

## Book Review: Pluriform Love: An Open and Relational Theology of Well-being<sup>1</sup>

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*Pluriform Love* is a catalytic book. Thomas Oord has pursued a thorough exploration of love as essential and primary to God's nature and as such, central to the way we make sense of both our orthodoxy and our orthopraxis. He frames his theological proposals in reference to the Wesleyan quadrilateral<sup>2</sup> and his central conviction is that the Western classical tradition has poorly understood and articulated love, resulting in a failure to produce a coherent understanding of God in relation to both Creation and the ongoing reality of evil and suffering.

I have been following Oord's 'Love project' with interest over the last fifteen years. He takes up important questions and explores conversations at the frontiers of science, theology, scripture and lived experience, opening new avenues of understanding. His style is at times provocative in its concise assertions and yet it retains a humbly pastoral and visionary quality which illuminates new horizons. This is an important book, especially for those of us who have had a strong formation in the Western Augustinian tradition and who experience a creeping cognitive dissonance. Oord pushes on the door of mystery as a conscientious seeker of truth and while his synthesis is erudite, it is accessible to a wide readership precisely because he himself is accessible and relational, weaving his significant pastoral and personal observations into his academic work in dialogue with countless others.

So then, a brief review of the content. *Pluriform Love* opens in chapter one, addressing the question of *why* love has been misunderstood, poorly defined, and rendered secondary in so much theological and biblical scholarship. Notwithstanding his critical review of specific scholarly contributions, Oord is careful to acknowledge the significant obstacles, both from within the biblical text and from within our contemporary vocabulary and understanding of love, to constructing a coherent doctrine of love. His own definition, in chapter two, expresses love as a verb which acts, '...intentionally, in relational response to God and to others, to promote overall well-being.'<sup>3</sup> find this a convincing definition which gives primacy to biblical witness and addresses the important

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Oord *Pluriform Love: An Open and Relational Theology of Well-being*. (SacraSage Press, USA, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Wesley's methodology for theological reflection took the Reformation emphasis of *sola scriptura* and made it *prima scriptura*, along with tradition (doctrines and practices of the church), reason and Christian experience.

<sup>3</sup> Oord, 2022. 28.

relationship of love with ethics and justice in producing well-being at both interpersonal and public levels.

Oord develops this view of love further in chapter three when he engages with 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian, Anders Nygren, whose thinking has been very influential in evangelical circles for defining *agape* as the *only* legitimate form of divinely sourced, Christian love. Forming an important deconstructive pivot, this chapter brings into focus Oord's rejection of Nygren's *agapism* which he counters, in chapter 4 with an alternative interpretation of *agape* as illumined by the Synoptic Gospels. This 'in spite of' love, is characterised by a self-giving, *kenotic* quality exemplified by the life of Jesus Christ and forms a powerful rationale for Oord's theodicy, which he develops later in the book.

In chapter 5 Oord outlines his trenchant critique of Western theology's most influential thinker, Augustine of Hippo, and concludes that Augustine's God does not, in fact, love us and that we should discard Augustine's views on love as they promote a detached view of a God who needs nothing from us. One of the strengths of Oord's bold approach to engaging antiquity is his ability to configure the consequences and limitations that certain ancient and contextual belief-sets may take in our modern era; influenced by the philosophies and contextual realities of his time, Augustine's God is unpalatable and undesirable in the light of the present. Oord regards Augustine's God as the 'ultimate narcissist' who uses people for his own satisfaction; a God who 'only loves Godself' and that only by loving Godself in creatures does God have 'any reason to interact with them.'<sup>4</sup> Has that view borne bad fruit in our experience? I would say it has.

Having explored his contentions with Augustine's doctrine of God and his views of love as *eros* or desire, Oord continues, in chapter six, to develop his reasons for rejecting *any* theological framework which fails to help us understand the love portrayed, both in the biblical text, and so tangibly at work in the world. His rigorous analysis and rejection of the philosophical underpinning of classical theism is followed by an outline of his own analogies of love, including the similarities and differences between divine and human forms of love which 'better fit love expressed by God and creatures as portrayed in scripture.'<sup>5</sup> Oord carefully illustrates, using Augustine's classical theism as his case study, his own litmus test, '...for philosophy's adequacy for a Christian theology of love' which is 'the measure to which it illumines the way God loves and calls us to do the same'.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 108.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 131.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 112.

Oord's reconstructive project comes fully into view in chapter seven. He develops an alternative Jesus-centred framework for understanding love, rooted in Clark Pinnock's open and relational theology and demonstrates how it helps us address the problem of evil which so vexes a theology of love: 'An essentially *kenotic* God is blameless'<sup>7</sup> as He cannot control 'anyone or anything'.<sup>8</sup>

The remaining two chapters advance a helpful biblical model of the pluriform nature of love which sustains Paul's vision 'that all creation be redeemed' which logically follows a right understanding that 'Love for creation is God's essence'.<sup>9</sup> Oord concludes his defence of the centrality of love by engaging with the problem of suffering within the context of his alternative evolutionary doctrine of creation, *creatio ex creatione sempiternalis in amore*, 'God, in love, everlastingly creates out of or in relation to creation'.<sup>10</sup> Once again, he argues against the classical position of *creatio ex nihilo*, which, he maintains, is not substantially supported by Scripture.<sup>11</sup>

In conclusion, *Pluriform Love* is a book well worth reading. The centrality of an essentially empathic, self-giving, uncontrolling love is key to Oord's open and relational understanding of God. This contrasts starkly with Augustine's impassible, timeless, immutable, and simple God. Oord advances both an intelligible theodicy, and a model for Christ-centred discipleship which takes seriously the mandate to participate as co-creators with divine love. This is a book which grapples with weighty theological conundrums with a persuasively light and illuminating touch, and invites readers to think, to feel, and, with hope, to create with love.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 155.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 161

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 221

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 217

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 189 and footnote 37.