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Process Theology: Influences, Ideas, and Conflicts

In *The Phenomenon of Man,* Pierre Teilhard de Chardin writes "Religion and science

are the two conjugated faces or phases of one and the same complete act of knowledge---the only

one which can embrace the past and future of evolution so as to contemplate, measure, and

fulfil[sic] them" (285). For years, theologians, physicists, philosophers, geologists, and countless

other experts in various fields have been trying to find the relationship between religion and

science. For many theologians, process theology bridges the gap between the two. By analyzing

some brief history, looking at major contributors and their ideas, defining process theology and

its concepts, and comparing its major ideas with those of classical theism, one may begin to see

how process theology is connecting science and religion.

To put process theology into context, one must take into account the history behind it.

Process theology has its roots in the Grecian philosopher Heraclitus (c. 504 BC), who viewed

reality in terms of "becoming" rather than "being." Additionally, Heraclitus believed, ". . . the

basis of reality was change and flux" and that the only constant in the world was change (Mellert

12). But another philosopher of the time, Parmenides, had a contrasting idea, believing, ". . .

underlying every change was some more fundamental reality that endured" (Mellert 12). The

ideas of these two philosophers clashed, and the western world accepted those of Parmenides. It

was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that the ideas of Heraclitus were revived.

The concepts and ideas surrounding process theology were introduced by many influential men.

Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) was a distinguished mathematician-philosopher who came up with a set of metaphysical concepts and categories called process philosophy, or what he labeled as "the philosophy of organism." Whitehead's idea was that each occasion is a momentary event which is partially self-created and partially influenced by other actual occasions (Diehl). "Every entity is the joint product of past causes, divine purposes, and the new entity's own activity" (Barbour 287). Whitehead believed entities are interrelated moments of an ongoing process, meaning that they are not isolated or independent beings, but are present in other actual entities. According to Whitehead, "nothing exists except by participation" (Barbour 285). In relating entities to God, Whitehead asserts "every occasion is dependent on God for its existence as well as for the order of possibilities it can actualize" (Barbour 296).

Following the ideas and thoughts of Whitehead was Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000), who acted as the chief catalyst of process theology in the 1960's and 1970's. Hartshorne agreed with Whitehead's idea that God is dipolar, but their definitions differ somewhat. Both asserted that God is eternal in purpose and character, but is temporal in the content of experience because God's knowledge of events changes as those events occur (Barbour 294). God's eternal character can be labeled his mental pole, which Hartshorne calls the "abstract nature" of God. God's temporal side can be labeled as his consequent nature, which Hartshorne calls the "concrete nature" of God. This means that God is both independent and dependent in his natures. God is independent in his abstract nature because nothing can threaten his existence, or cause him to cease being perfect in love, wisdom, or goodness. Those are the qualities that remain true to His character given any circumstance. But God is dependent in his concrete nature because "what the creatures do affects his response, his feelings, and the content of his divine life" (Diehl). The qualities of God's concrete nature are those which he has gained by his interaction and

experiences with the world. The difference between Whitehead's God and that of Hartshorne's is that Whitehead's God is *not* an enduring object but a single actual entity; whereas Hartshorne's God is dipolar in having an enduring character embodied in successive states (Viney). This difference in opinion remains a topic of great debate among process theists. But both Whitehead and Hartshorne agreed on the notion that God cannot see the future (God is not omnipotent) and changes in response to human actions. Whitehead and Hartshorne contributed greatly to the movement of process theology, but there have been some major influences from philosophical evolutionary thinking.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) was a distinguished theologian, philosopher, geologist, and paleontologist. He used knowledge from all of those fields to write his best known work, *The Phenomenon of Man.* Teilhard was also a Jesuit priest, but his work consistently was denied publication because the Church felt he threatened traditional theology. Teilhard's evolutionary thinking connected the worlds of science and religion because they combined his backgrounds of paleontology and theology and formulated new ideas about original sin and evolution. Teilhard's ideas were about the mind as well as the physical world. He believed that the more intelligent and complex we become, the less of a hold the physical universe has on us. Evolution would move by great leaps as humanity became more self-reflective, and able to appreciate its place within time and space. Teilhard developed the idea of an "Omega-Point," in which all potential is reached and a mystical new type of existence would emerge. He states that ". . . the human spirit is destined, by the very nature of its development, to find the uttermost degree of its penetration with the maximum of its vital force" (285). Though some regard his theories as abstract, far-fetched, or even controversial, Teilhard's *The Phenomenon of Man* was an original and monumental accomplishment. Teilhard applied his remarkable intellect, spiritual

faith, and integrity in pursuit of bridging the gap between Christian theology and the scientific theory of evolution. And like Whitehead and Hartshorne, Teilhard believed that entities could not survive without the existence of others, asserting that,

> No element could move and grow except with and by all the others
> with itself. . . Also false and against nature is the radical idea of one
> branch draining off for itself alone all the sap of the tree and rising
> over the death of other branches. To reach the sun nothing less is
> required than the combined growth of the entire foliage. (244)

Teilhard was an irreplaceable factor in the movement of process theology, and his work continues to inspire a deeper understanding of the universe around us. After looking at a brief history to the beginning ideas of process theology and some of its major contributors, it will now be easier to understand the definition and concepts of the movement.

Process theology can be defined as "a contemporary movement of theologians who teach that God is dipolar . . . and that he is integrally involved in the endless process of the world" (Diehl). There are seven basic concepts of process theology (Wikipedia). The first concept is that God is not omnipotent. He does not exert unilateral control in the sense of being coercive, but rather persuades. Barbour writes, "God does not determine the outcome of events or violate the self creation of all beings. God is never the sole cause of an event but is one influence among others" (295).

