



STATEMENT DG-035

NEOTHEISM: The Dangers of Making God in Our Image

by Norman L. Geisler

Summary

There is a new "kid" on the world view block called "neotheism." While claiming to be in the camp of theism, proponents of this view make several significant changes in the nature of the theistic God in the direction of process theology or panentheism. They claim, among other things, that God can change His mind and that He does not have an infallible knowledge of the future. Since a number of noted evangelical thinkers espouse neotheism, it poses a significant threat to the orthodox understanding of God. For example, if God does not know for sure what will happen in the future, then predictions in the Bible can be wrong. While the view is not heretical, nonetheless, it is a significant doctrinal deviation from traditional theism and would undermine both traditional Arminian and Calvinist beliefs about predestination.

The nature of God is the most fundamental issue in all theology.

It's what *theology* is all about. On it stands or falls every other major doctrine. From its inception, orthodox Christianity has been uncompromisingly theistic. Recently, a new view has seriously challenged this venerable history. In fact, this view claims to be orthodox but zealously desires to make major changes in the classical theistic view. Several proponents of this view, including Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, have collaborated on a volume titled *The Openness of God*.¹ Other Christian thinkers share similar views or have expressed sympathy for this position, including Greg Boyd, Stephen Davis, Thomas Morris, and Richard Swinburne.²

Neotheists have variously labeled their view "the openness of God" or "free will theism." Others have called this new form of theism a form of process theology or panentheism because of its important similarities to this position.³ Yet it seems more appropriate to call it neotheism for several reasons. First, it has significant differences from the panentheism of Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Hartshorn, and company.⁴ Neotheism, like classical theism, affirms many of the essential attributes of God, including infinity, necessity, ontological independence, transcendence, omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence. Likewise, it shares with traditional theism the belief in *ex nihilo* creation and direct divine supernatural intervention in the world. Since process theology denies all these, it seems unfair to list neotheism as a subspecies of that view.

On the other hand, since significant differences exist between the new theism and classical theism, neither does neotheism fit comfortably in the latter category. For example, neotheism denies God's foreknowledge of future free acts and, as a consequence, God's complete sovereignty over human events. These deviations from two millennia of Christian theology are serious enough to deserve another name, as well as to arouse concern. It seems appropriate, then, to call it neotheism.

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One proponent, Clark Pinnock, correctly positioned neotheism in titling his chapter in *Process Theology* "Between Classical and Process Theism." Whatever it is called, this view is a serious challenge to classical theism and a serious threat to many important doctrines and practices built on that view. Since they desire to be members of the orthodox theistic camp, they have understandably cast their view in that direction. Let's examine the distinctive features of their proposal.

CHARACTERISTICS AND INCONSISTENCIES OF NEOTHEISM

As the new kid on the block, neotheism desires to make itself clear, distinct, and appealing. Proponents list five characteristics of their position:

1. God not only created this world *ex nihilo* but can (and at times does) intervene unilaterally in earthly affairs. 2. God chose to create us with incompatibilistic (libertarian)⁵ freedom — freedom over which he cannot exercise total control. 3. God so values freedom — the moral integrity of free creatures and a world in which such integrity is possible — that he does not normally override such freedom, even if he sees that it is producing undesirable results. 4. God always desires our highest good, both individually and corporately, and thus is affected by what happens in our lives. 5. God does not possess exhaustive knowledge of exactly how we will utilize our freedom, although he may very well at times be able to predict with great accuracy the choices we will freely make.⁶

Neotheism is a form of theism, and should not be ranked as a heresy. Nevertheless, it is a significant doctrinal departure from the traditional theism underlying historic orthodoxy. As such, it deserves careful analysis. Granting what neotheists believe about God, neotheism is inconsistent. Moreover, it is an unnecessary aberration: the classical theistic view of God can be logically derived from the premises of neotheism, and the central desire of neotheists for an interactive God is possible without giving up the classical theistic view of God. These are just some of the problems with neotheism that are readily apparent. (As we examine the logical inconsistencies of neotheism it will be necessary to cover some philosophical ground that may prove slow going for the lay reader. A glossary has been provided to help such readers navigate through this section.)

