

Oord, Thomas Jay: (2022). **Pluriform Love: An Open and Relational Theology of Well-Being**. SacraSage Press, Middletown, DE. Paperback. 253 pages.
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by E. Maynard Moore

Tom Oord is constructing a both/and theology.

This is a radical departure from classical theism, and, in the 21st century, one can hope that Oord's coherent approach to Christian thought will continue to gain traction – even winning back to the faith many of those who have become skeptical of religious claims.

For too many people in this category – especially young people who now take seriously scientific explanations of the natural world – the claims of classical theism just do not square with their personal experience, regardless of tradition and the doctrines inherited from centuries of religious authority. To those, and many of us who long ago left behind the ‘master story’ built around orthodoxy, Oord is saying: wait a minute – you have a better option than either/or religious affirmations.

What Oord means is something like this. You do not have to choose (either/or) between science and Christian faith. You don't have to choose (either/or) between scripture and your personal experience. You can make a coherent both/and decision here. What you must do is recognize some of your assumptions and be open to another way to think about reality. If you adhere to a strictly literal reading of scriptural texts, what you are doing is affirming a seventeenth century scientific view of the world. You would be tacitly accepting the view that we live in a three-tiered universe with the firmament above, the earth below and underneath it all is the waters beneath the earth. To believe this you would be better off in the flat-earth society. The last four centuries have transformed the way we think about the universe, and it requires us to transform our way of thinking about religion as well – especially our Christian faith.

That does not mean throwing out our heritage or ejecting scripture from our thinking. On the contrary, Oord grounds his “open and relational theology” solidly in scripture. But it requires attention to the language of the original texts, which includes words and phrases that often escape accurate translations into modern English. For Oord, primary attention is required when we use the word LOVE – which has so many meanings in every-day usage that the important nuances in the sacred texts have become obscure. One important goal of this book is to recover these original nuances in Greek and Hebrew so that, once again, LOVE can serve as the foundational understanding of the word G-O-D.

Oord begins his treatment by showing, in Chapter One, how the word love has become something of a “catch-all” term for emotions, psychological ambiguity and shallow affections. We say we love anything from a new sweater to a deep dish pizza to an ocean cruise. What we have done is to so trivialize this word that it has lost all significance for us. Theologians – especially many Christian theologians – have not helped the situation since most of them choose one particular rendering for the word and exclude other meanings – so effectively that they unwittingly are joining ranks with those promoting an either/or theology.

Oord’s treatment makes reference to the biblical usage of the word love in the context of how we understand the universe in the 21st century, and in the process recovers for us essential qualities of the term as the foundation for our understanding of both the divine and the human. Once he clarifies the origin of the ambiguities in mainstream theology, in Chapter Two Oord provides for us his own definition of the term, especially in the context of God’s foundational character: Oord says (page 28): “To love is to act intentionally, in relational response to God and others, to promote overall well-being.” So defined, the rest of the book commits to a thorough treatment of the term, with specific implications from the Greek and Hebrew usage of this concept.

Oord turns first to the Greek, with special attention to the terms used in the New Testament which get translated into English as love: *agape*, *eros* and

philia. Most of us with any theological training are all too familiar with these root words, and most of us have read countless theological treatments through the ages, explaining these terms. In virtually every case, however, these theologians have emphasized one or the other of these terms while discounting the others as secondary. Again, this is an example of either/or theology. In contrast, Oord shows how the context in various scriptural passages helps to properly explicate each of these terms – and by “properly” we come to see how each of these terms enrich our understanding of love, both divine and human. We don’t have to choose between various renderings. We just have to understand the context in which they appear in scripture. What Oord has done for us is to present a coherent both/and theology.

In the process, at each point in dealing with the fullness of this more comprehensive understanding of love, Oord shows how classical theism fails us in the 21st century. He demonstrates how classical theism has attempted to integrate such terms as omnipotence, omniscience, eternity, impassibility, etc etc with a notion of God as love, but such efforts fail the test of logic and coherence. By the time we get to Chapter 7, Oord reveals his alternative view through a reference to “essential *kenosis*.” grounded in Paul’s treatment in Philippians Chap. 2 (page 154ff). Of the various options for understanding this critical concept, Oord selects the term “self-giving” as the description that best applies Paul’s meaning. This is affirmed best by recognizing that Paul’s treatment is exactly what Jesus commands and demonstrated in his own life and ministry. Thus, we today are called to identify with Jesus as Christ because this is how God reveals to us the imperative that inspires us to love. So inspired, we are called to live and act manifesting this other-enabling love.

All this is not to say the book is free from some annoyance. I have a quibble as to how Oord conflates his New Testament references to Paul’s writings far beyond the seven “authentic” Pauline letters. To conflate the Pastoral Epistles, Hebrews and later second century texts with Paul is not helpful. Similarly, to read Genesis as a unified text is even misleading when scholarship has shown that there are at least four different authorship sections of this opening book in the Bible, separated by centuries. And

although I agree with Oord's dismissal of the *Creatio ex nihilo* doctrine, I believe Oord needs further thought about his concepts of time and creation. This being said, these quibbles do not detract from the overall treatment of "God's controlling love" put forward in this book.

What I value most about Oord's treatment is how, by the time we get to Chapter 8, he specifically shows how this New Testament good news squares perfectly with the Hebrew understanding of the divine through scriptural usage about the Covenant, God's promises, and God's steadfastness. The two key Hebrew terms are "*hesed*" and "*ahavah*." The Hebrew writers used these terms over and over again in speaking about God's love and commitments to humanity, not only in various creation texts but also as a way to claim that God's love is "everlasting." Once again, Oord is clear that by using this term we are not referencing what the Greeks came to call "eternity." Such a perspective once again ties us up with the problematic claims of classical theism. In contrast, Oord shows how the Hebrew terms enable us to see divine love as a living and dynamic concept that in turn empowers us to live creatively and within fruitful and fulfilling relationships. In many ways, this Chapter itself is worth your valuable time and attention to this book.

Tom Oord has a lot to say here that furthers our thinking as we maneuver our way through so many traditional assumptions, shallow theologies, and the materialistic scientism in the 21st century. We constantly encounter religious detractors in the academy and in everyday life, not to mention the sterile claims in the churches that are founded in classical theism. This book is a valuable addition to the ongoing dialogue that is the essence of a living faith. More importantly, this theological perspective, which Oord calls open and relational theology, provides a solid grounding for our personal ethical commitments and a broader social ethic in the days ahead.