

OPENING THE TRINITY: DEVELOPING THE “OPEN THEISM” DEBATE

D.T. Williams¹

ABSTRACT

The reconciliation of the omniscience of God with the free choices of humanity is a problem which has taxed Christian thinkers for centuries. Recently the issue has become prominent with the emergence of support for “open theism”, the belief that free will is such that God cannot know the future, simply because it has not yet happened. This idea has produced considerable opposition largely based on the perceived insecurity with which it leaves Christians, and the feeling that it diminishes God. A further solution to the problem can be based on the concept of God’s *kenosis*, that God has freely chosen to limit himself, specifically his knowledge. As this is a freely chosen action of God, so not an inherent limitation, and is temporary, it meets the fundamental objections to open theism. At the same time, *kenosis* was done for the sake of enabling a relationship with God, in which Christians do find ultimate security.

1. INTRODUCTION

Followers of the theological scene will be aware of the debate that has been raging for the last few years concerning the nature of God. Discussion has largely cantered in the United States, but with a little impact on the other side of the Atlantic, and particularly in the evangelical wing of Christianity. It has been most intense in this area due to the implication of the issues involved for the idea of the inspiration and inerrancy of the scriptures (Wellum 2002:269), and also because of the tendency for evangelicalism to be Calvinistic rather than Arminian, respecting the idea of the sovereignty of God. The issue that has come to the fore is not at all new, but one that has surfaced quite regularly in the history of the Church. In a nutshell, the question that is currently generating so much hot air and the spilling of so much ink is the relationship between the knowledge of God and the free will of humanity. At its heart, the debate is about that most American of virtues, freedom, and about its relation to that most modern of assets in the computer age,

1 Prof. D.T. Williams, Faculty of Theology, University of Fort Hare, Alice.
E-mail: DWilliams@ufh.ac.za.

that of knowledge. It is really not surprising that the questions have arisen at this point in history.

Traditionally, Christianity has taught that God is perfect in all his attributes, and so has perfect knowledge of all events, past, present and future. Many then feel that the sovereignty of God means that he directly controls everything that happens (cf. Sanders 1998:11). But is this reconcilable with an affirmation that has also been precious to Christianity, that of human free choice? If God controls all events, even if he is fully aware of the future by virtue of his omniscience, can a choice actually be free; if a choice is really free, can the result of it be known beforehand? Over the centuries, Christian thinkers have battled with the issue, and although they have generally felt that it is possible to affirm both poles, have appreciated that there is more than a measure of paradox and inconsistency in holding both in tension.

The current suggestion that is being made is simply that human choices are indeed real, but this then means that the future is not fixed, but “open”. God is indeed omnipotent, so it is emphasised that there is no diminution of his power, and because the future has not yet happened, it *cannot* be known. God knows all that can be known, but the future is inherently not knowable. This is similar to the old question of whether God can do anything. The answer is affirmative, but he cannot make a square circle, not because his power is limited, but because it is inherently impossible.

The “open theism” view has many current advocates, such as Clark Pinnock, John Sanders and Gregory Boyd. Interestingly they are often associated with other ideas deemed radical by conservatives, such as annihilationalism, the view that the unsaved will be annihilated, not going to a conscious punishment in hell. As with these, their views have unleashed howls of protest from those who feel that open theism is a departure from orthodox Christianity and that the belief has severe practical implications. It is felt to diminish God and reflect upon his power, therefore rendering the Christian insecure.

The open theism view is obviously attractive; if only for the fact that it removes what is most definitely a situation of paradox. It is very difficult to accept that a decision is really free if it is believed that God employs exhaustive control and that the results of the decision are known

beforehand! The idea also provides a solution to the contentious issue of human suffering; Richard (1997:4) correctly observes that this is the human experience most in need of elucidation.

Nevertheless it has been felt that the idea is not acceptable to at least conservative Christianity. The American Evangelical Theological Society decided in November 2001 that

the Bible clearly teaches that God has complete, accurate and infallible knowledge of all events past, present and future, including all future decisions and actions of free moral agents (Field 2003:2).

