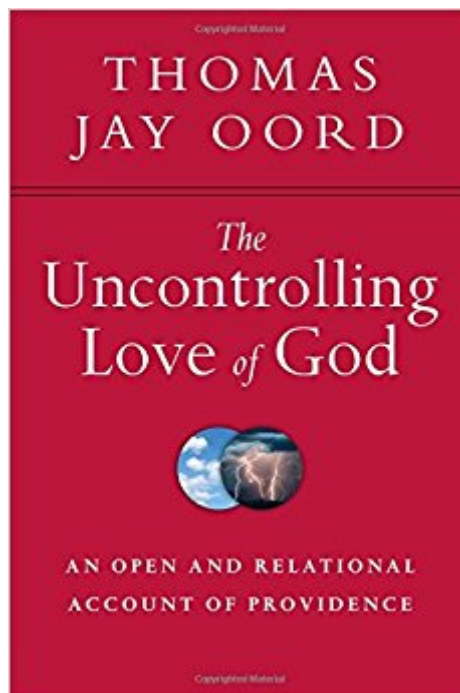




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# The Uncontrolling Love Of God: An Open And Relational Account Of Providence



## Synopsis

Rarely does a new theological position emerge to account well for life in the world, including not only goodness and beauty but also tragedy and randomness. Drawing from Scripture, science, philosophy and various theological traditions, Thomas Jay Oord offers a novel theology of providence—*an essential kenosis*—that emphasizes God's inherently noncoercive love in relation to creation. *The Uncontrolling Love of God* provides a clear and powerful answer to the problem of evil, the problem of chance, and how God acts providentially in the world.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A video introduction to the book: [youtube.com/watch?v=Sp3GVIqhYQk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sp3GVIqhYQk)"A work of a mature thinker, this book secures Oord's legacy as the theologian of love. It is a comprehensive theological response to the age-old question of how genuine evil exists even assuming the omnipotent and omnibenevolent God of Christian faith, and is all the more compelling given its biblical, philosophical and scientifically informed tapestry—*no mean feat!* The faithful across all Christian traditions will be encouraged to live a life of love even as skeptics will be invited to think again and again." (Amos Yong, professor of theology and mission, Fuller Theological Seminary)"Can I believe in the providence of God without making God responsible for evil? Open and relational theology answers yes, combining biblical and philosophical resources. Here Thomas Oord, the leading open and relational theologian, makes a powerful case for miracles and the providential care of the self-emptying God. His remarkably clear book offers readers a compelling theodicy and a welcome

gift to personal faith." (Philip Clayton, author, *The Predicament of Belief*) "A much-discussed option on the contemporary theological scene is so-called open theology. Working within the framework of open theology, and with some truly horrendous examples of evil constantly in mind, Thomas Oord develops a fresh and original doctrine of providence, the central thesis of which is that it belongs to God's nature to offer to creatures non-controlling, other-empowering love. Anyone who subsequently writes about providence will have to engage Oord's cogently argued and lucidly presented account." (Nicholas Wolterstorff, Noah Porter Professor Emeritus of Philosophical Theology, Yale University, senior research fellow, Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, University of Virginia) "Can we reconcile a biblical understanding of divine love and creativity with the universe of human experience and scientific understanding? Not a new question, of course, but one that requires fresh faith and intellectual subtlety. Tom Oord's new book offers both. And it is written with a clarity and passion that should appeal to a wide range readers." (John F. Haught, distinguished research professor, Georgetown University, author of *Resting on the Future*) "This is a scholarly and readable book arguing that God is essentially a God of self-giving love, and that this provides a way of seeing how evil can exist in a world created by God. It is an important theological work, and continues Oord's project of constructing a fully Christian 'open and relational' theology." (Keith Ward, FBA, Regius Professor Emeritus of Divinity, University of Oxford) "Written in his characteristically winsome style, Oord's account of *The Uncontrolling Love of God* is a highly accessible yet richly sophisticated affirmation of God's providential engagement with creation that takes seriously the insistence on randomness and novelty in recent science. Oord sprinkles throughout pastorally wise advice on how Christians might think about and engage the undeniable evil and ugliness in life by probing the implications of our fundamental commitment to the self-emptying love of God as manifest in Jesus Christ. Highly recommended!" (Randy L. Maddox, Duke Divinity School) "Thomas Oord's *The Uncontrolling Love of God* is an ambitious book offering a new account of divine sovereignty, divine interaction with creation, a new response to the problem of evil, and other issues needed for a plausible model of God. This account is presented in accessible prose, suitable for any college educated reader." (Eric J. Silverman, *Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 266, January 1, 2017) "Oord's work is a constructive attempt to provide answers to very complex questions in a way that seeks to satisfy human experience, findings from contemporary science, and doctrines of the Christian faith." (Jacob R. Lett, *Philosophy, Theology and the Sciences*, Vol. 3, No. 1) "The book is beautifully and clearly written." (Jonathan Clatworthy, *Modern Believing*, 57, 4) "Although it is worthy on its own terms, *The Uncontrolling Love of God* is perhaps best digested in dialogue with other voices. . . . Oord fills a critical gap in the literature of

