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Process Theology: A Christian Option or a New Religion?

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I Introduction

Process theology is a growing theological movement in which all of reality, including God himself, is seen as evolving. This system of thinking is an interpretation of Christian doctrines in the light of Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy, or 'organic philosophy' as he called it.

Some process theology ideas resonate with Christians, and perhaps rightly so. For example, that God is related to the world; that he experiences human suffering; that he is responsive to prayer; that God is not just 'out there' in the sky, but is intimately connected with us. However, the system as whole negates many of the basic doctrines of historic Christianity. For example, process theology denies creation 'out of nothing' (*ex nihilo*), God's omnipotence and his independence

from the world, as we will see below. In this paper I will attempt to show that process theology is essentially a new religion, well-crafted for the needs of both modern and postmodern people.

The process worldview addresses two crucial (post)modern concerns.¹ The first is freedom. Even at the most basic level and even in inanimate matter, it claims, freedom and self-actualization are at work. This process view of freedom addresses an important problem in the materialist scientific worldview. According to modern science everything occurs for material, physical reasons. Every event, choice or decision is the result of previous material causes. If this is true there is no such thing as free will, for all human decisions are simply the result of prior physical causes. But by re-imagining the meaning of cause and effect, as seen below, process theology has made

¹ I am using '(post)modern' to signify that a theme is applicable both to modernity and postmodernity.

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room for materialist freedom.

A second key (post)modern concern which process theology addresses is evolution, which is seen as an overarching metaphysical principle (not just a biological theory). All of reality, including God, is on a path of development. This second big idea of process theology is an adjustment of the notion of God to modern expectations. An absolute God is arguably less credible to contemporary post-Christian individuals than one who is 'one of us' as the Joan Osborne song goes.² According to process theology, God is growing with us and learning from us just as we are also learning from him.

The idea of a 'lesser god' is a corollary to freedom: having vanquished the tyranny of cause and effect, it will hardly do fall into the tyranny of an absolutely powerful God. The 'process god' also goes a long way towards solving one of the greatest philosophical problems of our time (at least in religion): the problem of evil. If God is all powerful and all loving, why is there evil in his creation? In process *theology* the existence of evil is explained by the fact that God is not all powerful or even necessarily all wise. However, this is seen as an inadequacy which he is working to overcome.

My remarks in the rest of the paper will be divided into three sections. In the first section I lay out the rationale

of Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy. Here all of reality, including God himself, is conceived of as being in process. The second section is dedicated to the idea of God and religion in process theology which is informed by this philosophical system. Essentially process theology conceives of God as a finite being existing in permanent reciprocal relationship to the world. The third section is dedicated to a biblical and theological assessment of the key claims of process theology. Here I try to show why I don't think process theology is compatible with historical and biblical Christian theology.

I respect process theologians for their efforts and I find process thought fascinating in its own right. However, given its growing popularity among many Christians, it seems timely to clarify process beliefs and particularly to contrast them with biblical teaching.

II Process Philosophy Explained

Since process theology is an interpretation of Christianity in the light of Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy, it will be important to first understand Whitehead's 'organic philosophy' (as he labelled it).

1. Time and actual occasions

The foundation of Whitehead's thinking is his concept of time. In contrast to our perception of time as an unbroken flow, Whitehead thought of time as a transition from one 'actual occasion' to another. The best metaphor I've see for this is a filmstrip, where there is a progression of still images with space

² This song was written by Eric Bazilian and performed by Joan Osborne on her 1995 album *Relish*. See <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_of_Us_\(Joan_Osborne_song\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_of_Us_(Joan_Osborne_song))> accessed 16 Feb 2012. The chorus goes as follows: 'What if God was one of us / Just slob like one of us / Just a stranger on the bus / Trying to make his way home.'

in between.³ Whitehead argued that reality is similarly made up of distinct 'images' which appear, persist and finally disappear, leaving room for the next 'frame' to take its place.

