

“Can Classical Theism Support Creativity, Adventure, and non Conformity? A Reply to Process Theists.” John Sanders, Hendrix College. American Academy of Religion, Montreal. November 8, 2009.

I deeply enjoyed reading these papers and I agree with much that is in them. My comments will seek to further some of their ideas as well as raise some questions. Let me acknowledge that in their brief papers our presenters cannot say all that needs saying and they cannot provide all the qualifications they would like to make. Some of my comments may reflect qualifications they actually affirm but did not have space to include. Also, all questions and comments come from a particular belief system so I want you to know that mine arise from open theism and not from process theism.

Some readings which several of our authors may find beneficial.

1. For insightful studies from the Hebrew Bible on the theme of partnership with God see Terence Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Abingdon, 2005).
2. Niels Henrik Gregersen, “Faith in a World of Risks: A Trinitarian Theology of Risk-Taking.” Eds. Else Pedersen, Lam Holger and Peter Lodberg, *For all People: Global Theologies in Context: Essays in honor of Viggo Mortenson* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002): 214-233.
3. For a chapter that claims that one significant factor that leads to a decreased motivation in Christian learning is the attribution of prescience to God see John Hull, *What Prevents Christian Adults From Learning?* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991).
4. For a doctoral dissertation that argues that God has to have faith in creatures see William Curtis Holtzen, *Dei Fide: A Relational Theology of the Faith of God*. University of South Africa, 2008.

I have a number of questions and issues regarding the papers.

(1) Omniscience, exhaustive definite foreknowledge, and divine risk taking.

Epperly defines omniscience as “the affirmation that God knows everything in advance prior to the creation of the universe, thus, determining in advance what will happen without any authentic creaturely input.” (p. 4) Malone-France raises a similar issue at the end of his paper (pp. 10-11).

I have three issues to raise here. First, the definition of omniscience need not include knowledge of future contingent events. Malone-France defines omniscience as knowing all that is knowable and since it is not possible to have definite knowledge of what free creatures will do in the future, God is fully omniscient. I coined the term (I believe) “dynamic omniscience” to affirm that at any moment God knows all there is to know.¹

Second, does divine prescience entail that God is the one who determines all events? I agree that if God knows prior to creation all events that ever will occur then what we call the future is determined. However, this does not necessarily make God the cause of the determination. In the most historically widespread view, simple foreknowledge, God just “sees” what creatures will do which means that some of the

¹ See my *The God Who Risks*, revised edition, 2007, pp. 206-9.

divine knowledge is contingent upon what creatures decide to do. That is, the causal arrow goes from creatures to God. If the creatures had acted differently then God would have different knowledge. This leads to determinism because there is only one possible future instead of multiple possible futures. God knows exactly what we will do rather than what we might do and since God's knowledge of what will do cannot be incorrect, there is only one possible future which, once God knows it, is determinate and cannot be otherwise.

Third, is it correct that a God who possesses exhaustive definite foreknowledge cannot be a risk taker? Although both meticulous providence and middle knowledge exclude risk from God, the view known as simple foreknowledge does not eliminate divine risk. This is because in the logical order of knowing God "first" commits the divine self to create a world in which beings will have free will. At that point God does not know exactly how history will go and so God takes risks that creatures who God does not control will do things that God does not want them to do. After the divine decision to create such a world God "learns" what these beings will actually do in the world. God may be disappointed in what God sees will occur in the world but God cannot change what will, in fact, happen in the world because that would render the divine foreknowledge incorrect.² Dynamic omniscience is not the only view which entails divine risk.

(2) Is omnipotence the same as meticulous providence?

It seems to me that process theists (e.g. Malone-France's paper) often equate divine power with a particular understanding of how divine power is exercised. Omnipotence is generally understood as the ability to do anything that is compatible with the divine nature and is not logically impossible. Meticulous providence is a particular understanding of divine sovereignty which holds that God micromanages everything that happens in the world such that nothing happens, down to the movement of electrons, except that which God specifically ordains to happen. At any specific moment the world is precisely the way God ordains it to be. However, an omnipotent God need not necessarily enact this form of sovereignty which is what the theological tradition known as "free will theism" has affirmed against Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin. Process thinkers reject omnipotence because it entails the notion of unilateral causation and they also reject meticulous providence because it is deterministic. However, it seems to me that the real villain for the process thinkers on this panel is meticulous providence.

(3) Does meticulous providence entail mindless obedience and exclude new initiatives? Epperly claims that "Creatures are most faithful to God when they passively follow what God has willed apart from any input of their own. Coloring outside the lines or challenging traditional practices of the reigning religious or social order is viewed in terms of willful disobedience and sinful pride against God and the leaders God has ordained. Passive obedience is encouraged, while creative adventures of ideas and

² For why simple foreknowledge and timeless knowledge are useless for providence see the discussion in my *The God Who Risks*, revised edition, 2007, pp. 209-217.

practice in scientific exploration, literature, theology, or justice-seeking are discouraged as threatening to the prerogatives of God.” (p. 5)

I don't think this is correct. According to the meticulous providence view God micromanages every event such that the world is precisely as God wants it to be at that moment. A proponent of this view can argue that God has eternally ordained that no one color outside the lines until a specific point in time when someone does so. Calvin, for instance, certainly was not passive in rejecting the dominant church authority of his day. Also, the Puritans challenged the status quo because they believed that God had specifically ordained that they do so. Warren has certainly affirmed that God has determined the most important events of our lives but has he gone on to conclude that we dare not do anything innovative? I doubt it since he, in fact, has gone against the grain of certain evangelical practices. The reason why this is consistent is that according to the meticulous providence view whatever we do is what God specifically ordained that we do. If we don't challenge traditional practices then that is what God ordained whereas if we do challenge traditional practices then that is what God ordained. Passivity is not a necessary entailment of this view and its proponents can certainly be interested in creative enterprises, exploration and justice-seeking.