Because the concern of this society is to uphold the authority of infallible Scriptures, argumentation has centred on the interpretation of Scripture. Open theists believe that this decision is one which is contrary to the Scriptures; its adherents make a strong appeal to Biblical theology (Master 2002:585), and point to references to God being ignorant of the future or changing his mind (e.g., Boyd 2001:100ff.). This would indicate that he does not use exhaustive knowledge, even if he has it. Indeed, Sanders uses just over a hundred pages in examining the Biblical material (Sanders 1998:38-139). On the other hand, traditional theology, especially of the Calvinistic persuasion, is well-known for its Scriptural foundation, as in revered texts such as that of Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*. Defenses of the position are common; a noteworthy recent work, reflecting particularly on Pinnock's theology, is that of Wright (1996). The traditional doctrine of omniscience is felt to be demonstrated by texts such as Isaiah 42:9 "Before they spring forth I tell you of them", contrasting God's knowledge with the impotence of idols.

2. REAL FREE WILL

Pinnock is arguably correct in his observation that practical Christianity almost invariably assumes the free will of people and an open future. A rigid determinism makes a mockery of the practice of intercessory prayer, the preaching of the gospel in evangelism and the commands to sanctification, among others. It is surely far from satisfactory to practise these when it is believed that human action is really irrelevant, and that they are done simply because God commands them. It is hardly surprising that in response to practical concerns, but also

in obedience to what was seen as the Scriptural view, a view of real free will was advocated. Wesley, for example, emphatically rejected predestination out of fear that it would undercut the drive to personal holiness (Pinnock 2001:168). It may be remarked that this was also Pelagius' concern!

Yet it is not a light matter to just cast out centuries of belief in the traditional attributes of God, such as his omnipotence and omniscience. It must be right to subject recent ideas to close scrutiny, if only because they are recent! A particular concern must be that the open view, by emphasising God's interaction with people in the historical process, must minimise his essential otherness, his transcendence. It puts God definitely in time, with everlasting life rather than an eternal life apart from the historical process (Pinnock 2001:75, 96 etc.). Such a denial of temporal transcendence must also be queried, as the atonement must have an effect beyond time; otherwise it could not have been effective in the period of the Old Testament, before it had historically occurred (cf. Rom. 3:25). It is not for nothing that the suggestions of open theism have been likened to those of process theology, although some, such as Pinnock (2001:140-50) are careful to draw distinctions from it.

The open theism idea is but one of the suggestions that have been proposed to solve the problem. One is that God is aware of all the implications of all possible choices; he "over-knows" the future (Boyd 2001: 130). The future is really free, but God is aware of all that can happen. In this case, however, the future is still uncertain, so one of the objections to open theism remains, that of the lack of real security. Then it may be suggested that even if the actions of individuals are indeed free, the actions of groups are predictable. This is of course the basis of the insurance industry; statistically, the future can be accurately predicted. This suggestion can well be applied to the old question of predestination, where it may well be argued that it is the group, the Church, that is predestined, while an individual is free to become predestined by joining the group. This is a welcome departure from the individualism that has been dominant in Western theology, but nevertheless does not solve all the issues, as there are events that are not due to human decision, but are still part of the future, such as earthquakes.

These suggestions, despite their merits, are a real departure from the notion of omniscience, in that God is then inherently ignorant of the really free choices of individuals. Such inherent limitation can hardly be acceptable to traditional theology. Also unacceptable to this group is the proposal of “process theology”, that God is developing along with the world, is gaining in experience and knowledge, and so again inherently limited.

More acceptable to traditional theology is the belief that the omniscience of God is actually so complete that God is aware of all the influences that affect a particular decision, so that even though the decision appears free, God in practice knows what it will be. This means that even if God has not actually acted to predetermine the future, decisions are not really free, in that a person is subject to all the influences brought to bear on him or her from outside. In practice, once again the future is fixed. Although it might seem that this view is actually quite compatible with open theism, in practice it means that actions are pre-determined, if not by God, then by circumstances, and most importantly, there is no real moral choice. Particularly if people are accountable for their actions, these are free, and so, again, not known beforehand.

3. *KENOSIS*

It is from a Biblical perspective that it is possible to make a further suggestion to solve the issue of free will in the context of an omnipotent and omniscient God. The starting point for this is the passage in Philippians 2:5ff., which speaks of the emptying, or *kenosis*, of Christ. 2 Corinthians 8:9 and John 17:5 are also often felt to support the idea. So just as Christ, as the second Person, limited himself in order to be incarnate and relate to humanity, so the other Persons could also limit themselves. In this case, God limits himself, specifically here the exercise of his omnipotence and omniscience, just so that human decisions are indeed free, and the future is then open. The relationship of prayer is really meaningless unless God has limited himself to give human free will; a fixed future empties prayer of its reality (Pinnock 2002:218).

