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Process Philosophy

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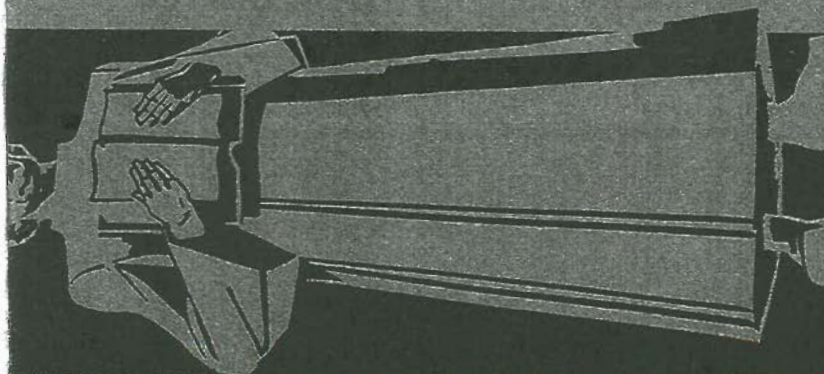
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# Introduction To Process Philosophy

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THE ATTEMPT TO delineate the new concept of reality must necessarily include reference to the philosophy of interdependence, also known as new philosophy, or organicism. The idea of interdependence extends to all fields of philosophy. It stands in sharp contrast to both dependence and independence. Dependence implies that some things are completely dependent for their existence and nature on others: that "other" may be God, universals, ideas, form and matter, Descartes' spirit and matter. Independence has been traditionally attributed to God or to entities, usually spiritual or psychic in nature, which exist (usually eternally) quite apart from dependent particularization. Theology speaks of Creator and creature in terms of dependence and contingency. God is *Spiritus independens*; man is *dependentur a Deo*. Interdependence involves ultimate unity as being as truly dependent upon ultimate plurality as plurality is dependent upon ultimate unity.

Source of the new reality can be traced to pragmatism or instrumentalism. Metaphysically it finds its roots in Whitehead's philosophy of organism. His idea of the world as "self-creative creativity" is consonant with his view that "it is as true to say that God created the world as that the world creates God."<sup>1</sup> Whitehead bifurcated God into a primordial and consequent nature, the former being a sort of up-to-date container of Plato's ideas, while the latter is denominated the occasion of occasions. The new thought is also dependent upon Emergentism. D. W. Gottshalk could write that relations not only always exist in items of fact, but items of fact always exist in relation. In his *Metaphysics in Modern Times*, published in 1950, he declares: "The permanence of experience exists in and through change as the change of experience exists in and through permanence. The empirical situation is neither pure emotion nor pure substance, but a relational complex of change and permanence in which each exists in the other, each is inter-ingredient, so to speak, in the other and each is as ultimate as the other."<sup>2</sup> What is the relation of the philosophy of interdependence to religion? Religion is concerned with the goal of life, not with casual and teleological metaphysics. The goal of life is to enjoy intrinsic value. Religion helps a person to discover and attain such value.

The philosophy of process or organicism can trace its roots to the 18th century. In Greek and scholastic thought finite things are bound together by a chain of causal relationships, never sufficient in themselves. The ground of contingent and secondary causes is an original uncaused cause, necessary being, God. Empirical philosophy and biblical theology discovered the fundamental discontinuity between the metaphysical quest for God and the scriptural revelation of God. In so doing both rejected static concepts. Hartshorne ob-



serves that many things come into reality, but not everything does so. Few have thought of God as doing this. God is real; he does not have to become real. The mere existence of God is not an instance of becoming, but only of being. For process philosophy the reality of God includes more than his mere existence or being. Rather the divine reality in its concreteness is the eminent form of becoming.

