

Process Theology

A critical evaluation of its methodology

By Job Thomas

A theological evaluation for the course Seminar Historical Theology

Professor:
Dr. Ron Michener

EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL FACULTY
St. Jansbergsesteenweg 97
B-3001 Heverlee

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Introduction

In this paper we want to evaluate process theological methodology. Process theology is a theological approach strongly influenced by the thought of change in reality. Based on philosophy and scientific observation process theologians conclude that reality is dynamic and changes constantly. The consequence is them having difficulty viewing God as a static Being—according to them the position of classic theism. In doing that process theology puts an emphasis on natural theology.

While process theology presents some interesting insights in the dynamics of God's acting, we are not convinced by the overall negative approach towards classic theism. Process theology offers a too biased evaluation of classic theism and does not do credit to its rich history. Next to using philosophy and science, process theology makes a very selective choice of Bible passages in defending its premises. The defenders rightly show a biblical God that changes his mind and brings human effort into account, but they neglect the more static attributes of God—such as his omniscience and omnipotence—shown in numerous Bible verses. The key problem is that they have difficulty acknowledging the paradox often portrayed in God's character. A paradox that makes quite sense in view of our human finiteness.

The Play: Process Theological Methodology

Before evaluating the process theological method, it is good to give an overview of this methodology. We want to address four features of process methodology. Before doing that we want to give a historical sketch of process thought.

The Storyboard: History of Process Thought

Though being introduced in the twentieth century, process theology has an ancient predecessor in the thought of eternal flux and becomingness of the world, introduced by the Greek philosopher Heraclitus (ca. 540-475 BC). He is especially known for his rivalry with Parmenides, who opted for a static approach.¹ 'You cannot step twice into the same

¹ Ed. L. Miller & Stanley J. Grenz, *Fortress Introduction to Contemporary Theologies* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1998), 91.

river,' Heraclitus charged.² Livingstone and Fiorenza add that also the German Romantic philosophy and the changing worldview introduced by the Darwinian revolution played an important role in the development of process thought.³

One of the more recent predecessors of process theology is found in Alfred North Whitehead, a process philosopher who proposed getting rid of traditional metaphysics—being all about substances—and replacing it with the idea of processes.⁴ His aim was to develop a concept of reality fitting the modern scientific approaches that had replace the Newtonian paradigm.⁵ Instead of presupposing all real things having a simple location, time being independent of all other things and the relation of things being external and accidental, modern science put more emphasis on interrelatedness. Whitehead's metaphysical scheme consists of four factors: actual occasions, eternal objects, God and creativity. The latter three are non-existing realities. The world consists of the actual occasions, while the other three function as formal categories giving shape to the world.⁶ Whitehead attempted to show how God acts in the world that we actually know; a world characterized by temporality and freedom. God and this free world mutually act upon one another.⁷

Another important philosopher is Charles Hartshorne, who believes that traditional Christian supernaturalism is no longer tenable. Instead of declaring atheism as the only alternative, Hartshorne favours panentheism, meaning that the world is included in God's being and that God and world are interdependent.⁸ Panentheism emphasizes that God goes beyond the created reality, but the reality is an essential part of God. 'Every-

² Stanley J. Grenz & Roger E. Olson, *Twentieth-century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 130.

³ James C. Livingstone & Francis Schlüssler Fiorenza, *Modern Christian Thought*, vol. 2, *The Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2006), 309; cf. Grenz & Olson, *Twentieth-century Theology*, 130. Livingstone and Fiorenza add the Buddhist doctrines of becoming and interdependence as a source, but this does not convince me. I do believe that this thought could have had an influence on Cobb, based on his background in the Asian missionary field (cf. Grenz & Olson, *Twentieth-century Theology*, 140), but I did not find this to be reported as a major source in any of the other consulted works.

⁴ Jonathan Hill, *The History of Christian Thought* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 309.

⁵ Grenz & Olson, *Twentieth-century Theology*, 135.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Livingstone & Fiorenza, *Modern Christian Thought*, 315.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 317.

thing is in God.' This has the logical consequence that if something changes within the known world, this influences God, since this change occurs within him.