The essence of this approach is that God is indeed as traditional theology advocated, being affirmed as omnipotent, eternal and so on, but that he limited himself so that he could relate to the world and its inhabitants. He could totally control all that occurs, he could exhaustively know the future, but chooses not to. This means that he opens himself not so much to change, to being affected, as taught by the open theists, but to relationships.

It must immediately be observed that the stress in open theism falls on human free will, reflecting the nature of God, and so on an open future, which carries an implication of the importance of humanity and its actions. In contrast, the idea of *kenosis*, while affirming that the self-limitation of God does enable real free will, will put its emphasis upon human self-limitation, again reflecting the nature of God. This reinforces the realisation of the need for grace and the response of obedience to God, as exemplified in Christ's own *kenosis*.

Such a suggestion is immediately opposed for two reasons. First, any idea of *kenosis* reminds of the ill-fated kenotic theory, and so tends not to be considered on its own merits. Then, secondly, and more reasonably, the suggestion is felt to limit God.

4. THE "KENOTIC THEORY" OF THE INCARNATION

The "kenotic theory" was popular in Germany between about 1860 and 1880, and then in England from about 1890 to 1910 (Grudem 1994: 550). The originator of the idea on the continent was the Lutheran, Thomasius, who taught that the Son had abandoned the metaphysical attributes of deity (McGrath 1997:355). Gess went further, including the other aspects of divinity, and also the idea of generation and the exercise of his cosmic functions, upholding the universe (Macleod 1998: 206).

Essentially, what was suggested was that in order to become incarnate, the second Person of the Trinity "emptied" himself of the attributes that are characteristic of being God, such as omnipotence and omniscience, so that his exercise of power and knowledge were just those of an ordinary human being. The kenotic theory was at least an attempt to probe a little into the mystery of the incarnation and not just to

ignore it. In fact, it is often felt that the statement of Chalcedon is not so much an explanation of the incarnation but a statement of its parameters, even of the problem.

The idea was immediately attractive to the Enlightenment worldview, for it meant that Jesus could share the understanding of the Bible of the “unenlightened” world of his time. He would therefore accept the stories of the creation and of Jonah as historical, and ascribe the authorship of the Pentateuch to Moses and the Psalms to David, all of which traditional beliefs were increasingly questioned at the time. It also reflects the Biblical assertions of Jesus’ ignorance (e.g., Matt. 24:36, Mk. 9:21), and growth (Lk. 2:52). On the other hand, the Gospels do indicate that Jesus did know and claimed that he was indeed the Son, and that the disciples also recognised his divinity. He also is recorded as having performed significant miracles. These miracles could well however be attributed not to the divinity of the Son, but to the action of the Spirit, who empowered him at his baptism, then inspired him and his disciples. The ministry of the Holy Spirit was largely neglected at the time of the development of the kenotic theory, but if it had not been, the self-limitation of Jesus may perhaps have met with fewer objections.

In England, the idea was espoused by Gore, who saw it as a way of reconciling Anglo-Catholics and liberals (Macleod 1998:206). As in the early Church, it was hard to separate theological discussion from more worldly concerns! He sometimes spoke in terms of “refraining”, sometimes of “abandoning”; it is notable that he accepted the definitions of Nicaea and of Chalcedon without reservation (Macleod 1998:206).

This presentation of *kenosis* was attacked for a number of reasons. J.M. Creed cites the admission of Thomasius himself that there is little support for the notion in the Fathers; and that the closest was a comment in Apollinarius that “incarnation is self-emptying” (Baillie 1956:94). Apollinarius was of course condemned as a heretic for his Christological views! This in itself is not too serious; all theology must be seen in its own context. In fact many of the Fathers would have been condemned by later standards. Thinkers such as Apollinarius were trying to understand and had no intention of being heretical or of deny-

ing what had previously been accepted. Grudem (1994:550) believes that no recognised teacher taught the idea for 1800 years, including native Greek speakers. On the contrary, Erickson (1991:78) asserts that it has featured in Christology's from the earliest days. Augustine can of course be relied upon to make at least some comments relevant to the issue; for him "Jesus emptied himself 'not by changing his own divinity but by assuming our changeableness'" (Macleod 1998:216). A more modern belief is that of Calvin, who said that whereas Jesus could not divest himself of his Godhead, he concealed it for a time (Macleod 1998:218); this is in line with the *krypsis* idea. Relating to humanity renders *kenosis* essential; Calvin even speaks of God's "baby-talk" in order to communicate with us (Horton 2002:324).