Fichte and Shelling both introduced dynamic categories into philosophical thought. And in the center of all processism stand Hegel, for whom the universe in its totality is a rational whole in which final reality is absolute spirit or idea. For Hegel the universe is a unity of thought indwelt by *Geist*; reason holds the key to the process and reason is activity and energy. "Reason is the infinite energy of the universe; since reason is not so powerless as to be incapable of producing anything but a mere ideal, a mere intention—having its place outside reality, nobody knows where; something separate and abstract in the heads of certain human beings."<sup>4</sup> Absolute spirit needs a world to function as rational energy. "God as an abstraction is not the true God: only as the living process or position his other, the world, and first in union with his other, as spirit, can he be subject."<sup>5</sup> The Universe is therefore dialectical process. Each successive stage preserves the truth of the previous one and moves on to more comprehensive expression of truth. The reality of the world is from God in the dialectical movement of his being. "All comes from God and all is in God; all is created by God and all remains as a moment in him. God is the movement towards the world and its *Aufhebung*."<sup>6</sup> Hegel launched idealist thought on movement from emphasis on being to becoming. Philosophy could never return to a concern with an unchanging absolute. Hegel marked the end of the old philosophical idealism. Hartshorne says that if we reject becoming as the basic form of reality we can hold that being is basic with becoming an inferior derivative; or that which is without becoming, is alone real. The options are therefore clearly either dualism or eternalistic monism.

Neo-idealists emphasized the dynamic form of processism. Reality is spirit in dynamic, active movement of thought. Reality they held, is "a creative, dynamic flux of events, the essence of which is thought." Left-wing Hegelianism, represented in Karl Marx, defined motion as the most important quality of matter. Motion is "impulse, vital spirit, tension." Primary forms of matter are the living, individualizing forces of being inherent in it and producing the distinction between the species.

In the twentieth century the idea of evolution as the controlling metaphysical model became generally accepted. Samuel Alexander, who qualifies as realist and empiricist but not positivist, postulates "space-time" as the primordial stuff out of which the universe evolves. Space and time are interdependent; there is, furthermore, no suggestion of a transcendent principle beyond this primordial substance. Referring to Spinoza, Alexander sees space as the bodily or somatic component, while time is a kind of spirit partner,

generator of new qualities and values. It is to space what mind is to body. Space-time is animated. The evolutionary process has a forward-moving impulse which directs it to its next stage of attainment. "There is a *nisus* in space-time which as it has borne its creatures forward through matter and life to mind, will bear them forward to some higher level of existence."<sup>7</sup> Deity is the next higher empirical quality to mind. For man, on the level of mind, deity is deity; for creatures on the level of life, deity is the quality of mind that still lies ahead. Thus deity is not God. "God is the being that possesses deity as its unique quality. Since deity in the real sense has not yet emerged, God is not actual. "The infinite God is purely ideal or conceptual. As actual, God does not possess the quality of deity but is the universe as tending to that quality. This *nisus* in the universe is present to reflection on experience. Only in this sense of straining toward deity can there be an infinite actual God." Thus God is really the whole universe tending toward deity. In the long run we are nothing, comments Hartshorne, except as God inherits reality and value from our lives and actions. "In ultimate perspective all life other than divine is purely contributory. We serve God, is the last word; not, God serves us."<sup>8</sup>

For Bergson the basic fact of experience is change. Becoming is the essential mark of ultimate reality, not being. Reality is a process in which an all-embracing life force is creatively active. Reacting to excesses of positivism and scientism, Bergson emphasizes the primacy of intuition and instinct over intellect. He also made time and change central categories of his philosophy. He holds that life is an unceasing, continuous, undivided process, a sort of cosmic movement of which we are expressions rather than parts. This is the doctrine of Creative Evolution. God is the immanent life-force, creative freedom. Action and creativity are manifestations of this *elan vital*. In morality and religion men give themselves up to this *elan vital* and intuitively unite themselves with the life force. Man's end is thus mystical union with God.

