

Classic Arminianism and Open Theism: A Substantial Difference in Their Theologies of Providence

Ever since the emergence of open theism on the evangelical scene in the 1990s, there have been several attempts to saddle Arminianism with the theological interests of open theism. On the one hand, Reformed theologians find it to their advantage to identify Arminianism and open theism, if for no other reason than the slippery slope argument has a concrete example. Open theists, on the other hand, seek some historical legitimacy through identification with Arminianism if not also some kind of theological cover. As a result, whether one is seeking to delegitimize open theism (as Reformed theologians intend) or to legitimize it (as open theists intend), it is to the mutual benefit of Reformed theology and open theism to classify Arminianism and open theism together.

At one level all agree that there is a significant chasm between Calvinists and free will theists. Arminians and open theists stand together on one side of that abyss. Most agree that libertarian freedom is a significant part of that great divide.¹ Consequently in a recent *4 Views* book entitled *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God*, Paul Helm and Bruce Ware represent Calvinist positions whereas Roger Olson and John Sanders represent libertarian positions. Ware's introduction places Olson and Sanders in a "broad Arminian camp."²

Sanders, no doubt, appreciates Ware's classification. One of Sanders' interests has been to persuade the evangelical community that open theism is closer to a miniscule

¹ Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000), 220, 226.

² Bruce A. Ware, "Introduction," in *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God: 4 Views*, ed. by Bruce A. Ware (Nashville: Broadman Press, 2008), 2.

modification of Arminianism than a radical revision.³ Indeed, Sanders seems to emphasize only two major differences, that is, the extent of divine foreknowledge and divine temporality.⁴ Between these, according to Sanders, the main issue is the question of exhaustive foreknowledge.⁵ But even then there “are *no practical differences*” between the two.⁶ Neither Arminianism nor open theism questions the nature of foreknowledge as divine dependence upon contingent events—no matter what their understanding of divine temporality.⁷ Open theism is actually, according to Sanders, “an attempt to correct some logical problems” that “are present in establishment Arminianism.”⁸ In fact, Sanders refers to his position as “open Arminianism.”⁹

Olson does not dispute Sanders’ minimalization of the differences between Arminianism and open theism.¹⁰ While Olson disagrees with Sanders’ conclusions concerning exhaustive foreknowledge, his essay does not note any other significant

³ John Sanders, “‘Open Theism’: A Radical Revision or Miniscule Modification of Arminianism,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 38 (2003): 69-102. Cf. John Sanders, “Why Simple Foreknowledge Offers No More Providential Control than the Openness of God,” *Faith and Philosophy* 14 (1997): 26-40 and “Be Wary of Ware: A Reply to Bruce Ware,” *JETS* 45 (2002): 221-31.

⁴ Sanders, “Radical Revision,” 77-8.

⁵ Sanders, “Responses to Roger Olson,” in Ware, *Perspectives*, 182.

⁶ Sanders, “Radical Revision,” 92 (*italics original*).

⁷ Steven Studebaker, “The Mode of Divine Knowledge in Reformation Arminianism and Open Theism,” *JETS* 47 (2004): 469-80.

⁸ Sanders, “Radical Revision,” 78.

⁹ Sanders, “Radical Revision,” 90.

¹⁰ Olson defines “classical Arminianism” as a Protestant evangelical who affirms the five points of the 1611 Remonstrance (to which the TULIP of Calvinism responds) and thus includes open theism within this definition (Olson, “Diversity of Calvinism/Reformed Theology,” <http://rogereolson.com/2010/08/13/diversity-of-calvinismreformed-theology/>). In this sense, open theists may not differ from classical Arminians, but this is the neither subject of this paper nor was it the topic of the *4 Views* book.

differences.¹¹ Olson did not exploit some of the key differences between the two positions even as he uses the language that would enable him to do so. For example, in contrast to theological determinism (“divine determinists”) where God exercises “absolute, meticulous control of every twist and turn of every molecule,” Arminians believe that “God *concur*s with every decision and action creatures make and do, but he does not cause all of it or control all of it.”¹² This one concept—concurrency—pinpoints a key, if not the key, difference between classic Arminianism and open theism, that is, the theological notion of concurrence in relation to providential divine governance. Whereas Olson contends that Arminians “agree that God is intimately involved in everything that happens,” this is not true of open theism.¹³

I intend to illuminate this key difference as an exercise in historical theology. I will do so by first articulating Arminius’ own understanding of concurrence in divine governance and then I will contrast this position with Sanders’ theology of providence. As a result, I will make the case that Arminius’ position is a significant and substantive alternative to both Reformed theology and open theism. While Reformed theology may be called a “Sovereignty of the Divine Decrees” and open theism a “Sovereignty of the Divine Project,” I call Arminius’ perspective a “Sovereignty of Divine Engagement.”

I. ARMINIUS ON DIVINE CONCURRENCE

¹¹ Olson, “Responses to John Sanders,” in Ware, *Perspectives*, 248-51.

¹² Olson, “The Classical Free Will Theist Model of God,” in Ware, *Perspectives*, 171 (my emphasis).