Creation Ex Nihilo Entails Theism, Not Neotheism

Neotheism affirms with Theism that God created the universe out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). God is ontologically independent of His creation. That is, if there were no world, there would still be God. Yet at the same time, they claim to reject God's traditional attributes of aseity and eternity (nontemporality). Logically, they cannot have it both ways.

God's Eternity Follows from Creation Ex Nihilo. If God created the entire spatiotemporal universe, then time is part of the essence of the cosmos. In short, God created time. Moreover, if time is something that is of the essence of creation, then it cannot be an attribute of the uncreated — that is, of God.

If on reconsideration a neotheist opts to hold that time existed before creation, then logical problems emerge. Was time "inside" of God — that is, part of His nature — or outside of Him? If inside, then how can God be without a beginning, since an infinite number of temporal moments appears to be incoherent (as proponents of the *kalam* argument for God's existence have affirmed).

If, on the other hand, time is "outside" of God, then some sort of dualism emerges. Moreover, if time is outside God, then we must ask whether it had a beginning or not. If it did not, then it could be argued that there is something outside God that He did not create, since time is as eternal as He is. This is no longer theism in either the classical or neotheistic sense. Yet if time is outside of God and had a beginning, then God must have created it (since everything with a beginning has a cause). In this event we are right back to the theistic position that God created time, and that God as the Creator of time is not temporal.

God's Transcendence Implies His Nontemporality. According to neotheism, God is beyond creation. He is more than and other than the entire spatiotemporal world. Again, however, if God is beyond time, then He cannot be temporal. The neotheist might reply that God is also immanent in the temporal world, and whatever is immanent in

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the temporal is temporal. Yet a proper understanding of God's immanence does not make Him *part* of the world (as in panentheism) but only *present* in the world (as in theism). God is in the world in accordance with His being, and His being is nontemporal. He is in it in a nontemporal way.

For example, God is a necessary being. As such He is immanent in the contingent world, but this does not make Him contingent. Rather, God the necessary Being is immanent in the contingent being in accordance with His being, which is necessary. As Creator He is immanent in His creation. This does not mean He is part of creation just because He is present in it. Therefore, immanence of a nontemporal God in a temporal world does not demand that God is temporal.

God's Uncausality and Necessity Imply His Pure Actuality. The new theists also believe God is not caused by any other being, and is Himself the cause of all other beings. But if God is uncaused in His being, then He must be Pure Actuality. For whatever is not caused never came to be; and whatever never came to be has no potentiality in its being. But if it has no potentiality, then it must be Pure Actuality.

To put it another way, if God is uncaused, then He has no potential. For to be caused means to have one's potential actualized. But what has no actualized potential had no potential to be actualized. Hence, God must have been pure Actuality. Thus the neotheists' belief that God is an uncaused Being logically entails what they say they reject, namely that God is a Being of Pure Actuality with no potentiality in His being.

The classical theistic view of God also follows from the neotheist belief that God is a Necessary Being; for if God is a Necessary Being then He cannot not be — that is, God has no potential in His being *not* to be. Once again, if God does not have potentiality in His being, then He is Pure Actuality. Therefore, the classical theistic view of God follows from what neotheists admit about God. Nevertheless, neotheism rejects the attribute of Pure Actuality. Thus neotheism is inconsistent and incoherent.

THEOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF NEOTHEISM

In addition to the philosophical incoherency of neotheism, there are some serious theological consequences. Several will be briefly enumerated here.

Predictive Prophecy Would Be Fallible

If all predictive prophecy involving free choices is conditional, then the Bible could not have predicted where Jesus would be born. Micah, however, did predict that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2), as He was. Indeed, the Bible also predicted when He would die (Dan. 9:25-27), how He would die (Isa. 53), and how He would rise from the dead (Ps. 16:10 cf. Acts 2:30-31). Either these predictions are infallible or else they were just guesses on God's part. If they are infallible, then neotheism is wrong, since according to their view God cannot make infallible predictions. On the other hand, if it is not infallible, then God was just guessing.

The same is true of most, if not all, prophecies about the Messiah. Such prophetic fulfillments involved free choices somewhere along the line, which — according to neotheism — God did not know. For example, if God does not know future free acts with certainty, then He does not know that the beast and the false prophet will be in the lake of fire. The Bible, however, says they will be there (Rev. 19:20; 20:10). Hence, either this prophecy is potentially false, or neotheism is not correct. In other words, if neotheism is true, then this prediction may be false.

