Thomas Jay Oord, *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

My purpose in this review is to give a critical analysis and evaluation of the main claims set forth in Professor Oord's book, along with observations about its writing style, intended audience, and potential use.

Before doing so, however, I want to distinguish my review and critique from the ecclesiastical hysteria surrounding the ideas espoused in this book, a hysteria fomented by misguided theological wannabes of modest intellectual stature whose reverence for a past they do not understand is commensurate with their fear of ideas whose significance they cannot grasp. Professor Oord's book does, in my judgment, fail to persuade on certain crucial points; it is, however, marked by a deep pastoral concern for the Christian church and a keen sensitivity to the intellectual and practical difficulties generated by certain tenets of traditional conceptions of God. That the sentiments expressed in this and similar books have occasioned institutional panic in some quarters of the church is a measure, not of the book's shortcomings, but of the incapacity of some to appreciate the importance of intellectual coherence and a stubborn refusal to entertain the possibility that some have a better grip on the meaning of scripture than do they.

The chief value of *The Uncontrolling Love of God* lies in its ability to articulate, in a readable and fairly nontechnical way, the assumptions and conclusions of Open Theism and Relational Theology, especially in relation to alternative ways of thinking about God, freedom, and evil. As such, it is a valuable tool for anyone who wishes to become acquainted with this school of theology or to probe Professor's Oord's particular rendition of it. The writing style is extraordinarily clear, succinct where necessary, expansive where helpful. It is suitably interdisciplinary, given the wide range of topics, and discusses many important theological themes and representatives.

Additionally, it is a merit of Professor Oord's book that it identifies and rightly rejects one of the silliest ideas ever promulgated, an idea that is curiously favored in the Evangelical community. I refer to the notion that although, *in se*, God is omnipotent and sovereign, God has freely chosen not to exercise divine power in order to secure creaturely freedom. Space does not permit a rehearsal of Professor Oord's excellent dismantling of this absurd notion, but I commend him for calling attention to the Evangelical emperor's lack of intellectual clothing (see pp. 141 and 158).

Before proceeding to points of critique, I need to register my sense of confusion about this book's genre. Neither the preface nor the rest of the book indicates the intended audience. As this book is published by IVP Academic, I assume that it is an academic book and thereby expect a certain sort of argument, characterized by a breadth of evidence, a depth of logical rigor, and attention to formal arguments–the sorts of things that academic types favor. My expectation, however, remains unfulfilled. Perhaps, then, this book is intended for a more general audience. It does, I think, work better as a manifesto–a statement of first principles and conclusions–than as a work of analysis and argumentation (at least the sort of argumentation that I find persuasive).

Here is what I mean about the book's argumentation. For my taste, one finds in *The Uncontrolling Love of God* a disappointing array of unnecessarily weak arguments:

- Generalizations without supporting evidence: For example, "By the end of the twentieth century, it seemed the majority of Christian scholars rejected the classical view of impassibility (p. 125)." What is the basis of this claim? Similarly, Professor Oord argues

upon the basis of what "most of us think" (p. 33). How could the number of people who think in a certain way be established?

- Citation of the views of other theologians and philosophers in place of express argumentation–an excessive tendency to appeal to authorities.
- Questionable premises offered without justification: For example, "Such appeals do not help us make sense of life, which is what we are all trying to do" (p. 89). Is it true that making sense of life "is what we are all trying to do" and constitutes a valid criterion for judging theological claims?
- Offering evidence in place of argumentation: "As I argued earlier, the most powerful evidence for free will is our own personal experience. In the way we act, we all inevitably presuppose we are, at least to some degree, free. I call this an experiential nonnegotiable." (p. 60). Our sense of freedom may be useful evidence, but it does not constitute an argument.

I was similarly disappointed by the use of scripture in this book. The abundance of scriptural reference in this book is, sadly, not matched by a uniformly responsible use of scripture. For instance, Professor Oord believes that the Bible teaches us the reality of chance events via the episode about the unfortunate men who died when a wall fell upon them (Luke 13:2-5) (p. 30). But surely the purpose of the story is to deny that God caused the event, not that it was a chance event, in the rather loose way in which *chance* is used in this book. Likewise, Professor Oord has not resisted the temptation to exercise selective attention in his use of the Bible (e.g., p. 109). He thus has no trouble finding biblical passages that support his view, but there is a noticeable lack of reference to texts that do not fit so easily into his theses. Then, there is the strange practice of reading the biblical text in an overly literal manner (see, for instance, p. 110). For Professor Oord, there seems to be a fairly straight and simple line from biblical references regarding God's changing and repenting to affirmations suitable for a formal doctrine of God. When others engage in such linear reading, we ordinarily label them Fundamentalists.

On a different note, I wish to mention a certain conceptual looseness found in the book. Take *randomness*, for example. In the discussion of this important notion, the impression is given that randomness means that which is causally undetermined–at least I think that is what it means, for the book connects randomness and the indeterminacy described by quantum physics. At the same time, events such as the results of a coin-toss and the path of a golf ball blown by the wind are said to be random (pp. 32-33). But these latter events are surely not causally undetermined. They may be unpredictable, but they are not causally undetermined. Likewise, Professor Oord unwisely associates indeterminacy and randomness with chaotic, i.e., complex, systems (p. 36), even though physicists generally interpret complex systems as deterministic. Finally, it is doubtful that quantum indeterminacy really implies an open universe in the manner in which this book claims (p. 35).

Finally, I invite attention to one of the book's central claims, namely that in each moment God gives to creatures freedom, agency, and self-organization (e.g., pp. 169 and 173). This is a curious claim, because Professor Oord believes as well that "Self—organization at life's lower levels derives from the inherent structures of things in themselves. The form, genes or mere existence of a thing contributes to it becoming what it is, moment by moment" (pp. 52-53). Self-organization, then, and presumably the freedom and agency that depend on it, are the result of a thing's inherent structure. It is therefore not clear just what God contributes and one is tempted to find the book's claim (that it is God who gives freedom and agency) a vacuous one.

Regarded as a manifesto, there is much to like about "The Uncontrolling Love of God," not least its

commitment to courageously asserting the conclusions that follow from its assumptions. Readers may or may not agree with those conclusions, but this book serves the important function of presenting Open Theism and Relational Theology in the most persuasive light possible.