open and relational theology, and he offers a clear, biblically sound, cruciform answer to the problem of evil and God's providence, while avoiding the pitfalls of divine culpability that previous models of providence fall into." (Benjamin L. Corey, *The Christian Century*, July 20, 2016)"Uncontrolling is unquestionably Oord's most comprehensive theological contribution to date. In it he coheres many of his thoughts into a single volume and presents a rational, systematic defense of his doctrine of essential kenosis. As Oord has done for some time, at great personal cost, he upholds God's self-giving, others-empowering love as God's divine attribute; it is love that defines God's providence and ultimately, God's power. Without a doubt, Oord's solution to the problem of evil and the suffering of individuals in the case studies he presents, is more appealing than classical alternatives. Oord has done original theological and philosophical heavy-lifting that Pentecostal and Charismatic scholars should engage, appreciate, and appropriate as highly compatible with the theological distinctives of our own movements." (Joshua D. Reichard, *Pneuma*, Vol. 38, 2016)"Tom's purpose here is to offer an explanation for divine agency in the midst of randomness in a way that respects freedom and embraces relationality. . . . It is, I will say, another fine book from a most thoughtful and thought-provoking theologian." (Robert Cornwall, *Ponderings on a Faith Journey*, October 1, 2015)

This video introduces The Uncontrolling Love of God:[youtube.com/watch?v=Sp3GVIqhYQk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sp3GVIqhYQk)

Over the last week, I've read Thomas Jay Oord's latest book, *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence*. This book was much talked about and anticipated in 2015, and I was excited to finally read it during my break from work and seminary classes. It's the latest and greatest thing in open and relational theology, a subject I have been researching and thinking about for a couple years now. In this book, Oord addresses the doctrine of God's providence and its relationship to the problem of innocent suffering (theodicy). This is no small task, as innocent suffering is clearly the biggest challenge to the claim that Christians worship a God who is perfectly loving and good, yet all powerful. Everyone has struggled with this question to some extent: if God could prevent a tragedy, why didn't God prevent it? Isn't God morally culpable for not preventing something horrible that God could prevent? Oord outlines four main ways that Christians have tried to understand God's role in allowing or preventing suffering: 1. God ultimately is the cause of every event, whether good or bad. This model comes fairly close to divine determinism as it sees every event as ordained by God and under his complete control. Oord

identifies this view with theologians such as John Calvin, Benjamin Warfield, and others especially in the Calvinist/Reformed tradition.<sup>2</sup> God empowers and overpowers. This model suggests that God gives people and the rest of creation free will, though occasionally God overrides that free will to accomplish God's plans. Oord suggests this is probably the most common view among most Christians in the pew today. Roger Olson and classical Arminian theology trends in this direction.<sup>3</sup> God is voluntarily self-limited. In this framework, God could control everything, but voluntarily chooses not to. When God creates, God commits to allowing creation to be free and so allows creation to run its course, though God could choose to control it. This view is associated with thinkers such as John Polkinghorne and Philip Clayton, both major voices in the science and religion dialogue.<sup>4</sup> God sustains as an impersonal force. This view is farther left of the self limiting model, for it denies God's personal agency. God is the invisible, ultimate sustainer of all being, though this God does not act in the world in personal ways. This is the God/Ground of Being of thinkers such as Paul Tillich and various forms of "liberal" theology. All of these models, according to Oord, fail to adequately explain God's relationship to the world in an ethically and scientifically credible manner. He points out what he sees as the shortcomings/failings of each of these positions and then counters with a fifth position that he calls "essential kenosis." Drawing on the Christ hymn of Philippians 2:1-11, which describes Christ's emptying of himself within the divine nature to take on a human body, Oord argues that this divine "kenosis" (self-emptying) is part of God's essence (essential nature) so that God's nature as self emptying love does not allow God to control the wills of creation any more than God is able to lie (Hebrews 6:18). God creates the world and gives it freedom to self-determine, and God cannot control it because that goes against the divine nature of self-emptying love. Oord writes, "The model of providence as essentially kenotic portrays God's self-limitation as involuntary. God's nature of love logically precedes God's sovereign will. This means that God's self-limiting kenosis derives primarily from God's eternal and unchanging nature of love and not from voluntary divine decisions. Because God's nature is love, God always gives freedom, agency and self-organization to creatures, and God sustains the regularities of nature" (ebook location 1241). In the "real world," this means that randomness is real. God does not directly cause all events, but that events, especially evil and tragedy occur as a result of creation's freedom. This, Oord argues, comports well with what physicists

