

The Disjunction Between Scientific Materialism and Classical Theism: A Process Solution

I. THEOLOGICAL ISSUE AND CONCERN

A. The Theological Issue

I am the full-time pastor of Trinity United Methodist Church in Franklin. I see two world views among the parishioners of Trinity and the other churches I have served or attended. There is the religious world view, reserved mostly for use during Sunday school and worship. This world view includes miraculous happenings, angels and demons, God and Satan. Sin results in penalty, virtue in reward, and God dispenses both. God's power is understood as absolute and unfettered. The theoretical foundation of this religious world view is classical theism.

The other world view, scientific materialism, is equally present among parishioners. It is used outside church. This world view is bereft of supernatural beings or events. God is not so much absent as unnecessary. Cause and effect are mechanistic: physical event "A" results in physical event "B." Penalties and rewards occur in a different scheme. Lung cancer results from smoking, not sin. Wealth comes not from righteousness, but from prudent manipulation of resources in a comprehensible economic system.

These world views are not readily compatible. The dissonance between them is reflected in the most important aspects of church life. How a congregation grapples with them affects its growth or decline, its ministries of compassion and justice, and its retention of youth, to name just three examples. The problem is made more acute by the fact that scientific materialism is useful every day of the week, while theism "works" almost exclusively on Sunday mornings.

B. My Theological Concern

A scientific world view offers a powerful way to explain and predict events for people's daily routines in business, health care, transportation and even recreation. Scientific methodology is central to almost every livelihood of church members, from farming to construction to business marketing. It works just as well for the nonreligious as the religious.

Classical theism, though absent from the routines of life Monday through Saturday, remains strong on Sunday mornings within liturgy and hymnody. While many persons often find a great deal of personal comfort in theism, it no longer powerfully addresses ultimate concerns of society at large, which cry out for divine love and justice to affect its social and political orders. If we remain theologically frozen in classical theism, says Bishop Kenneth Carder, "the church will answer questions *nobody is asking* and become a monument to a static and distant God"¹ and will "maintain its unblemished record of having nothing to do with anything important"² in people's daily lives or society at large.

Methodist pastors seem as uneasy with this world-view dissonance as laity. I subscribe to a UMC-sponsored e-mail listserve in which pastors post sermons for comment. Sermons emphasizing the Bible's ethical teachings are much more numerous than those resonating classical theistic themes. Even at Easter, the day of all days to affirm God's power, the resurrection seems to have less to do with the power of God than the moral obligations Christ places on us. I agree with John Hick's observation that usually, "statements about God, instead of referring to a transcendent divine Being, are expressions of ethical policies" of Christian living.³

¹ Kenneth Carder, Living Our Beliefs, the United Methodist Way. (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1996), 108, emphasis original.

² Langdon Gilkey in a lecture, Sept. 10, 1998. All citations from his lectures are used with his permission.

³ John Hick, Evil and the God of Love. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977), 337.

We preserve the trappings of theism in liturgy and hymnody, but we tacitly surrender them in preaching and teaching. Then we wonder why our parishioners say they are frustrated in connecting their religious faith with life at large.

II. THESIS

My thesis is that process thought offers a potentially productive avenue for helping to resolve the dissonance between theism and scientific materialism. I will examine the basics of classical theism and the scientific materialist world view. I will use theodicy as a theological frame because theodicy highlights the greatest tension between theism and scientific materialism. I will develop a process theodicy and offer some pastoral strategies for integrating process thought into preaching and sacrament. In an appendix, I will explore whether some aspects of the Methodist tradition are amenable to process thought.

III. CLASSICAL THEISM

A. Working Definition

In classical theism, God "is believed to have created the entire universe, to rule over it, and to intend to bring it to its fulfillment or realization, to 'save it.'"⁴ Classical theism draws on "intuitions and assumptions of Greek philosophy as much as biblical images," says Tyron Inbody.⁵

Catholic Scholasticism developed Aristotelian formulations of God "as absolute, changeless, eternal being or actuality."⁶ This idea of impassive immutability remained in the Reformation, though the Reformers emphasized God's sovereignty as unchallenged, absolute power, wholly

⁴ Langdon Gilkey, "God," Christian Theology, an Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks. Edited by Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 90.

⁵Tyron L. Inbody, The Transforming God, an Interpretation of Suffering and Evil. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 37.

⁶Gilkey, "God," 95.

righteous and gracious. God was understood to have "absolute priority and decisiveness" in divine election. Always known as powerful in the Jewish and Christian traditions, God was now understood as absolutely omnipotent, able to do anything God chose. "The concept of God's omnipotence is located at the center of classical theism,"⁷ and so is at the heart of theodicy problems.

B. Theism's Breakdown in Theodicy

Generally, my parishioners would agree with Daniel Howard-Snyder's observation that theism is the "view that there is an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good being."⁸ In theodicy issues these qualities are often highly problematic. Gregory Boyd tells the true story of Zosia, a little Jewish girl in Warsaw during the Nazi occupation, to illustrate why. Zosia had beautiful eyes which caught the attention of a German soldier.

