



*The Uncontrolling Love of God:
An Open and Relational Account
of Providence*

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It's Utter Pandemonium: Is It All God-Controlled?

On April 15, 2013, Mark Wolfe finished the Boston Marathon. Not long thereafter, Wolfe witnessed the massive destruction of terrorist-devised bomb blasts near the finish line. "It's utter pandemonium," he said, describing the chaos. "Everybody's just in disbelief and sadness."

While Wolfe and others observed the devastation firsthand, people around the nation and world turned to the media for details of the tragedy. The explosions caused more than chaos and damage to nearby structures. At least 250 bystanders and runners were injured. Fourteen required amputations. Three died.

The stories of the injured, maimed and deceased captured hearts around the world. Reports of heroic helpers at the bombing scene soon emerged. Police officers, firefighters, nurses, physicians and ordinary citizens were good Samaritans in a time of dire need. While the public lauded the helpers, grief and shock prevailed. Making sense of things proved difficult.

A few days later, FBI agents identified Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev as the disaster's masterminds. The brothers placed nails, ball bearings and other metals in pressure cookers and detonated the homemade explosives with remote devices. After police had found the two, a chase ensued and authorities killed one. Authorities eventually captured the second, and he admitted to their crime. Religious beliefs motivated them, Mr. Tsarnaev said. This calamity seemed another in a long list of evils perpetrated in the name of God, Allah or some other religious ultimate.

The Boston Marathon bombing is not unique of course. Terror-motivated bombings occur throughout the world, although in the United States they occur less frequently. Some blasts are more deadly and more damaging. But any terrorist bombing – no matter where it occurs – is one too many.

Believers in God explain events like the Boston Marathon bombing in various ways. Writing as a guest columnist in the *Orlando Sentinel*, Josh Castleman affirmed his belief in God despite the Boston horror. "I realize that many people will see this tragic event as evidence against God's existence," wrote Castleman in the newspaper. "But the reality is that in order for thousands of people to feel relief and joy, some had to feel unspeakable pain and heartache."

Castleman concluded his piece with a rhetorical question: "Where was God during the

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bombing?” He answers: “I think he was right in front of us, and he was hoping we wouldn’t just focus on the brief moment of evil, but instead, recognize him in the hours and days that followed.”

Some believers make sense of life by saying we need evil to appreciate the goodness of God and that God consoles those who suffer. Castleman seems to think evil is necessary for this purpose when he says that “in order for . . . people to feel relief and joy, some had to feel unspeakable pain and heartache.” Without evil, we would not know good, says this argument. To know firsthand the God of all consolation, we need reasons to be consoled.

We must go through hell to appreciate heaven.

The belief that God is present with those who suffer is increasingly common. “God suffers with us,” many say. God experienced pain and death in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, say Christians, and as a Fellow Sufferer, God now suffers with those in the throes of pain. In the midst of our greatest difficulty, God is present and empathetic. Many believers say they worship a suffering God. But must we endure evil to appreciate good? And can we best account for evil by saying God is present to and suffers with victims?

Most believers think God can do anything. God could control people or situations and stop any evil event, they say. If this is true, God must voluntarily allow evil just to suffer alongside victims. God permits evil in order to feel our agony. God could stop such evil, says this view, but God allows it so that we can feel supported in the midst of our pain.

Does this view make God a masochist? And do we want to emulate masochists? Do *we* always allow loved ones to suffer so we can suffer with them? Do we think it more loving to suffer with others than to prevent evil, if we were able, in the first place?

I think we should doubt that evil is a prerequisite for good, especially the vast amount of evil in our world. The amount of evil far outweighs whatever we might need to appreciate good. Besides, most Christians believe in an afterlife of eternal bliss. If we follow the logic of “good requires evil,” heaven must include pain and evil so saints can appreciate the heavenly hereafter. Not only does this way of thinking make evil necessary, but it causes one to wonder if the saints could experience perfect bliss knowing that evil makes their bliss possible.

Presumably, the Tsarnaev brothers used their free will to construct and detonate the Boston bombs. Yet their victims were apparently random: runners and bystanders just happened to be where bombs exploded. The brothers freely wreaked deadly havoc, yet their victims unknowingly ran by or stood near the blast.

This may prompt believers to ask different questions: Was the Boston Marathon bombing

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BOOK EXCERPT

part of God's providence? Although the victims seemed random, did God pick them to be injured or killed as part of a divine master plan? Are free will and randomness ultimately unreal because they actually manifest God's all-controlling hand?

Should we say evil is required, God-intended or even God-allowed?

— Taken from chapter one, "Tragedy Needs Explanation"



Thomas Jay Oord (PhD, Claremont Graduate University), author of *The Uncontrolling Love of God: An Open and Relational Account of Providence*

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A Legacy as the Theologian of Love

Thomas Jay Oord (PhD, Claremont Graduate University) is professor of theology and philosophy at Northwest Nazarene University in Nampa, Idaho. He serves as adviser or on the councils of several scholarly groups, including the Open and Relational Theologies group (AAR), Biologos, Institute for Research on Unlimited Love, Research Theological Fellowship, Wesleyan Theological Society and the Wesleyan Philosophical Society.

Oord has written or edited more than twenty books, including *Defining Love: A Philosophical, Scientific, and Theological Engagement* and *The Nature of Love: A Theology* and *Theologies of Creation: Creatio Ex Nihilo and Its New Rivals*. He is known for his contributions to research on love, open and relational theologies, postmodernism, issues in religion and science, and Wesleyan, holiness and evangelical theologies.

Oord's latest book, *The Uncontrolling Love of God*, relates directly to his previous research and academic work on love and open and relational theologies, and in this profound text he argues that we need a new understanding of providence, one that unpacks how the world can both be full of awful evil and awe-inspiring goodness.

"A work of a mature thinker, this book secures Oord's legacy as *the* theologian of love," praises Amos Yong, professor of theology and mission at Fuller Theological Seminary. "It is a comprehensive theological response to the age-old question of how genuine evil exists even assuming the omnipotent and omnibenevolent God of Christian faith, and is all the more compelling given its biblical, philosophical and scientifically informed tapestry – no mean feat! The faithful across all Christian traditions will be encouraged to live a life of love even as skeptics will be invited to think again and again."

"Most Christians believe God is loving and active in the world," says Oord. "Despite divine providence, however, we encounter both evil and randomness in the world. I was motivated to write a book offering a theory of providence that takes evil and randomness seriously, while affirming that God is involved in the world and good all the time. Consequently, I offer an open and relational theology of providence that emphasizes what I call 'essential kenosis': God's necessary self-giving, others-empowering love. This theology of providence affirms genuine randomness and explains why God is not culpable for failing to prevent genuine evil."

Oord serves as an ordained minister in the Church of the Nazarene and in various consulting and administrative roles for academic institutions, scholarly projects and research teams. He and his wife Cheryl have three daughters.