¹³ Olson, “Responses to Bruce A. Ware,” in Ware, *Perspectives*, 132.

Olson describes Arminius' notion of "divine concurrence" as "the most subtle aspect of his doctrine of sovereignty and providence."¹⁴ It is most thoroughly discussed in the secondary literature by Richard A. Muller in his *God, Creation and Providence in the Thought of Jacobus Arminius*.¹⁵ He argues that Arminius' theology of providence is a "modified Thomism" in response to the development of "early orthodox Reformed scholasticism."¹⁶ Specifically, Arminius modifies early Reformed orthodoxy "with a distinctly Molinist view of divine concurrence."¹⁷ This modification differentiates Arminius from his Reformed contemporaries but it also embraces an understanding of concurrence that is antagonistic to open theism. This demands close attention because the implications are momentous.

Divine concurrence is a common assumption in Thomistic as well as in emerging Reformed scholasticism. It affirms that God is the first cause of all finite acts. Through concurrence God sustains finite reality, provides both the capacity and efficacy of creaturely actions, and specifically directs those actions toward the divine goal. In other words, God is the primary causal factor in every finite act—God sustains, effects, and directs everything.

Arminius modifies this understanding of concurrence. He maintains the notions of sustenance and direction, that is, God ontologically sustains every act and directs

¹⁴ Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myth and Realities* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 22.

¹⁵ Richard A. Muller, *God, Creation, and Providence in the Thought of Jacobus Arminius* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 235-68.

¹⁶ Muller, *God, Creation and Providence*, 268.

¹⁷ Muller, *God, Creation and Providence* 266. On Arminius' Molinism, see Eef Dekker, "Was Arminius a Molinist?" *Sixteenth Century Journal* 27 (1996): 337-52.

(governs) every act. He modifies, however, efficacy. Specifically, in the divine permission of sin “God suspends any efficiency (*efficientia*) possible to Him.”¹⁸ He writes:

The last Efficiency of God concerning the Beginnings of sin, is the *Divine Concurrence*, which is necessary to produce every act; because nothing whatever can have an entity except from the First and Chief Being, who immediately produces that entity. The Concurrence of God is not his immediate influx into a second or inferior *cause*, but it is an action of God immediately [*influens*] flowing into *the effect* of the creature, so that the same effect in one and the same entire action may be produced [*simul*] simultaneously by God and the creature.¹⁹

Whereas traditional scholasticism affirmed a divine “influx” in the secondary cause such that God is a casual actor in every act, Arminius—following Molina (at least with regard to sin)—places this efficacy in the effect rather than the cause. God simultaneously acts in the effect rather than “acting *in* or *on* the secondary cause.” For Arminius, as Muller notes, God acts “*with* the secondary cause and flowing, with it, into its action and effect.” This protects the secondary cause as “determinative of its own action, and, therefore, free,” while at the same time recognizing the simultaneous action of God.²⁰ God, as Arminius writes, “joins His own concurrence to the creature’s influence”²¹ and that concurrence “produce[s] an act.”²²

¹⁸ Jacobus Arminius, “Examination of Dr. Perkin’s Pamphlet on Predestination,” in *The Works of James Arminius*, trans. James Nichols and William Nichols (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986 reprint of 1825, 1829 and 1875 volumes) 3.390.

¹⁹ Arminius, “Public Disputations,” X.ix, *Works* 2:183.

²⁰ Muller, *God, Creation and Providence*, 255.

²¹ Arminius, “An Examination of Dr. Perkin’s Pamphlet on Predestination,” *Works* 3.418.

²² Arminius, “An Examination of Dr. Perkins’ Pamphlet on Predestination,” *Works* 3.398. Cf. William Lane Craig, “Response to Paul Kjess Helseth,” in *Four Views of Divine Providence*, ed. Dennis W. Jowers (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 57: “...in Molina’s view, God not only conserves both the secondary agent and its effect in being, he also wills specifically that the effect be produced, and he concurs with the agent by causing the intended effect. Without such concurrence, the effect would not be produced.”

The difference between acting in and acting with regarding sin is the difference between a theological determinism and libertarian freedom as it pertains to efficacy. A theological determinism attributes the primary efficacy to divine causation such that God causes the sinful action within the secondary cause. Arminius wants to avoid such a position because he thinks it makes God the author of sin. Consequently, Arminius argues that in the determination of the agent to sin there is a suspension of divine efficacy in that determination along with the specific enabling permission of God. For Arminius, God ontologically sustains the secondary cause as the determinate cause, enables the capacity for secondary causation, and acts *with* the secondary cause rather than determining the secondary cause's action. Arminius rejects God as the primary (determinate) efficient cause in the sinful acts of the secondary agent because he wants to preserve both the freedom of the human will and the goodness of God who is not the author (cause) of sin.²³

At the same time, while God permits evil, God actively performs the good. God is the ultimate cause in the performance of good such that all the glory for such goodness belongs to God. Arminius, therefore, affirms that “the power of God serves universally, and at all times, to execute these acts, with the exception of permission.”²⁴ It appears, then, that the influx of power is universal except in the specific permission of moral evil.