"I could make two rings out them," he said, "one for myself and one for my wife.

Let's see whether they really are so beautiful. And better yet, let's examine them in our hands." A witty soldier proposed they take the eyes out. There are screams from the mother and child and laughter from the soldiers. Whom will God hear first? What happens next is that the fainting child is lying on the floor. Instead of eyes two bloody wounds are staring. The mother, driven mad, is held by the other women. Later, the Nazis found it necessary, of course, to eliminate the blind child.⁹

Such horrors present classical theism with its greatest challenge. Boyd says, "Assuming

⁷Inbody, 42.

⁸ Daniel Howard-Snyder, "The Evidential Argument from Evil," The Evidential Argument from Evil. ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996), xi.

⁹ Gregory A. Boyd, God At War. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 33-34.

(rightly) that God is perfectly loving and good, and assuming (wrongly, I hold) that divine omnipotence entails meticulous control, the problem of evil . . . becomes simply unsolvable."¹⁰

With God's power and goodness both claimed to be unlimited, John Hick says evil "is a problem equally for the believer and the nonbeliever. In the mind of the latter it stands as a major obstacle to religious commitment, whilst for the former it sets up an acute internal tension to disturb his faith and to lay upon it a perpetual burden of doubt."¹¹ This doubt is often sharpened by some claims of scientific materialism.

IV. THE CHALLENGE OF SCIENTIFIC MATERIALISM

Whatever truth was considered to be before the rise of empirical science, "it was thought by all clerics, theologians, scholars, artists, philosophers, even scientists to include 'facts'. . . . [The] symbols of revelation, creation, Fall, and redemption were thought to correspond directly to facts about the universe and its history."¹² Modernity, kick-started by the invention of the scientific method, began to explore truth and fact in new ways. Nature was seen to be explicable by science rather than impelled by mysterious forces. "When Newton explained the motion of planets by the universal theory of gravitation," said Carl Sagan, "it no longer seemed necessary for angels to push and pummel the planets about."¹³

John Wesley was a product of early modernity, which used science to shore up theism. He joined "the growing ranks of his contemporaries who favored 'scientific' evidence about God,

¹⁰Ibid., 20.

¹¹Hick, 3.

¹² Langdon Gilkey, Nature, Reality and the Sacred, the Nexus of Science and Religion. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 17.

¹³ Carl Sagan, Broca's Brain, Reflections on the Romance of Science. (New York: Random House, 1979), 286.

arguing that the evident order in creation required a Designer."¹⁴ By the middle of the nineteenth century, about sixty years after Wesley's death, modernity increasingly squeezed God out.

Today, church members are attempting to integrate their religious needs into a scientific world view that is concerned with materiality and material causes rather than things of the spirit. Carl Sagan tells the story of Napoleon's complaint to the Marquis de Laplace about Laplace's work, Mecanique celeste. "Napoleon complained to Laplace that he had found no mention of God in the text. Laplace's response has been recorded: 'Sire, I have no need for that hypothesis.'"¹⁵ The idea that God could be hypothetical is a product of modernity, says Sagan. People who ask him whether he believes in God, he says, are really asking for reassurance that their belief system "is consistent with modern scientific knowledge."¹⁶ The reason is because "the categories of the sciences are today regarded as ultimate, rather than those of religion."¹⁷

That scientific materialism is the dominant world view is demonstrated, for example, in studies attempting to validate prayer scientifically. One study, conducted in 1987 by cardiologist Randolph Byrd at San Francisco General Hospital, arranged for "intercessory prayer groups from across the United States to pray for roughly half of the 393 individuals admitted to the coronary care unit with either heart attacks or severe chest pain. This was a scientific experiment in which none of the patients, physicians, or nurses knew which individuals were receiving prayer."¹⁸ (As a

¹⁴ Randy Maddox, Responsible Grace, John Wesley's Practical Theology. (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 25.

¹⁵Sagan, Broca's Brain, 287.

¹⁶Ibid., 283.

¹⁷Hick, 337.

¹⁸Eunice Chang, "The Power of Prayer, Can Prayer Be a Source of Improved Physical Health?" Journal of the Hippocratic Society (Harvard University, Aug. 1, 1998).

whole, the set of such studies over the years is inconclusive.)

A desire for scientific validation also shows up in biblical studies. Gerd Lüdemann, a New Testament scholar, claims to have developed a "scientific" account of the resurrection. He writes, "a consistent modern view must say farewell to the resurrection of Jesus as a historical event."¹⁹ But nowhere does he explain why a scientific account is necessary or preferable over some other account. For that matter, he never explains how a scientific account of the resurrection is even possible. His claim is not merely that a scientific account is valid, but that it alone is valid. His method is not science so much as scientism.