Before leaving prophecy, another point must be addressed. Neotheists claim "the problem with the traditional view on this point is that there is no *if* from God's perspective. If God knows the future exhaustively, then conditional prophecies lose their integrity."⁷ This argument confuses two perspectives. Of course, from God's perspective (since He knows the future infallibly) everything is certain. As noted above, this does not mean that from the human standpoint these actions are not chosen freely. It is simply that God knew for *certain* how people would freely exercise their choice.

It Undermines the Test for False Prophecy

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If all prophecy is conditional, then there cannot be any such thing as a false prophecy. The Old Testament, however, lays down tests for false prophets, one of which is whether or not the prediction comes to pass. "If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously" (Deut. 18:22). If the neotheists are correct, however, then this test cannot be valid.

It Undermines the Infallibility of the Bible

Not only does the neotheist's denial that God knows the outcome of future free acts diminish (or deny) God's omniscience and omnipotence, but it also entails a denial of the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible, which some neotheists (e. g., Pinnock) claim to believe. If all such prophecies are conditional, then we can never be sure that they will come to pass. Yet the Bible affirmed that they truly would come to pass. According to neotheist thinking, such pronouncements are not infallible, and they may be in error. On the premise that God is only guessing, it is reasonable to assume that some *are* wrong. It is begging the issue to assume that it just so happened that all of His guesses turned out to be right. In the end, neotheism turns Deuteronomy 18:22 upside down and makes Moses presumptuous for predicting divinely inspired, infallible prophecy.

It Logically Leads to Universalism

Of course, the neotheist hedges his or her bet by affirming that it is morally right for God to intervene sometimes against free will to guarantee His ultimate desire to provide salvation for humankind. This objection, however, undermines the whole neotheistic position and leads to universalism. For if it is right for God to violate freedom sometimes for our salvation, then why not all the time? After all, neotheists believe God desires all persons to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9). Consequently, universalism follows logically from these two premises. For if God really wants everyone to be saved and He can violate their will to assure their salvation, then certainly He will do so. Hence, neotheism appears to lead to universalism.

God Cannot Guarantee Ultimate Victory over Evil

As neotheists insist that God does not know the future for sure and that He does not intervene against freedom except on rare occasions, then it seems to follow that there is no guarantee of ultimate victory over evil. How can He be sure that anyone will be saved without fettering freedom? Any limitation on freedom contradicts the neotheist libertarian view of free will (see endnote no. 4).

Such a view is contrary to the Bible, which predicts that Satan will be defeated, evil will be vanquished, and many will be saved (Rev. 20—22). Yet, according to the neotheist, since this is a moral question that involves (libertarian) free will, then it follows that God could not know this infallibly. If neotheism is true, then neither God nor the Bible can be completely infallible and inerrant. Yet, as we've noted, some neotheists claim that it is. This is inconsistent.

It Is Contrary to God's Unconditional Promises

It is clear that not all God's promises in the Bible are for everyone. Some are intended only for some people (Gen. 4:15). Others are intended only for a certain group of people (Gen. 13:14–17). Some are only for a limited time (Eph. 6:3). Many promises are conditioned on human behavior. They have a stated or implied *if* in them. The Mosaic covenant is one of this type. God said to Israel, "Now *if you obey me* fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession" (Exod. 19:5, emphasis added).

Other promises are unconditional. Such was the land promise to Abraham and his offspring. This is clear from the facts that (1) no conditions were attached to it; (2) Abraham's agreement was not solicited; (3) it was initiated while Abraham was in a deep sleep (Gen. 15:12); (4) the covenant was enacted unilaterally by God, who passed through the split sacrifice (Gen. 15:17–19); and (5) God reaffirmed this promise even when Israel was unfaithful (2 Chron. 21:7). Such unconditional promises that involve free choices would not be possible unless God knew all future free choices.

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Neotheists offer 1 Kings 2:1–4 as an example of how a seemingly unconditional promise is really conditional. God promised David concerning his son Solomon, "My love will never be taken from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you" (2 Sam. 7:15–16). Later, however, God seemed to have taken His promise back, making it conditional on whether Solomon and his descendants would "walk faithfully before [Him]" (1 Kings 2:1–4). On the basis of these passages, they argue that all seemingly unconditional promises are really conditional.

