

DYNAMISM AND ERROR: A CRITIQUE OF PROCESS THOUGHT AND ITS RAMIFICATIONS ON CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

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“My own path, however, is not to celebrate moving deeper and deeper into God's death and all its Nietzschean ramifications but to affirm that God can be reborn for us when freed from those features that have become both incredible and oppressive. Altizer is not interested in such a theoretical possibility. . . . He places his hope. . . . that in the depths of Hell we will find salvation. . . . I, on the other hand, do not have confidence that we will find salvation in the depths of Hell. I fear we will find only Hell.”¹

The Words of Dr. John B. Cobb, Jr. sound forth with passion and sincerity. They possess a certain transparency that is both vulnerable and appealing, allowing one to peer into the very heart of the man. At first glance, this statement is one that most evangelicals, being unfamiliar with Cobb, would find themselves in hearty agreement with, many of them likely to believe that the doctrinal convictions behind it are orthodox. Quite the contrary is actually true. Cobb seems to present a view of God that is alive and well and vitally involved in the world, much unlike Dr. Thomas Altizer, whom he criticizes above. Upon even a cursory examination, however, it would not take any length of time to discover the twisted, anemic nature of the impotent “god” which Cobb purports.

John B. Cobb, Jr. is known as the world’s premier “Process” theologian, meaning that the system of beliefs that he helped to develop is the theological conclusion of Process Philosophy, more commonly referred to as Process Thought. Process Thought is rather complex in all of its intricacies, but the basics of this system can be understood rather easily. Process rejects the notion of traditional philosophy that reality is concrete, consisting of matter and substance.

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¹ John B. Cobb, Jr., “F.A.Q.: Death of God,” “Process and Faith,” The Center for Process Studies, Dec. 1999, 06 May 2006, <<http://www.ctr4process.org/pandf/cobbfaq/dogth.htm>

Instead, it claims that the basic nature of reality is time and the change that it affects upon the things that exist within it. This “process” of change then becomes the truest mark of reality.

“Process philosophy identifies metaphysical reality with change and dynamism. The majority of metaphysics since the time of Plato, on the other hand, usually posits a "timeless" metaphysical reality of substances, objects, or *things*, while processes are denied or subordinated to timeless objects. Process philosophy reverses this trend, favoring ‘Becoming’ over ‘Being’ and ‘Non-being’ ”²

In Process, matter is not greater or truer than time because matter is seen as subservient to time and the change that comes with it. Everything that exists is subject to change, conditioning, and ultimately improvement. Therefore, it is this change or “process” which truly defines something as being real or alive. From this train of thought Cobb has structured his theology, particularly his doctrines of God. I will not be focusing on Cobb in this paper, however, but rather the philosophical framework for his efforts in theology, namely Process Thought and its creator, Alfred North Whitehead.

Alfred North Whitehead was born February 15, 1861 in Kent, England. Both Whitehead’s father and grandfather became heads of a private school in the town where they lived and their interest in scholastics had a significant influence on Alfred: “. . . . the prominent and active role which his father and grandfather played in his education impressed him so that he devoted a good deal of his lifetime to higher education, in England as well as later in the U.S.A.”³ During the first part of his professional life Alfred was known more for his expertise in mathematics and logic than for philosophy, having published together with Bertrand Russell the

² “Process Philosophy,” Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 6 May 2006, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Process_Philosophy, 6 May 2006.

³ C. J. Curtis, Contemporary Protestant Thought, (New York: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1970) 52

three-volume *Principia Mathematica*. It wasn't until late in life, as a professor of philosophy at Harvard University, that his influence in metaphysics came to be of any significance. The strength of his influence in this area was brought about by the release of his book *Process and Reality* in 1929.

It would seem that for Whitehead to develop a system so thorough in its defiance and opposition to traditional forms of philosophical and religious thought there must have been something in his past to cause disillusionment and dissatisfaction with his upbringing in the Church of England. Alfred's father was an Anglican clergyman, so it is almost a given that he would have been catechized and indoctrinated into the religion of his parents. It is quite obvious that this indoctrination did not last and it seems there is nothing to indicate what may have soured Whitehead toward it. Perhaps during his days of study at Cambridge University he simply became a casualty of the liberal theology that had gained a major foothold during the nineteenth century. To assume this would be pure speculation, so it remains only a possibility to consider.

“The process metaphysics elaborated in *Process and Reality* proposes that the fundamental elements of the universe are occasions of experience. According to this notion, what people commonly think of as concrete objects are actually successions of occasions of experience. Occasions of experience can be collected into groupings; something complex such as a human being is thus a grouping of many smaller occasions of experience. According to Whitehead, everything in the universe is characterized by experience”⁴ It seems strange that a contemporary philosophy would view the collecting of cells together to form the human body as being an “occasion of experience” made up of billions of almost insignificantly small “occasions,” yet that is exactly what Process suggests. Everything that happens, whether it is the

⁴ “Process Philosophy,” [Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Process_Philosophy), 6 May 2006, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Process_Philosophy, 6 May 2006.

conscious action of a living creature or the natural movement of water trickling through a creek in the middle of nowhere, is viewed as an experience. As if all of this were not enough to cause one's head to spin, there are still more implications to consider beneath the surface of Process Thought.

