

Andrews University

Digital Commons @ Andrews University

Memory, Meaning & Life

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

10-19-2010

Arminianism and Adventism: Does Open Theism "Limit" God?

Angelika Kaiser

Andrews University, angelika@andrews.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/mml>

Recommended Citation

Kaiser, Angelika, "Arminianism and Adventism: Does Open Theism "Limit" God?" (2010). *Memory, Meaning & Life*. 64.

<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/mml/64>

This Blog Post is brought to you for free and open access by the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Memory, Meaning & Life by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.

Memory, Meaning & Faith

[Main](#)

[About](#)

[Archives](#)

October 19, 2010

Arminianism and Adventism: Does Open Theism "Limit" God?

One of the presenters during the Friday-afternoon Break-out sessions was T. Richard Rice, since 1998 professor at the School of Religion at Loma Linda University, California. Dr. Rice has (co-)authored several publications on the topic of Open Theism, a term he himself has coined for describing a theological school of thought that aims at explaining that God in his love has made his creatures with an inherent free will.

Richard Rice opened his presentation by reminding the audience of the recent passing of his friend and co-author, [Clark H. Pinnock](#) (Feb 3, 1937 - August 15, 2010) and by expressing his gratitude and appreciation for the good collaboration they had over the years, especially in the area of Open Theism (OT). Pinnock was a foremost proponent of OT.

One of the books Pinnock, Rice and others published on the topic of Open Theism (OT) was *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (InterVarsity Press, 1994). Rice pointed to the fact that the understanding of God as proposed in *The Openness of God* was object of much criticism and saw itself confronted with the accusation, that it undermines the Christian teaching of God's nature. Critics claim that the attractions of OT come at the cost of God's majesty, since its rigorous pointing to man's free has certain implications for God's foreknowledge and is supposedly not in harmony with God's sovereignty.

Over the years, according to Rice, the assessment of OT became more measured and was generated, from some theologians, a certain amount of appreciation. [Bruce L. McCormack](#), for example, saw "limited divine foreknowledge" as one foundation of OT and acknowledged that Open theists reject the concept of God's timelessness and impassibility and thus being consistent with "limited divine foreknowledge and a mode of relating to the world that is characterized by affectivity ad reciprocity" (from *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives*, Baker Academic, 2008).

Rice presented several examples in which critics of OT mainly pointed to the limitations of God that would be a result of holding on to OT. Thus [Millard Erickson](#) points out, that OT supports "limited foreknowledge" and opposes "the traditional view of exhaustive divine foreknowledge" (from *What Does God Know and When Does He Know It: The Current Controversy Over Divine Foreknowledge*, Zondervan, 2003). According to [Gary Dorrien](#), Open theists hold to "the classical Arminian position, in which God is viewed as having limited his power in relation to the world in order to give his creatures freedom to live and flourish within it" (from *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1998). Rice also cited [Roger E. Olson](#), who was one of the plenary presenters at the Arminianism and Adventism Symposium. Rice cited from Olson's "[God's Self-Limitation](#)" in which the author recognizes that the concept of God who is limiting himself in creation as well as in incarnation is "an important presupposition of classical Arminian theology and of open theism." Rice went on as to explain that for Olson God has limited power, because he freely choose to limit it. Two main reasons/purposes are given by Olson as for why God made this choice: 1. to have "real, rather than imaginary, relations with human persons" and 2. because only if God "limits his power in relation to creation" he can avert to be reponsible for evil. Divine determinism, according to Olson, "inevitably makes God the author of sin and evil."

Pinnock himself, as proponent of OT, employs limit language in order to show how similar OT and other theological schools of thought really are. Thus he states that the concept of OT is "not alone in positing libertarian freedom of divine self-limitation of power to make room for the creature. It is not unusual for contemporary theologians to speak of the divine self-limitation or kenosis whereby God freely chooses to allow the world to impact him without, however, losing his lordship over it ... [the OT-model] echoes many themes of the theology of hope, which recognizes a God who limits himself in creating a world which has the capacity to affect him without his losing his lordship over it." Thus Pinnock himself draws on words of

limitation.

The main thesis, however, Richard Rice presented, was the proposal that Open theists should avoid limiting language. That kind of terminology suggests limitations of God which are both unnecessary and misleading. Open theists, according to Rice, can make their points without using the notion of limits. Rice argued, that by avoiding limit language the discussion could focus more on the positive features of God's character and being.