But we have to add some extra processes to the filmstrip in order to understand Whitehead's theory. In a filmstrip there is no interaction between each image. They just follow each other in predetermined order. But a process view of time thinks of each occasion as being in dynamic relationship to the occasions that come before and after. This dynamism occurs on two levels. First, there is process or development within each 'actual occasion'. Each 'moment' of time comes into being, or is actualized. It does not just appear fully formed as is the case of the image in the filmstrip. Whitehead called this process 'concrecence'. Then each occasion also ceases to exist. Thus, what we experience as an unbroken stream of consciousness is actually an ongoing series of comings into being and 'ceasings'.

In process philosophy, then, the basic unit of reality is the 'actualized occasion'. But just as in a filmstrip, the series of distinct still images are perceived as an unbroken process. Since all of reality is made up of these occasions of becoming, all the things that we normally consider distinct entities (for example, a ball or a person), are really series of 'moments' which share a common theme. As Lewis Ford puts it,

In this view we may conceive of anything material as a series of events having persistent characteristics that are constantly exemplified over a period of time.⁴

Whitehead's next step is to connect these actualized occasions. Clearly, each occasion does not rise randomly out of nothing—if this were the case there would be no continuity in our experience of reality. As in the filmstrip, there is a rational order to the events. According to Whitehead each occasion is influenced by the previous one, or each occasion 'prehends' the one before it.

Prehending is a concept that is unique to process thinking and it is intended to replace the scientific notion of cause and effect. We are not to think, says Whitehead, of causation as a clash of distinct forces such as, for example, the case of billiard balls bouncing off each other. Rather, any given occasion opens itself to the influence of a previous occasion and integrates those given tendencies into its own process. Each occasion does not respond slavishly to the previous moment. It receives what has been passed on and then shapes that heritage uniquely in its own process of actualization (thus Whitehead's term, 'actual occasions'). Then, when the current occasion has ceased, its self-actualization is passed on to the following occasion.

Another way of saying it is that 'Events produce themselves out of their causes rather than causes produce events as passive effects'.⁵ Thus

3 The image comes from John Cobb and David Ray Griffin in *Process Theology: an Introductory Exposition* (Louisville, TN: Westminster: John Knox Press, 1976), 14.

4 Lewis Ford, *The Lure of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 3.

5 Ford, *The Lure of God*, 7.

process philosophy replaces mechanistic cause and effect with organic prehension.

This is an extremely important distinction because with it Whitehead is able to defend free will, something that scientific materialism has not been able to do. Previous occasions have influence on the current occasion, but their influence is not decisive. Each occasion undergoes its own self-actualization.

Another crucial implication of prehension is that causes are internalized by their effect. So, unlike the modern scientific notion of cause and effect as the external interaction of objects (think again of billiard balls), the cause and the effect in process philosophy are integrally connected and affect each other internally. From this follows process notion of interdependence. Causes are taken into their effects; they literally become a part of that which they are influencing. This means that all things are organically connected.

2. Enter God

However Whitehead felt that this account of the interaction between actual occasions was not in itself satisfactory, for what is to keep the series of actualizations from incoherency, or endless repetition? Further, reality does seem to be a rational unfolding of events. There is an ongoing consistency in the flow of moments, such that we can recognize reality as an ongoing process. What, then, gives process philosophy its *process*? The crucial answer is that God is the one who leads the series of actualizations in a particular direction: '[God] is the principle of concretion—the principle whereby there is initiated a definite outcome from a situation oth-

erwise riddled with ambiguity.'⁶

However, God does not determine the outcome of the moment; he merely 'lures' its self actualization toward a particular goal. God is the director of the play, but he cannot issue orders—only suggestions. Or, in Whitehead's terminology, 'he is the poet of the world, with tender patience leading it by his vision of truth, beauty, and goodness'.⁷ Reality remains free to actualize itself along the lines of its own potential.

In process philosophy, then, God is the source of the potentialities that are available in each occasion's coming into being. It is only because of God's direction that reality makes as much sense as it does. However, God is not to be seen as separate from the universal process.⁸ He himself also prehends previous occasions and undergoes his own process—his own series of actualizations. Because of this, he not only exerts his influence on the world in each moment, but he is also influenced by the self-actualization of each previous occasion. God himself is not an exception to the rules of prehension and actualization.