²³ Arminius, “Letter Addressed to Hippolytus A Collibus,” III, *Works* 2:697-8: “I most solicitously avoid two causes of offense,—that God be not proposed as the author of sin—and that its liberty be not taken away from the human will: Those are two points which if anyone knows how to avoid, he will think upon no act which I will not in that case most gladly allow to be ascribed to the Providence of God, provided a just regard be had to the Divine pre-eminence.”

²⁴ Arminius, “Private Disputations,” XXVIII, viii., *Works* 2:367.

“For God does [effects] every good thing.”²⁵ God concurs in sustenance, capacity, efficacy, and effect for humanity’s good acts, but with regard to evil the divine efficacy is absent as a determinate cause since God does not cause evil.²⁶

Arminius appears to understand God’s relation to good and evil acts as “asymmetrical,” which is what both Bruce Ware and D. A. Carson have called it.²⁷ Here is Carson’s explanation:

[God] stands behind good and evil *asymmetrically*. To put it bluntly, God stands behind evil in such a way that not even evil takes place outside the bounds of his sovereignty, yet the evil is not morally chargeable to him; it is always chargeable to secondary agents, to secondary causes. On the other hand, God stands behind good in such a way that it not only takes place within the bounds of his sovereignty, but it is always chargeable to him, and only derivatively to secondary agents.²⁸

Ware explains the asymmetry as the difference between “‘direct-causative’ divine action” and “‘indirect-permissive’ divine agency.” On the one hand, God directly causes all good that is manifested in secondary agents. God is the active cause of human goodness. On the other hand, while God “cannot will directly and immediately to cause evil,” God “permits the evil to occur that he could, in any and every instance, prevent.”²⁹ On this score, then, God is passive in relation to evil and does not cause it. At the same time, God “permit[s] only those occurrences of evil that he knows will serve and never

²⁵ Arminius, “Examination of Dr. Perkins’ Pamphlet,” *Works* 3:371. Also, “For He permits sin, but does [effects, JMH] good” (*Works* 3.371).

²⁶ This point is noted by J. Matthan Brown, “The Impact of Luis de Molina on Jacob Arminius,” <http://jmatthanbrown.wordpress.com/2009/11/19/the-impact-of-luis-de-molina-on-jacob-arminius/> (accessed March 17, 2011). *Contra Muller, God, Creation and Providence*, 236.

²⁷ Ware, “A Modified Calvinist Doctrine of God,” in Ware, *Perspectives*, 102-109 and D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 213-18.

²⁸ Carson, *How Long?* 213.

²⁹ Ware, “Modified Calvinist,” in Ware, *Perspectives*, 103, 105-6.

thwart or hinder his purposes.”³⁰ Thus, in contrast to open theism that “accepts a world filled with innumerable instances of gratuitous or pointless evil, in the Reformed conception there is never, at any time or in any circumstance, such pointless evil.”³¹

That for which Ware contends is exactly the position of Arminius. God effects good and permits evil. Ware, however, differs from Arminius on at least two points. First, Ware is a compatibilist while Arminius is some sort of libertarian, but how this difference plays out is unclear since God is “permissive” rather than “directive” regarding moral evil according to Ware. How is a truly permissive act compatibilistic? Second, Ware roots divine actions in the immutable divine decrees whereas Arminius does not. Ultimately, Ware must affirm that God determines or decrees moral evil, but perhaps this is exactly where his modified Calvinism comes into play. Indeed, Helm questions Ware on this point: if everything happens “in accordance with the divine decree,” then “God’s relation to evil is not simply permissive.”³² Whatever the meaning of these differences, Ware’s modified Calvinism and Arminius seemingly share common ground on the question of God’s providential relation to evil.

Rejecting theological determinism, Arminius nevertheless suggests a high view of providence that far outstrips anything imagined by open theism. For example, in every finite act, God acts with creation. This “with” means that there is no dimension of the finite creation where God is not active and simultaneously working toward the divine goal. Even when the action is sinful, God specifically permits the sin, concurs in its effect

³⁰ Ware, “Modified Calvinist,” in Ware, *Perspectives*, 107.

³¹ Ware, “Modified Calvinist,” in Ware, *Perspectives*, 108.

³² Paul Helm, “Responses to Bruce A. Ware,” in Ware, *Perspectives*, 129.

by acting alongside the agent, and directs it toward the divine goal. This does not mean that God approves the act in the sense of sanctioning it, but rather that God has sustained the act, given the capacity to act, and has acted in the effects of the sin toward God's own purposes—God has concurred in the act through permission and has thereby concurred (and thus acted) in the effect. In this sense, God effects the act but God is “permittor [*sic*] prior to being the effector.”³³ God concurs and is thus the effector of the act but the prior permission means that God is not cause of the sin. Arminius summarizes the point in this way:

I openly allow that God is the cause of all actions which are perpetrated by His creatures. But I merely require this, that that efficiency of God should be so explained as that nothing whatever be derogated thereby from the liberty of the creature, and that the guilt of sin itself be not transferred to God; that is, that it may be shown that God is indeed the *effector of the act*, but only the *permittor of the sin* itself; nay, that God is at the same time the effector and permittor of one and the same act.³⁴

God, as den Boer explains, becomes “the *effector* of the sinful act by joining his *concursus* to the influence of the creature, without which *concursus* an act would never come to pass.”³⁵ Thus, God is both effector and permittor of the act though permittor first.