Probably the most important process theologian is John Cobb. He gives attention to God's consequent nature; 'God's effects on the world and the effects of the world on God.'⁹ Cobb does not follow Whitehead's somewhat vague and impersonal view of God and opts for God being a Person, as did Hartshorne:¹⁰

My conclusion, then, is that the chief reason for insisting that God is an actual entity can be satisfied by the view that he is a living person, that this view makes the doctrine of God more coherent, and that no serious new difficulties arise.¹¹

The First Actor: Philosophy

The method of process theology is a play in which three actors and one setting are the main features. We will start by highlighting the actors. The first actor is Philosophy. Remarkable about Cobb is that 'his work is an effort to reconceive Christian theology through an explicit engagement with modern *philosophy* and natural and social *sciences*.'¹² So process theology links philosophical interpretation with theological implications. Process theology puts an emphasis on Heraclitus' concept of change. Its defenders state that '[change] is fundamental to the universe, rather than something that merely happens to the things in it.'¹³ Following from this, process thought for example describes one of the main aspects of God to be his mutability. Since He is related to human beings and to the world, He has to change because both humans and the world they live in change.¹⁴ God is not a substance outside of time, but a changing Character.¹⁵ In claiming

⁹ Ibid., 328.

¹⁰ John W. Cooper, *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 186.

¹¹ In: *ibid.*

¹² Livingstone & Fiorenza, *Modern Christian Thought*, 327.

¹³ Hill, *History of Christian Thought*, 309.

¹⁴ Bruce A. Ware, "An Exposition and Critique of the Process Doctrines of Divine Mutability and Immutability," *Westminster Theological Journal* 47 (1985): 179-80.

¹⁵ Hill, *History of Christian Thought*, 310.

this, process theology does not charge the classical theism being wrong in conceiving of God as absolute, independent, and immutable, but in conceiving him as such *exclusively*.¹⁶

Process theology seeks not only to connect with the ancient thought of Heraclitus. It is in the first place a theological approach that wants to link up with contemporary findings. More than a decade after publishing his *Process Theology*, Cobb describes his approach as a postmodern philosophy. He expresses his awe for deconstructive postmodernism, since it addresses in a very clear way the same issues as does process theology.¹⁷ There are clear distinctions though. Process thought does not equal modernity with reason. It does not see postmodernism as a mere reaction to the failure of reason. As Whitehead has shown, (medieval) reason is something that has been rejected in many respects by modernity.¹⁸ Cobb claims that deconstructionists use the same critique as did modernists, but they strip it from the positive content of modernity.¹⁹ Process theology tries to go beyond this critique. It should be clear that the protagonist of the play is Philosophy.

The Second Actor: Science (and Human Experience)

A second actor is Science—and close related to that: Human Experience. Characteristic for many process theologians is they began their careers as scientist or had a strong empiricist interest and stated their philosophical work, countering the then dominant scientific positivism.²⁰ It is in this view not surprising that foundational to process theology is the reconciliation between theology and science.²¹

Although acknowledging the development of theology being linked to the faith community, Cobb appealed to the presence of theologizing out of that community to es-

¹⁶ Ware, "Process Doctrines," 176.

¹⁷ John B. Cobb, Jr., "Two Types of Postmodernism: Deconstruction and Process," *Theology Today* 47, no. 2 (1990): 151.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Livingstone & Fiorenza, *Modern Christian Thought*, 310.

²¹ Grenz & Olson, *Twentieth-century Theology*, 131.

establish a *natural* theology.²² This natural theology, rather than revelation, is a general characteristic of process theology. It ‘forms the starting point for the theological enterprise.’²³ Process theologians are convinced that ‘[not] only must the concept of God not contradict scientific thinking, it must move from a naturalistic starting point, which is completely open to scientific investigation.’²⁴ Whitehead himself is quite clear on this in stating that ‘religion requires a metaphysical backing; for its authority is endangered by the intensity of the emotions which it generates.’²⁵ This shows again the very strong connection process thought wants to maintain between their theology and the contemporary philosophy.

It is clear that process theology offers room for human experience. It is not afraid to use human existential questions as a starting point to develop theology. A beautiful example is the question about the use of prayer within a classic theistic view. Ford points out that theological reflection on prayer from this point of view is quite rare. He thinks this being logic: ‘[if] God orders and controls all things in accordance with his eternal purpose, what difference do our prayers make?’²⁶

The Third Actor: Scripture

The third actor in our play is Scripture—or Biblical Hermeneutics. As we will see later in the critical evaluation, Scripture does not have the leading role, as is the case within open theism. Significantly, Ford’s publishing a biblical support for process theology was due some years *after* the famous book by Cobb and Griffin.²⁷ We have to say though that his biblical argumentation is rather scarce. Ford for instance gives us the example of

²² Ibid., 138.