God provides each event with the aim or lure toward which it moves. The event actualizes itself, influenced by the possibilities that God has provided, but also becoming something unique in its self-production by appropriating elements out of its past. This result is then experienced by God. In this way, the world enriches God.⁹

⁶ Alfred North Whitehead, 'God and the World', in *Process Theology*, ed. Ewert H. Cousins (New York: Newman Press, 1971), 89.

⁷ Whitehead, 'God and the World', 91.

⁸ Ford, *The Lure of God*, 10.

⁹ Ford, *The Lure of God*, 11.

In Whitehead's words, 'the dipolarity of God is analogous to all actual entities'.¹⁰ God, like all other actualities, proceeds from prehension to self-actualization and God is therefore described, like all of reality, as 'dipolar'. The difference between God and other actualities is that God's 'primordial pole' has infinite potentialities which are actualized in his consequent nature or 'actual pole'. God is related to the world in the same way that one moment is related to another—there is an ongoing exchange of influence and actualization between the two.

It should be emphasized that Whitehead's description of God is not 'as clear as one might like',¹¹ and because of this there is still debate and discussion on the topic. Among the important issues is whether God is to be considered a 'personally ordered series of entities' (like all other persons in the world), or whether he is to be seen as a single actual entity.¹² Since the latter view makes it difficult for the world to influence God (it is not clear how a single, ongoing actuality would interact with a series of actualities), the former view is preferred by John Cobb and others who are more interested in process

philosophy for its theological implications.¹³

3. Evaluation of process philosophy

Process philosophy is a metaphysical system. This means that it attempts to provide a rational explanation for the nature of reality. It is interesting that Whitehead developed his ideas at a time when philosophers were becoming decidedly anti-metaphysical (*Process and Reality* was published in 1929). Overall, this is still the case today in philosophy. The problem with metaphysical systems is that they can be internally consistent without necessarily providing compelling external reasons for their veracity. In other words, metaphysical systems can do little more than suggest a possible explanation.

Hans Kung, therefore, asks whether both process philosophy and theology 'are not in fact mere assertions'.¹⁴ Karl Popper similarly suggested that 'like all Neo-Hegelians, [Whitehead] adopts the dogmatic method of laying down his philosophy without argument. We can take it or leave it. But we cannot discuss it.'¹⁵ It does seem that Whitehead's philosophy is driven more by his concern with freedom, cause and effect and evolution than by any compelling logical proofs external to the system. Also I wonder if interest in his philoso-

10 Whitehead, 'God and the World', 89.

11 Gene Reeves and Delwin Brown, 'The Development of Process Theology', in *Process Theology and Christian Thought*, eds. Delwin Brown, Ralph E. James, Jr. and Gene Reeves (Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1971), 26. 'Whitehead... characterized his own ideas of God as "very vague"'. David Ray Griffin, *Reenchantment without Supernaturalism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 157.

12 Reeves and Delwin, 'The Development of Process Theology', 39.

13 Reeves and Delwin, 'The Development of Process Theology', 39.

14 Hans Kung, *Does God Exist?* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1980), 180.

15 K. R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1966), II:247. Cited in Kung, *Does God Exist?*, 181.

phy is based more on the timely conclusions it bolsters than by any logical necessity it presents. Ultimately the claims of process philosophy might be justified, but they also might not be justified. It seems difficult to say anything more conclusive than that.

Still, a few critical questions may even lead to a negation of Whitehead's philosophy. First, we may wonder why, if prehension is real, we have neither intuitions about it nor any scientific evidence that points to it. This final point is particularly important because Whitehead is positing an alternative to the scientific notion of cause and effect, but the reasons for this reassessment are not scientific; they are philosophical. Also, what sort of corroboration can be provided for the idea that all of reality experiences self-awareness? This seems like a good example of a 'mere assertion' and one that is very non-intuitive at that.

III Seven Core Doctrines of Process Theology

Process theology retains all of Whitehead's main ideas and it therefore affirms freedom, evolution and self-actualization in the process sense. In terms of God's nature, process theology affirms that he is dependent on the world for his own self-actualization and the world likewise depends on him. God does not have control over the world and he cannot make any unilateral decisions about it. He can only woo or lure the world into following his will. Process theologians affirm that God is leading the world in a wise direction, but there is no guarantee that the world will cooperate with him. There are other implications that flow from

these ideas, and I will discuss those in the biblical evaluation section. For now we turn to some of the core ideas of process theology as expressed in its own categories.