Scientism is faith in science. As the dominant world view of our day, it is considered self-validating. Scientism makes two major claims, neither of which, however, are provable using the scientific method: (1) only science reveals the Real and only science can discover truth; (2) scientific knowledge of reality is exhaustive, not inherently limited, is holistic and sees reality as reality really is.²⁰

Early modernity's mechanistic view of creation was originally proposed as a way to preserve God's agency. This view was soon supplanted by the view that knowledge about the world beyond the self was limited to what could be known through sense-perception of material things.²¹ The materialism of the modern world view is its central feature. Thus, "the modern world view simply has no natural place for God in it."²²

¹⁹Gerd Lüdemann, What Really Happened to Jesus. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995), 118, 130.

²⁰Gilkey, Sept. 17, 1998.

²¹ David R. Griffin, God and Religion in the Postmodern World. (Albany: State University of New York), 52.

²² *Ibid.*, 54.

The challenge of the new, scientific ways of understanding the world resulted in theological liberalism, which attempted to ensure Christian faith in a world dominated by the increasing power of science. However, "Attempts to render God and the modern world view compatible have been unsuccessful,"²³ leading either to religious pantheism or insulation, which define the disjunction between scientific materialism and theism.

V. THE DISJUNCTION BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD VIEWS

A. Pantheism

Pantheism uses the word "God" to refer to the empirically observable order: "If we must worship a power greater than ourselves," asks Carl Sagan, "does it not make sense to revere the Sun and the stars?"²⁴ Even though ancient peoples did exactly that, nowadays "pantheism" usually is linguistic shorthand for a vague idea of something bigger than oneself. It keeps the word "God" alive but "it relinquishes certain ideas generally considered essential" in Jewish and Christian thought: a personal, purposive being of perfect goodness and power who is the fount of moral norms, human meaning and human hope.²⁵ Pantheism's incapability to be meaningful in people's lives can be seen in this example:

When her 3-year old son Graham came to her recently and asked, "Where is God?" Alexandra Roth took a deep breath.

Like many Americans, Roth has never found a home in any church or faith. . . . She considers herself an atheist, but she wants her son to have a sense of reverence and gratitude "and the idea of God is one pathway to that," she says.

²³ Ibid., 51, 58ff.

²⁴ Carl Sagan, Cosmos (New York: Random House, 1980), 243.

²⁵ Griffin, God and Religion, 52, 59.

So she told Graham that God is everywhere, but that only piqued his curiosity. "Is God in my body?" he asked. "Is God mixed with my lunch?"

"They're hard questions to answer," Roth said later, "especially if you don't have a catechism to refer to."²⁶

If Roth considers herself an atheist, it is unclear what she wants her son to have a sense of reverence for, or for what she wants him to be grateful, and why. Such an "idea of God" seems no more than an amalgam of generally desirable personal characteristics.

B. Insulation

Insulation "declares science and religion to be two mutually autonomous spheres of discourse."²⁷ The insulated God is often described as the material cause of things, the formal cause or even the ultimate form or ideal. But such descriptions only serve to save the talk of God "by denying the existence of God in any intelligible sense," without distinct agency, personality or purposiveness.

Scientists and religionists have generally cooperated in encouraging insulation. While religious persons have often sought scientific validation for their faith, God's own being has been denied as subject to scientific inquiry. In turn, the scientific community has usually denied that theologians are dealing with something real. David Griffin quotes a "leading biologist [who] jokes that only theology may exceed exobiology²⁸ . . . in being a 'great subject without a subject

²⁶ "Washington Post," June 4, 1995.

²⁷ Griffin, God and Religion, 59-60.

²⁸ Exobiology is concerned with theories of what life might be like on other worlds.

matter."²⁹

A scientism-based cosmology maintains that "scientific inquiry represents the only relevant avenue to truth about what is real, with the result that any proposition . . . based on grounds other than those provided by empirical science is merely 'subjective.'"³⁰ Subjective, of course, means unreliable or false.

C. The Effect of the Disjunction

The consequences of God being squeezed out by modernity are severe. "Nietzsche's prophecy was correct: a world that has lost God altogether is worse than the world that believed in the God despised by Nietzsche and the rest of late modernity."³¹ Three negative consequences of the loss of belief in God are:³²

1. Social Relativism. Modern thinkers "had first thought it a release and a relief to be freed from the supposition of objective standards." But surely this century, "the age of atrocity" illuminates the "need for consensus of the objectivity of certain prescriptions and prohibitions."

2. Technological Materialism. Because materiality is all there is (the material equals the real), "unconstrained competition for material resources describes much of the behavior" of modern-day persons, corporations and nations. However, "atheistic materialism simply means the replacement of one religious ultimate with another," and it cannot be said to be an improvement.

²⁹ Ibid., 1.

³⁰ Gilkey, Nature, 54.

³¹ Griffin, God and Religion, 56.

³² Ibid.