²³ Ibid., 141.

²⁴ Ibid., 131.

²⁵ Alfred North Whitehead, “Religion and Metaphysics,” in *Process Philosophy and Christian Thought*, eds. Delwin Brown, Ralph E. James, Jr., & Gene Reeves (Indianapolis, IN; New York, NY: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1971): 67.

²⁶ Lewis S. Ford, “Our Prayers as God’s Passions,” in *Religious Experience and Process Theology: The Pastoral Implications of a Major Modern Movement*, eds. Harry James Cargas & Bernard Lee (New York, NY: Paulist, 1976): 429.

²⁷ Lewis S. Ford, *The Lure of God: A Biblical Background for Process Theism* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1978).

Jesus growing in knowledge, trying to prove God does not transcend all rational structures whatsoever.²⁸ What process theology emphasizes is that God changes his opinion from time to time. He makes his decisions based on the reaction of his creation.

The Stage Setting: Praxis

There is a final important feature to consider in the methodology of process theology. As should be clear by the description of the actors, process theology is much involved with the environment within which it operates. We want to describe this feature as the stage setting of the practical theological play. Process theology puts a big emphasis on the connection between theology and the “praxis”. The ecological crisis made Cobb aware of this necessity.²⁹ Theology cannot be done in isolation from its ethical application.³⁰ For Cobb, a logical consequence of the process approach to theology was abandoning his preliminary desire to write a systematic theology. Doing that would be a mere trying to grasp the essence of Christian faith in an abstract manner, while process theology emphasizes the actual goal of theology being the attempt to transform reality.³¹

Process theology tries to live out the principle of interconnectedness. While other—especially more modern—theologies are hesitant towards subjectivity and contextualisation, process theology sees this to be a requirement for good theology: if worldviews change, then so should theology. This connection with the contemporary context and the ethical praxis is the setting within which process theology found it right to exist.

The Critics: Evaluation

We want to continue in the play analogy. As is the case for any play, critics come to evaluate how the actors performed and how well the stage was set. First we will give an overview of the strengths of process theology. Then we will offer a summary of some important weaknesses of the thought. We will present our own critique within this ev-

²⁸ Ibid., 125.

²⁹ Miller & Grenz, *Contemporary Theologies*, 89.

³⁰ Livingstone & Fiorenza, *Modern Christian Thought*, 333.

³¹ Miller & Grenz, *Contemporary Theologies*, 91.

aluation, summarizing it in the concluding paragraph. As it was the case in the previous paragraphs, it is not always easy to place critique in a certain category.

The Enthusiast: Strengths

Some critics are very enthusiastic about process theology. It attempts to provide a reasonable explanation for some flaws within classic theism. First process theology addresses contemporary philosophy in a quite attractive way. Philosophy and theology have always been closely related and process theology exploits this kinship. One gives the concept of change proper time for reflection and we believe this being a good decision. It has done so with influence. As Livingstone and Fiorenza point out:

Process theology has [...] influenced theological thinking in profound ways. While refusing to appropriate the entire Process metaphysical scheme, theologians find its critique of aspects of classical theism—e.g., the latter's often ill-advised concentration on the divine transcendence—to be salutary.³²

There is attention for philosophical grounds of theology. This acknowledgement is a good way of integrating philosophy into theology.

Second, process theology researches the depths of science and human experience. Gamwell, amongst others, uses the process theologians as good examples of avoiding exclusive appeal to the Christian community since they integrate a more general language and thought in their philosophy.³³ Often classical theism has neglected the common ground of metaphysics. An orientation towards the use of a more general language of theology is important. This is what the process theologians are doing or are at least trying to do.³⁴

Third, process theology has a place for some of the more difficult Bible passage presenting God as a dynamic Entity and not so much as a static Being. Hill confirms: "The strength of process theology lies partly in its appeal to the Bible."³⁵ In numerous biblical passages God is described as an acting character. He *does* things. Collins sees process

³² Livingstone & Fiorenza, *Modern Christian Thought*, 336.

³³ Franklin I. Gamwell, "Speaking of God after Aquinas," *Journal of Religion* 81, no. 2 (2001): 210.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Hill, *History of Christian Thought*, 310.

hermeneutics as a framework for biblical study. It is, according to him, a ‘refreshing affirmation of the public character of theology.’³⁶ On the other hand, he does not want to go as far as process theology in avoiding all Christian language.³⁷

Finally, the emphasis process theologians put on the connection between theology and the ethical praxis charmed us. Although this is not excluded within a classical theism, the danger of neglecting one’s responsibilities in light of the static Being that God is, is more real. Giving room to change and dynamics leaves no room for denying human responsibility in ethics.

