

What God knows: The debate on 'open theism'

by [James K. A. Smith](#) in the [July 12, 2005](#) issue

Theologian John Sanders lost his college teaching job recently because of his endorsement of “open theism”—the view that the future is not determined by God. His ouster from Huntington College in Indiana followed three years of nasty debate within the Evangelical Theological Society, a significant faction of which wanted to expel Sanders (along with Clark Pinnock) on the grounds that his position with respect to God’s foreknowledge was inconsistent with ETS’s adherence to biblical inerrancy.

Just what is open theism? What is at stake in the debate about it? And why has the topic elicited such passion in evangelical circles?

Open theism is grounded in a deeply pastoral concern about evil and suffering. Sanders begins *The God Who Risks* by recounting the death of his brother. Gregory Boyd, another proponent of open theism, closes *God of the Possible* with an extensive treatment of the pastoral implications of open theism in the face of tragedy. Open theism offers an answer to a longstanding question: If God is all-powerful and perfectly good and has complete knowledge of the future, how can God permit the evil and suffering we see on both global and personal levels?

If God *knows* that such suffering will occur, the open theist reasons, then there must be some sense in which God is responsible for such evil—which would compromise God’s goodness. Since such a conclusion would be clearly contrary to scripture and Christian tradition, the open theist offers another account: God didn’t know.

Open theism, then, is a retooling of our understanding of God’s foreknowledge. Open theism does not, however, reject the claim that God is omniscient. Boyd states this very clearly: “The issue is not whether God’s knowledge is perfect. It is. The issue is about the nature of the reality that God perfectly knows.” The question concerns what we might call the “ontological status” of the future: is the future something that exists to be known? More specifically, can the future actions of free moral

agents be known before such free decisions are made?

Open theists contend that God cannot know the future of free moral agents not because God lacks the knowledge or power or cognitive ability, but because the future of such free agents does not exist as an object to be known. God does not know the sufferings that a dictator will inflict upon his people not because God's power to know is impoverished, but simply because what such a free agent will do in the future is *open*, and therefore does not exist to be known. The future is blank and filled in only after choices are made.

One can anticipate an objection at this point: if God's knowledge entails knowing that evil and suffering are at least possible, then why did God create the world? Why create a world of free moral agents if one of the possible outcomes is a world of domestic abuse and genocide?

At the heart of the open view of God is a picture of God as a risk-taker. For God, evil and suffering are necessary risks that attend the creation of free moral agents who can relate to God in love. Unlike process theologians, open theists continue to assert creation *ex nihilo*, creation out of nothing. Creation is not a necessary emanation that God "needs" to be complete; rather, creation is a gratuitous act done primarily out of love and for love. God freely decided to create beings capable of loving relationships, and the necessary condition of such love is freedom. And the necessary risk of such freedom is evil.

Evil and suffering, then, are contingent future possibilities, but precisely insofar as they are the effects of decisions made by free moral agents, they are part of a future that does not exist. In other words, they do not exist to be known, even by God. There are thus limits to God's foreknowledge; these limits are not internal to God but rather stem from the nature of what there is to be known.

Despite the complaints of some evangelicals, open theism does seem to fall within the purview of catholic orthodoxy insofar as it maintains God's omniscience and asserts that creation occurred *ex nihilo*. Indeed, the utter biblicism of open theism makes it a truly evangelical phenomenon. It stems from its proponents' serious engagement with scriptural texts—though they could also be charged with a degree of naïveté in thinking that one comes to the scriptures without a host of philosophical assumptions. (A common strategy of open theists is to denounce "classical" notions of God's sovereignty as the product of the "Hellenization" of

scriptural exegesis. Sanders and other open theists take themselves to be coming to scripture without metaphysical presuppositions.)

The open theists' revisioning of God's foreknowledge, like a stone dropped into a pond, has had a ripple effect across the theological spectrum, raising questions about the nature of divine providence, God's sovereignty, prophecy and prayer, to mention a few issues. One can understand why such a radical rethinking with such broad implications would generate intense debate, particularly for evangelicals who value faithfulness to scripture and theological orthodoxy.

One of our first reactions might be to write off the whole debate as archaic and, worse yet, downright "scholastic." But there can be some virtue to such supposedly scholastic discussions. Indeed, I have found that parishioners are much more interested in "scholastic" questions than theologians are. I recall teaching at an inner-city Pentecostal church where young people were intensely interested in questions about prayer and God's foreknowledge; these matters were important to their discipleship.

The debate over open theism laudably pushes us to consider the nature of confessional language. It also raises important questions about human freedom, and perhaps even some political questions about freedom.

Open theism pushes us to reconsider the way religious language works. Just what are we doing when we confess that God is good? Or beautiful? Or sovereign? What are we to make of the scriptures that describe God as repenting or changing his mind? Classical conceptions of God have tended to say that when scripture speaks about God "repenting" or changing in some respect, such language is metaphorical and does not properly describe God's essence. On the other hand, when scripture asserts that God does not change, the classical tradition has thought that such language properly describes God's essence. Open theists, in contrast, take metaphorical language seriously. (There might even be something postliberal about open theism insofar as it seeks to let the language of scripture be that which governs the imagination.)

The underlying question is whether our language "hooks onto" God in some way. Are we really saying something about God? Or is God so wholly other that such statements never really reach their target? Is our confessional language ultimately equivocal, with no real connection between what we say and who God is? Or is God

“good” in the same way that we are good? Is such language about God univocal, such that God is conditioned by a general notion of goodness external to God?