3. Militarism. Militarism embraces coercive power at every level of political interaction.

Militarism's orientation is that the ultimate power of the universe is blind, brute force that "exercises coercive, destructive power."

Despite these consequences, science must not be theologically renounced. Science and religion are not inherently inimical to one another. Both are powerful ways of knowing which can often complement one another. For example, environmental science and ecological theology are closely allied. That the sciences do not tell us everything about reality does not mean they say nothing about it. "Accordingly," says John Cobb, "people cannot be satisfied with theologies that relegate the revelations of science to the status of information about mere appearance."³³

Pastors are faced with attempting to mediate the dissonance between the modern world view and parishioners' religious yearnings. God may be conceptually dead in modernity, but people continue to have ultimate concerns. Bishop Carder points out that from a religious point of view, "The great conflicts are between competing gods. Everybody believes in some God [so] the *nature* of the God or gods we believe in is the critical issue."³⁴ The kind of God we know matters in what kind of people we become. Whether we know God at all may matter whether we survive this present age is one of potential disaster on a global scale from environmental poisoning or nuclear conflict. I also have other, less global concerns. I want to keep our children meaningfully affiliated with the Church Universal rather than allow them by default to react against modernity by plunging into destructive existential despair, joining a cult or turning to a religious fundamentalism that mostly rejects science.

³³John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, Process Theology, an Introductory Exposition. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), 143.

³⁴ Carder, 13, emphasis original.

We pastors must make every effort to devise strategies to resolve the dissonance between theism and scientific materialism. To that task I now turn, using theodicy as the theological avenue of exploration.

VI. THEODICY

Working Definition and the Theological Dilemma

Theodicy is the set of theological problems and attempted resolutions related to suffering and evil in a world said to be created and governed by a perfectly good, ultimately powerful God.

"The theodicy problem is constituted by the difficulty of reconciling three separate propositions, all of which traditional Christianity has affirmed: (1) God, the creator, is omnipotent (i.e., all-powerful); (2) God is benevolent (i.e., all-good); and (3) evil exists."³⁵

The dilemma is this: If God has the power to prevent evil but does not, then God's goodness is called into question. On the other hand, if God is purely good but does not prevent evil, then God's power is called into question. Finally, if God is both actively, ultimately powerful and purely good, then perhaps there is no genuine evil — what humans think is evil is not actually evil but only appears so because our cognition is drastically limited compared to God's. Thus, suffering and evil are really just mysteries of God that we have to live with in faith. But faith so powerful is hard to come by. "In honesty," says Boyd, we must confess "that the world is full of occurrences that evidence . . . the nonexistence of a good and all powerful God."³⁶

I will proceed with the presupposition that evil and suffering are real, not illusory, and that persons who cry in anguish when their children perish, for example, are reacting appropriately to

³⁵Patricia L. Wismer, "Evil." The Abingdon Dictionary of Theology, Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, CD-ROM edition, 1992).

³⁶Boyd, 36.

the tragedy. A pastor who ministered otherwise would be guilty of malfeasance! My first task is to examine three of Christianity's historical theodicies.

B. Three Historical Theodicies

1. The Greater Good Some theodicies have maintained that suffering has some hidden, good purpose (such as pedagogy or spiritual maturity) that is unclear now but that sufferers will recognize later, or that will pay off in the future.

This theodicy is frequently found among oppressed peoples. Even though slaves in the Old South lived under murderous repression, they often thought of their plight as a temporary trial brought about for reasons known but to God. God would redeem his people by bringing them to heaven ("Sooner-a-I will be done with the trouble of this world") or in a distant emancipation ("Tell ole Pharaoh, let my people go"). Suffering was viewed as redemptive for the ultimate good of the Black race. Some Black clergy, such as the AME's Bishop Turner, thought that God's goal in slavery was to Christianize the slaves, who would return evangelically to Africa. For people under oppression, teetering on the cliff of despair, the idea that their suffering may serve some higher good or destiny might be all that keeps them from falling.³⁷

The view that God has a deliberate hand in tragic events is found among United Methodists. The husband of one of my wife's friends was killed in an airplane crash in 1993, leaving behind two small children. The grieving woman told me a few months later that she was sure her husband had died for some reason which she would understand later.

There are, however, three main difficulties in treating the greater-good view as a general resolution to the theodicy problem. First, no connection can be counted on between the suffering and its benefit. It isn't credible that a future generation will ever point to some beneficial condition in Central Africa and approve that it was gained by bloodlust slaughter of almost one million Tutsi tribe members by the Hutus in Rwanda earlier this decade.

³⁷Anthony Pinn, Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology. (New York: Continuum, 1995).

Second, there are many examples of suffering so radical and overwhelming that no possible benefit can be understood to outweigh them, this century being awash with examples. Such potential outcomes "pale and shiver" in the face of radical suffering and are not "robust enough to survive the evil and suffering our century has unleashed."³⁸

Third, the Bible does not shrink from calling evil evil and affirming that human suffering is real. A significant part of Jesus' ministry was spent alleviating human suffering and working against evil, e.g., evil spirits who opposed him and made people suffer. Jesus specifically rejected an accusation that he was working for evil in Mark 3.

