God Beyond Orthodoxy:
Process Theology for the 21st Century[1]

Philip Clayton
Center for Process Studies

When you read the title, "God Beyond Orthodoxy," you first want to know: what was the orthodox view? I do not in fact challenge everything associated with orthodoxy. But there are a few core assumptions of classical philosophical theology about which I must express some skepticism.

The first is the claim that divine perfection implies divine timelessness, changelessness, and lack of passionate involvement with the world. In response to the question, "What is God?," the Westminster Confession reads:

> God is a Spirit, in and of himself infinite in being, glory, blessedness, and perfection; all-sufficient, eternal, unchangeable, incomprehensible, everywhere present, almighty, knowing all things, most wise, most holy, most just, most merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth. (Westminster Confession, Question 7)

Why did classical theology associate divine goodness with impassibility, when the Bible seems so clearly to teach a God who can respond? The Greek philosophical concepts that were dominant at the time the classic creeds were being written pushed theologians in this direction. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes,

> In order to articulate the dogma of the Trinity, the Church had to develop her own terminology with the help of certain notions of philosophical origin: "substance", "person" or "hypostasis", "relation" and so on. In doing this, she did not submit the faith to human wisdom, but gave a new and unprecedented meaning to these

terms, which from then on would be used to signify an ineffable mystery, "infinitely beyond all that we can humanly understand. [2]

The Church uses the term "substance" (rendered also at times by "essence" or "nature") to designate the divine being in its unity [and] the term … "hypostasis" to designate the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the real distinction among them. [3]

Is human personhood really best understood in terms of "substance" and "essence"? Is divine personhood best understood using these categories? As many reservations as we today may have about them, this was in fact the framework that dominated the classical doctrines. Consider the classic definition of the person by Boethius in *De persona et duabus naturis* (c. ii):

> *Naturæ rationalis individua substantia* (an individual substance of a rational nature)… "Substance" is used to exclude accidents: "We see that accidents cannot constitute person" (Boethius, *op. cit.*)… *Substantia* is used in two senses: of the concrete substance as existing in the individual, called *substantia prima*, corresponding to Aristotle's *ousia prote*; and of abstractions, substance as existing in genus and species, called *substantia secunda*, Aristotle's *ousia deutera*. It is disputed which of the two the word taken by itself here signifies. It seems probable that of itself it prescinds from *substantia prima* and *substantia secunda*, and is restricted to the former signification only by the word *individua*… [4]

The category of substance sets the parameters for what a person is, hence what God is, hence how God is related to the world. Yet one wonders whether distinctions such as that between *substantia prima* and *substantia secunda* are really the ones that we need to use to understand our relations with each other and with God? Can the essence of a person be timelessly defined? Yet this framework provided at least the starting point for the orthodox doctrine of God in the medieval period.

There may be many of you in the audience who are orthodox in this sense. I have no evangelistic fervor to try to deconvert you. But I must also admit that this talk is not directed primarily at the Orthodox among you. It is addressed primarily to those for whom the orthodox view of God — at least in the form I have just described it — has become problematic or is no longer credible. And I must say right at the outset: I must count myself in the camp of those for whom that particular orthodox view of God has become problematic.

What happens when one becomes convinced that this understanding of God is no longer plausible? Let me put it bluntly: many assume, well, that's it for God. They tell us that one can now practice other forms of spirituality; or one can believe in some sort of "ground of all reality" to which the various religions point; or one can become a religious naturalist; or one can leave religion and spirituality behind altogether. If one still uses the language of theism, one must treat the word God as solely a human construct.

This is the direction that Stu Kauffman takes in a new book. He writes,

No matter what religion we are discussing in relation to reinventing the sacred, God is the most powerful symbol we have. Then dare we use the word *God* as we reinvent the sacred?... It may be wise to use the word *God*, knowing the dangers, to choose this ancient symbol of reverence, and anneal to it a new, natural meaning. God is our name for the creativity in nature.... This God is how our universe unfolds. This God is our own humanity.[5]

Kauffman continues:

But the two views [theism and Kauffman's view] do differ in their most fundamental aspect. One sees a supernatural Generator God as the source of the vastness around us. [Kauffman] sees nature itself as the generator of the vast creativity around us.... Is not nature itself creativity enough? What more do we

3

really need of a God, if we also accept that we, at last, are responsible to the best of our forever-limited wisdom?[6]

The trouble is: for Stuart Kauffman, theistic language is simply *false*. It doesn't refer to any actually existing being or transcendent reality that has God-like properties. Language of God, on this view, must be "merely metaphorical" or "merely symbolic." It must refer exclusively to human experiences, or must express core human values. Or perhaps God language can function to make people more aware of the injustices of oppression, the importance of racial and sexual equality, the relatedness of all living things, or the importance of the quest for liberation. They tell me, "All these uses of the G-word are fine. Just don't get metaphysical on me!"