The Unconvinced: Weaknesses

Process theology—according to us—has also some weaknesses. First we want to give some philosophical points of attention. Process theology takes philosophy as the protagonist. In trying to establish a more general approach and leaving the more traditional image of the static God, process theologians seem to throw the child with the bathwater away. The thought has a major weakness in not acknowledging God’s transcendence.³⁸ The theology pays attention to the immanence of God, but in doing so loses God’s transcendence, also being an important characteristic.³⁹ They tend to see the separation between classical theism and process theism too black-and-white. Process theology holds two options for Christians: they choose the entire classic theism-package (Thomism, according to Nash) or they reject it. There is no third alternative to them.⁴⁰ These self-constructed limits are mostly based in an oversimplified view on traditional theism. The interesting thing is that process theology—regularly too easy—sees classic theism as a mere product of Aristotelian philosophy. According to this view, God is an immovable static Being.⁴¹ One could question though—while still holding on to God’s absoluteness

³⁶ John J. Collins, “Process Hermeneutics: Promise and Problems,” *Semeia* 24 (1982): 115.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Hill, *History of Christian Thought*, 310.

³⁹ Grenz & Olson, *Twentieth-century Theology*, 142.

⁴⁰ Ronald H. Nash, “Process Theology and Classical Theism,” in *Process Theology*, ed. Ronald H. Nash (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987): 21.

⁴¹ F. Duane Lindsey, “An Evangelical Overview of Process Theology,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 134, no. 533 (1977): 28.

and immutability—whether the biblical view of God is this static. Some theologians see no problem in the paradox of the becoming and the being of God.⁴² We support this. This is something Cobb and Griffin acknowledge as well: one needs to be careful in seeing everything as in process, ‘for that would mean that even the fact that things are in process is subject to change.’⁴³

Further, process theology has been questioned in its statements. Some of those contain a *contradictio in terminis*, or at least seem to do so. For example process theology has defended God’s always-present attribute of love, but this seems irreconcilable with the ever-changing character of God.⁴⁴ Interesting is process theology, as far as love is concerned, having difficulty with the—who Cobb and Griffin call impassive—God of traditional theism.⁴⁵ Ware rightly addresses the semantic ‘game’ of process theology. He gives the following explanation:

What really is the meaning [...] of God's independence, for example, or God's immutability? To say that God is independent is to say that he, unlike all other entities, is *eminently* dependent; that is, God is independent of all else in this respect that he alone depends on all else. Likewise with God's immutability. God is immutable precisely insofar as his maximal changing never ceases. To speak of one who is maximally dependent and changing as also independent and immutable strikes me as odd, to say the least, and misleading.⁴⁶

Ware’s difficulty with process theology is their not acknowledging this game. He compares it with epistemological relativism. If everything is relative, even this is a relative statement, so the claim itself cannot be absolute.⁴⁷ Lindsey shows that many process theologians recognize the inadequacy of Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism as a foundation for Christian faith. He remarks it being strange that they nominate one more human philosophy to fill this role.⁴⁸

⁴² Livingstone & Fiorenza, *Modern Christian Thought*, 335.

⁴³ John B. Cobb, Jr., & David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Know, 1976), 14.

⁴⁴ Grenz & Olson, *Twentieth-century*, 143.

⁴⁵ Cobb & Griffin, *Process Theology*, 44.

⁴⁶ Ware, “Process Doctrines,” 191.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Lindsey, “Evangelical Process Theology,” 27.

Second, some critics believe process theology to be depending too much on science. Also this produces some difficulties. Despite the attempt to reconcile theology and natural sciences, process philosophy and theology are incompatible with the modern scientific understandings. It is actually representing a stunned ontology when one compares it with the complexity of the world now being discovered.⁴⁹

Also within the scientific paradigm one can discover incompatibilities within process theology. In ‘doing theology’ Cobb and Griffin for instance are not deploring subjectivity. They put to attention the selective emphasis on doctrines, but add that ‘selectivity and emphasis are essential to any ordered experience, and hence to any experience whatsoever.’⁵⁰ This is contrasted with their effort making it appear that their position is more consistent with the teaching of Holy Scripture than classic theism.⁵¹ One would expect a more modest claim. Cooper calls process theology the deism of the twentieth century, since process theologians—as did defenders of deism in the nineteenth century—considered their philosophical conviction to be the most rational of the contemporary worldviews.⁵²