David Ray Griffin lays out seven core doctrines of process theism. He admits that 'process theologians themselves have usually not clearly indicated which of their various views belong to the core doctrines of process theology and which ones are merely allowed by, without being entailed by, these doctrines'.¹⁶ Griffin's list of doctrines is not exhaustive, but he does think that that while one might add to them, none of them can be removed.¹⁷

- **The acceptance of 'hard-core commonsense notions' or 'the inevitable presuppositions of practice'.** This means that concepts basic to our self-understanding, such as free will, should be treated as true. They are not conclusions but building blocks or presuppositions.
- **Panexperientialism.** According to process theology all of reality has a measure of self-awareness. This applies first to each actualized occasion as understood by in Whitehead's process philosophy. Each unit of existence participates in its own self-actualization. But second,

¹⁶ David Ray Griffin, 'Process Theology and the Christian Good News: A Response to Classical Free Will Theism', in *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue between Process and Free Will Theists*, eds. John B. Cobb and Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 3.

¹⁷ The doctrines in this section come from Griffin, 'Process Theology', 3-7.

'compound individuals' such as humans and animals have a great capacity for awareness and self-determination. Finally, 'agregational societies' such as sticks, stones, and any other object we may think of also have a measure of self-awareness and determination. All of reality experiences and participates in its own self-actualization.

- **Nonsensationist doctrine of perception.** This means that **sensory perception is not the only mode of perception.** It is, in fact, secondary to 'prehension' which is the more fundamental mode of perception. This becomes particularly important when it comes to the experience of God, for prehension is the primary means of interaction with him.
- **All actualities have an objective and subjective mode.** This explains God's providential activity: just as God influences the world, so he is also influenced by the world. Each actuality is the object of causation by a previous actuality and then becomes an objective cause of the next actuality. Thus, 'the things that endure are analyzable according to things that occur'.¹⁸ Needless to say, there is no concept of a static reality in process theology; certainly no 'unmoved mover'.
- **Internal relatedness.** This follows from the notion that causes are internalized into their effect (prehension). Because of this the presence of God, as cause, can be

said to dwell in all things. It is also 'the basis for understanding causation as incarnation'.¹⁹ God is in the world as a kind of soft cause; the world apprehends that cause and allows it to have an effect as it sees fit.

- **Naturalistic theism.** In process theology the 'supernatural' is completely natural. God's relationship to the world is 'a fully natural part of the normal causal processes of the world'.²⁰ God's interaction with the world is not to be categorized as an interruption ('miracle'), or as contingent or optional. The very nature of God involves reciprocal interaction with the world.
- **Dipolar theism.** God is not to be viewed as entirely static and immutable. He is this in one part, or pole, but in another pole he is temporal, contingent, passible, etc. As mentioned in the process philosophy section, God is like any other serially ordered entity. He is in an ongoing process of concrescence and that process has two poles. The 'dipolar' understanding of God gives process theology a religiously adequate idea of God: one who is both necessary and contingent; one who provides a ground of being, but also participates in the process of the world. 'Although to be loving God must be affected by the world, the fact that God is loving must be an unchanging characteristic of God, independent of

18 Griffin, 'Process Theology', 4.

19 Griffin, 'Process Theology', 5.

20 Griffin, 'Process Theology', 6.

anything that may happen.'²¹

To summarize, then, process theology is crafted specifically to interpret two major philosophical themes, which are also 'hard-core common sense notions': the existence of process in the universe and the human experience of freedom. It does this by positing a God who is organically involved in the process of the universe and who provides a guiding lure, but does not, because he cannot, control the evolution of the universal process.

