
Process theology: a survey and an appraisal

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In recent decades, few philosophical or theological movements have influenced liberal and conservative forms of Christian thought more effectively than process theism. Theologian R. C. Sproul concurs when he says, 'The main-

line churches have been heavily influenced by the impact of [process philosophy] as it has emerged into a major, if not *the* major, school of influence in our day.'¹ Evangelical Paul Mickey, himself an advocate of process thought, is convinced that 'American theology in general, and this includes contemporary evangelicalism, is influenced by process modes of thought'.² As a result of its growth in popularity in Anglo-American circles, Michael L. Peterson states, 'One of the most important questions facing educated Christians today concerns the relationship of Christian orthodoxy to "process philosophy".'³

What is process theism? What are some of its historical roots? Who are its main advocates, and what do they believe? What are some responses that can be made to process thought? Are evangelical Christianity and process theology compatible with one another? These are the questions we would like to address in this introductory article.

The nature of process theism

Process theism is expressed under many names. Sometimes it is called panentheism, meaning all-in-God. It has also been labelled bipolar or dipolar theism (since its proponents believe that God has two poles) as well as organicist philosophy (since reality is viewed as a gigantic organism). But perhaps its two most common names are 'neoclassical theism' and 'process theology', the former because its adherents contend that God is finite and temporal, in contrast to the God of classical theism, the latter because process theists view God as a changing being.

Regardless of the descriptive label one applies to process theism, the movement's leaders and followers are agreed that the monopolar God of Augustine, Anselm and Thomas Aquinas must be replaced with the bipolar God of Whitehead and Hartshorne. In other words, panentheists desire to discard the conception of God as completely absolute and independent of the universe and replace it with the view of God as potentially absolute, actually relative, and ontologically dependent on the universe. Process theists stress God's becoming and his relativity over his mere being or absoluteness. In doing so, they embrace a God who is absolutely relative and immutably mutable — a deity who is the supreme exemplification of change.

The historical background of process theism

The origins of process philosophy date back at least to the Greek philosopher Heraclitus (c. 500 BC). He taught that the world is a constantly changing process. Some years later Plato (c. 400 BC) speculated that there was a Demiurgos who eternally struggled with the chaos to form it into the cosmos. He also maintained that God is to the world as the soul is to the body. This platonic viewpoint provides the dualistic background for panentheism's doctrine of a bipolar God.

In more modern history, G. W. F. Hegel's developmental pantheism provided a significant step to contemporary process theology. Hegel (d. AD 1831) presented a God who progressively unfolds himself in the historical process. In the late nineteenth century Herbert Spencer expanded Charles Darwin's biological evolutionary theory into a philosophy of cosmic evolution. Following this development, Henri Bergson proposed (1907) that the evolutionary process was driven forward in 'leaps' by a Life Force, whom Bergson eventually identified as God. Around the same time (1920) Samuel Alexander pioneered a process view of God's relationship to the temporal universe.⁴

Some major process theists and their beliefs

1. Alfred North Whitehead

The father of process philosophy is Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947). He was the first person to develop a systematic process metaphysic. He presented his perspective most fully in his now classic book *Process and Reality* (1929). Here he

combined a cosmic evolutionary model and relativity theory into a process philosophy of reality. Because Whitehead's thought is so central in the process movement, it will be our point of departure in explaining the major tenets of panentheism.

Whitehead maintains that there are three major concepts of God. First, the 'Eastern Asiatic concept' views God as 'an impersonal order to which the world conforms. This order is the self-ordering of the world; it is not the world obeying an imposed rule. The concept expresses the extreme doctrine of immanence.'⁵ Second, the 'Semitic concept' depicts God as 'a definite personal individual entity, whose existence is the one ultimate metaphysical fact, absolute and underivative, and who decreed and ordered the derivative existence which we call the actual world. . . . It expresses the extreme doctrine of transcendence' (*RM*, pp. 66-67). The third view of God is pantheistic. It is 'described in the terms of the Semitic concept, except that the actual world is a phase within the complete fact which is this ultimate individual entity. The actual world, conceived apart from God, is unreal. Its only reality is God's reality. . . . This is the extreme doctrine of monism' (*RM*, p. 67).

Whitehead rejects all three of these concepts of God. But he primarily aims his philosophical guns at the Semitic view, which he recognizes was adopted by the Christian church early in its history (*RM*, p. 72). Whitehead sees two main difficulties with this concept of God. One is that 'it leaves God completely outside metaphysical rationalization. We know, according to it, that he is such a being as to design and create this universe, and there our knowledge stops' (*RM*, p. 68). The other problem is that the Semitic concept needs to be proved. But 'the only possible proof would appear to be the "ontological proof" devised by Anselm, and revived by Descartes. According to this proof, the mere concept of such an entity allows us to infer its existence. Most philosophers and theologians reject this proof' (*RM*, pp. 68-69).

