SEARCHING FOR AN ADEQUATE GOD

A Dialogue between Process and Free Will Theists

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Introduction

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Process theists have engaged in many dialogues with parties situated on the liberal wing of the church and beyond Christianity, while classical free will (or openness) theists have mainly engaged parties on the evangelical/fundamentalist flank. Until now (however) they have not been much in dialogue with each other. It is time to change that because there is a lot for us to talk about. Any honest person on either side will acknowledge that we share many convictions and find much to appreciate in the other. A dialogue needs to happen because each position has assets that the other can appropriate and each can be stimulated by the other’s acumen.

The fact is that process and openness theists share important convictions. We both value natural theology and appreciate the contribution of process philosophy to modern versions of it. We agree that this way of thinking also has something to contribute to interpreting the biblical faith and the Christian message. As is rare among modern philosophers, process makes the love of God a high priority and a central theme. Consequently it holds to a dynamic understanding of the world and God’s interactive relations with it. It recognizes bipolarity in God, human self-determination, and divine persuasion. We both accept the need to critique classical substantive metaphysics and we both reject the notion that God is an absolute being, unaffected by the world.
We both insist that God is love and therefore filled with compassion and sensitivity. We do not believe that God determines the course of events unilaterally. We believe that the future is open and that some kinds of change even belong to the divine perfection and are not alien to it. We believe that God not only affects creatures but that creatures affect God. We both think that God suffers when things go badly for creatures. We both hold to the reality of libertarian freedom and consequently we both recognize that genuine evils exist. Both models are impressive ways to get at important things we both care a lot about.

It is also true that each side has real hesitations about the other that need to be faced up front. Starting with openness theists, one can say that their hesitations are for the most part biblical and theological in nature. For example, they repudiate the view that God does not exist apart from a world and (therefore) does not freely create any world in an ultimate sense. They have great difficulty accepting a source of creaturely power other than God with the implication that God cannot override it, even if God chooses. For God not to be able to do so for openness theists creates problems in the realm of miracles such as incarnation and resurrection and raises difficulties for the understanding of petitionary prayer. They think that, if God were tied in a metaphysical way to influencing the world and being influenced by the world in the uniform ways process dictates, this would diminish the freedom of God. It seems to openness theists that according to the process model God is locked into a way of relating to the world that leaves little room for divine initiatives in the history of salvation. Openness theists have the sense that the process God is more passive than the God of the biblical witness. Even though they want to replace a static view with a more dynamic view of God, not just any dynamic view will suffice.

In terms of philosophy, to engage in understatement, openness theists are less engaged generally speaking in metaphysics than process theists and they worry about the health of religion if it becomes too reliant on a particular philosophy. Christianity, when interpreted in a Whiteheadian conceptual environment, comes out looking a little different, they find. When the faith is translated into those categories, too many redefinitions of terms have to occur. For openness theists the ultimate metaphysical fact is God, not God and the world. Insistence on the world's necessity for God seems to conflict with God's free and sovereign love. These considerations, more than any arising from a close engagement with the niceties of the process vision, are what stick in the evangelical throat. Although they grant that the use of metaphysical categories is inescapable in theology, they think that theologians have to be more careful not to identify religious beliefs with a metaphysical system that is autonomous. We can adapt a metaphysics but we should not adopt one. We can utilize process insights to help us communicate the Christian faith without accepting the total system.

Process theists on the other hand are also hesitant and skeptical about the coherence of free will theism. They are convinced that they (the process theists) are the real free will theists and that the openness model is still too closely tied to classical theism to be effective. For the model to be intelligible, it would have to align itself more closely with process thought. As things stand, it is an unstable middle position, being neither fish nor fowl. There is still just too much coercive power, too much of the power to intervene, remaining in the openness position, even though it tries to distance itself from classical theism. From the process standpoint, the God of the openness model is still capable of coercion, and such a God who is only self-limited could at any time be un-limited. In the openness model, God still reserves the power to control everything, whereas in process thought God cannot override the freedom of creatures. This is a fundamental and crucial difference.

While openness theists affirm that God voluntarily gives freedom to the creature, process theists see freedom as an essential characteristic of the creature. God never overrides and always acts in love. The openness model gives the impression that God might love or might not love, depending on his will and freedom at the time. Though it sounds good to say that God can triumph over evil in the end, they make it sound as if God achieves this by putting love aside and by resorting to bullying tactics. Process theists have great trouble accepting that God's love for the world is voluntary. They are convinced that God, if not essentially related to the world, is only allowing Godself to be affected by the world and is not necessarily affected by it. They object to the idea that God only chooses to love and is not required by nature to love. A stronger doctrine of divine love would require us to think of God as essentially related and (therefore) essentially open to the world.

Furthermore, if God can really intervene in nonpersuasive ways, why doesn't God do so in relation to more genuine evils? It sounds as if
God does not stop them, though he could do so, because God likes the free will universe. But process theists want to know why God does not do more, if God really has the power to determine events unilaterally. And what kind of risk taker is a God who has the capacity for coercion? What risks are there that God could not avoid? In the end does God not permit gratuitous evils to occur because they suit him? There are a whole set of problems associated with the interventionist, supernaturalist model of the openness of God that naturalistic theism avoids.