In this paper I want to "get metaphysical" with you. I want to argue that the fight for liberation and the continuing battle against oppression can be *more* effective with the help of powerful and appropriate models of the divine. I want to try to convince you that there still are powerful ways to speak of God beyond orthodoxy. And although I am as convinced as many of you are that human language about ultimate reality necessarily falls short of its object, I don't think it follows that such language is "merely figurative," "merely symbolic." Instead, I think it is extremely important to try to give content to the word "God." Some uses of the God-term are more damaging than others and some less so. When it comes to ultimate truth claims, I am as cautious as you are. Still, I must confess that my goal in what follows is to say true things rather than false things.

In the end, it is this goal that leads me to self-identify as a process theologian. Note that the term "process theologian" is not an exclusive category. You can recognize process elements in your religious thinking or spiritual practice without having to give up the label Jewish or Buddhist or Christian or naturalist — or, for that matter, atheist. In my case, when I use the label "process," I don't cease to be a Christian theologian with a Quaker practice, with progressivist political convictions, with a continuing fascination in the person of Jesus, with a deep affinity with Hindu reflection on reality,

and with a lay person's interest with Buddhist meditative techniques and the goals that they serve. The same holds for you. Indeed, wouldn't it be a contradiction in terms for "process" to function as a straightjacket, forcing a person to ignore *her own process* for the sake of dogmatic pronouncements?

What then is the background to this word "process"? There have been process elements in many Eastern and Western thinkers. People have called Aristotle a process thinker, and Plotinus, and several of the German Idealist thinkers, such as Hegel. When we at the Center for Process Studies use the term "process," we are influenced by all of these thinkers, but in particular by one of the greatest systematic thinkers of the 20th century, Alfred North Whitehead.

What was Whitehead's view of reality? He believed that many of the great conundrums of modern philosophy and science could only be solved if one accepts the belief that all existing things are *internally related*. If you draw two dots on a piece of graph paper, they are *externally* related; their relationship is relative to the piece of paper on which they are both located. By contrast, each child is internally related to her or his mother. Not only was she once a part of her mother's body, but she has internalized many features of her mother's personality, her mother's beliefs, and her mother's reactions to the world. Our mother is a different person from ourselves (though it often takes many years to realize this!), but key features of who she was have now become a part of who we are.

It may be that our relationships with our mother is a paradigm case of internal relatedness. But Whitehead suggested that *all existing things are internally related to all other existing things.* All person-to-person relationships are of this nature. There is some sense in which I understand you *from the inside*, and I hope there are some ways in which you understand this presentation from a space internal to you. All living things are internally related to all other living things in certain senses. When one takes relatedness in its strongest form — as in the Buddhist doctrine of co-dependent

origination — one affirms everything that exists is internally related to every other thing. This is the sense in which Whitehead understood *internal relatedness*.

We won't have time today to review all the technical aspects of Whitehead's position. (I hope you will be motivated enough by today's talk to sign up for at least one class in process thought while you are here, so that you can learn about the details of this position!) Here it is in a nutshell: The ultimate units of reality are momentary units of becoming called "actual occasions." Each actual occasion has a passive and an active side. In its passive mode it apprehends or "prehends" the actual occasions that came before it. Because it is *internally* aware of all of them, we have here a form of internal relatedness. But each occasion also has an active or a creative moment. It synthesizes all this input into a unique response. In doing so, it becomes a unique entity, a unique response to the world. At the end of this process, it ceases becoming and becomes available for other, new occasions to apprehend (or prehend) its unique contribution. Because this process of prehending and responding characterizes all reality, Whitehead concludes that everything that exists has experience in some form. Thus his position is often called "pan-experientialism."

What of persons? Well, what we ultimately consist of are many, many of these units of experience, as does each part of us. Still, there is some sense of identity that extends over time. Each instance of becoming is part of still broader units of becoming, until one reaches *you as a person. You are* always apprehending new features of the world and other persons; you are always processing them in your own unique creative way; and you are always making those results available to other persons and other living things. According to process thought, you are an unending process of becoming, internally related to all things, one member in a cosmic community of becoming. The occasions that preceded you are responsible to you for the decisions and responses that they bequeath to you, and *you* are responsible for the actions and reactions that you contribute back into the whole pool of becoming.