In addition to these problems, Whitehead poses several objections to the Semitic view of God. For example, he contends that 'the notion of immanence must be discriminated from that of omniscience. The Semitic God is omniscient; but, in addition to that, the Christian God is a factor in the universe' (*RM*, p. 71). Therefore, God must be in the universe, not just beyond it. Furthermore, the theistic doctrine of divine aseity should be rejected because 'there is no entity, not even God, "which requires nothing but itself in order to exist".' Instead, 'every entity is in its essence social and requires the society in order to exist.' And 'the society for each entity, actual or ideal, is the all-inclusive universe' (*RM*, p. 104). Likewise, divine necessity and divine independence from the universe are denied. As Whitehead states, 'Apart from God, there would be no actual world; and apart from the actual world with its creativity, there would be no rational explanation of the ideal vision which constitutes God' (*RM*, pp. 150-151). Moreover, Whitehead dismisses the idea of God as infinite and all good: 'The limitation of God is his goodness. He gains his depth of actuality by his harmony of valuation. It is not true that God is in all respects infinite. If he were, he would be evil as well as good. Also this unlimited fusion of evil with good would mean mere nothingness. He is something decided and is thereby limited' (*RM*, p. 147).

What, then, is Whitehead's view of God? He tells us: 'God is that function in the world by reason of which our purposes are directed to ends which in our own consciousness are impartial as to our own interests' (*RM*, p. 151). Furthermore, since 'the temporal world and its formative elements constitute for us the all-inclusive universe', God is actually nothing more than the order and value of the actual world. As Whitehead states, '[God] is not the world, but the valuation of the world' (*RM*, p. 152). Indeed, 'there is nothing actual which could be actual without some measure of order.' And the creativity and forms exhibited by the world 'are together important to achieve actuality apart from the completed ideal harmony, which is God' (*RM*, p. 115). In short, God's consequent or actual nature is the existing universe.

This understanding leads to the view that God is constantly changing. For Whitehead maintains that the universe is an atomistic series of events, otherwise called 'drops of experience' or 'actual occasions'.⁶ These actual occasions come to be and cease to be very quickly. In fact, they pass in and out of existence so fast that 'the ancient doctrine that "no one crosses the same river twice" [must be] extended. No thinker thinks twice; and, to put the matter more generally, no subject experiences twice' (*PR*, p. 43). All is becoming, including God. There are no unchanging beings (*PR*, pp. 53, 71, 122, 317).

In addition, because God and the universe are mutually dependent on one another for their continued becoming, God 'is not *before* all creation, but *with* all creation' (*PR*, p. 521). He did not bring the universe into existence; he merely directs its ongoing progress. He does this by organizing the potentials of his primordial nature and urging them into the world process as various aspects of actual entities. In other words, he shapes the universe by luring the eternal potentials of his primordial, or potential, pole into the temporal realm of his consequential, or actual pole. In this way, the creation of the universe is both *ex materia* (out of pre-existing stuff) and *ex Deo* (out of God). This actualization of divine potentials is prompted by creativity, 'the principle of novelty' that grounds 'every actual entity, including God' (*PR*, pp. 31, 135).

Lastly, since God is constantly becoming and his potential is infinite, he will never completely realize all he could ever be. God will forever achieve more value and thereby enrich himself. However, 'neither God, nor the world, [ever] reaches static completion' (*PR*, p. 295). Consequently, evil — that which is incompatible with God's efforts of self-realization at any given moment — will never be controlled or defeated. As Whitehead notes, 'In our cosmological construction we are therefore left with the final opposites, joy and sorrow, good and evil, disjunction and conjunction — that is to say, the many in the one — flux and permanence, greatness and triviality, freedom and necessity, God and the World' (*PR*, p. 518).

2. Charles Hartshorne

Charles Hartshorne is close to Whitehead in importance and influence. Lewis S. Ford, himself a process theologian and relentless apologist, states as much when he writes, 'Hartshorne's clarity of presentation and arguments, coupled with a freedom from Whitehead's neologisms, has made him a most influential exponent of process thought, and many

read their Whitehead through Hartshorne's spectacles.'⁷ As we did with Whitehead's empirical approach to process thought, so we will briefly survey Hartshorne's rationalistic approach.