The second concept of process theology is that reality is made up of serially-ordered events that are experiential in nature, not of material substances (like atoms), that endure through time. These events, or units, are "creative experiences which influence one another in temporal sequence" (Diehl). They also have both a mental and physical aspect. This is saying that every moment is bi-polar, where it is affected by what happened in the past (physical pole) as well as

what could potentially happen in the future (mental pole). The main idea here is that the past

affects the future, meaning that in some way the past is carried forward into the future

(Richards).

   The third concept is that the universe is characterized by process and change carried out

by the agents of free will. To put this another way, "God has a will in everything, but not

everything that occurs is God's will" (Wikipedia). Rather than acting alone as a substitute for the

actions of entities, God always acts with and through them (Barbour 296). God gave us freedom

to allow positive opportunities for creative value, but he also accepts the risks of evil that occur

within those opportunities so that creatures could make their own decisions. God is "in his

nature infinitely good. He could do or wish ill, but it is not of his nature to do this" (Ruse 168).

   Another concept of process theology includes what is known as panentheism, which

translates into "all-in-God-ism." This means that God contains the universe but is not identical

with it. It is the belief that everything is *in* God, rather than everything is God (pantheism). "God

includes the world but is more than the world" (Barbour 295).

   The fifth concept is that God is changeable because he interacts with the changing

universe. Actions that take place in the universe affect God over the course of time, and "[i]n

each moment, God takes in our feelings and decisions and responds to them by calling us to

redeem from those experiences whatever good can be gotten, and to move from them in

directions that can, in the future, yield much greater good" (Mesle 15-16). God is present in each

moment of our existence, thus God continually increases his knowledge and experience of us and

the world. Hartshorne believed that if temporal process and creativity are ultimately real, then

God himself must be in process in some sense and thus, dependent upon the free decisions of the

creatures (Diehl).

Some process theologians believe that people experience an objective immortality in that their experiences live on forever in God, who contains all that was (Wikipedia). Barbour agrees that "God evokes new subjects into being and preserves their achievements and is thus the source and conserver of all finite values" (296). Barbour refers to God's universal influence as God being omnipresent (295).

A final concept of process theology is the idea of dipolar theism, which has been previously mentioned. Again, this is the idea that God is both eternal and temporal in the fact that He has both a changing aspect (his concrete nature) and an unchanging aspect (his abstract nature).

After looking at process theology in terms of its definition and concepts, how does this movement of thought conflict with classical theism? There are several major contrasting ideas between the two, such as transcendence versus immanence, creatures being viewed as divine subjects versus co-workers, God's perfection, and omnipotence versus omniscience. In regards to transcendence versus immanence, classical theism argues that God is in some way distant to the world, working against and outside the world and its processes. Process theologians argue that God works within and with the world and is not separate to the world's processes. This leads to another contrasting view. Where classical theism asserts that all creatures are merely divine subjects bound only to do the will of God, process theology argues "God is the supreme or eminent creative power, but not the only creative power" (Viney). In process theology, we are seen more as co-workers or co-creators with God. With this, it is not surprising that classical theism and process theology have differing views about God's perfection and how one should emulate it. Referring back to classical theism's belief that we are merely alive to fulfill God's will, it also related to the notion that one is encouraged to study God to be more like God

(Richards). This is obviously a negative view of the relationship with God because no one can be perfect in love, goodness, and wisdom. It is simply impossible and can lead to feelings of guilt and worthlessness because ". . . this idea serves merely to indicate a certain unattainable perfection, and rather limits the operations than, by the presentation of new objects, extends the sphere of the understanding" (Kant 407). Process theology teaches that one should be more like God in that God is not a controlling power. It is about persuading and listening to others' views rather than imposing and being close-minded.

Another conflicting idea between classical theism and process theology is God being omnipotent versus God being omniscient. Classic theism holds that God is omnipotent and knows the future, thus God imposes his divine will onto people. But if the future could be known supernaturally, then wouldn't God already be fated to do whatever brings about the foreseen? This would mean that every entity would lack free choice, including God. Process theologians argue that God is omniscient, knowing everything that has happened in the world up until now, not everything that will happen. This asserts that the future is open, but that there is no guarantee that good will triumph over evil in the universe. With this, God took a chance in the act of bringing the world into existence. "God cannot guarantee the outcome within this world. What can be guaranteed is God's steadfast love and constant working for the good. God will be with us in each moment, sharing our struggles, sharing our experiences of sin and suffering, and loving us in the midst of them all" (Mesle 16). Because in process theology God is seen as a co-worker, he is also a sufferer who understands, and therefore, could not control or know the future. Michael Ruse uses Kant's theory that "God could not make a functioning and happy society if everyone could lie and cheat and break promises with impunity. This is simply not possible, and

God has never claimed the ability to do the impossible. . . God could only want what is best for us, and He could only make and endorse the rules which best serve us" (Ruse 168).

Through analyzing process theology in its history, its contributors, its concepts, and its conflicts with classical theism, one may begin to understand why this theological movement has been insightful. Whether using a clearly defined set of metaphysical concepts to express a vision of God, or integrating science and religion through process metaphysics, process theology offers an alternative view to faith in God and challenges traditional theology. As Teilhard de Chardin writes, "There are no summits without abysses" (288).

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