This is not theological determinism but rather a sustaining and governing sovereignty. Arminius draws the contrast by commenting on a statement in the “*Confession of the Dutch Churches*” as he knew it (a potential revision of the Belgic Confession):

³³ Arminius, “Public Disputations,” X.ix, *Works* 2:183.

³⁴ Arminius, “Examination of Dr. Perkins’ Pamphlet on Predestination,” *Works* 3:415.

³⁵ William den Boer, *God’s Twofold Love: The Theology of Jacobus Arminius (1559-1609)* (Reformed Historical Theology, 14; trans. by Albert Gootjes; Oakville, CT: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), 98.

“Nothing is done without God’s ordination,” [or appointment]: If by the word “ordination” is signified “that God appoints things of any kind to be done,” this mode of enunciation is erroneous, and it follows as a consequence from it, that *God is the author of sin*. But if it signify, that “whatever it be that is done, God ordains it to a good end,” the terms in which it is conceived are in that case correct.³⁶

Every finite act in the world, then, serves the divine goal and is ordained to a good end. Even sin, though it is not a good itself, can serve God’s end whether “the creature intend the same end” or not.³⁷ Divine permission is “ordained...to a certain end, and that the best end.”³⁸ God uses even sin “for the end that he himself wills” and “does not allow the sin that he permits to lead to any end that the creature intends.”³⁹ God, indeed, places a “limit on his permission, and a boundary on sin that it may not wander and stray in infinitum at the option of the creature.” God prescribes the “time” and the “magnitude” of sin,⁴⁰ and thus “wisely, justly, and powerfully directs sin wherever he wills.”⁴¹ God both delimits and directs sin within the creation. God justly governs the creation in such a way that “all things” are “administered...to the best ends, that is, to the chastisement, trial, and manifestation of the godly—to the punishment and exposure of the wicked, and to the illustration of his own glory” and God “employed that form of administration which

³⁶ Arminius, “Declaration of Sentiments,” X, *Works* 1.704-705.

³⁷ Arminius, “Public Disputations,” IX.xvii, *Works* 2.172.

³⁸ Arminius, “Examination of Dr. Perkin’s Pamphlet on Predestination,” *Works* 3.390.

³⁹ Arminius, “Public Disputations,” X.x, *Works* 2.184.

⁴⁰ Arminius, “Public Disputations,” IX.xviii, *Works* 2.173.

⁴¹ Arminius, “Public Disputations,” X.x, *Works* 2.184.

allows intelligent creatures not only their own choice...to perform and accomplish their own motions and actions.”⁴²

Divine permission, then, is no mere general permission rooted in the created order. Rather, it is rooted in the divine will as it limits and directs sins though they are the free actions of human agents. Arminius stresses that “whatever God permits, he permits it designedly and willingly.”⁴³ Divine permission, according to Arminius, is not merely general but quite specific. God decides to permit specific acts that could have been prevented or hindered. Consequently, “divine permission is not ‘idle,’” inactive, or passive.⁴⁴ For example, “God permitted Ahab to kill Naboth” because “it was the divine will, that Ahab should fill up the measure of his iniquities, and should accelerate his own destruction.” Or, “God permitted Satan and the Chaldeans to bring many evils on Job...for it was the will of God to try the patience of his servant.” Or, “God permitted Judah to know Tamar his daughter-in-law...because it was the will of God, to have his own Son as a direct descendant from Judah.”⁴⁵ Divine permission is a specific act of the divine will about specific events within the creation.⁴⁶

God permits sin in general and any particular act of sin for two “general or universal reasons.” On the one hand, God gave humanity a “freedom of the will” that was

⁴² Arminius, “Public Disputations,” IX.xxiii, *Works* 2.177.

⁴³ Arminius, “Public Disputations,” IX xi, *Works* 2.168; also X.v, *Works* 2.180.

⁴⁴ Arminius, “Examination of Dr. Perkins’ Pamphlet on Predestination,” *Works* 3.393.

⁴⁵ Arminius, “Public Disputations,” IX.xiv, *Works* 2.170.

⁴⁶ As Gregory A. Boyd notes, this is precisely the position of Molinism: “The Molinist must accept that each and every *particular* evil was *specifically* permitted by God for a *specific* good reason” (italics original). This radically contrasts with open Theism as Boyd articulates it. “In the open view, God has a morally justified reason for giving agents the capacity freely to engage in a certain range of *possible* behaviors but no specific reason for how agents use their freedom” (“Response to William Lane Craig,” in Jowers, *Four Views on Divine Providence*, 139).