Like Whitehead, Hartshorne rejects the Augustinian-Thomistic view of God. Hartshorne even charges that the theologians who propounded this concept were involved in two forms of idolatry: ontolatry, the worship of being (God as pure act); and etiolatry, the worship of causality (God as the uncaused Cause).⁸ God, Hartshorne claims, is not 'merely infinite or merely finite, merely absolute or merely relative, merely cause or merely effect, merely agent or merely patient, merely actual or merely potential, *but in all cases both*, each in suitable respects or aspects of his living reality, and in such a manner as to make him unsurpassable by another. He is even both joy and sorrow, both happiness and sympathetic participation in our grief.'⁹ God is both sides of the metaphysical contraries at the same time but not in the same pole. That is, he is timeless, absolute and infinite in his abstract pole, yet temporal, relative and finite in his concrete pole.¹⁰

Hartshorne's concept of the divine poles is critical to his metaphysical system. He maintains that the concrete pole is God as he exists at any given moment in his ever-changing experience. The abstract pole is that which is common and constant in God's character given any possible or actual world. For example, when a human being suffers pain, God experiences that pain in his concrete pole by sympathetic participation. However, God's abstract pole experiences nothing in particular. It simply represents God's ability to experience anything that becomes in any world. Put another way, God as concrete is God as he actually is now. God as abstract is God as he must always be. Hence the divine abstract pole is an abstraction of the divine concrete pole.¹¹ From this premise Hartshorne concludes that all of reality is characterized by becoming and relativity, not by being and absoluteness. Only potentiality — pure possibility — can be considered being and absolute. In fact, 'becoming is reality itself', while being is 'an empty universal, the common property of all becoming whatsoever'.¹²

God is also personal, but he is not, as Whitehead thinks, an actual entity. For Hartshorne, God is 'an enduring society of actual entities'.¹³ But unlike other societies, God endures no matter what world or world-state exists. Moreover, like other individuals, God is partially new each moment. God in his present concrete state is not identical to what he was in his previous concrete state. Thus the God one may serve now is not the God one may have served yesterday nor the God one may serve tomorrow.¹⁴

Concerning God's relationship to the world, Hartshorne believes that the divine concrete pole and the universe are one. As he puts it, 'God is the wholeness of the world.'¹⁵ However, this does not mean that God is identical to the world, as in pantheism. Instead, it means that God literally permeates the world in his concrete pole without destroying the individuality of his creatures. God accomplishes this by including within himself the 'totality of all ordinary causes and effects' without becoming identical to them. Therefore, the universe is in God but he is distinguishable, though not separable from, the universe (*MVG*, p. 348; *DR*, pp. 89-90).

As one might suspect, Hartshorne rejects the traditional theistic view of creation *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). Instead, he contends that God creates the world *ex materia* (out of pre-existing matter). That is, God makes 'new actualities' from 'past events'.¹⁶ Consequently he is the cosmic shaper and orderer of each world that has existed in the infinite past and that will exist in the infinite future (*MVG*, pp. 230-232). But God is not the sole 'creator', for the materials he transforms 'are prior acts of self-creation' which either himself or his creatures performed (*DCD*, p. 280). In other words, God partially creates himself, and the creatures that compose his world-body partially create him as well. As Hartshorne states it: 'God in his concrete de facto state is in one sense simply self-made, like every creature spontaneously springing into being as something more than any causal antecedents could definitely imply. In another sense, or causally speaking, God, in his latest concrete state, is jointly "made" or produced by God and the world in the prior states of each. We are not simply co-creators, with God, of the world, but in the last analysis co-creators, with him, of himself' (*NTOT*, p. 113).

It follows from the foregoing that human beings can either (1) contribute to God's happiness by creating value that he can absorb, or (2) bring him sorrow by committing evil acts that cause discord and ugliness in his cosmic memory. Of course, God desires that his experience of joy be enriched. But he cannot guarantee that this desire will always be fulfilled, since he cannot fully control the activities of his free creatures without destroying them and thereby destroying himself, which is impossible. Therefore, evil will always exist, and God will never become completely perfect. Such are the inevitable and logical risks of genuine freedom (*DCD*, p.285; *NTOT*, pp. 112-113).

3. Schubert M. Ogden

The last major advocate of process theism we will deal with here is Schubert M. Ogden. He is a theologian who adopted, though not uncritically, the process philosophy of Hartshorne and supplemented it with Rudolph Bultmann's existentialism.¹⁷ Ogden gives a comprehensive presentation of his process perspective in his book *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (1963).

Ogden joins other process theists in abandoning the classical view of God. He gives three arguments against classical theism that are common among other process thinkers. The first one is the antinomy of creation. Classical theists believe that God freely created the world and therefore was under no necessity to create. They also maintain that 'God's act of creation is one with his own eternal essence, which is in every respect necessary'. Ogden argues that these two beliefs result 'in the hopeless contradiction of a wholly necessary creation of a wholly contingent [*i.e.* freely created] world'.¹⁸

The second argument is the antinomy of service. Classical theists think that 'the end of man is to serve or glorify God through obedience to his will and commandments'. They also believe that the divine being man is to serve is a 'statically complete perfection incapable in any respect of further self-realization. God can be neither increased nor diminished by what we do.' From these two tenets Ogden concludes that whatever man does cannot truly be *for* God since man's service cannot make any difference *in* God (*RG*, pp. 17-18).