IV. A Biblical Evaluation of Process Theology

Process theology is a philosophical religion. It does not claim special revelation and the closest thing it has to a founder (Alfred North Whitehead) was not primarily interested in the idea of God. It has no miracles and no prophets. It is an entirely rational explanation of God and reality. Process theology interacts significantly with Christianity and many of its expositions consist of adjustments of the classical doctrines of the Bible and the historic Christian creeds. In theory it does not need revelation. Its principles could be deduced directly from process metaphysics.

A Scriptural response to process theology need not attempt to disprove its metaphysical claims. In fact it is a system that would be difficult to negate. As we have seen in the phi-

losophy section, it might be true, but it also might not be true. Rather, our goal ought to be to simply evaluate the claims of process theology in the light of the teaching of the Bible. As we will see, process theologians do often appeal to the Scriptures, not so much to prove their ideas as to show that they are in continuity with the Bible.

Another important dynamic in this discussion is that process theologians make some insightful critiques of the classical idea of God ('Classical Theism'). These are well worth hearing, particularly because Christians have often been guilty of confusing theological doctrines with the direct teaching of the Bible. Yet, as we will see, the critiques from process theology can also be overstated, not allowing for the variety of thought that has existed throughout Christian history, and not doing justice to the teaching of the Bible itself. It is true that Christian theologians have often spoken more explicitly than the Bible (think, for example, of the doctrine of the Trinity). But it has also been true at times that they had solid biblical reasons for doing so.

I have focused on comparing biblical and process expositions of three topics.

1. Omnipotence

a) Can God do as he pleases?

The process theology concept of God provides a striking contrast to the classical doctrine of God's omnipotence. In process theology God is the great director. He provides options, inspiration, guidance—he 'lures'—but he does not have unilateral power. He cannot do whatever he sees fit. Rather, he must contribute his part to the

²¹ Griffin, *Reenchantment*, 162. Note that this is just an explanation of Hartshornian dipolarity. There is also a Witheadian dipolarity between God's primordial nature, which provides the aims of process and his consequent nature, which is the actualization of his aims.

world's own self-actualization. There is also another limitation to God's power in this approach—since the God of process theology is finite there is also a limitation on the extension of his power; since he cannot be everywhere, he obviously cannot do anything that might be doable.

God's limitedness features very prominently in process theology descriptions, arising to the level of a polemic against 'coercive power.' Charles Hartshorne, an important early adopter of process theology, identified 'the power to determine every detail of what happens in the world', as the 'the tyrant ideal of power'.²² For Hartshorne the only viable idea of power is one that influences all things but determines nothing. Elsewhere he connects the 'monopoly of power' to determinism and states that, although God must be unsurpassably great in order to be worshipped, omnipotence is to 'burden the divine worshipfulness with a logical paradox of our own making'.²³

Some authors have also blamed classical omnipotence for the tendency to see God as the defender of the status quo. If God can do anything he wants to do, it follows that whatever is must be what he wants.²⁴

²² Richard Rice, 'Process Theism and the Open View of God: the Crucial Difference', in *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue between Process and Free Will Theists*, eds. John B. Cobb and Clark H. Pinnock, 163-200 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 186. Emphasis original.

²³ Charles Hartshorne, *A Natural Theology for Our Time* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1967), 119.

²⁴ Griffin, *Reenchantment*, 133. See also Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology: an Introductory Exposition*, 9.

The bottom line is that process theology needs a limited God in order for its version of freedom to work. A limited God who participates in the actualization of all actual entities leaves room for free will; a God who is all powerful calls into question the scheme. David Basinger has argued that the process theology understanding of divine power and coercion is the 'metaphysical linchpin' of the whole system, and that it is not a solid foundation.²⁵

b) The problem of evil

There are some problems associated with this position—the first being that a limited God cannot decisively address the problem of evil. What process theology gains in human freedom it loses in power to act against evil. The problem of evil is not just left unsolved, but becomes a human problem, which must be resolved by human means. This is because evil results from a failure to follow God's lure,

Insofar as the whole creation trusts God to realize the purposes he proposes to us, then the good will triumph. The continued presence of evil, both in man and in the natural order, testifies to the very fragmentary realization of creaturely faith in God.²⁶

Since process theism rejects an eschatological intervention,²⁷ we are left with the possibility of an endless process of existence from which evil will

²⁵ David Basinger, *Divine Power in Process Theism: A Philosophical Critique* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), 113.