and biologists are learning about events at the micro or quantum levels. Things happen outside of God's control all of the time, but God is present in all events, calling all aspects of creation to their fullest and best potential, even though they may resist that call. (For those who are familiar with process thought, this is very similar to the idea of the divine lure calling all occasions to participation in the divine life. However, Oord distances himself from classic process thought in that he maintains a traditional view of God that affirms that God is personal and has agency in the world.) God does not coerce creation in the sense of overpowering its agency, but calls it to cooperate with God in a way that is good and beneficial. When creation and free creatures choose not to cooperate with God, evil occurs and God cannot be blamed for it. Oord uses this model to offer an account for how miracles can occur in the world. He defines a miracle as "an unusual and good event that occurs through God's special action in relation to creation" (ebook location 2755). This model, thankfully does not deny the special action of God, nor does it require God to arbitrarily break God's own "lawlike regularities in nature" (Oord's term for natural laws) at certain times, and not at others. Since open and relational theology affirms that the nature of the future is not exhaustively foreknown by God as settled, but is comprised of possibilities, God works miracles by providing new possibilities for creatures to cooperate with. This book gave me quite a bit to think about. I found it to be incredibly understandable, probably more so than my review of it! The conclusion that God's nature is uncontrolling love that does not allow God to override creation's freedom is undoubtedly a very uncomfortable position for many to consider. However, I would recommend reading the book before dismissing it outright. Oord seems to adequately address many of the qualms we might have. He utilizes the Bible's own account of divine action well and incorporates a healthy dose of philosophy and science. My only disappointment with the book is that it lacks a chapter on eschatology. One of the major (though unfounded, in my opinion) criticisms of open theology is that if the future is not definitively settled, then how can we trust that God will bring about the new heavens and new earth. Open theology typically affirms that God has settled some events and will not allow the world to self-destruct or run on endlessly, but will bring about a conclusion to history. It is process theology that does not hold to such an assurance. I'm sure Oord affirms that the final consummation is settled somehow, and I would be interested to see how he works that out in the paradigm of essential kenosis. Overall, it was a great and challenging book that offers a lot of practical resources to the question of suffering and God's goodness.

I found Oord's presentation very well organized and plainly written. He initially concisely presents competing views of providence, identifying strengths and weaknesses. Then he clarifies the similarities and differences of the strongest competing view with his own. In the latter part of the book he carefully explains his concept of open and relational theology that accounts for the regularities and randomness of our world, including good and evil. Oord puts words to the understanding that most anyone would eventually attain who identify God's divine nature of love as being preeminent and therefore constraining how he created the cosmos and how he is related cooperatively to it in a noncoercive way. This is a significant contribution in the unfolding wisdom that proceeds from Christ to help us understand the context of the world we live in wherein God relates to us through uncontrolling love.

I kind of speed read this book over three days, but I will be revisiting it often throughout this year. Thomas Oord presents a compelling understanding of providence and God's will in relation to the problem of evil. This view of providence, which he terms "essential kenosis", is also positioned as a kind of middle way between the different understandings of God's sovereignty. Oord's writing style is inviting and arguments convincing, and you can feel that he respects his readers. Before going to seminary to study for the ministry I graduated with a B.S. in Cell and Molecular Biology, so I appreciated the way current understandings of biology and physics are used in this book, which was able to speak to me in ways that few other theology books have. This being an academic book, Oord's also provides a wealth of other resources and books on related topics, such as openness theology. I look forward to mining these resources, as well as the many insights I gleaned from this book, in the coming months and years.

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