The third objection Ogden gives is from 'existential repugnance' (*RG*, p. 18). He states it this way: 'If what we do and suffer as men in the world is from God's perspective wholly indifferent, that perspective is at most irrelevant to our actual existence. It can provide no motive for action, no cause to serve, and no comfort in our distress beyond the motives, causes, and comforts already supplied by our various secular undertakings. But, more than that, to involve ourselves in these undertakings and to affirm their ultimate significance is implicitly to deny the God [of classical theism] who is himself finally conceived as the denial of our life with the world.' It will do no good to refer to this wholly indifferent God as 'the loving heavenly Father revealed in Jesus, who freely creates the world and guides it toward its fulfillments with loving care'. This will only entrap one in the antinomies already cited. Hence, once it is understood that classical theism undercuts man's belief in 'the importance of the secular' — his affirmation 'that man and the world are themselves of ultimate significance' — classical theism should be rejected as existentially repugnant (*RG*, p. 18).

Ogden replaces the monopolar deity of classical theism with the bipolar God of Charles Hartshorne (*RG*, p. 141). Ogden does this, however, with a liberal Christian emphasis. For example, he talks about the neoclassical God creating the world *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), but he does not understand this to mean that God brought the entire universe into existence from no pre-existent material. Rather, he maintains that God has always existed with 'some actual world of creatures'. Therefore, each one of these worlds was 'created "out of nothing", in the sense that there once was when [each of them] was not'. In other words, each new world did not actually exist before God co-created it, but it was potentially 'existent' in the 'conjoint actuality of God and of the creatures constituting the precedent actual world (or worlds)' (*RG*, pp. 62-63).

Ogden also affirms that God has been a co-creator with others throughout the infinite temporal past. He claims that this understanding conflicts with a literal interpretation of Genesis 1-2. However, he contends that a literal approach to these chapters displays a misunderstanding of the nature of myth, which is 'to illumine the essential structure and meaning of our life in the present'. And since Genesis 1-2 are mythological, they need to be demythologized and their existential meaning for contemporary man determined. Once this is done, one can see that 'the myth and doctrine of creation affirm primarily that the one essential *cause* of each moment is God's boundless love for it' (*RG*, p. 214).¹⁹

Ogden traces moral evil to creatures' misuse of their freedom. One way in which we human beings abuse our freedom is when we reject 'ourselves as the creatures we know ourselves to be'. At the root of our self-rejection is 'our rejection of God's acceptance of our lives and of all lives'.²⁰ This act is what Ogden calls sin.

Furthermore, Ogden affirms that God redeems all by accepting 'all things into his life', including 'unrepentant' sinners — those 'who have rejected his [God's] acceptance in rejecting themselves as the creatures they inevitably are'. However, unrepentant sinners cannot be saved from sin, only repentant sinners can. This is so because salvation is the 'process that includes not only the redeeming action of God

himself but also the faithful response to this action on the part of the individual sinner' (*FF*, pp. 86-87). Consequently, all sinners are redeemed — accepted — into God's all-embracing life, but only those sinners who faithfully accept God's acceptance of them will be saved.

Ogden also contends that 'God acts in history' but not through miraculous intervention. He understands God's action in history in two ways. One is that since every creature is partly created by God, each creature's 'freedom has definite limits ultimately grounded in God's own free decisions'. The other way God may be said to act in history is to the degree that man represents through his speech or conduct both 'his own understanding of God's action [and] the reality of God's action itself' (*RG*, pp. 180-181).

Moreover, Ogden denies the existence of an actual heaven and hell. Once a human being dies, he or she ceases to exist except as a loving memory in the mind of God (*RG*, pp. 36, 226-230).²¹ But this should not discourage us, since the value we contribute to God's experience before our death can 'advance the real good' in the world. That is, the good deeds we perform can add to 'God's ever-growing perfection, which is, indeed, "the true life of all"' (*TNT*, p. 186).