??? The proponent of meticulous providence may experience anxiety about whether or not a proposed course of action has been ordained by God. But then if she experiences anxiety it is because God eternally ordained she would and if she does not experience anxiety, well then that was ordained.

(4) The God of process theism, human creativity, and moral behavior.

Lee argues that “letting be” is what God does in order to allow us exercise creativity (p. 8). She also says that God accepts us just as we are (p. 10). Epperly says that “A non-competitive and creative God values creativity and adventure more than obedience and conformity” (p.7).

Perhaps within the family of process theists the term creativity has lots of connotations that those outside the family don't know. As an outsider the statements by our authors led me to wonder whether they believe that God simply affirms any sort of creativity without regard to what we do. But this is not the case. Epperly says that “Creaturely agency often leads to pain and suffering” so creativity may lead to evil and not just to good. Lee says that God is seeking to get us to work against injustice. This leads me to ask whether the process God might sometimes want us to conform and obey. Does the process God just let us be the way we are without trying to change us? Does not the God of process theology attempt to lure us into “better” choices and behaviors?

(5) Lee discusses Johnsons Mother-Sophia as life-giving force. One might compare this to the Odes of Solomon (second century Syriac Christianity). Ode 8 speaks of the breasts of God prepared that the believers might drink my holy milk and live by it.

Ode 19 reads:

1. A cup of milk was offered to me, and I drank it in the sweetness of the Lord's kindness.
2. The Son is the cup, and the Father is He who was milked; and the Holy Spirit is She who milked Him;
3. Because His breasts were full, and it was undesirable that His milk should be ineffectually released.
4. The Holy Spirit opened Her bosom, and mixed the milk of the two breasts of the Father.

It is interesting that it is the Father who provides the life-giving milk. Here is an action that is literally impossible for human males perform yet we have no difficulty understanding the point of the verse.

(6) Does Middle Knowledge entail that God has no Options?

Malone-France argues that a God with middle knowledge "*is not free*. For . . . if God has absolute knowledge of the definite actual future associated with each possible world that God might create, then it follows that God has absolute knowledge of which possible world is best. Add to this the claim of divine omnibenevolence and it follows, necessarily, that there is one and only one "choice" that God could make regarding which possible world to create." (p. 10)

It seems to me that this argument can be rendered problematic in two different ways. The first way is to ask whether or not the God of process thought escapes the accusation. According to process theology God has absolute knowledge of what is the right thing to do in each and every situation. God would know what is the best initial aim to put forth. Must not God always choose the best initial aim? If there is always one best initial aim and God is omnibenevolent, then the God of process theology does not have multiple options and so is not free in the sense desired by the author. Divine anxiety would not arise because God lacked absolute knowledge of what is the best thing for us to do but from whether or not we will do it.

The second way is to inquire whether a God with middle knowledge has no options. If God has middle knowledge then God selects which world to instantiate from innumerable possible worlds. Prior to creation a God with middle knowledge can guarantee that the result of the divine choice will result in overall divine satisfaction. Though even with middle knowledge God cannot guarantee that God gets everything God wants since there is an element of luck involved because the possible worlds are not determined by God. Perhaps the warehouse of feasible worlds just does not contain a world in which God gets, say, 80% of what God desires. It could be argued that in such a case God has to choose from worlds which are relatively better or worse than others. Some contemporary analytic philosophers argue that there is no absolute ranking of values. It is impossible to calculate that "so much" of one value is equal to a specific amount of a different value. Thus, God has to decide between incommensurable values which means that there is no single best world. If the relative goods and evils in these various worlds cannot be strictly

quantified then even if God has middle knowledge God would have a few feasible worlds as options to create instead of just a single best one.³

(7) Which contradictory attributes are present in the incarnation?

I found Suna-Koro's paper fascinating. However, I'm afraid I don't have enough expertise in post colonial theory to be much of a dialogue partner. Also, since my time is almost up I want to ask her about her assertion that the Chalcedonian definition breaks the law of non-contradiction because it entails "contrary attributes [that] could not possibly coexist within the same subject at the same time." (p. 7 and in note #15). In the paper you do not specify any of these contradictory attributes. Since you affirmed a divine kenosis I was wondering which specific "contrary attributes" you believe are present in the doctrine of the incarnation. If Suna-Koro replies that these attributes are actually logical contradictions (in the strong sense of the term) then I would ask how logical contradictions, since they are literally meaningless, can be used as part of a meaningful theology.

³ See William Hasker, *The Triumph of God Over Evil* (InterVarsity Press, 89-92) and Robert Merrihew Adams, "Must God Create the Best?" *Philosophical Review*. 81 (1972): 312-332.