As you may already know, there are many more complicated things to be said about this view of reality. But now I want to ask: What is the role of God in all of this? God is *also* an actual occasion (or, some would say, a series of actual occasions). Unlike the rest of us, however, God never forgets and God never passes out of existence. At every moment of your becoming, God prehends your valuations and your most intimate responses. God takes them up into the divine life. *And God becomes different as a result*. At the next moment of your becoming, God offers back to you those valuations, and the experiences of all other living things, but now valued and interpreted from the divine perspective. The becoming God becomes a part of the becoming you. Then, in the next moment, you contribute *your* response to this becoming back, in an unending process of divine-human (and divine-nonhuman dialogue).

That's process theology in a nutshell. It is, I suggest, a powerful alternative to the traditional picture of God with which I began this talk. But the steps I've covered so far are only the beginning of the story. Philosophically and theologically, it goes much deeper. We need to understand more fully what this position implies, what it asserts, and what kind of religious, ethical, and political responses it suggests. The only way to do this is to spend some time looking carefully at some of the great process thinkers and some of their key texts.

Key Tenets of Process Theology for the 21ˢᵗ Century

I can present what I consider to be the key tenets of process theology in nine brief theses.

(1) *Panentheism*. According to Charles Hartshorne, panentheism is "the view that all things are within the being of God, who yet is not merely the whole of actual things."[7] He writes,

"Panentheism" is an appropriate term for the view that deity is in some real aspect distinguishable from and independent of any and all relative items, and yet, taken as an actual whole, includes all relative items.[8]

Note the dialectical nature of this position. Two things are asserted: God is "distinguishable from" all created things, yet God also "includes" them.

(2) *Relatedness*. It is *because* I seek an understanding of God that adequately expresses the divine relatedness that I affirm panentheism. In his excellent introductory essay to a well-known book on panentheism, Michael Brierley notes,

> Panentheism is the result of conceiving "being" in terms of relationship or relatedness. This is why process theism is a type of panentheism, for "process" asserts that "entities" are inseparably interrelated, and thus that relationship, rather than substance, is "of the essence."[9]

(3) *Process theism is located between traditional theism and pantheism*. David Ray Griffin puts the point nicely:

> Being arguably the most illuminating term for the naturalistic theism of process philosophy, panentheism brings out the fact that it combines features of both pantheism, which regards God "as essentially immanent and in no way transcendent," and traditional theism, which regards God "as essentially transcendent and only accidentally immanent."[10]

Griffin's work helps to explain why panentheism isn't just pantheism with a new name. As he describes it,

> Panentheism is crucially different from pantheism because God transcends the universe in the sense that God has God's own creative power, distinct from that of the universe of finite actualities. Hence, each finite actual entity has its own

creativity with which to exercise some degree of self-determination, so that it
transcends the divine influence upon it.[11]

Pantheism makes it difficult to conceive how finite beings can be agents in their own
right. Spinoza in the West and *advaita* philosophers such as Shankara in the East
struggle to avoid the conclusion that finite agency is really illusory. By contrast,
panentheists affirm the strongest possible form of divine immanence consistent with
"some degree of self-determination" on the part of finite agents.

(4) *A reciprocal relationship between God and world*. Are the relations between God and
world *fully* symmetrical? Process thinkers give different answers to this question.
Griffin advocates a complete symmetry:

> God is internal to the world (as traditional theism said), [and] the world is internal
> to God: "It is as true to say that the World is immanent in God, as that God is
> immanent in the World" (PR 348).[12]

The passage from *Process and Reality* that he quotes is Whitehead's strongest statement
of a fully symmetrical relationship between God and world. It bears quoting in full:

> It is as true to say that God is permanent and the World fluent, as that the
> World is permanent and God is fluent.
> It is as true to say that God is one and the World many, as that the World is one
> and God many.
> It is as true to say that, in comparison with the World, God is actual eminently,
> as that, in comparison with God, the World is actual eminently.
> It is as true to say that God is permanent and the World fluent, as that the
> World is permanent and God is fluent.
> It is as true to say that God is one and the World many, as that the World is one
> and God many.

It is as true to say that, in comparison with the World, God is actual eminently, as that, in comparison with God, the World is actual eminently…[13]

Other process thinkers, this author included, pull back from full symmetry. The infinite divine Creator, we argue, can be involved in deep reciprocal relations with finite agents without being the *same as* them.