Finally, Ogden admits that there are passages in the Bible which support the orthodox understanding of the Bible as God's inspired, infallible Word to man. However, he adds, 'Scripture does not characteristically appeal to revelation as providing special knowledge of God's existence and nature.' For 'what Christian revelation reveals to man is nothing new, since such truths as it makes explicit must already be known to him implicitly in every moment of existence'.²² Furthermore, like many process theologians, Ogden maintains that the Bible must be reconstructed via a Bultmannian demythologization method so as to recover the true canon of Scripture — the canon within the canon. In regard to the New Testament, this process involves discovering 'the apostolic witness to Jesus the Christ, which is historically prior to the [writing of the] New Testament' yet embedded in the New Testament.²³

Some responses to process theism

Although many Protestants and Catholics have adopted in part or in whole a process or process-like view of God, others have challenged this perspective. We will point out some of the more penetrating criticisms.

Many critics have found the panentheistic arguments against classical theism to be unwarranted. For example, Ogden's antinomy of creation is answerable on a classical metaphysical of being. Thomas Aquinas argued that the only thing God must will necessarily is his own being. Therefore, anything else that he wills must be willed freely. Thus, even if God's will is viewed as one with his unchangeable nature, nevertheless it is of the nature of God that creation flow from him freely, not by necessity. Given this, there is no contradiction in the classical belief that God as a necessary being freely created a contingent universe.²⁴

Similarly, Ogden's antinomy of service is resolvable. Ogden assumes that nothing can be done *for* God unless one's service adds to the nature or perfection of God. But this assumption begs the question in favour of a process deity. On

the classical view, God is an absolutely perfect being and therefore in need of nothing to enrich his nature (Acts 17:24-25). However, this understanding does not entail that nothing can be done *for* God. For example, God may desire that man serves him by carrying out some of his purposes for creation. As man does this, he magnifies God's glory, which is the outward manifestation of God's internal character. As a magnifying glass enhances an object in the viewer's eyes without changing the object's nature, so man's service for God exalts God's character without altering his immutably perfect essence.

Moreover, Ogden's argument from existential repugnance assumes a view of divine independence that classical theists need not accept. Divine independence does not necessarily entail that God is indifferent to the needs and pain of his creatures. Rather, divine independence means that God does not depend on his creation to fulfil anything in his nature or character. And since he is wholly perfect, he is free to respond to his creatures out of his superabundance. Put another way, God does not need our love but he desires it. And because he is love, he 'has sent his only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God [or that he needed us to love him], but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins' (1 Jn. 4:8b-10).

Although these are not the only objections process theists have raised against classical theism, the fact that these three common arguments can be answered without abandoning any central tenets of classical theism indicates that the panentheistic case is not as strong as some people may think. Besides, process theism appears to have some problems of its own.

First, the bipolar concept of God seems to be contradictory. A contradiction results when opposites are affirmed of the same thing at the same time and in the same manner or respect. Process theists claim that God is both infinite and finite, necessary and contingent, and absolute and relative, at the same time. This appears to be contradictory. However, Hartshorne is quick to point out that the metaphysical opposites are not applied to the same divine pole. Attributes such as infinity and necessity characterize God's abstract pole, while attributes like finity and contingency apply to his concrete pole. Therefore, metaphysical opposites are not being attributed in the same respect to God. Consequently, he claims the bipolar view of God is not contradictory (*AW*, pp. 22-24; *MVG*, p. 322). This response, however, does not adequately answer the charge of logical incoherence. For Hartshorne fails to bring up the fact that there is no real distinction between the two divine poles. God's abstract pole has no concrete, or actual, existence. It is simply a mere idea that has no extra-mental reality (*NTOT*, pp. 76-77; *MVG*, p. 218). Therefore, God must not be really infinite, necessary, and so on, but only finite and contingent. Or, God must be the metaphysical opposites at the same time and in the same pole. The first option corresponds to finite monopol godism, not panentheism. The second alternative manifests a contradiction at the heart of process theism. Either way one takes it, there seems to be a serious problem of logical coherence in the bipolar concept of God.

Second, the panentheistic claim that all of reality is in process poses a critical problem. For the statement 'All of

reality is in process' is itself either in process or not in process. If the statement is changing, then its truth value and meaning are also changing. That is, the statement may be true one moment and false the next, or meaningful one second and meaningless the next. Indeed, the statement may even be true and meaningful in some places of the universe at some moments and false and meaningless in other places of the universe during the same moments. In short, if the statement 'All of reality is in process' is itself in process, then no-one could know from one occasion to the next if it were actually true or meaningful, which is self-defeating. On the other hand, if 'All of reality is in process' is itself not in process, then there is one aspect about reality that is not changing, which is self-defeating. Furthermore, if it were held that all of reality is in process except the truth and meaning of the statement 'All of reality is in process', then one would be engaged in special pleading. There seems to be no way for a panentheist to offer a sound case for the belief that everything in reality is changing.