²⁶ Ford, *The Lure of God*, 24.

²⁷ Ford, *The Lure of God*, 24.

never be eradicated.

Another related problem is the assumption that God's lure is indeed a good and wise one. According to process theology God himself is also learning and growing. Might he not also lead the world in an unwise direction? In fact the entire assumption that a process god is good, wise and loving can be only a mere assertion. There is no compelling reason why this must be so.

Cobb and Griffin argue that divine power in classical theism creates a deeply personal problem for believers: the classic question of why God would allow terrible things to happen to certain people and not others.²⁸ This is certainly not a question to be taken lightly. However, does the process God resolve this existential problem? Is a god who cannot do anything about evil any better than one who can but does not? Are we not faced now with the possibility of bitterness and dismissal? Can an impotent God earn our respect?

We have already seen above that it is important for process theologians to have a God who provides a sufficient ground for being, a God who can be worshipped. But is this really an adequate God? Is he worthy of worship? As David Basinger notes, 'this being cannot unilaterally insure the occurrence of less evil or unilaterally intervene in response to petitionary prayer...or give us direct, conscious guidance'.²⁹ Clark Pinnock put it well when he said that 'many people will

feel that a godling of this small proportion is not big enough to satisfy their religious needs...and is vastly inferior to the God of the Bible'.³⁰

c) Is this the God of Scripture?

It is also difficult to reconcile the limited God of process theology with the biblical account of God's power. Although the biblical record does not use the term 'omnipotence' and does not present a formal doctrine of God's power, it is clear that there is nothing that the biblical God cannot do: 'not one statement exempts anything from the reach of divine power'.³¹

In Jeremiah 32:17 the prophet prays, 'Ah Lord God! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for you.' Particularly striking are statements in which God is completely unfettered and flatly contradict the process notion of divine power: 'Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps.' (Psalm 135:6) Or, 'But our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases.' (Psalm 115:3)

In the New Testament God's power is transferred to Jesus and this is why his miracles are so important. They show that God was at work in his ministry.³² The assumption in the gospels is that the world is under the dominion of Satan and God, in the person of Jesus, has begun to wage war against

²⁸ Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology: an Introductory Exposition*, 9.

²⁹ Basinger, *Divine Power in Process Theism*, 113-114.

³⁰ Quoted in Basinger, *Divine Power in Process Theism*, 14.

³¹ Gerhardus Vos, 'Omnipotence', in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 3:592.

³² *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 5:445.

that dominion. His power is adequate to the task, seen particularly in Jesus' exorcisms (for example Mark 1:21–28 and the incident with the Gerasene demoniac). It is not so much that Jesus' behaviour supports 'omnipotence' as such, but that the exercise of power in his ministry is indeed absolute or 'tyrannical'—not collaborative. The demons are not 'lured' or wooed into action. They are decisively commanded. For those who are concerned about the problem of evil, this would seem to be good news. The point is that finally we have here in the person of Jesus someone who can wield power against evil.

So even if the philosophical aspects of the doctrine of omnipotence are not flushed out in the Bible, and even if we might quibble about the precise nature of God's power in the Bible, it is clear that scripture does not present us with a limited God who must rely on the cooperation of the universe in order to accomplish his purposes. Rather we see a God who will accomplish whatever it is that he has set out to do.

2. Impassibility

a) The problem of perfection

A common criticism of the 'classical' view of God which is made by process theologians is that because of his unchanging perfection, the classical God of Christian theology must necessarily be unaffected by the world. This, they argue, contradicts the biblical teaching that God is love. For God to love his creatures he must be able to interact with them. Otherwise how can he be in relationship?

The notion of impassibility comes from Greek philosophy and is based on the insight that anything which is per-

fect must also be static. If it is perfect and then changes, it can no longer be perfect; conversely, if it changes and is perfect, it could not have been perfect before. Also implied in this view is that God has no passions or feelings. These are of course passing and are responses to external stimuli. Perfection cannot respond to external influence for this would mean change and it is already perfect. Nor can perfection depend on anything external—this would imply a lack. Perfection is both unchanging and unresponsive; it is static and hermetically sealed.

