Oord, Thomas Jay. *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015; 229 pages.

Thomas Jay Oord is one of the leading figures in the study of open and relational theology. Oord's previous publications have been centered around the idea of love and how it effects our understanding of God. While in the *The Nature of Love* Oord focuses on the Christological aspect of this theory of essential kenosis, and in *Defining Love* concentrates on defining the concept of love, this book targets particularly on the doctrine of providence. Hence, *The Uncontrolling Love of God* has arguably added to the long list of Oord's significant contribution to this theological discussion.

Let me briefly explain the core argument of this book and how Oord goes about making that case first, and then I will present my take on this project. The main thesis of this book is that God's relational love, vis-à-vis God's relation to the world (i.e., the doctrine of providence), is better understood through "the essential kenosis" model that Oord grounds in and expands from the Pauline treatise on Christ emptying himself in the book of Philippians. The adjective "essential" and the noun "kenosis" are the keys to understand the entirety of Oord's argument. First, God's love is essential. In Oord's words, "God must love. To put it in a double negative: God cannot not love." (p. 161) In other words, love is a must and necessary attribute of God. Second, God's love is kenotic. Oord intentionally renders the Greek word κένωσις as "self-giving, others-empowering love." (p. 159) Meaning, God's love will not control and coerce others. For Oord, therefore, God's love is an uncontroling love. Hence, the idea that God is a controlling divine being is an oxymoron because love by definition has to be not only relational, but also uncontrolling.

Oord begins his entire project by anchoring it in some real life tragedy stories. These tragedies, which he categorizes as "genuine evil," have triggered many important theological questions. Where is God in the midst of those sufferings? Why doesn't God do anything to prevent them? If God is good, why do they happen? Dealing with these "big questions of life" (p. 78), this book is centered around

the issue of theodicy. This book, in other words, is an apologetical effort to answer the problem of evil. In chapter 2, Oord explains the issue of regularities and randomness in life. For Oord, a good answer to those difficult questions should seriously consider both sides, i.e., regularities and randomness. Chapter 3 examines primarily the question of agency and freedom. How we understand the freedom of a moral agent, for Oord, constitutes an important element to answering the question of not only the existence of both genuine evil and good, but also regularities and randomness, in the world.

Chapter 4 aims at presenting different views on God's providence ranging from a complete emphasis on God as the main cause of everything (i.e., fatalism) to the idea that God's actions in the world are completely unknown. Oord leaves a spoiler alert that his position fits right in the middle of these different views (see the chart in p. 83). Chapter 5 lays out in detail how various scholars in the open-relational theology tradition have tried to make sense of the regularities and randomness in the world. Chapter 6 argues for the primacy of love in the theological construction of providence. Oord, zooming into John Sanders's work, points out that Sanders's positon is fundamentally problematic because it advocates that God has the ability to prevent evil but chooses not to do so. If it is true, Oord maintains, then "this God sounds more like a project manager less like personal Lover who cares for each creature." (p. 141) By rejecting Sanders's proposal, Oord argues that a true personal Lover must not have the ability to prevent evil logically and essentially. "At the heart of essential kenosis is the belief that uncontroling love is logically preeminent in God," Oord writes. In other words, love has to come first in God's nature. Chapter 7 contains a detail explanation of both biblical and theological ground for essential kenosis doctrine. This discussion leads to a sharp conclusion that "God *cannot* unilaterally prevent genuine evil." (emphasis is his, see p. 167) God's love puts essential boundaries or limits to God's power. For Oord, therefore, by placing these limits to God's power, one can "solve the problem of evil." (p. 169) Furthermore, if God's power is not boundless, then how do we explain miracles? Can miracles take place? Oord has rightly anticipated the potential question of miracles. Chapter 8 concentrates particularly on tackling this problem. Key to Oord's view of miracles is his insistence of the

doctrine of *creatio continua*, that is, the ever-continuous process of creation. Miracle, Oord argues, is not the violation of the law of nature, but rather an account of God's loving creative activities. The book ends with a postscript in which Oord presents a brief summary of the entirety of this project. The essential kenosis doctrine of providence, Oord contends, perceives reality of life as "an adventure without guaranteed results." (p. 220)

