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Process Theology: A Response

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There have been recent attempts to reformulate classic Christian concepts. In many instances, these attempts reflect a sincere desire to render the Christian faith more intelligible and appealing to modern mind. It is regrettable however that in some cases, the effort to make the Christian faith more relevant and fashionable has resulted in compromise. With the supplanting of divine revelation by human reason and the canons of naturalistic science as the basis of ultimate authority, the God of the Bible has been reduced and made subservient to the creative process in nature (process theology), to the vague regulative principle of the universe (Kant), to an impersonal ground of being (Tillich), and the God who is 'dead' (Nietzsche, Altizer, *et al.* No longer is he the living, loving sovereign Creator and Sustainer, Judge and Saviour of the world who is revered, trusted and obeyed by mortal men. In the name of modernity and scientism, some philosophers and theologians have created gods in their own image.

John S. Feinberg's paper on process theology represents a sincere and thorough effort to expound and evaluate this school of thought from the evangelical perspective. Sufficient background material is supplied to assist the reader to arrive at a clear understanding of the underlying developments in science and philosophy that influenced process thought. Due to the abstract nature of the concepts and technical terminology employed by Whitehead to formulate his metaphysical system, the average student may find process thought extremely complicated. Feinberg does well in presenting a detailed description and orderly exposition of the major concepts in process thought.

What we will do by way of comments is, first, to interact with Feinberg over selected points of the paper. The discussion will then be carried further, particularly on the question of God in interaction with some process and evangelical thinkers. We will conclude with an attempt to recast the classical Christian concept of God in the light of Scripture and the challenge of process theology.

As a general reaction to the paper, it should be pointed out that in his critique of process thought, Feinberg simply dismisses the ideas of Whitehead and the rest of process thinkers as altogether without any positive value. Whatever may be the motivation for this reaction, it is obvious that he fails to find in their work significant contribution to the contemporary discussion on God. This is in great contrast to the favourable reaction of some evangelicals to some features of process [p. 336](#) thought. In a major evaluation of process theology, for example, Geisler recognizes several positive contributions of process thought (see *Tensions in Contemporary Theology*, pp. 237–82), despite making a devastating criticism of it. For one thing, Geisler readily acknowledges that process theology points to the need for a comprehensive and coherent philosophical and theological framework through which the biblical understanding of God may be formulated. The need for evangelicals to account for *all* the biblical data about God is further recognized. The Scriptures do speak of God as 'foreknowing', 'repenting' and

acting *in time*. To a great extent, Geisler agrees with some points made by Hartshorne and Pike, specially in connection with the reality of God's relation to the world. For indeed, 'a God who cannot act or interact with the world would be less significantly personal'. Geisler admits that 'the doctrine of God's relationality is a biblical and vital teaching which is neglected or lost in some expressions of traditional theism'. Thus process thought 'is to be thanked for reviving this emphasis'.

The other value of process thought lies in its responsible critique of 'purely essentialistic Greek categories' employed in classic formulations on the nature of God.

Notwithstanding the serious deviations of process thought from orthodox beliefs, evangelicals should recognize the value of modern attempts to recast the traditional concepts of God in a way that intentionally interact with present day thought, and to render biblical faith more intelligible to modern man. Furthermore, in spite of the serious problems raised by process theology (like the notions of God's interdependence with the world, the presence of evil, and that the world can actually frustrate and limit God), evangelical theologians should rethink theological formulations of the doctrine of God for purposes of clarity, accuracy and faithfulness to the Scriptures. This is not seen in Feinberg's paper except a brief indication that God 'changes', that is, adjusts his attitude toward those who repent and turn toward him. There should have been a more vigorous and specific interaction in the paper with the ideas of Hartshorne, Pike and Ogden on God's nature and relation with the world.

It also seems to this writer that Feinberg misunderstands some elements in process thought. One has to do with Whitehead's notion of God's primordial nature in conjunction with the concept of eternal objects which Feinberg relates to Plato's 'forms'. Feinberg does not agree that the platonic forms had actual existence; hence, he concludes on this account that 'God's primordial nature is nothing more than an idea' (p. 41). Feinberg contends that 'the only real things and real p. 337 causes are actual entities, but since the ordering of eternal ideas is not itself an actual entity, it must be unreal' (p. 41), that Whitehead 'offers no one to do the ordering other than God does it' (p. 41). So, 'if God's primordial nature just is the eternal ideas, it must be something that is nothing' (p. 42).

This needs clarification. This writer believes that in the Platonic system, though the 'forms' were in the realm of ideas, they were as real and basic (if not more) than actual material objects as they undergirded the latter. Though abstract, the forms as universals cannot be separated from the actual world. In Whitehead, eternal objects are like a colour that comes and goes but does not perish. It is in the eternal objects that (in contrast to constant flux in the world) or 'forms of definiteness' are found. For, in the 'philosophy of organism it is not "substance" which is permanent but "form" '. Eternal objects are pure potentials but are actualized in objects. How then can actual objects ingress from non-existing determinants?