“designed as the mistress and the free source of their actions.” On the other hand, there is the “declaration of divine glory” from which “the praise of the divine goodness, mercy, patience, wisdom, justice and power may shine forth and be revealed.” God permits the use of human freedom for divine glory, even when that freedom is used in malevolent ways. God does this because, as Arminius quotes Augustine, “God judged that it was the province of His most omnipotent goodness rather to produce good from evils, than not to allow evils to be.”⁴⁷

Arminius’ theology of providence involves no mere broad general permission of sin but a concurrence in the ontology, capacity, and effect of the action itself. Divine providence, therefore, as Arminius defines it, “conserves, regulates, governs and directs all things, and that nothing happens by chance or accident” (*sed dico omnia eam conservare, regere, gubernare at que dirigere; quodque nihil plane casu aut fortuito contingat*).⁴⁸ Arminius does not believe that events within God’s creation are independent of the divine will. Rather, God is intimately engaged with the creation in every one of its acts, even evil ones and, in this sense, divine providence is an expression of the will of God. Arminius’ theology of providence does not allow for “accidental” or “chance” events. God grants specific permission (not just the general permission conditioned by the created order) for evil or tragedy and thus Arminius’ understanding of providence is meticulous though it is not deterministic, that is, every evil act is deliberately and specifically permitted. He writes:

⁴⁷ Arminius, “Examination of Dr. Perkins’ Pamphlet on Predestination,” *Works* 3.408.

⁴⁸ My own translation of Arminius, *Opera Theologica*, “*Declaratio Sententiae*” (Leiden: G. Basson, 1629), 121 (cf. “Declaration of Sentiments,” II, *Works* 1.657).

Beside this, I place in subjection to Divine Providence both the free-will and even the actions of a rational creature, so that nothing can be done without the will of God, not even any of those things which are done in opposition to it; only we must observe a distinction between good actions and evil ones, by saying, that "God both wills and performs good acts," but that "He only freely permits those which are evil." Still farther than this, I very readily grant, that even all actions whatever, concerning evil, that can possibly be devised or invented, may be attributed to Divine Providence Employing solely one caution, "not to conclude from this concession that God is the cause of sin."⁴⁹

Divine Providence is sovereign over free will and "nothing can be done without the will of God." Evil is subject to the specific sovereignty of God. Nothing happens without God's own decision—a decision to permit sin and concur in its effects. God limits, directs, concurs in the effect of evil, but God does so for the sake of divine glory (both justice and goodness) and towards the "best ends" of humanity.

Arminius envisions a world in which every act needs specific divine permission or causation. It is a world where God effects every good and permits every evil for good ends. For Arminius, God is—in some sense—the primary cause of every act. For good acts God acts *in* as well as *with* the actor. For evil events God acts *with* secondary actors as God permits them to do evil. God's relationship to good and evil is asymmetrical. Arminius' main interest is to protect God's faithfulness to his own love by attributing the origin of evil in the world to human freedom so that God is not the author (determinative cause) of sin as well as to protect God's sovereignty over the created order. On the one hand, Arminius seeks to preserve God's goodness—to defend God against the charge of evil. On the other hand, he believes that God is specifically responsible for evil acts in the world since God specifically permits each one. God is so sovereign over the creation that

⁴⁹ Arminius, "Declaration of Sentiments," II, *Works* 1:657-8.

God decides whether to permit every specific act of sin. God is meticulously involved in the world though not deterministically.

This is the position of Classic or Reformed Arminianism as it appeared in the first decades of the seventeenth century. It appears in the Arminian Confession of 1621 primarily authored by Simon Episcopius. The Confession states, for example, that though sin does not “follow from God’s permission as an effect from a cause,” nevertheless “the actions that flow from disobedience” God “variously directs either to this or that object, and to some certain end, to whom and what he pleases.”⁵⁰ The result of this divine permission and direction (governance) is that “nothing happens anywhere in the entire world rashly or by chance (*temere aut fortuito*)” since God is neither ignorant nor “idly observing.”⁵¹

II. THE OPEN THEISM OF JOHN SANDERS

Sanders tirelessly asserts that “when God decided to create beings with libertarian freedom God chose not to meticulously control them and this implies risk-taking for God,” which, according to Sanders, is “affirmed by all Arminians.”⁵² Sanders rejects any notion that God has scripted the human drama or drawn up a blueprint for every act in creation. Free will theists reject theological determinism or, as it is often called in discussion of open theism, “meticulous providence.”⁵³

⁵⁰ *The Arminian Confession of 1621*, trans. Mark A. Ellis (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2005), VI.3 (p. 60).

⁵¹ *Arminian Confession*, VI.7 (p. 62).

⁵² Sanders, “Radical Revision,” in Ware, *Perspectives*, 96-7.