(5) *The integrity of the natural order*. For genuinely autonomous agents to arise in evolutionary history, it's necessary that the natural order be regular, lawlike, and comprehensible to creatures. As Griffin writes,

> The naturalism of process panentheism, with its rejection of creation ex nihilo and thereby the possibility of supernatural interruptions of the world's most normal causal processes, overcomes the main arguments against the existence of a Divine Power, such as the problem of evil, the evolutionary nature of our universe, and the existence of many religions.[14]

Not all process theologians reject creation from nothing.[15] But we do resist claims to the unlimited omnipotence of God. For the same reason, most of us are hesitant about ascribing physical miracles to God. Only in this way, we believe, is it possible to avoid making God responsible for the evil and suffering that occurs in the world.

(6) *The Panentheistic Analogy*. Many process theologians appeal to some form of the mind-body analogy as a model for the God-world relation. Here's how Griffin puts it:

> In this version of naturalistic theism . . . what exists necessarily is not simply God, as traditional theism holds, or simply the world of finite existents, as atheism holds, but God-and-a-world. This position can be expressed by saying, as does Hartshorne, that God is essentially "the soul of the universe," being related to the universe somewhat in the way in which the human soul, as the dominant member of the human being, is related to its body.[16]

I've called this argument the *panentheistic analogy*. Credit goes to the feminist theologians Sallie McFague (*The Body of God*[17]) and Grace Janzten (*God's World, God's Body*[18]), who have courageously championed mind-body analogies to help conceive the God-world relation. Note that already Hartshorne had made central use of the same analogy. He defined pantheism as "the view that the whole of nature is related to a divine mind as a [hu]man's body is related to [that person's] mind . . . [Panentheism so defined] offers the only hope of construing the world as a genuine and orderly whole, the only hope of intelligibly relating together mind, matter, and law."[19] Hartshorne made equally strong claims for the panentheistic analogy when he wrote that the mind-body analogy "is in fact the only way to achieve a just synthesis of immanence and transcendence, the only way to avoid the twin errors of mere naturalism and mere supernaturalism . . . ."[20]

(7) *God as supreme example.* It is false to claim that process theologians equate God and finite beings. Even Whitehead, whose symmetries we noted above, called God the "chief exemplification" of his metaphysical principles. For Hartshorne God is similarly the supreme instantiation of values:

> Panentheism sees in God not just another example of whole or totality, unity in multiplicity, but the supreme and most excellent example, as [God] is the most excellent example of "goodness," "knowledge," and other conceptions. This supreme example as such deserves to be interpreted with care, and not (as commonly happens) according to casual associations, of such words as "all," "universe," "whole," and "parts."[21]

Marjorie Suchocki beautifully synthesizes the relational side of process theology with the idea of God as ethical standard. Her book *God, Christ, Church* God does not focus on God as the most powerful or the most knowledgeable being. Instead, it is God as "the supremely related one" who becomes the chief exemplification of value.[22]

(8) *Ethical implications*. What are the ethical implications of process theology? In Hartshorne's formulation,

> We are in the free, partly-contingent divine life with our own contingency and freedom. (That this is possible means that the divine life does not consist in mere 'power,' mere control, but has also a passive aspect, as all life indeed must have . . .).[23]

Hartshorne's combination of panentheism with the autonomy of finite beings allows him to stress the wholeness**,** autonomy, and integrity of each individual. As he writes elsewhere, "God is the wholeness of the world, correlative to the wholeness of every sound individual dealing with the world."[24] Process conceptions of the love of God start at this point. As Michael Brierley notes,

> Panentheism is the result of process, mutuality, reciprocity or love, being made foundational to "being." This is why "love," as a term expressing relation, is such an important concept for process theologians, and why attention to love has been the cause of much doctrinal revisionism.[25]

(9) *Christology*. To be a Christian theologian is to relate one's beliefs about God in some important way to the life and teachings of Jesus. Process theologians have sought to understand the ministry and teachings of Jesus in light of the principles we have been considering. Thus Hartshorne writes,

> The devotion of Jesus to his fellows was not mere benevolence, a wishing them well, or an eagerness to do things for them. It was a feeling of sympathetic identity with them in their troubles and sufferings, as well as in their joys, so that their cause and their tragedy became his.[26]

To say that Jesus was God, then, ought to mean that God himself is one with us in our suffering, that divine love is not essentially benevolence—external well-wishing—but sympathy, taking into itself our every grief.[27]