To Whitehead, then, 'God is an actual entity, and so is the most trivial puff of existence in far-off empty space.' The process of creativity (or ordering) itself cannot account for the actual becoming of objects; it is God who grounds eternal objects and causes ingression into the world of becoming. It is for this reason that Whitehead introduces God as a nontemporal actual entity. As he puts it,

The ontological principle can be expressed as: all real togetherness is togetherness in the formal constitution of an actuality. So if there be a relevance of what in the temporal world is unrealized, the relevance must express a fact of togetherness in the formal constitution of non-temporal actuality (God in his primordial nature).

Behind the process of ordering is the Orderer of external objects. Nevertheless in Whitehead, God is not different from the order of eternal objects. For, on the side of his

primordial nature, 'he is the unlimited conceptual realization of the absolute wealth of potentially. In this aspect, he is not before all creation, but with all creation.' So then, in process thought, God is finite though 'primordial creature' and does not create external objects; for his nature requires them in the same degree that they require him. And so it is not accurate, as Feinberg contends, to conceive of God within process thought as a non-entity.

As an attempt to explain the creative process in the universe, Whiteheadian metaphysics, to my mind, is both attractive and intriguing. It seeks to supply a model of the process of ingression, conspescence and differentiation of objects, as well as their bonding [p. 338](#) in clusters and unities. While the Bible clearly teaches that God created the heavens and the earth and all that there is, it does not provide any details on how it was done. Not everything came into being *ex nihilo*. The book of Genesis implies that God did not create all entities directly or immediately (without means). The innate forces set by the Creator in nature were at work in the generation of forms and classes apparently under divine superintendence. Process metaphysics provides a model and explanation of the dynamics of creativity, the emergence of new forms in the world, as well as the disappearance (perishing) of objects. It offers an explanation for the interrelatedness and interdependence of every entity in the world.

We now turn to the specific objections of process theologians directed at the classic formulations of the doctrine of God. This will extend the discussion on God beyond the scope of Feinberg's presentation. The critique by process theologians of the classic theistic formulations (particularly those of Thomas Aquinas) has led Geisler and others to recognize the need to rethink, if not to reformulate or expand, the classic formulations in order to connect inadequate or misleading points in the traditional understanding of God and to take account of all the data of Scripture on the subject.

Following Aristotelian categories (potentiality and actuality), Aquinas argues for God's timelessness or eternality as a logical consequence of the immutability of his essence. Aquinas advances three arguments for this.

Argument One

Everything that changes has potentiality, for change is a passing from a state of potentiality (for change) to a state of actuality; hence, there is no potentiality in him, and therefore he does not change; otherwise he is not a necessary Being.

Argument Two

Whatever changes is composed of what changes and what does not change (Change requires a changeable and unchangeable element). But God is a simple, not a composite Being; if he were composite, he would be a creature. Therefore, God cannot change in his being.

Argument Three

Whatever changes acquires something new which it did not possess [p. 339](#) before the change. As a perfect Being, God cannot acquire something new, as though he reads something outside his Being to perfect him. Thus God is immutable.

Aquinas' argument for God's timelessness may be stated thus: Whatever changes is in time (temporal). That which changes requires a successive series of different states. But as a necessary Being, God is immutable, hence eternal or timeless.

It should be pointed out that for Aquinas, eternality though timeless is not the same thing as endless time. Eternality is a unity, an essential whole, concurrent. Endless time is

temporal and involves successive, enumerable moments, broken up in endless parts. In God eternity is 'immovable and innumerable', and all moments are seen concurrently. Therefore God is qualitatively different from all creatures.

Pike and Ogden severely criticise this manner of understanding God. For Pike timelessness would eliminate God's foreknowledge (everything is an eternal *now*). God cannot act in time since he can act only in eternity as a timeless Being. This would jeopardize the doctrine of creation since the Bible describes creation as occurring in time. Further, immutability makes God an impersonal, impassible Being since he would be incapable of responding intellectually, emotionally and volitionally. Such a God cannot be an object of worship and trust. Pike also contends that the Bible depicts God as changing his mind in answer to prayer, in responses to repentant men or due to their wickedness.

In a somewhat similar vein, Ogden contends that the essentialistic view of God leads to some antimonies or paradoxes. The act of creation occurred in time and the temporal world is a contingent product of God's creative act. If 'God's act of creation is one with his own eternal essence, which is in every respect necessary', Ogden concludes that we are caught in a 'hopeless contradiction of a wholly necessary creation of a wholly contingent world'. Moreover, to understand God as perfect and absolute is to render service and relationship unnecessary since God cannot respond or relate to finite humans whose callings and activities obtain in the temporal space-time order. It also follows that service and worship have no value or significance to an infinite and absolute Creator—God.