The philosophy of Whitehead has been called "the most attractive non-Christian form" of process philosophy. Whitehead is a realist. He is a critical empiricist. Science is a method of abstraction which cannot offer a full picture of reality. The basic presupposition of Whitehead is that the universe must be understood by an organismic model. He attacks the concept of "simple location." We must surrender the scientific view of reality as consisting of discrete configurations of matter spatially and temporally isolated. Evolution as process must be understood materialistically. Evolution requires an underlying activity, a substantial activity, expressing itself in individual embodiments and evolving in the achievements of organism. The universe is an organism, a patterned process in which there is an intimate relation between all parts, all parts pervading one another. Becoming is the process of organismic development. The whole universe is a process of feeling in which all actual entities are mutually sensitive. Actual entities are fleeting centers of experience.

Actual occasions are completely free and self-determinate until they perish. In perishing, occasions or past actual entities do not cease to be. They attain a kind of objective immortality and become stubborn facts for future actual occasions toprehend. Every actual occasion enjoys the past as alive in itself. The universe is therefore dynamic: a process of becoming in which actual entities are continually arising as new creatures and passing away. Ultimate reality, the ground of the real process of becoming, is creativity.

According to Whiteheadism thought God is the principle of concretion in creativity. God arranges eternal objects into patterns of relationships and makes these available to actual entities. God is not creator. Actual entities are self-creating. The becoming of the world is, in fact, the becoming of God. The world creates itself. It finds vision or telos for self-creation in the all-inclusive primordial valuation of the eternal objects by God. "God is free, complete primordial, eternal, actually deficient and unconscious."<sup>9</sup> The world lives by its incarnation of God in itself.<sup>10</sup> We may at this point offer the following brief summary of process thought, particularly as it relates to its concept of and concern for God. God is no exception to metaphysical principles. His self-identity, established by his subjective aim, is always the same: he is vital actuality. God is the principle of determination why *this rather than that* set of possibilities actualized. Time is real to God: He is not above or outside temporality; He enters into his own reality. God is forever creating new possibilities in which he is involved. The world, in process, is open-ended; this includes the inevitability of chance for error. There is a decided element of risk in the process. God makes the best of everything, even evil. Evils, comments Hartshorne, may be attributable "to the decisions of creatures—meaning creatures in general, not simply human creatures. The concrete course of events is then not determined by divine decision or any other sort of decision, but by the interplay of countless decisions of various kinds."<sup>11</sup> There is a kind of "cosmic democracy" with which one must contend. God is love, however, because he absorbs evil. Man's experience of God is not that of a companion. Love finds its own reward in the immediate present.<sup>12</sup>

Teilhard de Chardin also accepts evolution and applies this category to the totality of process. He traces evolution from cosmogenesis through biogenesis to anthropogenesis through Christogenesis. We have a living universe, with man the key to the whole process. Man is at "the momentary summit of an anthropogenesis which is itself the crown of a cosmogenesis."<sup>13</sup> Teilhard insists that the universe has psychic as well as a physical aspect. The primacy of mind in the stuff of the universe is what might aptly be called his ontological presupposition. The universe shows developing unities, increasing complexity. And the primitive stuff of the universe is energy. The emergence of consciousness and thought is the key to the whole past.

Science is concerned with but one dimension, the physical



It is unable to realize the psychic dimension. For Teilhard there are two aspects: A physical or tangential, and the psychical or radial component. The tangential is responsible for linking elements together at the level of complexity: it shapes the outward form of the process. The radial component is responsible for movement to higher levels of organization. The universe is folding "in upon itself until it is interiorized in a growing complexity."<sup>13</sup> Hominization took place at the critical point when consciousness bolted back upon itself to become self-consciousness. A noosphere was stretched around the planet and the process became conscious of itself. Now man knows he has it in his power to determine the future. As Bonhoeffer would put it, the world has come of age.

Our universe is dependent upon the greatest energy which is love. This constitutes the radial component of energy. Love super-personalizes man. Through genuine love and sympathy the human elements in a personalized universe rise to the level of a higher synthesis.<sup>14</sup>

Teilhard speaks frequently of the point Omega. The whole process is leading to a personal center as its present reality. This sounds, incidentally, very much like the Thomistic-Aristotelian tradition of a Prime Mover. Omega is personal, loving, and lovable. It is a present actuality. It transcends space and time. Christ is the summit of Teilhard's evolutionary development. Thus he claims a Christian philosophy. His creed is terse: I believe the universe is an evolution; it goes towards spirit; it achieves itself in the personal; the personal supreme is the universal Christ.