A common criticism was made by Archbishop William Temple who voiced an objection based on Hebrews 1:3. He could not see that a *kenotic* Christ could fulfil his function of upholding the universe (Macleod 1998:209). It may be commented here that providence does not in fact need the constant direct involvement of Christ, but as long as the possibility of God's intervention in the process is affirmed, this need not then be Deism (cf. Sanders 1998:10). Many open theists, while respecting free choice, so seeing a limitation of God's control, speak of God intervening if his overall intention is threatened (Nicholls 2002:629f); the same can be true of a *kenotic* God.

The theory did go out of favour, and the very word *kenosis* gained a measure of notoriety. More modern thought has however expressed some sympathy with the idea of *kenosis*, in that it allows the world to affect God (Pinnock 2001:12). It is also attractive especially as it is in keeping with the preferred approach to Christology "from below", to start from the evidence of Jesus' humanity, and to seek to understand him in the context of that. It is suggested that the traditional view of God's attributes is actually foreign to Christianity, but is imported from Greek philosophy (Horton 2002:317). It must be observed here that a similar accusation is often made about the doctrine of the Trinity. This is in contrast to early kenoticism, which was really "from above", so tried to relate it to an assumed immutability; this certainly contributed to its downfall. A recent approach is rather to try to understand God from the experience of Christ's *kenosis* (Richard 1997:84). Moltmann is particularly noteworthy. As in other areas, he expresses an appre-

ciation for the insights of Eastern Orthodoxy. Russians, such as Bulgakov in *The wisdom of God*, have used the idea in respect of creation and the Trinity, not just in Christology (Baillie 1956:98). Thus Moltmann (1981:219) has described the act of creation as a limitation in God, insofar as it was the result of a choice to create an entity which has an existence outside, and therefore to an extent independent of, God. God therefore suffers with, and therefore for, his creation, hardly the traditional impassibility. In this case, God is "open", because he is affected by what happens in the world. Bonhoeffer is also noted for similar views, which must also be seen in the context of his historical context in the Germany of the Second World War.

A major objection to the earlier concept of *kenosis* rests on the belief that this implies a change in the nature of the second Person, at least for a while. This seems in conflict with the traditional teaching of immutability, but if this is seen not so much as an aspect of a divine attribute, but as consistency or faithfulness (e.g., König 1982:89), this problem is resolved, and also explains such problems as the repentance of God as in the story of Jonah (also Pinnock 2001:85f.). H.R. Mackintosh accepts *kenosis*, as the only immutability is that of love (Macleod 1998:218). Later development avoided this problem by arguing that the attributes were not abandoned, but rather either "hidden" or that Jesus abstained from using them. The former is often called the theory of *krypsis* (Greek "hidden"), and was advocated by the University of Tübingen, the latter, referred to by *kenosis*, by Griessen. Such an interpretation of *kenosis*, seeing it not so much as divestment, but as self-limitation, avoids much of the criticism of the original idea.

P.T. Forsyth was also associated with the idea of *kenosis* in Britain. He pointed out some of the problems with the traditional view, such that it is hard to see how there could in fact be two wills in Christ if one was divinely omniscient while the other was human and fallible (Macleod 1998:208). Significantly he saw such aspects as omnipotence not so much as attributes, but rather as functions of deity. Indeed, Martin (1983:171) comments that any metaphysical "laying off" of attributes is foreign to Paul, or, he suggests, to reality. Then the respected New Testament scholar Lightfoot observed that the schema of Philippians 2 was of the outward and accidental (Macleod 1998:216). The use of the Greek *morphe*, "form", was not based on Greek philosophy, but on

the Septuagint; it implies outward appearance and change, the accessibility of what is there. A further significant observation that he made was that the humility that he expressed in the incident where he washed the feet of his disciples was in the immediate context of his coming from the Father (Jn. 13:2f). "It is his very form to forgo his rights"; so he felt that it was inherent to the very nature of God to humble himself. This point becomes clearer with the realisation that the *kenosis* of Philippians was in relation not to humanity in relation to deity, but to the lordship which Christ refused to use (Martin 1983:175), but later, after the cross and resurrection, was clearly granted. Thus *kenosis* is a self-limitation, a rejection of the use of power and authority that is still available.