There lies great danger in seeing the experiences of the world making up the concrete, real being of God. ‘[What] basis do we have for imagining that the character of God is any different from the character of the world?—unless, of course, there is in God a moral nature that knows and upholds that which is just and right quite apart from his experience of the world.’⁵³ Within this paradigm, God is all depending on what his creation does. While we do believe that God makes room in his decisions for what his creation does, it is quite another thing to put the Creator as depending on his creation.

Third, we want to make some remark on process theological use of the Bible. While open theists, such as Clark Pinnock, do not fully agree upon process theology, they see it offering great insight as far as the dynamics of God are concerned.⁵⁴ There are major

⁴⁹ Grenz & Olson, *Twentieth-century Theology*, 142.

⁵⁰ Cobb & Griffin, *Process Theology*, 34.

⁵¹ Nash, “Process Theology and Classical Theism,” 22.

⁵² Cooper, *Panentheism*, 165.

⁵³ Ware, “Process Doctrines,” 192.

⁵⁴ Clark H. Pinnock, “Between Classical and Process Theism,” in *Process Theology*, ed. Ronald H. Nash (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987): 313.

differences as well. The two most important are the normative order of Scripture and philosophy—where Scriptures are fundamental and theology precedes philosophy—and the ultimate difference between the act and the fact of God and man.⁵⁵ While process theology emphasizes the interdependence of God and man, open theism sees God as the ultimate metaphysical fact. In open theism God is metaphysically not bound by the things he does.⁵⁶

We understand that Cobb wants to create a more general platform for theologizing, but his choice to put philosophy and science before Scripture, does not convince us. It is logical that one has presuppositions in doing hermeneutics, but we have the idea that process theology does some serious reading into the text and is too selective.

Fourth, although process theology does well in connecting theology with the praxis, their claims of classic theism not doing this are biased and not nuanced. We do not entirely agree with Hill, describing process theology as a ‘desperate’ attempt to restate traditional doctrines for modern ears, but we can understand his critique.⁵⁷

Cobb’s panentheism does offer a kind of eschatological hope, but it is not comparable with the optimistic faith in inevitable process. Through human and divine joint effort it is possible to do things that matter.⁵⁸ This is according to us a too strong emphasis on human effort and the “makeability” of a better world. Theology should make the connection with ethics, but it cannot forget its position as servant of God’s will.

Finally—and this is a more spiritual critique—process theology is lacking a personal God. This is quite remarkable at first sight, since process thought makes way for the personal interaction of God and man. God for instance changes his mind in dialogue with Abraham, Moses and the repentant people of Nineveh after Jonah’s visit. Still the image of God process theology sketches seems cold and impersonal. In this view, we deliberately chose the stage illustration. Process theology offers us a play we can attend to, but it does not leave room for the theologian—or even the Christian in general—to engage in the play, as theology should. Theology is not a mere description of who God is, but an active process in which the theologian cannot stand on the side line, but has to

⁵⁵ Ibid., 318-9; Cooper, *Panentheism*, 191.

⁵⁶ Pinnock, “Between Classical and Process Theism,” 319.

⁵⁷ Hill, *History of Christian Thought*, 309.

⁵⁸ Livingstone & Fiorenza, *Modern Christian Thought*, 331.

engage actively. Process thought—quite paradoxical actually—does not pay much attention to this and in doing so is missing one of the quintessential features of Christianity.

Conclusion

Process theology offers both great insights and a worthy goal for theology. It is true that some biblical passages are difficult to reconcile with the static God of most dominant Greek philosophy. At the same time, the claim that theology should connect with modern philosophy and science and that it should focus on praxis is rightful. Our big problem with process theology is that its theologians create a polarity between themselves and classic theism and are too much denying the strengths of the latter. We think that process theology provides a noteworthy addition to theological method, but does not convince as a solely standing theological system. In this regard, we want to end with the words of Nash:

Certain features of what has been called the classical concept of God require modification. But it is quite another thing to demand that the whole traditional Christian concept of God be scrapped in favor of a God who is neither omnipotent nor omniscient. This is as bad a bargain as exchanging Aladdin's old lamp for a shiny new one.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Nash, "Process Theology and Classical Theism," 26.

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