

Book Review by Malcolm Martin

Hearn, Roland, Kling, Sheri D. and Oord, Thomas J. (Eds) *Open and Relational Leadership: Leading with Love*. Grasmere, ID: SacraSage Press, 2020

What would it mean to lead like a God who is open, relational, and loving? What does leadership look like in an open and relational world with open and relational people? What “style” of leadership fits this view?

Yet another book exploring leadership might be viewed as the last thing that is currently needed; many bookshelves already groan under the weight of texts in this area. The editors of this volume, however, identify that many works reflect business and political theories, or focus on a few carefully-selected Bible verses, rather than examining the subject from a distinct theological perspective. The framework of ‘open and relational theology’ sets the foundational approach for the essays included, but it is not necessary for the reader to be familiar with, or agree with, this particular theological paradigm in order to engage with the thinking presented.¹ Many readers will, however, find familiar parallels with relational studies of the Trinity, the ‘being with’ explorations of Samuel Wells and the ‘leader as follower’ approach of Leonard Sweet.

Open and Relational Leadership arranges its essays into two sections: theory, examining the nature of divine leadership, and application, exploring contemporary leadership practices. This division is acknowledged to be somewhat permeable, as each essay tends to offer a blend of the two areas: ‘After all, it’s hard to keep issues in boxes when the overall themes are openness and relationality!’ (Hearn et al. 2020:i).

Readers who launch into the book without glancing too closely at the contents page might struggle to find a chain of developing thought as they progress through the chapters; this is because the pattern is simply an alphabetical arrangement by author. Recurring strands of thought do emerge, most notably the foundational importance of

¹ Further information on open and relational theology can be found at <https://c4ort.com> and in other writings of proponents such as Thomas Oord.

transformative love, but drawing these threads together is left to the reader – a conclusion would presumably run counter to the ‘open’ aspect of the theological framework. The book therefore lends itself better to distinct engagements with the individual essays, taking time to reflect upon the thinking expressed, rather than extended reading sessions.

Fifty-nine essays are included, with each generally being only four pages long. The sixty contributors² are predominantly connected with Wesleyan denominations, mostly with backgrounds in contexts of church leadership or theological education. The selection includes one Salvation Army officer and another author with an ecumenical placement to The Salvation Army. Short biographies offer valuable insights into the degree of diversity that is included, although greater balance in terms of gender and geographical context might have further enhanced the breadth represented.

Such diversity of contributors inevitably produces an occasional degree of unevenness and a few authors seem to struggle to conceive of a world beyond their own geographical context, but the short nature of the essays makes it easy to move on. Particular highlights for me included ‘God Leads Like a Midwife’, although I would have liked to see a connection with Isaiah 66:9, and ‘Going for the Gold’, which unexpectedly drew leadership lessons from *Kelly’s Heroes*; readers will undoubtedly find other chapters which leave them wanting more.

² One author contributes two essays, while two others are co-authored.