5. SELF-LIMITATION

It must be stressed that the *kenosis* of the second Person need not be thought of as affecting his fundamental nature. Although Baillie (1956: 97), in his study of Christology, feels that the suggestion of *kenosis* came from a presupposition that unlimited divinity and humanity cannot be united, the Fathers constantly applied Philippians 2 to the incarnation, seeing no change in the eternal *logos* (Richard 1997:75). Emphatically, it is not something imposed from outside, which would indeed be contrary to the sovereignty of God. It is a voluntary self-limitation, so does not imply any change in the essential nature of God. Richard (1997:38) then stresses that redemption occurred because Jesus positively accepted death; it was by his choice of love, not something forced on him. As omnipotent, he is freely able to limit his own omnipotence and his omniscience; in fact, to say that God cannot limit himself is itself a limitation (Erickson 1991:81). In this regard, a useful distinction has been suggested between omnipotence, being able to do anything, and almightiness, being able to do all that is wanted (Van den Brink 1993: 215). Pinnock (2001:96) therefore criticises Wright as believing that God's sovereignty demands that he actually controls everything.

Macleod (1998:219) writes that "it is perfectly possible to speak of real renunciation without defining it as renunciation of deity". There is then no conflict with pre-existence, as Temple feared (Macleod 1998: 210). Smith, in the article on *kenosis* in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* endorses it as orthodox (Grudem [1994:550], who however finds

this assessment surprising). Similarly, the open theists commonly assert that far from compromising God's power, their stand rather enhances it (Boyd 2001:147). A fixed, so known future, effectively limits God. On the contrary, self-limitation enables a real gain for God, enabling relationships with free agents that would otherwise not have been possible (Pinnock 2002:216). Again, an open future means that God is open to being affected by it, while opening to relationships involves being affected by them. In fact, God is so great that he is able to cope with the uncertainty generated by the freedom of others. The point is also made that he would have been limited if he could not have created free agents; indeed, although there are things that God cannot do, such as sin or die, these are in fact negations of limitation (Highfield 2002:286).

There is a natural inclination to view limitation as inherently bad, and so inappropriate to God. Part of the reason for this is that many of the limitations that are experienced by human beings are not inherent, but on the contrary have been received by choice. Where choices have led to sin, and then to limitations, these are indeed bad. Boyd (2001:251) suggests that Jesus' power was what people would have had if unfallen. The connection of human limitation with sin is certainly implied in the Genesis account of the fall. Quite apart from the Genesis account, the limitation of humanity follows as an inevitable consequence of the nature of sin itself. This may be understood as a breakdown in relationship; Boyd (2001:346) suggests it to be self-centredness, so closeness. It was because of this that humanity lost the ability to live forever, as they lost access to the tree of life. They lost eternal life. Because of the breakdown of the link with God, his life is not enjoyed by people and death occurs. It will in any case result as the bodily inter-relationships deteriorate. Then they certainly lost their power to affect the environment because of the curse that was laid upon it (Gen. 3:17). In any case, as the power that humanity has over its environment is largely enabled by co-operation between people, any breakdown in this results in a diminishing of that power. They also lost an aspect of the freedom of movement in their exclusion from the garden. Perhaps it is even the case that although the first sin is described as due to eating from the tree of knowledge, this was specifically "of good and evil" (Gen. 2:9). Certainly their knowledge was

also affected. As human knowledge is also due to interaction, both with other people and in the internal brain processes, this is also affected.

However, even if sin, and so the limitation due to it, is wrong, the choice that enabled sin is not. In fact, the ability to choose is part of the human role as in *imago Dei*, being able to choose because God has himself chosen. And such choice can be to self-limit. The Philippians passage (2:5ff.) indicates the free choice of the second Person in this regard. Christ chose, but choice does not have to result in sin; the New Testament witness is of his sinlessness. Likewise, whereas the choice to sin restricts relationship, Christ's choice to self-limit was in order to enhance it. Incidentally, of course, it is the absence of sin in the Trinity that enables the possibility of the full inter-relationship of *perichoresis* between the Persons, and between the two natures of Christ.

