

“PROCESS THEOLOGY 101”
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Call to Gather: Responsive Reading #436¹

Reading: “Sonnets to Orpheus, Part Two, XII” by Rainer Maria Rilke

Want the change. Be inspired by the flame
where everything shines as it disappears.
The artist, when sketching, loves nothing so much
as the curve of the body as it turns away.

What locks itself in sameness has congealed.
Is it safer to be gray and numb?
What turns hard becomes rigid
and is easily shattered.

Pour yourself out like a fountain.
Flow into the knowledge that what you are seeking
finishes often at the start, and, with ending, begins.

Every happiness is the child of a separation
it did not think it could survive. And Daphne, becoming
a laurel,
dares you to become the wind.²

Sermon

It occurred to me in preparing this sermon that I am a third generation advocate of process theology. This is kind of a cool thing to say because the origins of process theology only go back four generations. So my process theology lineage goes back almost to the beginning of the movement.

The origin of process theology can be traced to the great British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. Born in 1861, Whitehead in his long lifetime witnessed extraordinary changes—from the Einstein revolution in physics to the massive suffering during two horrific world wars. He based his system of philosophy on the emerging understanding from Einstein and other scientists that the essential nature of life is change and relatedness. These are the two pillars of his philosophy: the constancy of change and

¹ *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

² http://panhala.net/Archive/Sonnets_to_Orpheus_II_XII.html.

the utter inter-relatedness of everything. He called his system the “philosophy of organism.” Everything in the universe, he said, constantly grows and decays and changes like the cells in a living organism—everything including God. And like all the parts of an organism, everything in the universe is related. Again, this includes God.

Several mid-twentieth century theologians led the way in applying Whitehead’s philosophical insights to theology. Perhaps the most notable among these was Charles Hartshorne. Hartshorne studied with Whitehead and later became a professor at process theology’s mid-century epicenter, the University of Chicago Divinity School. He was a Unitarian Universalist.

Henry Nelson Weiman, a colleague of Hartshorne’s at the University of Chicago, was another important pioneer in the second generation of process theology. A student of his there, Duncan Littlefair, became the senior minister of the Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan in 1944 and served in that role into the late 1970s. Fountain Street Church was my childhood church. Though I never once remember Dr. Littlefair mentioning either his mentor Weiman or process theology by name, it became abundantly clear to me when I wrote a book about his ministry that process theology was the backbone of his theological viewpoint.

I think it would be accurate to say that I continue in the same tradition. Even though I don’t mention Whitehead or Weiman or even Littlefair very often, I think they constitute my theological lineage. I have incorporated other ideas into my theology, too—feminist and liberation theologies, for example—but at its core my theology is process theology.

What is process theology? It is a theological movement based on some key ideas. It is not a creed or a totally developed system that adherents have to buy completely. I’d say it is a worldview, a way of understanding humanity, God, and how we should live ethically. Although its roots lie in Christianity, there is nothing in process theology that limits it to Christianity.³

What ideas are central to process theology? A good place to start is the movement’s understanding of God. Process theology’s understanding of God differs very significantly from that of orthodox Christianity. The most important difference is process theology’s central assertion that God is neither all-powerful nor all-knowing. Charles Hartshorne bluntly labels the ideas of God’s omnipotence and omniscience “common (theological) mistakes.”⁴ For him and other process theologians, the traditional understanding of God as all-knowing and all-powerful simply does not make sense. It doesn’t make sense on a grand scale given the world’s suffering which reached such terrible new heights in the cataclysmic twentieth century. And it doesn’t make sense in our individual lives which inevitably include at least an occasional stiff shot of suffering.

Process theologians wrestle head on with central questions about God—questions like: Why do bad things happen? Does God cause bad things to happen? Could God prevent them? Process theologians answer these questions by asserting that God cannot be both good and all-powerful. If God is all-powerful and bad things happen anyway,

³ Paul Custodio Bube, “Process Theological Ethics,” *Handbook of Process Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006), Jay McDaniel and Donna Bowman, eds., p. 149; John B. Cobb, Jr., *The Process Perspective* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), p. 69.