Third, the process view of God's relationship to the world seems incoherent. Panentheists contend that God depends on the universe, and the universe depends on him. This concept of mutual ontological dependence raises some serious questions. How can God be dependent on that which depends on him? How can God be the cause of that which is causing his own existence? A process theist might say that God is not the cause of the universe in the same sense in which the universe is causing him. But if that is the case, then there must be some sense in which God is completely independent of the world, which is a denial of process theism. We can pose the same problem this way. If the entire universe — God's concrete pole — were to cease to exist, would there be any reality left to God? If the answer is no, then God is actually totally contingent and dependent on the universe. But if this is so, then God and the universe must be caused to exist by another being, which itself is necessary. In other words, the panentheistic God must be caused to exist by the theistic God! However, if the answer to the question is yes — that something of God would be left if the whole universe were to perish — then neoclassical theism is really classical theism in disguise. For process theists would then be holding that there is a necessary, unchanging, timeless being who is ontologically independent of the contingent, changing universe. It seems, therefore, that the only way to make process theism coherent is to transform it into classical theism.

Fourth, panentheists' belief in an infinite regress of causes is incoherent. That is, it is logically impossible that God and the universe could have been co-creating each other for an unlimited duration. An infinite regress of causes means that A causes B to exist, and B causes C to exist, and so on *ad infinitum*. Put another way, A could not exist unless B did first, B could not exist unless C did first, and so on. Hence every cause in the causal chain is dependent on another cause in the chain for its existence. We might illustrate it this way: suppose person A wanted to borrow ten dollars from person B. In an infinite regress, however, person B could not loan person A ten dollars unless person C had loaned that amount to person B. Of course, person C would not have ten dollars to loan unless person D had first loaned it to person C. And so the regress goes. Now it is clear from this illustration that if no-one is found who simply had ten dollars to loan — that is,

one who did not need to borrow the ten dollars from someone else — then person A would never get to borrow the money. However, if someone is found who has ten dollars to loan, then the regress stops, in which case the causal chain is not infinite. When applied to the question of existence, this reasoning demonstrates the incoherence of an infinite regress of causes. For if no cause in the causal chain ever just has existence to give — that is, it did not get its existence from another cause — then nothing exists, which is patently absurd. On the other hand, if some cause in the chain has existence that it did not get from another cause, then the regress comes to a halt, in which case there exists an uncaused Cause that has caused the existence of all other existents. In short, the concept of an infinite regress of causes leads either to an absurd conclusion or to an uncaused Cause, both of which are contrary to the claims of panentheism.²⁵

Fifth, the neoclassical concept of personhood destroys self-identity and contradicts human experience. Most people think of themselves as personal beings who endure change to some degree. However, few believe that they become new persons each moment of their existence. In fact, to say 'I become a new person each moment I exist' assumes that there is something that endures through the changes — namely, the 'I'. Otherwise, what changes? If nothing endures from moment to moment, on what grounds can it be claimed that anything changes? If there is no sense in which the self is a continuous identity, it appears that one can only speak of an I – I – I – I series of unrelated actual occasions. And in that series of 'I's', the only thing that can be said to change is the series itself, not each individual 'I' in the series. What happens to each 'I'? It would seem that each successive 'I' pops in and out of existence. Hartshorne appears to confirm this when he states that a sleeping or unconscious individual ceases to exist as a person (*LP*, pp. 220-221). This means that a parent awakening a child from sleep is actually calling a new young one into existence!²⁶

Sixth, many sharp criticisms have been made of the common panentheistic viewpoint of the Bible as containing legends and therefore requiring demythologization. It has been pointed out by experts in mythology that the Bible does not read as a book laden with myth.²⁷ In fact, its historical reliability is widely accepted by most historians and archaeologists of antiquity.²⁸ Moreover, it is doubtful if the time gap between the composition of the New Testament documents and the events they describe is sufficient to allow for significant accumulation of fictitious elements around the core of historical facts.²⁹

Seventh, the biblical interpretation of many process theologians is unsound. For instance, panentheists often understand the Bible texts that depict God repenting or changing his mind as indicating real change in God's nature (Gn. 6:5-7; Ex. 32:14; Jon. 3:10). But if these passages are to be interpreted literally, then it would also seem reasonable to interpret literally those references to God as having arms, eyes and wings (Ex. 15:16; Pss. 11:4; 89:13; 91:4), an exegetical option that practically no Bible scholar takes seriously. In addition, there are many passages which contradict the notion that God can change in his being (Ps. 102:25-27; Mal. 3:6; Heb. 1:10-12; 13:8; Jas. 1:17). It seems, therefore, that the exegetically most satisfactory interpretation is to understand all passages that ascribe change in God's nature as figurative,

or anthropopathic. This conclusion does not imply that God is unable *personally* to respond to his creatures. But it does entail that his personal interaction with creatures does not effect any change in his immutable essence.³⁰