In response to these criticisms, we make the following statements.

First, the God of the Bible is unchanging in his nature but not in his relations or dealings with his creatures. Bruce Wray speaks of God's 'ontological immutability' with reference to 'the supreme excellence of his intrinsic nature', or to 'God's external and self-sufficient being'. This is the way the biblical authors describe God's unchangeableness ^{p. 340} ([Ps. 102:25–27](#); [Mal. 3:6](#); [Isa. 1:17](#)). Wray also affirms God's 'ethical immutability' which relates to God's faithfulness and reliability in performing his promises.

Secondly, the ontological immutability of God need not detract from his involvement in the world. On the contrary, as Dorner stresses, 'our conception of the immutability proper to God must *account for rather than conflict with* God's vitality'. The God of the Bible is dynamically active in history and creation and is sovereignly and lovingly involved in the affairs of men and nations. To quote Dorner again, 'God constantly changes in his affairs with people as he encounters new happenings and responds to changing situations, but God's changes always express rather than deny his unchangeable moral nature'.

Thirdly, the element of mutability in God has to do with 'relational mutability', that is, as men change in their attitude toward God, he in turn adjusts his dealings with them in conformity to his moral nature. We can also in this respect speak of change in God's emotions; hence, he is not impassible. He can be angry ([Num. 12:9](#); [Josh. 7:1](#); [Isa. 42:25](#)); jealous ([Exod. 20:5](#); [Josh. 24:19](#); [Zech. 1:14](#)); compassionate and merciful ([Ps. 103:8](#); [145:8](#); [Jer. 3:12](#)); patient and longsuffering ([Exod. 34:6](#); [Num. 14:8](#); [2 Peter 3:9](#)).

Fourthly, regarding the act of creation, we need not assume that a necessary Being must necessarily create. God's act of creation (flowed from his free choice and could therefore involve him in time (aspect of his creative act).

For all its inadequacies and flaws, process thought has suggested ways by which the concepts and categories employed in traditional theism may be corrected, expanded or clarified. Evangelical thinkers should not merely react to what they consider unorthodox or unbiblical. Since theological formulations are the product of our creative efforts, they are ever in need of improvement, if not modification.

There is need to explore the implications and relationships between the concepts of the essential and economic Trinity; God's *ad intra* and *ad extra* relations with regard to

time, eternity, immutability and the incarnation; his transcendence and immanence. Further study on these ideas will enrich our understanding and experience of our God, who is also the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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The Gospel and Religious Pluralism

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We are living in a world that is characterized increasingly by religious pluralism. At the beginning of this century most people in Western world would have regarded non-Christian religions as demonic phenomena and their adherents as destined for hell.¹ It was seen as the great task of the Christian world to evangelize the non-Christian world and to save all those millions from eternal perdition. Today the situation is quite different. Many church people believe that there is truth in all religions and that they all provide their adherents with a way to God and to salvation. By means of dialogue we are all called upon to share our spiritual riches with others, whether we are Christian or non-Christian. At any rate we should work together towards a better world and most certainly refrain from all attempts to convert the others to our particular brand of religion.

Why did all these changes take place? A great number of factors could be mentioned here and we could spend a great deal of time on them. We shall restrict ourselves, however, to a brief enumeration of the main factors, without going into details. First of all there is the fact that we know much more about the other great religions than people did at the beginning of this century. Due to increased international travel, the development of modern means of communication, the growth of religious studies in many universities and in particular also the presence of people of other faiths in our own countries, all of us are aware that the other religions are living realities. None of us today would dare to say what Temple Gairdner wrote in his official account of the World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh, 1910: 'The spectacle of the advance of the Christian Church along many lines of action to the conquest of the five great religions of the modern world is one of singular interest and grandeur.'² Not only have we witnessed a strong revival of these great religions, but today their adherents live next door to us. Thousands upon thousands of people from other countries, taking their own religion with them, have settled in the USA and in Britain; on the European continent we daily meet with the many guest labourers, immigrants and refugees, coming from non-Christian p. 342 lands.³ Most of

¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith tells us in one of his articles that the *Encyclopedia Britannica* has its first article on 'Buddhism' in its ninth edition, in 1875. Cf. 'Mission, Dialogue, and God's will for us', *International Review of Mission (IRM)*, 1988, 360/1.

² Quoted from John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, 1977, 64.

³ Cf. Max Warren, *I Believe in the Great Commission*, 1976, 148. 'It is a new experience in Europe to have some schools in which fifty percent or more of the children are Hindus or Muslims.'