⁴ Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany: State University of New York, 1984), pp. 2-5.

then it must God who allows (or even causes) bad things to happen. If this is true, then God must not be good. If on the other hand God is good yet bad things happen anyway, then God must not be all-powerful. Process theologians conclude that the latter is true: God is good but not all-powerful. God's job does not include preventing bad things from happening—or making good things happen. God's power is limited.

Another way to describe God's limited power is to borrow a famous concept from President Bush: God is not the Decider. Rather than pulling all the strings, process theologians believe that God *persuades* us toward that which is good and true and loving. God cares about us and has some power, but this power is not decisive on its own. Importantly, it's also not coercive power. We have a choice about whether to be persuaded by God.

This means that each of us has some power in our own lives. This power is limited, and it varies from person to person. A wealthy woman living in the United States or Europe will likely have more power over her life than a poor man living in sub-Saharan Africa. But we each have some freedom: we each can use whatever power that is ours for good, or we can use it for ill. We can allow God's call to persuade us and do what is good, or we can ignore God's call.⁵ To some (limited) extent, we are each the Decider in our own lives.

So rather than God up in the clouds pulling the strings like some grand puppet master, the God of process theology *participates* with us in our lives. Parker Palmer succinctly puts it this way: "God is in the mess with us."⁶ God walks with us not only through the good but also through the bad. God is a loving, supporting companion in the light and in the darkness. When we are joyous, God is with us. When we are worried, God is with us. When we are suffering, God is with us.

Emmanuel is one of Christian process theologians' favorite images. Emmanuel literally means "God with us." A distant God pulling our strings can't be with us.⁷ But a God who walks with us through the good and the bad in life can be with us.

Another important idea about God in process theology is that God—like us—never really knows how things will turn out. God can't know because the freedom of individual actors means that the outcome is never certain. Will my loved one die from this recurrence of cancer? Will humanity find a way to reverse global warming? Will Obama or Clinton win the nomination? Will forty-five turn out to be a mid-point in my life-span (as I hopefully asserted in a sermon a few weeks ago)? Will the world as we know it end in an apocalyptic nightmare as the "Left Behind" series foresees? Will the Cubs finally win the World Series this year (or this century)? We (merely) human beings certainly don't know the answers to any of these questions. Process theology asserts: neither does God. Only an all-knowing, all-powerful God could know the answers to these questions. Since God doesn't have these abilities, God, like us, cannot foresee the future.

Where is God? For process theologians: not up in the heavens, but right here, in the midst of our lives. The God of process theology is thoroughly immanent, incarnate in us and between us and in everything. As the theologian Sallie McFague concludes,

⁵ Cobb, pp. 4-5, 33.

⁶ Parker Palmer, *The Active Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), p. 92.

⁷ Donna Bowman, "God for Us," McDaniel and Bowman, eds., p. 19.

“There is no place God is not.”⁸ And so, God was in Auschwitz. God is in the Grand Canyon at sunrise. God is in Osama bin Laden’s soul. God is in Guantanamo. God is in your soul, and God is in my soul. God is in everything.

For process theologians who are Christian, Jesus is especially significant because of the powerful way he exhibited the truth that God is incarnate, embodied within human beings. It isn’t that Jesus was God incarnate and you and I are not; rather, Jesus incarnated God to “a remarkably full degree”⁹ compared to you and me and just about everybody else who’s ever lived. Process theologians see Jesus as qualitatively the same as you and me: a human being. The difference is that he spoke and acted in ways that revealed to a remarkable degree the truth of God’s presence within the human soul.

Jesus is also significant because he was God-like in the way he walked with people who were experiencing profound pain and grief and injustice. Like God, Jesus was a compassionate companion. And like God, he cajoled and guided his traveling companions with love, not force.¹⁰ The significant thing for followers of Jesus isn’t that Jesus was God-like in this way; the significant thing is that we can be God-like, too. We can be a compassionate companion with our fellow travelers. This is the direction God is trying to persuade us to walk.

Let me turn now to a central tenet of process theology that goes back to Whitehead: the nature of life is change. Creation, process theology declares, is never finished; it is always unfolding.¹¹ The unfolding of creation is a never-ending process (hence the name “process theology.”) This is the point of Rilke’s poem that was the Reading today.