Whitehead puts it even more simply: "The life of Christ is not an exhibition of over-ruling power. Its glory is for those who can discern it, and not for the world. Its power lies in its absence of force. It has the decisiveness of a supreme ideal, and that is why the history of the world divides at this point of time."[28]

I close with Whitehead's most famous and probably also his most beautiful statement as a process thinker about the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed and lived:

There is, however, in the Galilean origin of Christianity yet another suggestion which does not fit very well with any of the three main strands of thought. It does not emphasize the ruling Caesar, or the ruthless moralist, or the unmoved mover. It dwells upon the tender elements in the world, which slowly and in quietness operate by love; and it finds purpose in the present immediacy of a kingdom not of this world. Love neither rules, nor is it unmoved; also it is a little oblivious as to morals. It does not look to the future; for it finds its own reward in the immediate present.[29]

Conclusion

The process theology I've just sketched forms important links with many of the world's religions. There are important schools of process theology within Hindu, Buddhist, and Chinese religious traditions, for example. Here I have sought to show only that process theology is not opposed to the motivations of the Hebrew Bible and Christian New Testament. In some ways, I have suggested, it may even be truer to those motivations than were many classical theologies.

13

In closing, I would like to step back from the details of the presentation and underscore three features of the position that I am defending. First, I am presupposing that it is all right to let human experience, ethical values, and even political commitments influence how we think about God. This is *constructive theology*. It does not eliminate the role of scripture and tradition as influences on our thought and practice. But it does insist that we are justified in drawing also on our own experience and reason in understanding them. (Many of you will recognize the "Wesleyan quadrilateral" in my emphasis on combining scripture and tradition with experience and reason.)

Second, this process of reflection, practice and activism is open-ended. The emphasis on practice is so great that even the process philosophy underlying the whole approach can be cast into question and modified. There is no dogmatism here. It really is process all the way down. Finally, it may be a theoretical, and even metaphysical, position. But I hope you can see that it immediately implies a distinct kind of community, a distinct way of relating to other persons and living things, a distinct understanding of one's self and one's own beliefs. Perhaps you can begin to see why there would be a process economics, a process environmentalism, a process understanding of church or synagogue, a process view of the relationship between religions, perhaps even a process psychology and a process political theory.

This has only been the quickest of introductions to process thought. But I hope that I have been able to convey a sense of the sort of affirmations and involvements that process theologies imply for one's theory, practice, and experience of the world. It is a genuinely exciting process!

Endnotes

[1] This paper was presented at the Center for Process Studies at Claremont School of Theology on Sept. 9, 2008. I would like to give my thanks to Ashley Riordan and Deena Lin for their valuable research assistance, and to Trisha Famisaran for her work on administering and publicizing the public event.

[2] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 251.

[3] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 252.

[4] *Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Person."

[5] Stuart Kauffman, *Reinventing the Sacred: A New View of Science, Reason and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 284.

[6] Ibid., 283.

[7] Charles Hartshorne, *An Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. "Panentheism."

[8] Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), 89.

[9] Michael W. Brierley, "Naming a Quiet Revolution: The Panentheistic Turn in Modern Theology," in *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World*, ed. Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 13.

[10] David Ray Griffin, *Reenchantment without Supernaturalism: A Process Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 141.

[11] Griffin, *Reenchantment*, 142.

[12] Ibid., 141.

[13] Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, revised edition, p. 348.

[14] Griffin, *Reenchantment*, 391.

[15] I have recently defended a form of process panentheism that defends creation ex nihilo; see Clayton, "Open Panentheism and Creatio ex nihilo," *Process Studies* 37/1 (2008): 166-83.

[16] Griffin, *Reenchantment*, 391.

[17] Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: an Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993).

[18] Grace Jantzen, *God's World, God's Body* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1984).

[19] Charles Hartshorne, *Beyond Humanism: Essays in the Philosophy of Nature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969), 66.

[20] Charles Hartshorne, *Man's Vision of God* (Chicago: Willett, Clark & Company, 1941), 208.

[21] Charles Hartshorne, *An Encyclopedia of Religion*, s.v. "Panentheism."

[22] Marjorie Suchocki, *God, Christ, Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology*, new revised edition (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 33.

[23] Charles Hartshorne, *Anselm's Discovery: A Re-examination of the Ontological Argument for God's Existence* (Lasalle, IL: Open Court, 1965), 109.

[24] Charles Hartshorne, *A Natural Theology for Our Time* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1967), 6.

[25] Brierley, 14.

[26] Charles Hartshorne, *Reality as Social Process* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1953), 147.

[27] Ibid., 147.

[28] Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, 57.

[29] Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 343