⁵³ Michael L. Peterson was one of the first to define “meticulous providence” and identified it as “an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good God would not allow gratuitous or pointless evil” (“The

Sanders contrasts “classical theism” (which for him is theological determinism) and “free will theism” on several counts, but I will focus on the one pertinent to my analysis of Arminius. According to Sanders, classical theists affirm “specific sovereignty,” that is, “only what God specifically ordains to occur actually happens.” This is part of a “meticulous blueprint.” Free will theists, in contrast, affirm “general sovereignty,” that is, “God ordains the structures of creation (our boundaries) and allows for human freedom (libertarian freedom).” Consequently, there is no “exercise of meticulous providence.”⁵⁴ This appears in Sanders as an “either-or” as if these are the only two choices.⁵⁵ The net effect of general sovereignty is that God “macromanages” the creation though God may “micromanage” a few things.⁵⁶ Consequently, God does not have a “specific purpose for each and every event which happens” and thus Sanders denies that “each and every event has a specific divine intention.”⁵⁷ As a result, general sovereignty “allows for pointless evil.”⁵⁸

General sovereignty in contrast to specific sovereignty means that while “God is in control in the sense of being accountable for creating this sort of world and carrying out the project the way God has,” that is, “God alone is responsible for initiating the

Inductive Problem of Evil,” *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 33 [1981]: 85). He first articulated this in “Evil and Inconsistency: A Reply,” *Sophia* 18.2 (1979): 20-27. The term has now become virtually synonymous with Augustinian or Calvinist understandings of providence (that is, deterministic or decretal) in the discussion of open theism.

⁵⁴ Sanders, “Radical Revision,” in *Perspectives*, 71, 75.

⁵⁵ Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 211-7.

⁵⁶ Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 213.

⁵⁷ Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 214.

⁵⁸ Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 214.

divine project and for establishing the rules under which the game operates,” God is not specifically responsible for any particular evil or tragedy.⁵⁹ God is “only...accountable for what he does intentionally,” and this does not include what God permits under the conditions of the created order and the divine project.⁶⁰ God is responsible for the created reality as it stands but God is not responsible for specific acts of evil within the creation.

The created order and libertarian freedom constitute key principles in God’s governance of the world. Therefore, according to Sanders, “God could not prevent us from doing harm to one another without constantly violating the very conditions in which he created us to live.”⁶¹ Sanders seeks to preserve human freedom and divine goodness by removing God from any direct or specific responsibility for specific evils within creation. God cannot be responsible for evil except in some broad sense of general permission by virtue of the order of creation. God has no specific relation to any evil act. God is not responsible for particular acts of evil since God could not have prevented it without violating his own creation order and intent.

This point, I think, is the fundamental theological and pastoral impulse of open theism. Sanders has stated it in multiple ways. The roots of his own theological reflection are the accidental death of his brother. “Was God responsible for his brother’s death,” he asks.⁶² Could God have prevented it? Or, worse, did God cause it? Sanders rejects meticulous providence because he believes that God can have no specific responsibility

⁵⁹ Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 215.

⁶⁰ Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 261.

⁶¹ Sanders, “Openness and the Problem of Good and Evil,” in *Does God Have a Future? A Debate on Divine Providence* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 41.

⁶² Sanders, “How I Came to the Open View,” in *Does God Have a Future*, 11. See also Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 9-10.

for evil acts in the world. One can hear Sander's own experience as he recounts the relief others have felt in the light of open theism. This is the great service, according to Sanders, that open theism has rendered to many pastoral situations.

[T]he proponents of openness have concentrated on the problem of evil and many people find it liberating to not have to blame God for our evil and suffering. We do not have to think that God specifically ordained some horror for our supposed well being. We do not have to pretend to be thankful for the evil that comes our way. Instead, we are liberated to fight against it, taking personal responsibility to collaborate with God (2 Cor. 6:1). Open theists have received thousands of letters and phone calls from people saying that they are so glad that they no longer have to believe God wanted their baby to die or their daughter to be raped.⁶³

This impulse appears again and again in Sanders. For example, in the *4 Views* book he states this way:

This should relieve a great burden from many people who have been taught that everything that happens to us is part of the divine blueprint for the greater good. A fair number of people in church are angry at God though it is considered improper to confess it. The anger arises because people have been told to believe that God ordained their cancer or the death of a daughter for some unknown and difficult to grasp good.⁶⁴

Sanders' theology of providence, then, has a pastoral impulse that arises out of his experience. This is quite understandable as we all do the same thing as we seek to make sense of our own experiences of evil and tragedy. His theological interpretation of his experience, however, accentuates three significant differences between Sanders' version of open theism and Arminius. At the heart of these differences is open theism's denial that God *specifically permits* every evil act, *concur*s with every finite act by acting alongside the actor and in the effects of the act, and sovereignly *directs* those acts toward good ends.

⁶³ Sanders, "Radical Revision," in Ware, *Perspectives*, 98-99.

⁶⁴ Sanders, "Divine Providence and the Openness of God," in Ware, *Perspectives*, 213-14.