What’s more, process theologians assert, each one of us in our own small way is part of creation’s never-ending dance of change during our brief days upon this earth. As process theologians see it, each of us is a co-creator with God and with the rest of the universe. That’s a profound statement: each of us is a co-creator with God and the rest of the universe. We help create this continually unfolding universe. We are part of the creative process—and every moment is ripe for something new and creative and wonderful. Every moment—even when things seem lousy—has within it the potential for something really wonderful to happen.

Co-creation with God implies inter-relatedness: we are related to God and everything else that with us co-creates the ever-changing universe. Inter-relatedness is the other pillar of Whitehead’s organic philosophy. The centrality of this affirmation to process theology makes it of course a very congenial worldview to Unitarian Universalists.

So these are the central ideas of process theology. Now comes the big question: how does process theology suggest we live ethically? The most important ethical task in process theology is trying to figure out at any given moment what God is attempting to persuade us to do. In other words, how can we be creative in this moment? Prayer, meditation and other spiritual practices can help us figure this out. But no one—not even God—can figure it out for us. God and other people (who after all are God incarnate) can

⁸ Paul Rasor, *Faith Without Certainty* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2005), p. 20.

⁹ Cobb, 39-40.

¹⁰ John B. Cobb, Jr., “Jesus and Christ in Process Perspective,” McDaniel and Bowman, eds., p. 36.

¹¹ Jeanyne B. Slettom, “Introduction,” Cobb, pp. 1-3.

help, but in the end we have to act, and to act constructively, if we are to be a co-creator of the universe.

Once we figure out what God is trying to persuade us to do, it's important to remember that we might have it wrong. We're not all-knowing either. Process theology teaches that we should never hold onto an ethical choice in absolute certainty that it's the correct one.

One good ethical guideline is suggested by God's relationship with humanity: God guides and loves and persuades rather than coerces and kills. This suggests that in our own ethical decisions, we would be wise to lean toward guiding and loving and persuading rather than coercion and killing.

The interdependence of all suggests another good ethical guideline: we should try to take into account the impact of our decisions on the web. What's good for us must not be the sole or even the dominant factor in our ethical decisions.

So this is process theology in a nutshell. I've boiled down four generations of thinkers and thousands of books into fifteen minutes. Now let's bring it alive by applying its ideas to a current issue that is very much on many of our minds and hearts: the war in Iraq. Did God cause the war? Can God end it? Where is God in the war?

Process theology would say that God on God's own neither caused the war nor can end it. God did not make Saddam Hussein attack his own people or Kuwait. God did not decide that George Bush should be President of the United States. (It was the Supreme Court that decided that.) God did not put the idea of attacking Iraq at the top of the Bush Administration's to-do list. God did not cause the Administration to develop a war-plan that overlooked what to do after Saddam fell. And God on God's own cannot figure out a way to end the war.

So where is God in Iraq? Process theologians would say that God is with Bush and the militia leaders and the Prime Minister and everyone involved in the war, cajoling and encouraging them all to find the path of peace and justice and love. God is with all of us in this country cajoling us to do the same here. God will not, God cannot end the war on God's own. We human beings will have to be part of the solution, too. We will have to co-create peace with God and with each other. And not just Bush and the next U.S. President and Prime Minister al-Maliki and Muqtada al-Sadr will have to do this; you and I will, too. We have to be part of the solution, too.

And God is also with all the suffering people there and here. God is with the American and Iraqi combatants and their families and the Iraqi civilians. God is in the American humvee that hits a road-side bomb. God is with the Sunni who's kidnapped, killed and left on the side of the street to be discovered in the morning. God is with the young Shi'ite family walking through an outdoor bazaar when a bomb goes off. God is even with the suicide bomber as she or he enters the bazaar with explosives strapped on and the insurgent setting up a roadside bomb. God is walking with all the wounded and suffering, with the killers and the victims alike. God is within each of them, encouraging them and cajoling them to lay aside their weapons and their differences and find common ground.

I can't prove any of this is true. But this kind of God does make sense to me. Oh, a part of me wishes that there was a God who could wave a magic wand and solve the Iraq war and global warming and everything else wrong on our planet. But a God with that kind of power just doesn't make sense. It doesn't square with the facts.

More than anything else, the God of process theology reminds me that I have within me the capacity to do good things. God is incarnate within me. I best get in touch with that capacity and figure out how to do my part in co-creating a better world.

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