The idea of essential kenosis is an audacious and novel one, and thus this book is and will continue be provocative. I commend Oord for his tremendous bravery to undertake such a bold project. By taking seriously the works of philosophers, scientists, and other theologians, Oord invites his readers to think beyond not only the classical theological position rooted in the Aristotelian metaphysics of the Unmoved Mover, but also beyond the conventional open theist position of God's self-voluntary limitation as presented in the works of John Sanders, Clark Pinnock, etc. His metaphysical framework however reflects a heavy influence of Whitehead's process thought, which is understandable because Oord was educated at Claremont under prominent process theologians such as John Cobb and David Griffin. As to how far Oord has departed from the process metaphysical tradition, it is not clear in the book. Nevertheless, whether one agrees with him or not, Oord's proposal will shape the landscape of theological discussion surrounding the doctrine of providence. The post-Oordian theological enterprise on this doctrine, consequently, must in a meaningful way engage the concept of essential kenosis.

Another thing that I find very intriguing about this book is that it bluntly rejects a picture of God as an almighty emperor who totally controls the universe. If one's theology (i.e., the way one thinks of God) determines one's socio-political relations, then Oord's essential kenosis could be understood as a decolonial project destabilizing the totalistic and imperialistic power structure constructed around the notion of all-controlling God both in church and society. How do we construct the notion of "sovereignty" within the framework of essential kenosis? Oord's God is apparently very different from that of Carl Schmitt. The God of essential kenosis is unable to unilaterally determine or decide on the exception. This

book has an immense implication and impact on the political theology that unfortunately Oord has not explored further.

The problem of evil that lies at the heart of Oord's project is certainly a slippery one. The notion of "evil" itself, let alone "genuine evil," is vague and unstable because any production of knowledge cannot escape language. Just as Sallie McFague has correctly pointed out, theology is always metaphorical. A metaphor cannot capture the totality of what it tries to represent. It is always partial and incomplete. There is no transcendental signified that grounds the fixed, universal, or ahistorical meaning of the signifier "evil." It is not a surprise that evil has become a topic of debate for centuries. People will see evil from the particularities of their contexts. Oord's project, therefore, has to be understood as an effort to deal with the problem of evil from the particularity of Oord's context. Let me give an example for this point. The pick of Boston Marathon bombing, instead of U.S. drone strikes in Iraq and Syria or the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki or the war in Iraq or the killing of unarmed black men on the U.S. streets or the Oklahoma City bombing, is an interesting one. Boston Marathon becomes an instance of genuine evil because it understandably fits well to the larger political narrative of American war against terrorism, rooted in a deep Islamophobic culture in American society. I am not trying to justify what Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev did in Boston. My point is that the selection of this particular event as a genuine evil, as though there's no other possibilities of interpretation, reaffirms and reinforces the already established anti-Islamic narrative in the U.S. By ignoring the complexity of international socio-political and economic contexts of this event, I am afraid that Oord's notion of "genuine evil" is too reductionistic. People have different understandings of what evil (or good) is. Can Oord use the killing of unarmed black men on the streets as the example of genuine evil? If he does, I bet some people are going to defend the use of police force, and it will thus put Oord in a difficult situation to defend his position. Whether a particular event is deemed as genuine evil pertains more to the politico-linguistic struggles than metaphysical ones.

This particularity of Oord's perspective leads to another concern that I have about this book. Majority, if not all, scholars that

Oord interacts with in this book are white men. There is no serious engagement with feminist/womanist, Asian, Black, or Hispanic thinkers. Do they not struggle with the problem of evil from a theological point of view? Yes, they do. As a matter of fact, these scholars are deeply wrestling with the problems of racial oppression, gender discrimination, colonialization, poverty, etc. Privileging with work of white male scholars, while overlooking the enormous contributions of other scholars who do not represent the dominant culture, is problematic. A serious work on the problem of evil cannot afford to ignore these voices.

Again, even though I have some concerns about this book, I still think that Oord has significantly contributed to the ongoing theological discussion on the doctrine of providence. I would recommend this book to pastors, theological students, and everyone who is struggling with the question of evil and the relation between God and the world.

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