2. Retribution The theodicy of retribution holds that we deserve punishment because God is just. "Suffering is connected with the retributive justice of God and is directed against our sin and guilt."³⁹ If we ask, 'why do bad things happen to good people?' the answer is, 'there are no good people.' The line of thought that God sends suffering to people because of their sin is not absent from the Bible; it is prominent in some of the oracles of some of the Hebrew prophets. However, "this motif did not attain the status of a universal explanation for evil until Augustine . . . it directly opposes the standard Protestant understanding of atonement (in which all sin is already atoned for), and though an entire book of the Bible is devoted to its refutation (Job), and Jesus himself teaches against it (Lk 13:1-5; Jn 9:1-5), it has nevertheless dominated the church's thinking on this subject."⁴⁰

Some formulations of this theodicy are more sophisticated than just proposing that God slam dunks sinners. A retributive system ensures a continuing moral order in creation. It recognizes that "unless retributive justice is honored, our world collapses into chaos, and good and evil deeds

³⁸Wendy Farley, Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion, a Contemporary Theodicy. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 12.

³⁹Inbody, 59.

⁴⁰Boyd, 41-42.

are no longer recognized for what they are."⁴¹ A retributive theodicy affirms that evil is real, unlike a greater good theodicy.

The retributive scheme relies heavily on cause-effect relationships. It is thus most at home with parishioners' scientific materialist world view. "Smoking causes death" is a medical-scientific version of a theodicy of retribution note that the news accounts of Joe DiMaggio's death from lung cancer this month pointed out he had been a lifelong smoker. The religious spin of the scientific materialist retributive scheme is that God has ordered creation so that consequences are built in, which tends to ameliorate the view that suffering might simply be pointless.

3. Eschatology An eschatological theodicy maintains that the good of God will ultimately prevail in the eschaton, despite the presence of evil now. Usually theodicians, such as John Hick, maintain that while some suffering is used by God for an ultimately good end, the good end is not the purpose of the suffering. Evil is real but is insufficiently powerful to prevent God from bringing creation to its final, good fulfillment. The present life of both good and evil is eventually resolved "beyond this world and beyond the enigma of death." The eschaton does not bring a point-for-point reward for suffering, but "an infinite good that would render worth while *any* finite suffering endured in the course of attaining it."⁴² An eschatological theodicy also implicitly holds that God's power is not unbounded because evil is overcome only gradually.

4. A Critique There is some intuitive truth in each of these historical theodicies.. "*Up to a point* each of them helps to explain why the things that happen to us happen."⁴³ Wendy Farley calls that point radical suffering, which she defines as "destructive of the human spirit that cannot be understood as something deserved"⁴⁴ for any of the theoretical reasons lurking in the

⁴¹Inbody, 61.

⁴²Hick, 339-341, emphasis original.

⁴³Inbody, 65, emphasis original.

⁴⁴Farley, 21.

background of the traditional theodicies. She therefore rejects the traditional theodicies in favor of a theodicy of tragic vision. Being limited, imperfect creatures in a limited, imperfect world is the price of existing at all. God produces, not reproduces. The fact that the world is other-than-God necessarily means that imperfection and an often great measure of ungodliness always exist. Thus, both creation and creaturely freedom are "tragically structured. The conditions under which human beings live are already corrupted by evil."⁴⁵ Farley's basic vision of creation is that it is tragic, and that God responds more in compassion than power.

The persuasiveness of the traditional theodicies largely depends on taking "God's existence, goodness, and omnipresence as axiomatic, beyond question."⁴⁶ However, the theodicies' contexts of origin have all but disappeared. Each of them, writes Griffin, presupposes that the traditional belief in God is so secure that theodicy inquiries "cannot force a rejection or reformulation" of God's very existence. But such a presupposition isn't valid in a multi-cultural, multi-religious America where Wiccans and New Agers have their own cable channels and web sites, and where non-deist Buddhism is considered mainstream along much of the west coast. Few people nowadays affirm certain doctrines "as being beyond refutation by experience and argument," and fewer people than before affirm certain ideas "solely on the authority of the Bible."⁴⁷ J. L. Mackie echoes this observation by writing that the problem of evil is a problem "only for someone who believes that there is a God who is both omnipotent and wholly good" in the first place.⁴⁸ Mackie

⁴⁵Ibid., 61.

⁴⁶Griffin, God, Power, and Evil, a Process Theodicy. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), 255.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," The Problem of Evil. Edited by Marilyn Adams and Robert Adams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 25.

argues that evil disproves the existence of God. Yet he envisions no God other than the one described by classical theism. But atheism and classical theism are not the only choices available, as I hope to show.