First, for Sanders there are “chance events and accidents” within the creation.⁶⁵ Sanders approvingly quotes Peter van Inwagen’s definition of a “chance event” as any “state of affairs that is without purpose or significance” and “serves no end.”⁶⁶ Human freedom and the boundaries of the created order mean that God permits random, accidental events. “Genuine accidents or unintended events, both good and bad, do happen, for that is the sort of world God established.”⁶⁷ Divine permission entails that God gives “‘consenting ontological support’ to actions that he does not support morally”—which is equivalent concurrence as ontological sustenance.⁶⁸ But this does not mean that God specifically permits evil acts or acts alongside of them, that is, in the sense of a teleological concurrence for each specific evil. Thus, tragic accidents and human horrors are fundamentally “chance” events even though there may be rare occasions when God “brings about” some “misfortune.”⁶⁹

Second, in consequence of chance events, there are gratuitous and pointless evils. “The Holocaust is pointless evil,” for example. “The rape and dismemberment of a young girl is pointless evil.” And, Sanders adds, “[T]he accident that caused the death of my brother was a tragedy.” These events are pointless because “God does not have a specific

⁶⁵ Ibid. 207, 213. See Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 215-16, 261-63.

⁶⁶ Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 215-6, quoting Peter van Inwagen, “The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God,” in *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism*, ed. Thomas Morris (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 220.

⁶⁷ Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 216.

⁶⁸ Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 220 quoting Vincent Brummer, “On Thanking God Whatever Happens,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 48 (1984): 9.

⁶⁹ Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 216.

purpose in mind for these occurrences.”⁷⁰ Such tragedies or evils are “pointless because [they] do not serve to achieve any greater good.”⁷¹ There are events, then, within human experience that have no specific meaning or significance. They are simply accidents or, in the case of evil, monstrous horrors without purpose. Nevertheless, “God works to bring good out of evil,” but “God cannot *guarantee* that a greater good will arise out of each and every occurrence of evil.”⁷² Sanders’ concern here is theodic and it reflects the rising significance of the evidential version of the problem of evil within both pastoral and philosophical contexts (that is, the quantity, quality, and gratuitous character of evil in the world) with which, I think, open theism is primarily concerned.⁷³

Third, God has no specific sovereignty over all evil in the world. God is self-limited in terms of human evil. God “could,” according to Sanders, “veto any specific human evil act, but if he made a habit of it, this would undermine the type of relationships he intends. God cannot prevent all the evil in the world and still maintain the conditions of fellowship intended by his purpose in creation.”⁷⁴ God’s hands are tied regarding specific occurrences of evil within the creation. Though “most open theists” believe that “God does intervene at times,” including Sanders,⁷⁵ it raises considerable

⁷⁰ Ibid., 262.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 263 (italics original).

⁷³ Cf. Terence Penelhum, “Divine Goodness and the Problem of Evil,” *Religious Studies* 2 (1967): 107: “It is logically inconsistent for a theist [one who believes in an omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good God, JMH] to admit the existence of a pointless evil.”

⁷⁴ Sanders, “Divine Providence and the Openness of God,” in Ware, *Perspectives*, 211. See Sanders, *God Who Risks*, 258-59.

⁷⁵ Sanders, “Divine Providence and the Openness of God,” in Ware, *Perspectives*, 212: “Additionally, in my opinion, God is much more active than we can ever identify; but most of his

questions as to why God did or did not.⁷⁶ Consequently, open theists usually counsel that there are limitations to God's actions within the world. In raising the question of "why does not God [violate human freedom] more often in order to bring about a better world," Sanders points us to David Basinger who suggests "perhaps...God has already maximized the extent to which he may profitably violate human freedom."⁷⁷ The upshot is that God is doing the best God can. "We believe," Sanders writes, "that God is doing all he can, short of rescinding his original gifts of freedom to his creatures, to prevent what evil he can and, for that evil that does occur, God works to bring good out of those situations (Rom 8:28)."⁷⁸ But there are no guarantees that God would succeed, and—presumably—whatever evil occurs is beyond God's sovereignty due to the creational boundaries God instituted, that is, God's own self-imposed limitations. God's sovereignty "cannot guarantee that a greater good will arise out of each and every occurrence of evil."⁷⁹

III. CONCLUSION

work, like an iceberg, goes unseen by us. God may be doing much in any given situation even if we do not detect it or if it is not the sort of help we desire."

⁷⁶ Sanders, "Divine Providence and the Openness of God," in Ware, *Perspectives*, 211-12.

⁷⁷ Ibid.; referring to David Basinger, *Divine Power in Process Theism: A Philosophical Critique* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), 63.

⁷⁸ Sanders, "Divine Providence and the Openness of God," in Ware, *Perspectives*, 213. It would seem, then, that God is severely limited since God could not even prevent the horror of the Holocaust much less other tragic events in life. Cf. Paul Kjoss Helseth, "On Divine Ambivalence: Open Theism and the Problem of Particular Evils," *JETS* 44 (2001): 493-511, particularly 507, n.48: "But if these kinds of evils or the potential consequences of these evils are not sufficiently egregious to warrant unilateral intervention, then what in the world could be? Are we *really* to believe that God has intervened in the past *only* when particular evils were in the process of surpassing the wickedness of things even more egregious than child kidnappings and rapes, or the events that led to the Cultural Revolution or the Cultural Revolution itself?"

⁷⁹ Sanders, "Divine Providence and the Openness of God," in Ware, *Perspectives*, 213.