“The particular character of every event, and consequently the world, is the result of a selective process where the relevant past is creatively brought together to become that new event. Reality is conceived as a *process* of creative advance in which many past events are integrated in the events of the present, and in turn are taken up by future events.”⁵ This quote from The Center for Process Studies, the primary force for the advancement of Process Thought in the world today, is revealing as to the role of successive events in Process. Past events are crucial to the development of events in the present, which lead one to the choices they will make in the future. Each event is interconnected, and indeed, each past event is alive and active in the event of the present, and the present event will be immortalized in the future events it will play a part in bringing about. To shed some more light on this: “People living in the United States are affected by particles released from a volcano in the Philippines. Business practices in Japan affect the global community. Individual elements that have little effect in themselves, such as a molecule of carbon monoxide, are often greatly effective in large numbers, as ecological effects of large amounts of carbon monoxide pollution attest. Relativity is descriptive of sub-atomic particles, social groups, as well as planetary systems.”⁶

I have discussed the nature of Process Thought regarding reality and the consequences of this philosophy as it relates to successive moments in time, but the most important questions

⁵ “What is Process Thought?” The Center for Process Studies, 6 <<http://www.ctr4process.org/about/process/>>, 6 May 2006.

⁶ Sheela Pawar, “A Synopsis of Process Thought,” The Center for Process Studies, <<http://www.ctr4process.org/about/process/Synopsis.shtml>>, 6 May 2006.

have yet to be addressed: Does believing in Process require the changing of one's views of the nature and attributes of God? Does Process reject the orthodox view of salvation? Does Process reject the orthodox view of the Divinity of Christ? The answer to all of these questions is most definitely "YES."

If we look at Process from a logical standpoint we will realize immediately that it is damaging to true Christian theology. As I have already stated, Process celebrates the basic nature of reality as change and flux. If all reality exists as change and flux, and God is real, then the only logical conclusion is that God is Himself changing, growing, improving, and ceasing to be what He has been before. So what does Process Thought actually say regarding this? The answer is a frightening one: ". . . . Whitehead ruled out the God of a narrow, supernaturalistic piety. He also excluded the notion of a transcendent creator God who by an act of the will called all things into being out of nothing and continues to govern omnipotently from outside his creation" ⁷ "Because God contains a changing universe, God is changeable (that is to say, God is affected by the actions that take place in the universe) over the course of time." ⁸

It is disturbing to see the violence done by Process to the nature of God. It is equally disturbing to see what it does to the Person of Jesus Christ. Process rejects the doctrine of incarnation as traditional Christianity understands it. "God is in all of us, calling us to be all that is possible in each moment. The more fully we answer the call in one moment, thereby embodying God, the greater the possibility for a fuller embodiment of God in following moments. The more we resist God's call, the smaller God's role in our lives becomes. Thinking

⁷ C. J. Curtis, Contemporary Protestant Thought, (New York: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1970) 70-71

⁸ "Process Theology," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 15 April 2006, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Process_Theology, 7 May 2006.

in terms of degrees, it is not difficult to see Jesus as having incarnated God with remarkable fullness. He can function for us as a paradigm of incarnation.”⁹

So just what does this mean? In other words, Jesus was so in tune with the call of God on his life that he allowed God to embody him fully. In the same way, if we respond to God with total obedience, God can fully embody us and we can be “incarnations” of God, just like Jesus. In Process, Jesus is our example of “incarnation,” he is our model for how we should incarnate God in our lives. This is an absolute denial of the true divinity of Christ, which takes away any possibility of salvation within the orthodox Christian view. This makes Jesus nothing more than a human who lived up to his full potential, which diminishes Him and elevates man by placing us on a level where we can now embody God just like Jesus, basically making us like God.

I have already logically proven that Process destroys true salvation, but let us look at what Process actually says about the cross of Christ: “Jesus was killed not so much by the individual sinfulness of particular people but by the principalities and powers of his time. But his life and death did, in some measure, break the control of those. His followers found that they could create communities that formed life in a different way, enabling them to distance themselves to some extent from the powers of evil in society. Even where outwardly they could be destroyed by those powers, inwardly they could maintain a measure of transcendence.”¹⁰ In other words, the death of Christ didn’t really save us from our sin so much as it taught us true selflessness and gave us courage to live together in peaceful community. This is the Process view of how Jesus has saved us.

⁹ John B. Cobb, Jr., “F.A.Q.: Incarnation” Process & Faith, <<http://www.ctr4process.org/pandf/cobbfaq/incarn.htm>, 7 May 2006.

¹⁰ John B. Cobb, Jr., “Atonement” Process & Faith, <<http://www.ctr4process.org/pandf/cobbfaq/atone.htm>, 7 May 2006.

For all of its claims of hope, relevance, and positive living, Process turns out to be nothing more than another bankrupt form of thought; another one of Satan's manifestations as an angel of light. Process says that it makes Christianity accessible to the contemporary intellectual who has rejected orthodox theology for its inability to stand up to the challenges posed it by science. In reality, Process does nothing to make Christianity more accessible since its teaching cannot even be considered legitimately Christian. Process is politically correct, humanistic relativism that utilizes Christian terminology to bring credibility to its masquerade. There is painful irony in the quote from Dr. Cobb regarding Altizer's theology from the beginning of this paper. Cobb feared that Altizer's idea of liberty and salvation would actually lead us to Hell. However, in Cobb's attempt to revive God from the death that Altizer claimed He had suffered, I am convinced that Cobb, and Whitehead before him, has only propagated a different way of putting to death any hope of embracing the true God in his system of beliefs. I fear that in Process Thought, just as in the death of God, we will again find only Hell.