5. The Theological Task The challenge for pastors is to promulgate a world view which integrates the virtues of the scientific way of knowing with the virtues of theism's religious vision of reality. It is simple to say, but not so simple to do! I believe that process thought is potentially very fruitful for this task, to which I now turn.

VII. A PROCESS THEODICY

In religious studies, writes Bible scholar John Dominic Crossan, "nobody can avoid presuppositions, although you can avoid *these* in favor of *those*."⁴⁹ My presupposition in theodicy is that God is wholly good. If any part of God's nature is evil, I see no recourse but despair. We would be under the thumb of a Cartesian evil genius. The major point of contention between theism and process thought thus becomes God's power, and to a lesser extent, God's knowledge.

A. Process Thought.

Process thought, says Griffin, holds that "the fundamental units of reality are experiential events."⁵⁰ This point distinguishes process cosmology from scientific materialism. Scientific materialism holds that the fundamental units of reality are material substance. Not so, says process thought. The building blocks of the real are dynamic events.

In an event, past influences are organized according to a self-determined response of the event itself. Possibilities for outcomes are presented by God. The best possible outcome for each

⁴⁹John Dominic Crossan, The Birth of Christianity. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 95.

⁵⁰Griffin, God, Power, and Evil, 7.

event is God's "initial aim" for the event, which can be thought of as God's will. Each event is an embodiment of God's creative power in that it conforms in a higher or lower degree to God's will. As each event occurs it becomes a creative influence upon yet-to-come events.⁵¹

God is seen as the "supreme, all-inclusive embodiment of creative power."⁵² God thus influences all creation and is influenced by it in turn. Because there is nothing and no one else to whom this conceptualization applies, this description of deity conforms to Anselm's definition of God as "something than which a greater is inconceivable."⁵³ There is a difference, though, in how process thought grapples with Anselm's definition and how theism shaped by Medievalism and the Reformation did.

Charles Hartshorne says that classical theism's idea of God's power is "the *tyrant* ideal of power."⁵⁴ In contrast, "there is a highest conceivable or supreme power, creative of and controlling the world, but it does not and could not achieve the absurdity of monopolizing decision-making; rather, it is creative of and controls individuals with some decision-making power of their own."⁵⁵

Process thought holds that self-determination is built into existence. Each "actual occasion" of experience is determined from three axes. The first is everything that has happened before it. The second is God's aim toward possible outcomes. The third is the occasion's own "subjective

⁵¹ Griffin, God and Religion, 64.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Quoted in Henry Bettenson, ed. Documents of the Christian Church. 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 137.

⁵⁴ Charles Hartshorne, Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes (Albany: State University of New York, 1984), 11.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 38.

aim," which is the "self-selected purpose that governs what an actual entity shall become."⁵⁶ Thus, there is genuine freedom in all creation: "Within each moment, an entity is influenced by others, creates its own identity and propels itself into further experiences."⁵⁷ God is present in and influencing (but not determining) each moment of experience. A notion of divine meticulous control is thus absent from process thought.

Because God does not micromanage every event in the universe, freedom is another point of distinction between process thought and traditional theism. The stricter side of theism denies there is any real freedom. According to John Calvin, "all events whatsoever are governed by the secret counsel of God [who] so overrules all things that nothing happens without his counsel. Events are so regulated by God, and all events so proceed from his determinate counsel, that nothing happens fortuitously."⁵⁸ In such a scheme, human beings make no free choices.

In contrast, process thought considers self-determination inherent in each event. Self-determination does not here mean rational decisions resulting from evaluation of data. It is the way in which prior events are integrated into the present moment of experience. However, an entity is neither totally free nor outside-determined. The influences of prior events cannot be wholly overcome, but neither are they rigidly deterministic. Cobb writes that the past cannot impose an outcome on a present actuality because "the present can derive from the past only what

⁵⁶Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, God, Christ, Church, A Practical Guide to Process Theology. (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1997), 237ff.

⁵⁷Sheela Pawar, "Basic Synopsis of Process Thought." (Claremont, CA: Center for Process Studies, 1998).

⁵⁸John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1.16 2, 3, 4. Translated by Henry Beveridge. <http://www.reformed.org/books/institutes/index.html>

the past contains," while outcomes "can be derived only from the sphere of possibility."⁵⁹ But how are possibilities able to affect new events? After all, possibilities have no past history, being abstracted toward the future.

Process thought locates God between the actual world of past events and the abstract sphere of possibilities. God establishes the relation of abstract possibilities to every new event. "In sum, God is that factor in the universe which establishes what-is-not as relevant to what-is, and lures the world toward new forms of realization."⁶⁰

All events require mediation of their past to the possibilities of the future. Mediation can be carried out only if the actualities and potentialities are completely integrated, which requires complete knowledge of all the concretized past and all the possible futures. All these things are known only by God. God is thus omniscient, in that he knows everything that can be known.