This argument fails for many reasons. First, it is a non sequitur since their conclusion is much broader than the premises. Even if this were an example of an implied condition, it would not prove that all promises are conditional.

Second, it overlooks the many cases in Scripture (see above) where there are unconditional promises. These are counterexamples that refute the contention that all God's promises are conditional.

Third, it is inconsistent with the neotheist view of God. They insist that God is an ontologically independent Being, yet God's knowledge is part of His essence or being. How then can God's knowledge be dependent on anything else?⁸

Finally and most significantly, the argument is based on a failure to see that the two texts refer to two different things. In 2 Samuel, God was speaking to David about never taking the kingdom away from his son Solomon. This promise was fulfilled, for, despite Solomon's sins (1 Kings 11:1–2), the kingdom was not taken from him during his entire lifetime. In fact, the fulfillment is explicitly stated when God said to Solomon, "Since this is your attitude and you have not kept my covenant and my decrees, which I commanded you, I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates. Nevertheless, for the sake of David your father, I *will not do it during your lifetime*. I will tear it out of the hand of your son" (1 Kings 11:11–12, emphasis added). Thus, God did keep His promise to David about Solomon.

The other text (1 Kings 2:1–4) is not speaking about God's promise to David concerning His son Solomon. Rather, it refers to God taking the kingdom from one of Solomon's sons. No unconditional promise was made here. From his death bed David exhorted Solomon, "Walk in [God's] ways, and keep his decrees and commands...that you may prosper in all you do and wherever you go, and that the LORD may keep his promise to me: '*If your descendants watch how they live, and if they walk faithfully before me with all their heart and soul, you will never fail to have a man on the throne of Israel*'" (1 Kings 2:3–4, emphasis added). This promise was both conditional ("if") and limited to Solomon's sons. It said nothing about Solomon, concerning whom God apparently made an unconditional promise not to take his throne away during his lifetime.

It Undermines Confidence in God's Promises

One of the practical consequences of making all predictions conditional is that it undermines confidence in God's Word. If we cannot be sure that even God can keep His word, then it undermines our belief in His faithfulness. The Bible, however, says we can accept God's Word unconditionally. Sometimes it says this explicitly in the context of affirming that He knows "the end from the beginning" (Isa. 46:10). In this context Paul wrote, "if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself" (2 Tim. 2:13). Again, he reminds us that "God's gifts and his call are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29). Hence, with regard to these unconditional promises, "It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy" (Rom. 9:16).

It Hinders Belief in God's Ability to Answer Prayer

Despite the fact that neotheists make much of God's dynamic ability to answer prayer, it would appear that their concept of God actually undermines confidence in God's use of special providence in answering prayer. They admit, as indeed they must, that most answers to prayer do not involve a direct supernatural intervention in the world. Rather, God works through special providence in unusual ways to accomplish unusual things. But a God who does not know for sure what any future free act will be is severely limited in His logistic ability to do things that *can* be done by a God who knows every decision that will be made. Thus, ironically, the neotheistic God is a liability to answered prayer, which they consider extremely important to a personal God.

It Implies That God Would Not Know Who the Elect Are

If neotheists are correct, then God does not know who will accept His salvation. They opt for a corporate election, in which God knows that Christ is elect and hence all who are in Him will be elect — whoever they are. But there are serious problems with this view. The Bible tells us that there will be *some* elect, but according to the neotheists' view God could not even be sure that there will be *any* elect. The "bus" destined for heaven may be empty if all invited occupants freely choose not to take it.

Furthermore, how could they even be certain that any "bus" is going to heaven? After all, according to their view they cannot even be sure that Christ would choose to resist evil (for presumably He had a libertarian free will, too). No wonder one exponent of process theology, after which their view is patterned, said that God is waiting with baited breath to see how things will turn out!

This conclusion is contrary to the Bible. Scripture informs us that Christ was "the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world" (Rev. 13:8) and that some individuals were chosen in Him before the world began (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:4). But this would not have been possible to say unless God knew their future free acts.

Finally, Paul included himself among those whom God knew and chose before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). If God cannot know future free acts, this would not have been possible.