The latter, univocal notion of confessional language would seem to reduce God to little more than an idol: theology, as Ludwig Feuerbach suggested, would just be anthropology, and in all of our talk about God we would end up talking about ourselves. But the former, equivocal notion of theological language would disconnect us from any real knowledge of God, leaving us within a flattened realm where confessional language never makes it outside of the atmosphere of immanence. Ironically, then, both univocity and equivocity wind up in the same place, leaving us with religious language that merely bounces around the echo chamber of immanent reality, never being ruptured by transcendence or making its way out *to* transcendence.

This is why a long theological tradition, embodied especially in Augustine and Aquinas, has suggested that confessional language is neither equivocal nor univocal but operates on the basis of analogy. And both emphasized that the paradigm for understanding this was the incarnation itself, whereby the transcendent inhabits immanence, really and fully, without giving up transcendence. The Word becoming flesh, piercing that atmospheric ceiling of immanence, is that which underwrites our words about God. This means that our confessional language both “hooks onto” God *and* is characterized by some slippage. God is given in such language and at the same time exceeds our metaphors. God gives himself to human understanding, all the while resisting comprehension.

This translates into a confessional humility. As Augustine once explained it to his parishioners, “We are talking about God; so why are you surprised if you cannot grasp it? I mean, if you can grasp it, it isn’t God. Let us rather make a devout confession of ignorance, instead of a brash profession of knowledge.” Evangelicals would do well to be reminded of such sanctified ignorance when it comes to denouncing open theism. We all would do well to take seriously the incarnational operation of language. Retrieving a sense of analogy is to confess that “in the beginning was metaphor.”

A second key theme here is human freedom. Open theism is the logical consequence of an Arminian understanding of human nature, free will and the effects of sin. Indeed, open theism assumes human freedom and seeks to extend the implications of this to our understanding of God.

But what exactly does it mean to be free? Open theism, reflecting a contemporary consensus, assumes a libertarian notion of human freedom. This is what Isaiah Berlin famously described as a “negative” understanding of freedom: one is free insofar as one is free *from* external constraints. To be free is to be autonomous and self-determining, free to do otherwise. Freedom is freedom of choice. It is this understanding of freedom that is enshrined in liberal democracy. This construal of freedom is so deeply ingrained in our culture, and even in contemporary theology and Christian philosophy, that it’s almost impossible to think of freedom in any other way.

Open theism, assuming that humans are free *in this way*, constructs an account of God’s foreknowledge that attempts to reconcile claims about God’s omniscience with human freedom—the sense that human choice creates the future as it goes. In this sense, open theism sees God as “making room” for human choice by granting space for human autonomy, even if that means that God takes the risk that we will choose badly, as we so often do.

However, there is another trajectory of thinking about freedom in the Christian tradition. Augustine emphasized a “positive” understanding of freedom as empowerment: I am free insofar as I am *able* to achieve the good. On this score, freedom isn’t just the ability to choose, but the ability to choose well, to choose rightly. What is valued is not autonomy, but a sense of dependence upon God—even a participation *in* God as that which properly orients us to the *telos* that constitutes human flourishing. In this telling of the story, sin and evil result from the very desire to be autonomous, to secure one’s independence from God.

Given the complexities of this problem and the inadequacy of language, we ought to be humble about which approach we take. And we might do well to hold both models in some kind of dialectical tension.

That said, we should also be attentive to the political presuppositions that might color our theological understanding, as well as the way our theologies of freedom might translate into some surprising political policies. Could there be a sense in which open theism’s concern for human autonomy reflects an accommodation to the picture of human nature bequeathed to us by modernity, and liberal democracy in particular? Could it be that open theism, like modernity, flirts with idolizing freedom as autonomy?

Open theists think that freedom of choice is a good that warrants human suffering. But is this not to almost make freedom of choice an end in itself? Might one not, in the vein of Ivan Karamazov, suggest that creation in that case was a pretty irresponsible risk for God to take? If the price of freedom is the suffering of children, we might conclude that freedom's not worth the price of admission and happily return the ticket.

I can't help reading this theological controversy within the context of our current political climate, where freedom has been enlisted as the engine that drives a hawkish foreign policy, even while it is also employed to guard a laissez-faire global economy. President Bush's second inaugural address linked the language of freedom as the guiding principle of America's democratic missionary calling to the theological principle that freedom is the "gift of the Almighty" to every human being.

But what concept of freedom is at work here? Clearly, the rhetoric of the current administration—which so reveres the ideal of a free market—is predicated on a libertarian or "negative" notion of human freedom, as is the notion of freedom assumed by open theism. (Though open theism is castigated as "liberal" by conservative critics, some of them are beholden to this same liberal notion of freedom.)

The open-theism debate could be instructive if it questions the assumption that freedom is to be understood in libertarian terms. For as David Burrell has recently shown in his book *Faith and Freedom*, not only are such libertarian notions of freedom contrary to a long history of theistic thought, but such a reduction of freedom plays right into the hands of capitalism's valuing of choice for its own sake, with no concern for *telos* or choosing well. Perhaps open theism, in seeking to resist the static, dispassionate god of an antique metaphysics, has played into the hands of a market-driven god who is only too happy to multiply choices for the sake of consumption.

The open-theism controversy offers an opportunity to revisit fundamental questions about our confessional language and, more important, about how to understand freedom in an age in which liberty is the banner under which an empire expands. It could be that the Son who makes us "free indeed" frees us, above all, from enslavement to libertarian notions of human autonomy. That has consequences for both Christian worship and public theology.