There are important differences, then, to work through. But a dialogue that is respectful, uncontrived, and serious might just prove to be mutually beneficial. It could provide a stimulus to better work on both sides. As the proverb goes, iron sharpens iron. What good is idle praise? What we all need are hard questions. We need to have our feet held to the fire. That is how we grow in understanding.

Let's be honest — there is risk for us both in this dialogue. The conservatives will undoubtedly say: "There, we told you so — the openness theists are talking with the process theists! Did we not warn that they are covert processians who aim to smuggle these process ideas into evangelical thinking?" And certain liberals and modernists will say: "Why do you process theists bother with fundamentalists? Why do you lower yourselves to appear in print together with them? Where is your self-respect? Are you so desperate to find acceptance in the mainline?" Together we say to the critics — we will not allow ourselves to be led by such fears.

Conversations like this between different positions can be valuable, if each maintains respectful openness to the other. When competing positions speak truthfully about themselves and address valid criticisms, further reflection can be provoked. After all is said and done, differences are not something to be done away with but something to be embraced because, when we embrace them, a larger sense of the truth can emerge. So we do not have to try to assimilate the other or try and fit the other opinion into our framework. We do not have to exclude the other and make enemies. We can practice a hermeneutic of charity. We can repudiate our fears.

John B. Cobb

Perhaps we can summarize our differences as follows. On the one hand, openness theists are closer to the Bible and affirm its tendencies to anthropomorphism in its representation of God. To them, this is more important than rational coherence of doctrine or avoiding various intellectual problems. They have adopted openness theism because this is more expressive of their understanding of the biblical God than classical theism rather than because it fits better with modern or postmodern thought.

Process theists, on the other hand, are keenly aware that supposing that God must be thought of anthropomorphically has led many moderns (and postmoderns) to reject all belief in God. They find in process thought a way to affirm what seems Christianly most important in anthropomorphic theism without being anthropomorphic. But the resultant doctrine does not include some of the ideas that openness theists associate with God's freedom. In terms of the late medieval debate between Thomists and nominalists, process theists believe that God's acts flow from the divine nature, whereas openness theists see God's will as free over the divine nature, in a manner analogous to human beings.

The difference is, in part, one of the understanding of history. On the whole, openness theists are less impressed than process theists are by the human importance of the changes in culture and worldview that have occurred since biblical times. Therefore, they are more comfortable with formulations that are less consciously modified to reflect these changes. By contrast, process theists suppose that theology can be convincing today only if it makes contact with contemporary scientific and historical knowledge.

In interaction, the differences can be reduced. Openness theists do not lack interest in rational coherence, and process theists do affirm the variability of divine action in the world. Openness theists are open, among other things, to philosophical reflection. That is why they are interested in discussion with process theists. Process theists are deeply concerned to think in a way that is continuous with the Bible. It is the greater continuity of process metaphysics with biblical categories that has attracted them. This means that the criticisms each directs to the other are meaningful to the recipients. Openness theists are uncom-
comfortable in acknowledging incoherences in their position. Process theists are uncomfortable in being unbiblical.

Furthermore, openness theists know that we do not live in the same thought world as that in which the Bible was written. Process theists believe that there was much truth in that ancient thought world that has been lost as it has been largely replaced by another one. Thus openness theists are prepared to adapt to a new cosmology. Process theists seek a cosmology that makes it possible to recover Christian truths that, for so many thoughtful people, have been covered over by changing cosmologies. In all these ways there are inclinations in each community that move toward the other.

The social and ecclesial locations of the two groups also differ. Openness theists come from conservative evangelical traditions and undertake to free them from some of the rigidities that limit their creative development. Process theists are more often members of old-line denominations and seek to give content and assurance to the waning beliefs of their members. Both groups have significant influence but neither represents the mainstream of the churches in which they chiefly operate. Should they gain greater influence in their respective churches, we could look forward to reduced mutual suspicion and closer ecumenical relations.

The order of the chapters that follow creates a kind of spectrum running from David Ray Griffin's strong endorsement of process theism to William Hasker's equally confident exposition of free will (openness) theism, in which there is opportunity for these two eminent philosophers to reply. In the middle section of the book are three chapters by theologians who explain how they relate to this discussion, not only intellectually but experientially. Nancy R. Howell and David L. Wheeler are able to integrate process insights quite freely in their evangelical experience, while Richard Rice, though appreciative of process thought, is much more wary. Again the opportunity is given for each of them to reply to each, which adds much by way of nuance and depth.

1 Process Theology and the Christian Good News: A Response to Classical Free Will Theism

DAVID RAY GRIFFIN

To get right to the point, the issue of this book is whether process theology or classical free will theism provides a better framework for interpreting and defending Christianity's gospel, its good news. Advocates of classical free will theism have been forthright in stating their attitude toward process theology. Although they are extremely critical of the all-determining theism of Augustine, Thomas, and Calvin, they regard process theology as even worse (O 107, 141; NPT 316). Having been asked to develop the case for process theology in response to classical free will theism, I will be equally frank in my statement of what I regard as serious problems in this position. My case is developed in the following way. In the first section, I make some preliminary points about the three terms in the title of this essay. In the second section, I lift up the main points on which process theism and classical free will theism differ. In the third section, I give some reasons for not finding