6. HE BECAME EMPTY SO THAT WE MIGHT BE MADE WHOLE

It is significant that, just as the limitation of humanity is due to the free choice of sin, it is this which is behind the *kenosis* of Christ. Open theism, which concentrates on the nature of God, does not in itself carry a view of salvation. In contrast, a kenotic approach puts its emphasis on human salvation, simply because its stress falls on the reason for *kenosis* in enabling relationships. Thus the Philippian hymn is firmly in the context of atonement; it was because of sin that *kenosis* was necessary at all. It is also evident there that *kenosis* deepened as the drama of the atonement progressed, with the most complete emptying occurring in the actual crucifixion. Again, this was no negation of his power and authority; Richard (1997:38) stresses that redemption occurred because Jesus positively accepted death; it was by his choice of love, not something forced on him.

This aspect can be seen in one of the beautiful pictures of salvation in the scriptures, that of the adoption of believers as children of God (Rom. 8:15, Gal. 4:5). God is not just creator, but is also Father. Here it is the essence of being a father that he stoops, self-limits for his children. What may be stressed is that the power and strength of the man is not inherently affected by being a father, but that he chooses, for the sake of the relationship with his children, to curtail them. And

perhaps, it must be added that in a different situation, such curtailment will not be done, but his power and ability will be used to the full. Such may indeed be done just for the sake of those children, to protect and care for them.

What Christian theology has always affirmed is that the actions of Christ then enable salvation to those with faith in him. There are two ways of looking at this, by no means contradictory, but as complementary viewpoints. In both of these, the action of the *kenosis* of Christ can be seen to form an integral part.

On the one hand, a frequent theme in the Patristic understanding of salvation is that of the so-called “amazing exchange”, that Jesus, as sinless and divine, died for sinful human people, experiencing the effect of their sin in his death and giving them his sinlessness so that they can be forgiven, and his life so that they can live eternally. The book of Hebrews in particular presents the action of Jesus as a sacrifice, fulfilling the Old Testament pattern; it is obvious that sacrifice is a form of *kenosis*, of giving up, even of life. In the case of Jesus it was a voluntary act; he willingly sacrificed himself. Although this action is usually presented in the obvious terms of the contrast between life and death, sin and holiness, the same principle is applicable in a wider context of the humiliation of Christ. The very reason for his assumption of *kenosis* was that people, through the effect of their sin, were already experiencing powerlessness and emptiness. It is this, equally an effect of sin as is death, that is experienced by Christ for believers. Certainly an aspect of salvation is the giving of wholeness, enabled by the voluntary yielding up by Christ of his own; again, there is an exchange. Christian salvation is not just the forgiveness of sins, not even the attainment of eternal life, but so that people could become whole, as fully human as God created them to be, open in their relationship to God, and so to each other. And so more Christ-like; although after the glorification of Christ, his *kenosis* would have ceased, Jesus would not have stopped being human, indeed he is only then what humans should be. At our resurrection, we become really human for the first time!

Because of what Christ has done, wholeness then became possible to his body, those in union with Christ through faith. Immediately there

was a possibility of relationship with God, openness to him, and therefore the life of God could be received. A Christian, in relation with God, has eternal life (Jn. 3:36, etc.). More than this, the gifts of the Spirit then reflect the empowerment of the believer, manifesting such as healing, knowledge and other aspects of the overcoming of limitation. There are even descriptions of the overcoming of spatial limitation, seen Biblically in the teleportation of Ezekiel, but occasionally reported today (Bennett 1974:139). Nevertheless, as Christ's glorification is progressive, so is this personal sanctification; it is this that prevents the exercise of full humanity.

Such a view of the atonement clarifies much of what was happening at the passion of Christ. Yet, just as with the more traditional penal substitutionary theory of the atonement, it is open to serious criticisms, in particular that it does not really have a place for the resurrection of Christ, and secondly that it does not carry with it an indication of what the human response to the cross should be. These problems can be overcome by seeing additional facets to what happened in the *kenosis* of Christ. Firstly, Aulén (1950), in his criticism of the penal substitution theory, stresses the resurrection of Christ, but as victory over sin and death, a victory in which the believer can share, and so be saved. This is especially noteworthy in that although the theory would seem to focus on the total power and authority of God in the overcoming of evil, it is rather the case that the victory was achieved through the weakness of Christ on the cross. In this case, it gives a strong indication of the Christian approach to confronting wrong.