I suggest that we no longer use the language of “meticulous providence” as an equivalent for “theological determinism” (or a Calvinist understanding of sovereignty). Originally the phrase “meticulous providence” identified a view of providence that denies pointless or gratuitous evils. This does not entail determinism or any understanding of eternal decrees as in Reformed scholasticism. Arminius affirms “meticulous providence” (without using the modern phrase) because he denies gratuitous evil exists. God is so sovereign over evil that no evil will occur that does not serve God’s purpose or to which God does not attach some specific meaning or significance. Nothing happens, according to Arminius, by chance or accident.

I suggest at least three categories to clarify this confusion: (1) *The Sovereignty of the Divine Decrees* where God has decreed from eternity what will happen within human history (Reformed scholasticism); (2) *The Sovereignty of Divine Engagement* where God is active, or concurs, in every event within human history such that every event has divine purpose and meaning though without divine decrees determining what will happen within human history (classic Arminianism); and (3) *The Sovereignty of the Divine Project* where God, for the sake of the divine project risks the effects and meaning of human history in such a way that it is beyond divine management for the greater good but does not endanger God’s ultimate goal or project (open theism).

Arminius affirms with Reformed theology a “meticulous providence” where God has such sovereignty over evil such that no evil act is autonomous and uncircumscribed by God’s intent for good.⁸⁰ God is so sovereign that God concurs with the act itself such

⁸⁰ Sanders’ version of libertarian freedom is fundamentally “autonomous” and he sometimes describes it that way; cf. Sanders, “Divine Providence and the Openness of God,” in Ware, *Perspectives*, 231.

that its effect has specific meaning and significance. This is a critical difference between classic Arminianism and open theism. Whereas Arminius asserts an understanding of concurrence that entails a meticulous providence, open theism does not. This difference is no minor one since it reaches to the very core of why open theism, at least pastorally, arose as an alternative to Reformed theology and more traditional Arminianism. When classic Arminianism affirms “meticulous providence” (in the sense in which I have defined it), this constitutes a radical disagreement with open theism. In terms of “meticulous providence,” Reformed theology and classic Arminianism stand together.

On the other hand, classic Arminianism and open theism share a common conviction that human freedom is, in some sense, libertarian rather than compatibilist. God permits sin; God is not the primary cause of sin. In the permission of sin, according to Arminius, God does not concur in the efficacy of the act though God does concur in the ontology and capacity of the act. Here open theists and classic Arminians stand together. Where they differ is that Arminius believes that God concurs in the effect of every act in such a way that God sovereignly limits and directs the ends of sin. Open theists do not believe God has accorded himself that sovereignty since they think it inconsistent with the divine project. Classic Arminianism does not believe that theological determinism is a necessary precondition for the purposefulness and the meaningfulness of every human experience, even tragic evil.

So, my first suggestion is that we recognize that Reformed theology and classic Arminianism share a common vision of God’s meticulous providence over creation such that there is divine intent, meaning and significance in every event. There are no gratuitous evils because God concurs in the effect of every human act. This entails that

God directs that act toward good ends. Since open theism rejects this sovereignty, this constitutes a radical revision of classic Arminianism.

My second suggestion concerns the pastoral dimension of this discussion. While Sanders' experience of tragedy and his study of Scripture moved him away from a classic theological position, my study of Scripture and my own experience of tragedy has moved me toward a more classically Arminian rather than open theistic perspective. Unlike Sanders my early understanding of God was more deistic than it was classic. My tragic experiences—the loss of a wife to death after almost three years of marriage and the loss of a sixteen year old son to a terminal genetic condition—not only moved me away from a mechanistic understanding of God to a more relational one, they also moved me toward a deeper faith in a sovereign God, a God more like the one envisioned by classic Arminianism rather than open theism.⁸¹ Classical Arminianism makes better sense of Scripture and is, in my experience, more existentially satisfying.

Whereas Sanders moved toward absolving God of responsibility for evil and tragic acts in the world except for a general permission embedded in the created order, I have tended to locate the specific permission of evil acts within the decision (will) of God. Whereas Sanders believes that God answers prayer on the basis of a general permission and embedded created order, I believe God answers prayer in relation to the specifics of the situation, the divine intent in that situation, and the divine goal. When, therefore, I prayed for the health of my wife or my son, God made a specific decision about whether to heal or to permit death. God's response to prayer was either a specific cause or permission. In either case God could have acted otherwise. God's decision to

⁸¹ See my *Yet Will I Trust Him: Understanding God in a Suffering World* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1999).

permit was a specific decision rather than a general one. Since God's decision is never arbitrary or divorced from the divine character, that decision arose out of God's intent for good within the creation and within my own life as well as the lives of my wife and son.

This is my pastoral point.⁸² Tragic experiences are neither gratuitous nor meaningless. They have significance. Meticulous providence affirms that there is a specific divine intent in every experience whether tragic or blessed. Rather than random events, our experiences participate in a specific divine teleology. This is the pastoral value of classical Arminianism that open theism does not offer. Our lives are partly a tapestry of our own making but every thread has divine significance and meaning, even the dark ones.

⁸² Of course, more needs to be said than this within a theodicy, but that is not my purpose in this essay. Christology and eschatology have much to say about how this point would function within a broader theodicy to the extent that we can even talk about theodicy.