Teilhard thus speaks of Christ in a mystical and cosmic sense. Christ is fixed to a point of reference, the Incarnation. A historically incarnated God is the only one who can satisfy not only the inflexible rules of the universe in which nothing is produced or appears saved by way of birth, but also the irrepressible aspirations of our spirit. Christ incorporates humanity into his mystical body, for the cosmic Christ pervades the whole process. The universe is in process of Christification or Christogenesis since Christ is completing himself in it. The cosmos is moving to the completion of Christ in the Parousis, the last critical point in the process of union with God. The Incarnation will be complete only when the part of chosen substance contained in every object, spiritualized first of all in our souls, and a second time with our souls in Jesus, has rejoined the final center of its completion.

We can now draw certain conclusions with regard to process thought and its relation to biblical faith. Processism believes in a possible God and an unfinished universe. It confesses a kenosis of the word and the spirit. Its God acts in intimate relationship with his creaton. And in an unfinished world God calls men into full cooperative fellowship with himself in shaping the universe, in bringing its disorderly and irrational elements into line with its purpose. "The biblical God," says Hartshorne, "is a creator appealing to us as lesser creative agents to make the most of our capacities to add new

values to the world." Life is process; divinity is process: and all process brings new values into existence. The ultimate issue, the permanence of values once created, is out of our hands, and in God's hands forever.<sup>15</sup>

But there is cosmic hope. History becomes, through incarnation, a continuing incorporation of men and environment within the life of God. The redemptive process in history is brought to a focus in the body of Christ. Bonhoeffer insists that it is now essential to the real concept of the secular that it shall always be seen in the movement of being accepted by God in Christ. The unity of the reality of God and of the world, accomplished in God, is repeated, is realized, ever afresh in the life of men. The cosmic hope is that God's purposes ultimately will be actualized at all levels of creation. This will issue in a transfigured universe, as Teilhard saw it. What God has potentially achieved in the Incarnation will be consummated when the whole universe is gathered into the life of God.

Obviously, from the viewpoint of historic Christianity, process philosophy is not biblical Christianity. But process philosophy is an attempt to provide a new theory of divine nature based on a realistic metaphysics. Whitehead, Bergson, Hartshorne, and Teilhard are leaders in attempting to apply an evolutionary concept to God and his universe. It leads to a limited God. In the process, observes Sontag, God can become a principle second to the idea of process itself.<sup>16</sup> God is not omnipotent; he is rather one element in the process to preserve certain goals or values. Process philosophy promises a full scale-revision in contemporary philosophy which at this point has not as yet been accomplished. Yet its challenge to theology and to religion is truly staggering. For its concern is to speak to contemporary man. This concern is always a striking challenge for theology!

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1929), p. 528.
2. D. W. Gottschalk, *Metaphysics in Modern Times* (University of Chicago Press, 1950), p. 71.
3. Perry LeFevre, ed., *Philosophical Resources for Christian Thought* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968), p. 45.
4. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (Dover, 1956), p. 9.
5. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Nature* (Dover Publications, 1950) p. 47.
6. Erich C. Rust, *Evolutionary Philosophies and Contemporary Theology* (Westminster Press, 1969), p. 60.
7. Samuel Alexander, *Space, Time, and Deity* (London, 1920), II, 346.
8. LeFevre, p. 52.
9. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 489.
10. Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (London: Cambridge Press, 1927), p. 140.
11. LeFevre, p. 54.
12. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (Harper and Row, 1959) p. 34.

13. Teilhard de Chardin, *Man's Place in Nature* (Harper and Row, 1966), p. 32.
14. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Future of Man* (Harper and Row, 1964), p. 119.
15. LeFevre, 63ff.
16. Frederick Sontag, *The Future of Theology* (Westminster Press, 1969), p. 51.