Secondly, Aulén (1950) draws particular support from Irenaeus. He is noted for his theory of "recapitulation", in that Christ was, in his incarnation, uniting with humanity, and drawing it to salvation. Significantly, he views this as the bestowal of what is real humanity; "those that fear God ... such are justly called men" (*Adv. Haer.* V 9.2, cited in Aulén 1950:38). A crude view of this, that Christ is the new "head" (Latin *caput*) of a redeemed humanity, so reversing by his obedience the effects of the sin of the first head, Adam (Lampe 1978: 48), is questioned today. Nevertheless Lampe then draws attention to a second aspect of the meaning of "recapitulation". Recapitulation then means, firstly, the reversal of the effects of the sin of humanity, typified by Adam, but, secondly, its union with the immortality of the

Son (Lampe 1978:49). Thus he adopted the problems, the humility and emptiness that is the common human lot, but then in his resurrection and glorification, carries it through to the fullness of salvation. A person who is “in Christ” shares in the experience of Christ, so dies to sin, and rises also to eternal life in Christ.

7. REAL SECURITY

Particularly with the second models, there is an indication of what real wholeness and fullness of life means. Humanity becomes as God intended it to be when it is fulfilled in the imitation of Christ, which includes his *kenosis* as a fundamental part of his nature. For Balthasar, *kenosis* reflects a “genuinely human act of trusting self-abandonment” (Macleod 1998:219). The humility and willingness to be a servant that is exemplified in the incarnation shows what real humanity is like, and even that real fulfilment comes not in seeking to benefit oneself, often at the expense of others, but in seeking to serve. However, such a lifestyle of sacrifice seems contrary to the normal human way of doing things, contrary to common sense. The Christian ethos is constantly subject to the accusation of impracticability. Certainly it can only make sense in the context of the security of the future.

In this regard, a perceived problem with the concept of open theism is that it is felt to make the Christian insecure because there is no guarantee that God will provide the future that he has promised (Ware 2002:208). Real human freedom adds an element of chance if the future is not controlled by God.

What open theism is putting forward is something believed to be inherent in the nature of reality. The future is open simply because it has to be; it is fundamentally unknowable. Even if God had made people into robots and so totally predictable, which would effectively fix the future, it is really still unknowable as it has not happened. Most open theists then depart from the full consistency of their position and say that although God does respect human free will, he may override this and intervene so that his purposes will be met; he does not leave the future entirely to chance and the whims of human choices. The future is partly settled (Pinnock 2002:217). The idea of *kenosis*, on the other hand, by its very nature includes a response to the fact that God

created people with free choice. Then by his own choice, he acted, in the incarnation and atonement, to help people in the need that was produced by their choice. God's action was for the benefit, and ultimate security of his people. There is no indication in the idea of *kenosis* that God is not ultimately trustworthy, but on the contrary, the whole process is done just because of his reliability, because it is the means of salvation.

The Philippians passage concludes with the distinct action of God in compelling the response of humanity. At that point there will be no further choice; "every knee shall bow" (Phil. 2:11). God then takes a further action to consummate the process, in this case complete the act of salvation. This is the same thing that is part of the Christian view of salvation, that God is ultimately reliable despite present appearances, and so faith can, and should, be placed in him, enabling salvation. The classic example is of course that of Abraham, who believed the promise of God despite the clear indication that a child was an impossibility (Rom. 4). So even though what we observe of Christ might seem to be incapable of saving, just because of his *kenosis*, his action contains the promise of a future consummation. After all, the hymn which celebrates *kenosis* does close with a prediction. This means that in the present situation of *kenosis*, human choices can be free; yet as this is not due to an inherent limitation in God, ultimately the future is secure under his control. Van den Brink (1993:219) cites the case of the control that a competent rider has over a horse, expressing real power.