Classical theism, however, views the past and the future as equally concretized in God's knowledge. According to Martin Luther, "God knows nothing contingently, but that he foresees, purposes, and does all things according to his immutable, eternal and infallible will. This bombshell knocks 'free-will' flat, and utterly shatters it."⁶¹ God knows what will happen next year as certainly as he knows what happened last year. Thus, God's omniscience equals his omnipotence, since "God must in fact determine every detail of the world, lest something happen that was not immutably known."⁶² While process thought does connect divine omniscience to

⁵⁹Cobb and Griffin, 43.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Martin Luther, "Bondage of the Will." Martin Luther, Selections from His Writings. Edited by John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor Books Doubleday), 181.

⁶²Cobb and Griffin, 52.

divine power, it does not equate knowing to determining. God responds to the world and lures it toward the best possibilities for each of its events, but does not determine the world.

In summary, process thought holds that reality includes but is not limited to that which is empirically observable and testable. Science yields real but partial views of reality. Freedom is built into each element of reality. God is omnipotent in the sense that he possesses the greatest power it is possible for any entity to have, but that level of power is not total power over everything. God "influences all that happens but determines nothing in its concrete particularity."⁶³ Human beings truly are significantly free, and nature is not wholly under God's control. God's knowledge of the world is not equated with dominating power over the world. God knows what is and what is possible in each event and mediates between them. God influences each actuality toward the best possibility, but cannot dictate that possibility.

Process thought thus provides a response to classical theism's conundrum of the co-existence of evil in a world governed by a wholly good God. God presents the good in each moment and pulls each moment toward the good, but not coercively. In this way process thought also answers the argument that evil obviates against the existence of God. The atheist argument from evil declares that no God exists at all because of evil, but the God so denied is the God of classical theism. Process thought says classical theism's description of God isn't accurate, and that God still exists.

However, process thought has been criticized for proposing a God who is essentially a helpless, divine wimp, an underachiever. Phillip Hefner claims that process thought really just asserts that "God is achieving at grade level."⁶⁴ The question is valid: can the God of process

⁶³Hartshorne, 25.

⁶⁴Philip Hefner, "Is Theodicy a Question of Power?" Journal of Religion (January 1979), 91.

thought overcome evil? Cobb and Griffin say, "merely to see that the existence of God is compatible with [the existence of] evil does not suffice. Our concern is also that this evil be overcome or at least that we be assured that evil does not have the last word."⁶⁵ To that end I now turn.

B. A Process Theodicy.

Because God is not in total control of any event, "God never is or could be totally responsible for anything that occurs in the world."⁶⁶ Evil is contrary to God's wholly good nature and God's will (that is, God's initial aim) for each actual occasion, but events are not wholly subject to God's power. This position solves why evil exists despite the existence of a wholly good God, but raises the question of whether we have any reason to believe that evil will ever pass away.

Not everything that happens is the will of God but the will of God is in everything that happens. Even in the most desperate circumstances, God's initial aim continues "to create the best possible good from among the real possibilities in every occasion of experience."⁶⁷

Whitehead held that experiences (which are, remember, the basic component of the universe) are good to the extent they are characterized by beauty. "Hence, the criteria are aesthetic criteria. They can be summed up under 'harmony' and 'intensity.' That is, an experience is good to the degree that it is both harmonious and intense."⁶⁸ Process thought postulates two dimensions of evil, the opposites of harmony and intensity.

⁶⁵Cobb and Griffin, 118.

⁶⁶Inbody, 150.

⁶⁷Ibid., 153.

⁶⁸Griffin, God, Power, and Evil, 282.

Evil is understood as discord, opposing harmony, and triviality, opposing intensity. Suffering may be seen as discord, and hence evil. But not only is suffering evil. Triviality is also evil even though it may not cause suffering. Triviality is the subjective aim for some possibility other than the best possibility God presents. Triviality rejects the higher experience in favor of the lower experience.⁶⁹ (The thought occurs to me that triviality may also be understood as a starting point of sin. Sin has classically been defined as defying the will of God, which would indeed be the case if one deliberately, subjectively aimed for some possibility other than God's initial aim.)

I doubt process theodicy has a direct philosophical relationship with either traditional eschatological theodicy or tragic-vision theodicy. Yet there are elements from both that seem congruent with process thought. Just as Farley saw suffering inherent in the fact that beings exist as other-than-God, process thought sees discord and triviality as inherent in the subjective aim of beings. For process theodicy, suffering is not the deepest problem, nor even death. Whitehead borrowed Locke's phrase, "perpetual perishing," to describe the deepest problem the fact that nothing actually lasts.⁷⁰ Evil and the momentary triumph over evil fade alike into nothingness. As Ecclesiastes mourns, "The dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten" (Eccl 9:5b). The destruction of even the memory of the past is perpetual perishing.

Hence process theodicy becomes eschatological to rescue creation from nothingness. God prevents perpetual perishing by the fact that all of a person's existence, "with all its concrete values, is an imperishable possession of deity, 'to whom all hearts are open and from whom no

⁶⁹Ibid., 285.

