the importance of Trinitarian theology. Wood rightly points out that in systematic theology providence has been seen in relation to the Father with the neglect of any Christological or pneumatological considerations<sup>30</sup>. Thus the tendency is to see the providential God as the Supreme Being of philosophical theism and his actions can be determined by natural theology. Such a sterile doctrine of providence is corrected by Trinitarian thinking and indeed open and relational theologies. God is both transcendent and immanent, acting as creator and sustainer, incarnate Christ who dies on the cross, and the power and presence of the Holy Spirit pervading the church and the world. This reminds us once again that the nature of God's providential action is complex and how

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<sup>27</sup> Outler, A. (1968) *Who Trusts in God: Musings on the Meaning of Providence*, Oxford University Press, New York.

<sup>28</sup> Outler, A. (1968) *op. cit.*, p. 96.

<sup>29</sup> Boyd, G. A. (2000) *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*, Baker, Grand Rapids, p. 94.

<sup>30</sup> Wood, C. M. (1999), 'How Does God Act?' *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 1, 138-152.

we perceive it is also complex. The triune pattern is the way God relates to all things but is also the pattern of our knowledge of that relation. To the extent that we can understand how God is related to what goes on, we understand it 'through Jesus Christ' and 'in the Holy Spirit.' Trinitarian thinking has often been neglected in the area of providence in favour of logic or science. It safeguards a specifically Christian understanding while posing creative questions to the doctrine. An example of this can be found in Pannenberg's attempt to describe the work of the Spirit in terms of the force of a field, as an immaterial force causes physical changes<sup>31</sup>. Much can be said against such a suggestion, but it does raise the question about whether some generalized physical theory can serve as meaningful metaphor for God's cosmic presence, and indeed about what are the limits of such a metaphor.

Transformation of this creation is a key understanding in the biblical literature for new creation. This transformation is not just in the matter or space-time but a transformation in context and relationships. The transformative work of the Spirit is at the heart of such a process. A Trinitarian doctrine of providence encourages a sense of the activity and transformative work of God in this creation. Whatever freedom is given to this creation we cannot reach our potential in isolation.

The distinguished cosmologist Martin Rees comments, 'What happens in far-future aeons may seem blazingly irrelevant to the practicalities of our lives. But I don't think the cosmic context is entirely irrelevant to the way we perceive our Earth and the fate of humans'<sup>32</sup>. This is a challenge to all theologians, not least those who take openness seriously.

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<sup>31</sup> Pannenberg, W. (1989), 'Theological Appropriation of Scientific Understandings: Response to Hefner, Wicken, Eaves and Tipler', *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*, **24**, 256.

<sup>32</sup> Rees, M. (2003) *Our Final Hour*, Basic Books, New York, p. 4.