Through the Christian centuries some thinkers have accepted this as a valid insight and have applied it to the Christian view of God. David Ray Griffin presents the example of Anselm of Canterbury (12th c.), who meditated on this very problem when he prayed,

If thou art passionless, thou dost not feel sympathy; and if thou dost not feel sympathy, thy heart is not wretched from sympathy for the wretched; but this it is to be compassionate.³³

Process theology has a compelling answer to the problems raised by impassibility. It affirms that God is not, in fact, perfect. He is not static and he is not complete in and of himself. He exists, process affirms, in relation with and in mutual dependence to the world and is thus able to feel sympathy for people. In process theology the very definition of God implies that he is intimately intertwined with the world. God is seen as a fellow sufferer.³⁴ Or,

³³ Quoted in Griffin, *Reenchantment*, 149.

³⁴ Gordon E. Jackson, *A Theology for Ministry* (St. Louis, MI: Chalice Press, 1998), 33. This is Whitehead's phrase.

as Cousins puts it, 'The deepest reality of God is seen not in his detachment or in his power, but in his love. In contrast with the static Absolute and the all-powerful monarch, the process God is the God of persuasive love revealed in Jesus Christ.'³⁵

Since in process theology God is involved in a reciprocal relationship with the world, he is explicitly affected by what happens in the lives of individual human beings.

b) Perfect and in relationship

Surely many Christians would be just as shocked as Griffin is at the idea that God is static, unresponsive and unfeeling. Donald Nash points out that process theology does make some legitimate criticisms of Thomistic or 'classical' theology in this respect.

However, Nash also points out that process theology lays down an unreasonable gauntlet, as if the only options on the table were impassibility or process theology; a perfect unresponsive God or an imperfect feeling God. In classical theology the views have never been that stark. It has generally been understood that although God is perfect and unchanging in his purpose and character, this does not mean he cannot be in relationship with his creatures.³⁶

The Greek thinking that lies behind the notion of God as impassible was never fully integrated into the classical

view of God, and Christians throughout the centuries have always affirmed God's personal involvement in history and in the lives of the individual.³⁷ Indeed large tracts of the Bible, including the Psalms, flatly contradict the idea that God is passionless and unresponsive. The process theology argument on this issue assumes that the influence of Greek philosophy on Christian theology was stronger and less complex than it really was.

Anselm himself was clearly struggling with this problem, very likely because of his biblical understanding of God's compassion. He does arrive at a solution, even if it would not satisfy most of his fellow Christians. According to Anselm, God does not feel compassion towards us, but his nature is such that we rightly experience compassion when we are confronted with him.³⁸ Anselm the biblical Christian rightly struggled with this notion. He did not simply accept it as non-problematic.

Classical theism has always promoted the idea of a God who embraces suffering, especially in the person of Jesus Christ on the cross. If we accept the incarnation as God dwelling in a human being there can be no doubt that God is in dynamic relationship with the world. It is the love of God for human beings that brought about God's self-giving act on the cross. It is God's love that leads to his self-giving: 'God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us'

³⁵ Ewert H. Cousins. 'Process Models in Culture, Philosophy, and Theology', in *Process Theology*, ed. Ewert H. Cousins (New York: Newman Press, 1971), 15.

³⁶ Ronald Nash, *The Concept of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 31.

³⁷ Carl F. Henry, 'A Critique of Process-Theology', in *The Living God: Readings in Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: 1979), 405-406.

³⁸ See chapter vii of Anselm's *Proslogion*.

(Rom. 5:8 ESV).

However, the same Bible that describes this personal self-giving of God to the world also affirms in no uncertain terms God's mighty power (see above on omnipotence), speaks of him as dwelling in unapproachable light, too exalted for humans to see (1 Tim. 6:16), and declares his ways past human comprehension (Rom. 11:33). Therefore, the logic of scripture does not support as necessary the connection that process theology makes between relatedness and limitedness. In the Bible God is both perfect and in relation to the world.