Although many other objections have been raised against process theism, these demonstrate that the movement's most fundamental tenets are plagued with severe problems that appear to be insurmountable.³¹

Process theism and evangelicalism

Process theology has had wide influence, even among those who reject its cardinal tenets, including among evangelicals.³² This fact raises the question: Is process theism compatible with evangelical theology? The answer must be no, if evangelical theology is grounded on a classical theistic understanding of God and the world. For example, a process evangelical could not accept creation *ex nihilo* since creation is necessarily *ex materia* in panentheism. Neither could a process evangelical adhere to infallibly predictive divine prophecy, since God is not omniscient and the future is open and indeterminate according to neoclassical theism. Furthermore, a process evangelical would have to give up the biblical hope of God's final triumph over evil (Rev. 20-22). A consistent process evangelical would even have to reject the idea that God performs miracles, that is, supernatural events. This is so because panentheism views God as a cosmic Sympathiser and Director, not a cosmic Activist and sovereign King. Therefore, miraculous intervention is not possible for a divine passive recipient of creaturely activity, even though it is perfectly compatible with a God who created the universe from nothing, sustains it in existence by his power, and loves human beings so much that he sent his Son into the human arena to die in man's place for sin.

It appears, then, that panentheism as such and evangelicalism cannot be philosophical or theological bedfellows. Those who try to wed these diametrically opposed views are engaged in an impossible task. This is not to say that we cannot gain some positive value from process thought. For example, while traditional theism is right in maintaining that God does not change in his *essence*, certainly God engages in changing *relations* with his changing world. And while the biblical God is by nature *beyond* time, yet he surely acts *in* time. However, evangelicals should be careful not to sacrifice the fundamentals of the theistic God on the panentheistic altar. The cost is too great.

¹R. C. Sproul, 'The Relativity Blitz and Process Theology', *Christianity Today* (23 April 1982), p. 50.

²Paul Mickey, 'A Process Perspective as an Option for Theology of Inspiration', a paper available through Theological Students Fellowship, n.d., p. 1.

³Michael L. Peterson, 'Orthodox Christianity, Wesleyanism, and Process Theology', *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 15:2 (Fall 1980), p. 45.

⁴More information on the contemporary development of process theism can be found in the essay 'The Development of Process Theology' by Gene Reeves and Delwin Brown, in *Process Philosophy and Christian Thought*, ed. Delwin Brown, Ralph E. James and Gene Reeves (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co. Inc., 1971), pp. 21-64.

⁵Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, rp (New York: A Meridian Book, New American Library, 1974; first pub. 1926), p. 66. Hereafter referred to as *RM* in the text.

⁶Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960; first pub. 1929), p. 95. Hereafter referred to as *PR* in the text.

⁷Lewis S. Ford, 'Hartshorne's Encounter with Whitehead: Introductory Remarks', in *Two Process Philosophers: Hartshorne's Encounter with Whitehead*, AAR Studies in Religion 5 (Tallahassee: American Academy of Religion, 1973), p. 1.

⁸Charles Hartshorne and William L. Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God*, rp (Chicago: The University Press, 1976; first pub. 1953), p. 24.

⁹Charles Hartshorne, *A Natural Theology for Our Time* (LaSalle: The Open Court Publishing Co., 1967), pp. 74-75, italics ours. Hereafter referred to as *NTOT* in the text.

¹⁰Charles Hartshorne, *Aquinas to Whitehead: Seven Centuries of Metaphysics of Religion* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Publications, 1976), pp. 22-24. Hereafter referred to as *AW* in the text.

¹¹Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), pp. 79-81. Hereafter referred to as *DR* in the text.

¹²Charles Hartshorne, 'Personal Identity from A to Z', in *Process Studies* 2 (Fall 1972), p. 209.

¹³Charles Hartshorne, 'The Dipolar Conception of Deity', in *The Review of Metaphysics* 21 (December 1967), p. 287. Hereafter referred to as *DCD* in the text.

¹⁴Charles Hartshorne, *Man's Vision of God and the Logic of Theism* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1964; first pub. 1941), p. 211. Hereafter referred to as *MVG* in the text. See also *NTOT*, p. 104.

¹⁵Charles Hartshorne, *The Logic of Perfection* (LaSalle: The Open Court Publishing Co., 1962), p. 126. Hereafter referred to as *LP* in the text.

¹⁶Charles Hartshorne, *Whitehead's Philosophy: Selected Essays, 1935-1970* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), p. 195.

¹⁷Schubert M. Ogden, 'Bultmann's Demythologizing and Hartshorne's Dipolar Theism', in *Process and Divinity: Philosophical Essays Presented to Charles Hartshorne* (LaSalle: The Open Court Publishing Co., 1964), pp. 495, 498, 506, 510, 511.