Reasons for open theists to avoid the usage of limit language in characterizing God:

Reason # 1) The connotations of `limit` language.

The word "limit" carries negative connotations; it obviously points to something which is inferior, which has ends and boundaries. As we think of God, however, we think of the ultimate, the unexplainable, the never-ending and all-knowing and -encompassing and since OT is not targeting primarily at minimizing this understanding, limit language is inappropriate to clearly depict the main thesis of OT.

Reason # 2) The logic of omniscience.

Richard Rice indicates that the most negative reaction against OT is maybe the most inaccurate one, and that is the thinking, that OT is about divine foreknowledge. The accusation is made, that OT wants to eliminate the notion of God as foreknowing human free decisions. Rice countered with the statement that Open theists actually react to this accusation not by solving, but by dissolving it: regarding decisions out of the human free will, there is nothing to know, because they are not yet made. So in this regard one cannot speak of God's foreknowledge, since there is nothing to foreknow. The real question regarding human decisions is the status of free will decisions: are they foreknowable, or not? Thus the crucial question is: what is there to know? Rice stated, that nothing is wrong with God's foreknowledge or knowledge itself. It's just the question, What there is to know?

Reason # 3) The logic of decision.

OT believes, so Rice, that God had a choice when it came to creation, that he actually had the option of creating beings which either would enjoy freedom of will or not. If both choices were possible, then, why did God choose to create as he did, i.e. creatures with a free will? The choice between these two options is just existent, so OT, when both options are significantly different. By choosing one of these two options, God embraced the values of the one, and not of the other. That means, that absolute certainty about how humans will behave is not available in a creation where creatures enjoy libertarian freedom. But in a creation where the creatures have no free will, everything would of course be foreknowable, but at the cost of God becoming also the originator of evil and be less loving and less interested in real interaction and relationship with the beings he created. Either way, limitations are involved.

Reason # 4) The subtlety of divine power.

One reason, so Rice, for not employing limit language in order to explain God's nature by the OT-model, concerns the nature of divine power. God endows creature with capacity to exercise freedom, to make choices and contribute to ongoing events. God gives up a measure of divine power so creatures could have some for their own. But, as Rice indicated, there are problems with the basic presupposition of this thinking. The main presupposition is, that there is just a certain amount of power circulating around. Rice asked, why we should think of power this way. We do not think of love and happiness this way, i.e. that there exists just a certain amount of love and a certain amount of happiness in the universe. So why should we think of power that way?

Also, a world in which God's lets man partake in decision-making processes, may express God's nature more fully and adequately than a world where he decides everything himself. For Rice it seems to be a higher kind of power, where God takes

the choices of others into account, than where he makes all the choices by himself. Referring to [Gen 50:20](#) Rice pointed to Joseph who states that God made something good out of the bad the brothers intended.

Reason # 5) The richness of divine experience.


For the sake of representing the richness of the picture the Bible paints of God, limit language is unuseful. In Scripture God is shown as interactive, affected by the creatures he has made in his image, a God who changes his mind on certain things, who alters the plans he has and so on. Rice sees it as respecting the divine consultation, the divine "if", the divine "perhaps". Since the essential thesis of OT is to depict God as a being who motivates to personal relationships, it finds according to Rice, vast biblical support.

In his conclusion Rice pointed to the fact that Open theists have good reasons not to use language of limitedness. A main personal reason for Rice is that OT is philosophically defensible and has no need of employing words of limitation. Clark Pinnock spoke of God as acting in "perfect anticipation": he knows and foreknows the events that will surely happen if they depend on his own unilateral influence; he knows what is likely to happen seen the developments going on, and he knows what is possible to happen.

Posted by [Angelika Kaiser](#) on October 19, 2010 in [Arminianism and Adventism Symposium](#), [Historical Theology](#) | [Permalink](#)

[Save to del.icio.us](#) | 

Comments

 You can follow this conversation by subscribing to the [comment feed](#) for this post.

Verify your Comment

Previewing your Comment

Posted by: |

This is only a preview. Your comment has not yet been posted.




Your comment could not be posted. Error type:

Your comment has been posted. [Post another comment](#)

The letters and numbers you entered did not match the image. Please try again.

As a final step before posting your comment, enter the letters and numbers you see in the image below. This prevents automated programs from posting comments.

Having trouble reading this image? [View an alternate.](#)



[Contact](#)

[Archives](#)

[Feeds](#)

Powered by [TypePad](#)

Copyright © 2010 Andrews University