The fact that some Christian theologians in the past developed a theology that lost sight of God's capacity for relationship is really a minor issue. It is inaccurate to paint the entire spectrum of possibilities entailed in the classical view of God as if they were all summed up in the Thomistic/Aristotelian synthesis. Bruce Demarest goes so far as to say that it is 'irresponsible to replace the God of theism with a finite, evolving Deity in order to affirm relatedness to the world'.³⁹

3. Creation

a) Process and ex-nihilo

Since in process theology God and the world are an interrelated pair, it follows that God could not have existed without the world. In fact, the world is essential for God's own process, since it is the stage of his self-actualization. This interdependence carries important implications for the doctrine of

creation, because the classical doctrine of creation affirms that the world is dependent on God and that God is not dependent on the world.⁴⁰

A process theology description of creation goes something like this: 'the fusion of novel form with inherited matter by the self-creative decision of the emergent creature'.⁴¹ This somewhat tortured definition is nothing more than a restatement of the process philosophy concept of becoming that occurs in each actual occasion. Each of these is seen as an act of participatory creation between God and actual entities. Since creation out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) by God would imply that there was a time when God existed without the world, this must be rejected. Ford suggests that the biblical record does not necessarily entail creation 'out of nothing':

In themselves the Old Testament traditions concerning creation, whether in the Priestly (Genesis 1) or Yahwistic (Genesis 2) accounts, or in Second Isaiah, Job or the Psalms, do not insist upon this. Creation out of nothing is first mentioned in the Apocrypha: 2 Macc. 7:38.⁴²

Griffin also calls creation *ex nihilo* a post-biblical doctrine, and states another fatal problem that it poses for process theology: 'Given the doctrine of creation ex-nihilo, God can unilaterally determine the state of affairs in the world.'⁴³ In calling into existence that which did not exist, God would

⁴⁰ Nash, *The Concept of God*, 24.

⁴¹ Ford, *The Lure of God*, 21.

⁴² Ford, *The Lure of God*, 21.

⁴³ Griffin, *Reenchantment*, 137.

³⁹ Quoted in Nash, *The Concept of God*, 31.

be exercising complete power over the universe's actualization.

b) Biblical creation

However, the notion that the Bible does not teach creation out of nothing is very problematic.

Creation in the Bible is more than manufacture or artistic arrangement on the assumption of existing material. God is not just an architect or builder who works with what is at hand. Nor is creation an emanation from God...God is the Creator in the strict sense, i.e., He creates out of nothing (*ex nihilo*).⁴⁴

The simplest interpretation of Genesis 1:1, 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth', is that before the moment in which the heavens and the earth were created, nothing we could call a world or a universe existed. The declaration of verse 1 without any intimation of competing pre-existing matter suggests that the Genesis story is a purposeful affirmation that God is the only source of the universe. This is a contrast to other ancient cosmologies that included the forming of the world out of primordial matter.⁴⁵ As the Genesis narrative continues, the creation from nothing continues to be implied, for it is by God's mere word that the earth is moulded and filled. Certainly, there is no hint of primordial matter that participated in its own creation.

Many commentators have mistakenly claimed that the Hebrew word for 'create' (*barah*) in this passage entails creation from nothing, but this is not supported by its use elsewhere in the Old Testament.⁴⁶ However, the doctrine of creation from nothing does not depend on the use of a particular word. Rather, the concept is inherent in the creation account.

V. Conclusion

I have tried to show in this paper that process theology is not compatible with the teachings of the Bible or the classical doctrines which spring from it. It is a philosophical system built on the thought of Alfred North Whitehead. Process thinkers do attempt to attempt to find coherence between the Christians Scriptures and their ideas, but the attempt ultimately fails.

Two notions in particular will continue to create dissonance with the biblical account of God. First, the idea that God's power is limited, and second the notion that God is dependent on the world for his own self-actualization. The biblical view of God, in contrast, shows him to be almighty; that is, able to do anything he sees fit. Further, although the world depends absolutely on God, there is no sense in which God needs the world in order to fulfil himself.

⁴⁴ J. Lindsay, 'Creation' in *ISBE*, 1:803.

⁴⁵ K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 129.

⁴⁶ Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, 129. It would be strange to have a word completely dedicated to that concept.