For Abraham, the future was secure, but only secure because it rested on the fact that the future was not completely open, but that God would do what he had promised. Basically, the fulfilment of his life came from his faith, his relationship, to God. For Christians likewise. Such fullness of life depends on a complete relationship with God as his children, which is only possible through the opening of the Trinity. Through this, Jesus left the intimacy of the total inter-Trinitarian relationships so that people can be incorporated into that life. By the opening of the Trinity in the sending of Christ, the future of people in relation to him becomes closed; they become ultimately secure. More than this, the Trinity remains opened, so that people may participate in its life and so its future. The openness of the future is overcome in

the openness of God. As with Christ, this includes the anticipation of future glory.

8. CONCLUSION

The presentation of the attributes of God in “traditional theology” was attractive in the day, for it contrasted dramatically with the fickleness of the polytheistic deities and the insecurity attached to their worship. What may be asked, however, was whether, as in much of theology, this resulted in an overemphasis, a view of God supported by the more philosophical world-view of Plato and Aristotle. Again as often in theology, there were several reactions which stressed human responsibility, but often seen in antithesis to the views which were opposed. Particularly in view of the scriptural support for each pole, it becomes important to try to find a solution that does not reject one in favour of the other, but can accommodate both. Such a solution must also be rational, not hiding behind a claim of paradox and mystery, as is so often done. It is this that an affirmation of *kenosis* does, continuing to respect the total sovereignty of God, but exercised to accommodate human freedom.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

AULÉN G

1950. *Christus Victor: an historical study of the three main types of the idea of the atonement*. London: SPCK.

BAILLIE D M

1956. *God was in Christ: an essay on incarnation and atonement*. London: Faber & Faber.

BENNETT D & R

1974. *The Holy Spirit and you: a study-guide to the Spirit-filled life*. Eastbourne: Kingsway.

BOYD G A

2001. *Satan and the problem of evil: constructing a Trinitarian warfare theodicy*. Downer's Grove, Ill: InterVarsity.

CONGAR Y M J

1983. *I believe in the Holy Spirit, Vol. 3: The river of the water of life (Rev. 22:1) flows in the East and in the West*. New York: Seabury/ London: Geoffrey Chapman.

ERICKSON M J

1991. *The Word became flesh: a contemporary incarnational Christology*. Grand Rapids: Baker.

FIELD D

2003. Questions to an open theist. *Table talk* 8.

GRUDEM W

1994. *Systematic theology: an introduction to Biblical doctrine*. Leicester: InterVarsity/Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

HIGHFIELD R

2002. The function of divine self-limitation in open theism: great wall or picket fence? *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45(2):279-99.

HORTON M S

2002. Hellenistic or Hebrew? Open theism and Reformed theological method. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45(2):317-41.

KÖNIG A

1982. *Here am I! A Christian reflection on God*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

LAMPE G W H

1978. Melito and Irenaeus. In: H. Cunliffe-Jones (ed.), *A history of Christian doctrine* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark), pp. 40-50.

MACLEOD D

1998. *The Person of Christ*. Leicester: InterVarsity.

MASTER J

2002. Exodus 32 as an argument for traditional theism. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45(4):585-98.

MCGRATH A E

1997. *Christian theology: an introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.

MOLTMANN J

1981. *The Trinity and the kingdom of God: the doctrine of God*. London: SCM.

NICHOLLS J A

2002. Openness and inerrancy: can they be compatible? *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45(4):629-49.

PINNOCK C H

2001. *Most moved mover: a theology of God's openness (Didsbury lectures 2000)*. Grand Rapids: Baker/ Carlisle: Paternoster.

2002. There is room for us: a reply to Bruce Ware. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45(2):213-9.

RICHARD L

1997. *Christ: the self-emptying of God*. New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist.

SANDERS J

1998. *The God who risks: a theology of providence*. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity.

VAN DEN BRINK G

1993. *Almighty God: a study of the doctrine of divine omnipotence*. Kampen: Kok Pharos.

WARE B A

2002. Defining Evangelicalism's boundaries theologically: is open theism evangelical? *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45(2):193-212.

WELLUM S J

2002. Divine Sovereignty-Omniscience, inerrancy and open theism: an evaluation. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45(2):257-77.

WRIGHT R K M

1996. *No place for sovereignty: what's wrong with freewill theism*. Downer's Grove, Ill: InterVarsity.

Keywords

Trinity

Open theism

Kenosis

Free will

Trefwoorde

Drie-eenheid

Oop teïsme

Kenosis

Vrye wil