A HOUSE BUILT OF CARDS

In summation, since neotheists assert that God is infinite and omniscient and an ontologically independent Creator of this world ex nihilo, then their belief that He is mutable, temporal, and does not know future free acts is incompatible. Indeed, the only consistent way to believe the latter is for neotheists to forsake theism entirely and adopt pantheism. The neotheistic halfway house is built of cards: it has no consistent structure. Its proponents live in a theological no man's land. They cannot have it both ways. There is no logical stopping point between classical theism and contemporary pantheism. The traditional attributes of God stand or fall together.

The challenge is this: "Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve" (Josh. 24:15). The alternatives are the self-existing I AM of Scripture who says, "I the Lord do not change" (Mal. 3:6) and who "knows the end from the beginning" (Isa. 46:10), or the Whiteheadian god of process thought who is waiting with baited breath to see how things will turn out. As for me and my house, I will choose the God of Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas. Triple A theism has always been the best way to travel on the theological road!

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NOTES

¹Clark Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

²Those who have written books include Richard Rice, *God's Foreknowledge and Man's Free Will* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985); Ronald Nash, ed., *Process Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1987); Greg Boyd, *Trinity and Process* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992) and *Letters from a Skeptic* (Colorado Springs: Victor Books, 1994); J. R. Lucas, *The Freedom of the Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970) and *The Future: An Essay on God, Temporality and Truth* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1989); Peter Geach, *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: University Press, 1977); and Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), is close to the view. A. N. Prior, Richard Purtill, and others have written articles defending neotheism. Still others show sympathy to the view, such as Stephen T. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) and Linda Zagzebski, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

³Clark Pinnock, "Between Classical and Process Theism," in Nash; William Hasker, *God, Time and Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); David and Randall Basinger, eds., *Predestination and Free Will* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986).

⁴See Norman L. Geisler and William D. Watkins, *Worlds Apart: A Handbook of World Views* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989).

⁵By the "libertarian" or "incompatibilist" view of free will they mean "an agent" is free with respect to a given action at a given time if at that time "it is within the agent's power to perform the action and also in the agent's power to refrain from the action" (Pinnock, et al., 136–37). By the "compatibilist" view of free will they mean "an agent is free with respect to a given action at a given time if at that time it is true that the agent can perform the action if she decides to perform it and she can refrain from the action if she decides not to perform it" (137). As they observe, "the difference between the two definitions may not be immediately apparent." The main distinction is that on a libertarian view, for free will to exist one must have both "inner freedom" (no overwhelming desire to the contrary) and "outer freedom" (no external restraints); on the compatibilist's view only "outer freedom to carry out the decision either way she makes it" is necessary, even if "the decision itself may be completely determined by the psychological forces at work in her personality" (ibid.).

⁶Ibid., 156.

⁷Ibid., 52.

⁸See R. Garrigou-LaGrange, *God: His Existence and Nature* (St. Louis: B. Herder Books, 1946), appendix 4, 465–528.

GLOSSARY

- **actuality:** That which is actual as opposed to that which merely has potentiality. Pure actuality is the attribute of God that excludes all potentiality from Him (see aseity), including the possibility of nonexistence.
- **aseity:** Self-existence; the attribute of God in which He exists in and of Himself, independent from anything else.
- **contingent:** Dependent on another; a contingent being is dependent on another for its existence.
- **free will:** The power of human beings to perform certain human actions that are free from external and/or internal constraint; the ability to cause certain actions by one's self without coercion from another.
- **immanence:** God's presence within the universe as compared with His transcendence over it.
- **necessary being:** A being that must exist; it cannot not exist (as opposed to a contingent being, which can not exist).
- **ontology:** The philosophical study of the nature of being (from Greek ontos, being).
- **panentheism:** The belief that all is in God, as opposed to pantheism, which claims that all is God.
- **potentiality:** That which can be; the ability to be actualized.
- **process theology:** A form of panentheism that holds that God is finite and constantly changing, having two poles or dimensions (bipolar).
- **theism:** The belief in one infinite, personal, transcendent, and immanent God who created the world out of nothing (ex

nihilo) and who also intervenes in it supernaturally on occasion.

- **transcendence:** That which is more or goes beyond; that fact of God's being beyond the universe and not only in it.