¹⁸Schubert M. Ogden, *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977; first pub. 1963), p. 17. Hereafter referred to as *RG* in the text.

¹⁹Cf. Ogden's essay 'Toward a New Theism', in *Process Philosophy and Christian Thought*, p. 177. Hereafter referred to as *TNT* in the text.

²⁰Schubert M. Ogden, *Faith and Freedom: Toward a Theology of Liberation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), p. 86. Hereafter referred to as *FF* in the text. See also Schubert M. Ogden, *Theology in Crisis: A Colloquium on the Credibility of 'God'* (New Concord: Muskingum College, 20-21 March 1967), p. 55.

²¹See also Schubert M. Ogden's 'The Meaning of Christian Hope', in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 30 (Winter-Summer 1975), pp. 160-163.

²²Schubert M. Ogden, 'On Revelation', in *Our Common History as Christians* (New York: OUP, 1975), p. 272, 287.

²³Schubert M. Ogden, 'The Authority of Scripture for Theology', in *Interpretation* 30 (July 1976), p. 256.

²⁴Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I.19.3.

²⁵This argument against an infinite regress of causes comes from Richard Purtill's book, *Reason to Believe* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 83-87.

²⁶Cf. Peter A. Bertocci, 'Hartshorne on Personal Identity: A Personalistic Critique', in *Process Studies* (Fall 1972), pp. 216-221; Rem B. Edwards, 'The Human Self: An Actual Entity or a Society?', in *Process Studies* (Fall 1975), pp. 195-203; Royce Gordon Gruenler, *The Inexhaustible God: Biblical Faith and the Challenge of Process Theism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), chaps. 2-3.

²⁷For example, see C. S. Lewis's 'Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism', in *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967).

²⁸See Clifford A. Wilson, *Rocks, Relics and Biblical Reliability* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977); K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1966); Edwin Yamauchi, *The Stones and the Scriptures* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1972); A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, rp (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978).

²⁹It is generally accepted that the NT was completed by about AD 100, only 70 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Some

scholars, like John A. T. Robinson (*Redating the New Testament* [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976]), argue that the composition of the NT was completed before AD 70, making the accumulation of mythical elements to its pages virtually impossible.

³⁰ See Norman L. Geisler, 'Process Theology', in *Contemporary Theology*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry and Alan F. Johnson, rev. edn (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), pp. 271-272.

³¹ Other objections against process theism can be found in these sources: Gruenler, *The Inexhaustible God*; Bruce A. Demarest, 'Process Theology and the Pauline Doctrine of the Incarnation', in *Pauline Studies*, ed. Donald A. Hagner and Murray J. Harris (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1980), pp. 122-142; Norman L. Geisler, 'Process Theology', in *Tensions in Contemporary Theology*, rev. edn, pp. 237-284; Norman L. Geisler, 'Process Theology and Inerrancy', in *Challenges to Inerrancy*, ed. Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), pp. 247-284; Norman L. Geisler and William D. Watkins, *Perspectives: Understanding and Evaluating Today's World Views* (San Bernardino: Here's Life Publishers, Inc., 1984), chap. 5.

³² Some evangelical or conservative theologians who are sympathetic to certain aspects of process thought include Mark Lau Braunsen, 'Evangelism and Social Ethics: Some Practical Implications', *Perkins Journal* 35 (Winter/Spring 1982), p. 18; Paul

Mickey, 'A Process Perspective as an Option for Theology of Inspiration' (see above, n.2); Merold Westphal, 'Temporality and Finitism in Hartshorne's Theism', in *The Review of Metaphysics* 19 (March 1966), pp. 550-564; Clark Pinnoch, 'The Need for a Scriptural, and Therefore a Neoclassical Theism', in *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979); Brian L. Hebblethwaite, 'Some Reflections on Predestination, Providence and Divine Foreknowledge', in *Religious Studies* 15 (December 1979), pp. 433-448; Hendrikus Berkhof, 'The (Un)Changeability of God', in *Grace Upon Grace*, ed. James I. Cook (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 21-29; Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, 2 vols (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 1:27-30, 45; Reginald S. Luhman, 'The Concept of God: Some Philosophical Considerations', in *Evangelical Quarterly* 54 (April-June 1982), pp. 88-104; Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'Letter to a Young Theologian', in *Reformed Journal* 26 (September 1976), pp. 16-17, and 'God Everlasting', in *God and the Good*, ed. Clifton Orlebeke and Lewis Smedes, pp. 181-203; Stephen T. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); Ronald H. Nash, *The Concept of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); James Daane, 'Can a Man Bless God?' in *God and the Good*, pp. 165-173; Jim Garrison, *The Darkness of God: Theology after Hiroshima* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).