

The Promise of Process Theology

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Introduction

Most essays in this book are critical of process theology. They are based on the assumption that this theology is not sufficiently Christian. But even if it is not, we have to account for the fact that many theologians find process theology attractive and compelling. Why is this? Let's examine five reasons. Remember, process theology is not a church that demands total belief from its members. It is a set of ideas. Anyone is free to adopt one or more of them.

Process Theology and Science

It's no secret that for the past six hundred years Christian theology has often had a rough time with science. The theory of evolution riles many Christians. But before evolution there was debate about the age of the earth and universe, and before that, unease about whether the earth lies at the center of the universe.

It's possible to exaggerate theology's tension with science—plenty of scientists have been Christians. Besides that, most Christians have made peace with science's claim that the earth is not at the center of the universe. Most accept that the earth is much more than six thousand years old.

Process theology strikes a chord with some theologians because one of its goals is to harmonize theology and science. Some Christians have a lot of sympathy for this goal while others regard modern science as a tool of the devil. They think attempts to harmonize theology with science mean rejecting God's inspired revelation. Process theology agrees with the former group. From the beginning it has been committed to achieving harmony between science and theology. So theologians who have a scientific outlook and are sympathetic to science often find process theology attractive.

We can trace process theology's affinity with science back to one of its founders, Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947). Whitehead was a mathematician familiar with new developments in twentieth-century physics. His philosophy, which underlies process theology, was written in dialogue with those developments. Because of the scientific character of Whitehead's thought, process theologians generally believe that human understanding in all fields is dynamic and changeable, just as scientific theories change in response to new discoveries. They hold that theology should likewise be sensitive to discoveries in other disciplines, including the sciences. Theology, in other words, should be flexible and adaptive to new knowledge.

Not surprisingly, when Christians who are scientists want to dialogue with theologians, they often find it easiest to converse with process theologians. These Christians want to use scientific knowledge to help understand their faith. Many theologians influenced by other types of Christian theology have little or no interest in conversing with science. When scientists seek dialogue, the results are usually disappointing. Such theologians may be unaware of important issues or hostile toward science. This is unfortunate, because the sciences raise many important questions for Christian faith.

Process theologians promote a spirit of openness to truth wherever it is found. They believe science (as well as religion, the arts, and philosophy) is one way we learn truth. Theology has nothing to fear from and much to learn from science. Process theologians believe scientists have much to learn from religion. They strive to unify the various avenues to truth.

Process Theology and the Doctrine of Creation

As noted, process theology rests on the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. He was interested in creating a philosophy that combines the truths of science and religion. He was especially concerned to understand God's relation to the world. As a result, process theology has always taken a keen interest in the doctrine of creation and how God relates to the world. Many process theologians see this as a chief strength.

Why is this so notable? Isn't every theology keenly interested in the doctrine of creation and of God's relation to the world? No. All Christian theologies make some formal statement about creation. But not all theologians find the doctrine of creation critically important. Those who don't, think other doctrines are more central and deserve more attention.

If we were to survey Protestant theology through much of the twentieth century, we would see other doctrines typically crowded out the doctrine of creation. The twentieth century was marked by debates about the nature

of Scripture, salvation, and Jesus Christ. These are important matters. They deserved all the attention they received. But the practical effect was that theologians had little time and energy for creation.

So, it is significant that process theology has, from its start, devoted considerable attention to the doctrine of creation. What accounts for this preoccupation with creation when many other theologies neglected it? According to process theology, the world is important to God. Doesn't every theology affirm that? After all, the Fourth Gospel tells us that God loves the world.

It's true, every Christian theology affirms the world is important to God. But process theologians point out that this affirmation doesn't agree very well with another traditional affirmation. From the beginning, Christian theologians have stated God is radically independent of the world and doesn't need the world. God created the world freely and not out of any sense of need. God was perfectly complete and blessed in eternity before creation. The world added nothing to God (since God was already perfect without it). So, although God *loves* the world, God does not *need* the world.

Process theologians say this makes God seem aloof and less than personal. It is, they argue, essential for personal beings to be involved in the lives of others. And so it is with God: God is supremely involved with others because God is intimately related to every creature—human and nonhuman. God intimately *feels* what each creature feels. This has an effect on God, just as our empathy with others has a deep effect on us. More important, God's experience of the world and of creatures in the world is an essential *part* of God. Just as I am the person I am to a large extent because of the experiences I have had, so to some extent, God is who God is because of God's experiences. They contribute to God being God.

If this is true, process theologians argue, then the traditional view of God as radically independent of the world makes no sense. God's experience is just as dependent on the world as our experience is dependent on the people and things we experience. Without them we would have no experience and hence no "existence." In the same way, without the world, God would have no concrete experience of human joy, pain, despair, and trust. God's empathy for creatures fills God's experience and enriches God's life. Without this, God would not be fully God.

Understandably, process theology has been at the forefront of environmental concerns. Because the world and its creatures are so important to God, they should be important to us as well. Preserving resources, protecting habitats, and ending environmental degradation should be very important for Christians; God has a stake in the world's well-being.

Process theology wants us to take seriously the world's importance for God. It wants us to stop thinking about God as detached and unaffected by creatures and their experiences. Finally, it wants to instill in us an ethical sensitivity so that concern for the environment becomes an important topic for theology and the church.

Questions About Theodicy

Every theology has things about which it is greatly concerned. In many cases, other types of theology show less concern about those things. Greek Orthodox theology, for instance, is passionate about saints and icons. Protestants are not.

A driving passion of process theology is theodicy. Theodicy is a theological term for the problem of evil. If God is all-good and all-powerful (omnipotent), then evil poses a problem. Why? If God is good, then God should want to eliminate evil; if God is all-powerful, God *can* eliminate evil. But evil exists. Therefore it seems that God is either not all-good or not all-powerful. In either instance, God is not God.

Discussion of this problem has a long history in Christian thought; many creative responses have been offered. Most theologians have held that although God *can* eliminate evil, God chooses not to do so. If we ask why God chooses not to eliminate evil, we find two varieties of answers: (1) in a mysterious way, evil serves God's purposes; (2) allowing evil to exist is the price God pays for creating free beings.

Process theologians object to both answers. The basic problem is that they assume God is all-powerful-able to eliminate evil but chooses not to.

The problem, process theologians say, is that the idea of an all-powerful being doesn't make sense. If God is all-powerful, then God would possess all possible power. Humans and other creatures would have no power at all. To use economic terms, power seems to be a zero-sum game: if God possesses all power, then humans possess zero. However, it seems obvious that humans do have some power—we make choices, and actions have effects. Therefore, process theologians conclude, God does not *possess* all power.

Theologians who believe that God is all-powerful think they have good answers for process theologians. In particular, they don't agree that power is a zero-sum game. However, let's follow process theologians' line of thinking. Their next step is that since God is not all-powerful, it is impossible for God to eliminate all evil. Blaming God for evil is a mistake.

Process theologians' solution to the problem of evil is a bit more involved. In their view, there are two types of power: *persuasive* and *coercive*.

We use coercive power when we try to force someone or something (pets, for example) to act contrary to their desire. Coercive power can also be called physical power. We use our bodies to move things. If I explain to a child why he or she should move away from a hot stove, I am using persuasive power. If I physically lift the child and move the child away from the stove, I am using coercive power.

Process theologians believe God possesses persuasive but not coercive power. The reason is simple: God does not have a body. Without a physical body, God is not able to move things as we do. As a result, if a comet or meteor is on a collision course with the earth, God will not be able to intervene and save the earth. If a car is bearing down on a child walking across a street, God cannot change the situation physically and save the child. None of this means God *wants* these terrible things to happen. It just means God does not have the power needed to make significant physical changes in the universe. Instead, God attempts through persuasion to move all things toward God's goals. For example, instead of physically forcing each of us to care for our neighbors, God sets before us the ideal of loving care and invites us to act accordingly. Because God uses only persuasion, God's will is frustrated when we creatures ignore persuasion and go our own way. Moreover, not only would acting coercively undercut God's character, but it would undermine human freedom and dignity as well.

Theologians who object to process theology find plenty to dislike in its theodicy. They don't like its rejection of God as omnipotent. They don't like the way process theology restricts God's action to persuasion. It is difficult, critics charge, to believe in miracles (at least big, dramatic miracles) unless you also believe that God can move physical objects around. Others object to the idea that humans can frustrate God's will. These objections are serious and deserve consideration.

At the same time, we have to give credit to process theologians for tackling a difficult subject. They have confronted a stubborn fact and tried to deal with it responsibly. There is, after all, a massive amount of evil in the world. Much evil does not seem to serve any divine purpose, and some people feel that much of it could be eliminated without damaging human freedom. If an undersea earthquake creates a tsunami killing hundreds of thousands of people, what purpose can it serve? So they ask, would our freedom really be compromised if God were to prevent the earthquake? Process theologians have an answer: Isn't it better to believe that God is simply not able to prevent such physical events?

Process Theology and the Bible

Discussion of theodicy prepares us to discuss how process theologians interpret the Bible.

Theologians have always been impressed by biblical accounts of God's actions in the world. From stories such as parting the Red Sea and Jesus' resurrection, theologians have concluded there are no limits to God's power. God's will is unstoppable and unchangeable.

But other stories in the Bible present a somewhat different picture. In Genesis, for instance, God seems to negotiate with Abraham about the destruction of Sodom. Abraham convinces God not to destroy the city if a few righteous citizens could be found (Gen. 18:16-33). Similarly, in Exodus God seems willing to be convinced by Moses not to destroy the Israelites (Exod. 32:7-14; Num. 14:10-19).

The prophetic literature also contains stories about God changing his mind, as when God decides not to destroy Nineveh once the people repented (Jon. 3:6-10). Such passages suggest God's will is not necessarily set in concrete but is flexible. They suggest God takes notice of human actions and responds appropriately. Instead of seeing God as rigidly pursuing a predetermined course of action through sheer power, they suggest God is willing to act, observe, and act again in light of human response. God's overall goal may be fixed, but God is willing to change strategy in light of human obedience or stubbornness.

The Bible's portrait of God's actions and power is thus varied. Traditional theology has focused on God's power and developed doctrines of his omnipotence and changelessness. By contrast, process theologians believe such emphases have overlooked the other way the Bible describes God—God's willingness to negotiate, to have a change of mind, and to explore alternative strategies.

Process theologians have a theory about why most theologians have ignored this other side of God: they have been influenced by a philosophical idea of God that contradicts the Bible.

Ancient Greek and Roman philosophers held that God must be (1) incapable of change, and (2) incapable of being affected by the world (impassible). In other words, God's nature was fixed and unchanging, regardless of what happens in the world. Greek and Roman philosophers thought change and the ability to be affected by things were signs of weakness and limitation. God, they felt, must be independent and fixed. God's actions and will must not depend in any way on human actions or other things in the world.

Almost all early Christian theologians accepted this view of God. Through the Middle Ages and the period of the Reformation, this was the standard Christian perception. It remains the view of many Christians.

However, process theologians believe this perception contradicts the Bible. We simply cannot find in the Bible the belief that God does not change and is unaffected by human deeds. On the contrary, process theologians believe the Bible frequently portrays God as changing and adjusting plans in response to human actions. They also emphasize that the Bible shows God suffering because of human disobedience. Think of how Hosea and Ezekiel depict God suffering as the husband of an unfaithful wife. Or think of God's anger in response to Israel's sin.

Process theologians believe they are being faithful to the Bible's picture of God when they stress God is intimately involved in the world and highly responsive to human action. A theology is needed that takes account of what the Bible teaches regarding God's relation to the world. Traditional theology is poorly suited to do this.

Process Theology and Human Freedom

A central affirmation of process theology is that God does not predestine events; God endows humans with free choice. This affirmation is one reason process theology attracts many Wesleyan theologians.

To appreciate this point it is important to understand Wesleyan theology in the Christian tradition. In Britain, Canada, and the United States, Wesleyans have always been a minority. Even if we do not include Roman Catholics, there have always been more non-Wesleyan Protestants than Wesleyans. More important, the dominant Protestant tradition in these countries has been some form of Reformed (i.e., Calvinist) theology. Wesleyans have usually found themselves in situations where the loudest Protestant voice was Calvinist.

There are many admirable features of John Calvin's theology. It has very strong, helpful, and clear views about Scripture, the Holy Spirit, the church, the sacraments, and many other subjects. However, it is also committed to a strong view of predestination. Wesleyans find two features of this position troubling: (1) God determines who will and will not be saved. God's decision to save or not to save is primarily based not on faith or lack thereof, but on God's purposes. (2) The grace by which God leads us to repentance and faith is "irresistible"; God's grace always, unfailingly accomplishes God's purposes. Grace is *causative*—it causes us to have faith.

As far back as John Wesley (1703-91), Wesleyans have objected to Calvin's understanding of predestination. There are several objections, one of which is that the doctrine of irresistible grace seriously distorts the Bible's teaching.

Wesleyans agree with Calvin that we are saved by God's grace alone and that faith and repentance are given by God. However, Wesleyans do not believe God's grace is irresistible or that God's purposes are always accomplished. On the contrary, they believe God's purposes are often frustrated because people refuse to respond positively. God's grace *enables* us to respond in repentance and faith; but it does not *compel* or *cause* obedience. Although all are touched by God's grace, many turn away and refuse to respond obediently. Wesleyans express this as *freedom*. Humans have a limited freedom to respond or not to respond to God's grace—a freedom God gives.

By now it should be obvious that process theology also affirms human freedom and responsiveness to God. It does so for various reasons, including some fairly complicated philosophical ones. Like Wesleyan theology, process theology rejects the doctrine that God predestines and that grace guarantees results. Like Wesleyan theology, it affirms that God offers grace to all and everyone can be enabled to respond positively. Not surprisingly, many Wesleyan theologians have found process theologians to be kindred spirits.

As earlier mentioned, there is an important similarity between Wesleyans' criticism of Calvin's theology and how process theologians evaluate much of traditional theology. Wesleyans believe Calvin's theology of predestination and grace ignores significant portions of the Bible. Similarly, process theologians believe traditional theology seriously misinterprets the Bible when it portrays God as incapable of change and as not being seriously affected by the world.

Wesleyans and process theologians affirm limited human freedom and believe God can empower free, obedient response. They agree that God interacts intimately with human beings. No wonder, then, some process theologians have thought that, of all the available Christian theologies, Wesleyanism lies closest to their concerns and convictions.

Conclusion

Process theology is not a flawless theology. Essays that follow will discuss some of its limitations. But every theology, including Wesleyan theology, has its limitations. Our responsibility is to separate the wheat from the chaff—to discern the truth that process theology contains and to take it seriously.

Chapter 2 Outline

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