⁷⁰Cobb and Griffin, 120.

secrets are hid,' including emotional secrets and hidden beauties of a person's inner life."⁷¹

Existence inevitably entails loss in the temporal world, but there is no reason why that should be the whole story.⁷²

In response to the charge that process thought is weak toward the idea of personal immortality, Cobb identifies three general lines of thought about human life. The first, scientific materialism, is that persons have no existence other than their present mortal life. The second is that "in the 'end' all that has been still is in some fulfilled or perfected way."⁷³ The third view is that life continues after death "either immediately or after the end of history," in a fulfilled and transformed way. "Process theologians," says Cobb, "can be found in all three camps."

Marjorie Suchocki belongs to the last camp. She says, "much hinges upon resurrection and judgment if God's justice is finally to be vindicated."⁷⁴ Merely to achieve a present world conforming to God's initial aims does nothing to overcome the concretized evil of the past. To perceive what does not conform to God's will requires judgment, without which justice cannot be achieved. The fullness of justice in turn requires resurrection to be achieved. If past evil is truly to be overcome, resurrection requires transformation. Suchocki says,

Resurrection cannot be limited to a world of souls. God feels *all* subjectivities in the process vision. Transformation is not restricted to humanity, but must be extended to the whole universe. There will be a new heaven and a new earth, but the locus of both is God's own being through God's power of resurrection.

⁷¹Hartshorne, 40.

⁷²Cobb and Griffin, 123.

⁷³Cobb's full explanation can be found at http://www.ctr4process.org/p&f/dr_cobb.htm, a sub-site of Claremont Seminary's Center for Process Studies' web site. These quotations are used with permission.

⁷⁴Suchocki, 200.

This resurrection is spiritual, not material. The world is not simply transposed to God, so that it exists in a sort of parallel state. The world is *transformed* in God.⁷⁵

In resurrection, subjects share in the consciousness of God. Suchocki admits that her language is not fully adequate for trying to imagine what the deeper consciousness of God might be like. Yet she affirms that in the fuller consciousness of God evil is overcome. Subjects, having both experienced and committed evil, are made aware in the fuller consciousness of God of what good possibilities existed. Through participating in God's infinite subjectivity, subjects participate in the experience of all the others involved in their evil. This participation constitutes judgment, the declaration of God's will against what is not God's will. The limitations of the finite ego are broken down, which "becomes the breakthrough to God. Judgment issues into transformation"⁷⁶ by leading subjects into a wider subjectivity than their own. Victim and victimizer participate in one another's experiences through the divine nature and thus participate in one another's redeeming transformation. Past evil no longer has power to effect events. In this way evil is overcome eschatologically.

C. Summary

No theological system can answer every question or respond adequately to every criticism. Even so, I think process thought goes far to bridge the gap between the world views of science and religion. Process theism does not require renouncing scientific methodology in favor of a world run by divine fiat. Neither does it require persons to surrender their religious vision for godless materiality.

⁷⁵Ibid., 205, emphasis original.

⁷⁶Ibid., 214.

Pastors wishing to integrate process thought into their ministry face potentially great challenges, not least of which that it uses a technical jargon quite unlike that of traditional religious discourse. "Thy initial aim be done" is unlikely to displace "Thy will be done" anytime soon. The task is to develop ways in which the biblical language of hope, love, justice, redemption, to name a very few categories, can be integrated into process theology in a way that preserves the integrity of both the biblical message and process thought's internal rigor.

Success in that endeavor will help overcome the fact that process thought is presently mostly an intellectual exercise, while people are connected to their religious convictions mostly emotively. This observation is not a criticism, but a caution that affirmations of the heart are surrendered less readily than ideas of the head. The pastoral challenge is not just to explain process thought in a way that makes sense, but to communicate it in ways that enable people to embrace it as a real religious vision for living. For this task Suchocki has blazed a trail with God, Christ, Church, but much work remains to be done.

Despite their shortcomings, the traditional theodicies will continue to be affirmed by some persons in tragic circumstances. "Sometimes in our deepest suffering," says Inbody, "when we are near despair, most of us long for an omnipotent power that can unilaterally rescue us or at least reassure us"⁷⁷ that some greater good will ultimately come from evil. Pastors must be careful not to knock down more than they build up. If we deprive our flock of their existing conceptions of God without first offering new conceptions, they may find themselves in a spiritual free fall with no theological parachute. The pastoral method should be evolutionary, not revolutionary. In light of these considerations I turn to pastoral strategies for process theology in a congregational

⁷⁷Inbody, 156.

setting.

VIII. PASTORAL STRATEGIES, OR WILL IT PREACH?

The two ministries central to the pastoral office are preaching and sacrament. By sacrament I mean the ordinary Protestant sacraments of baptism and Eucharist. I recognize that the Roman Catholic and Eastern orthodox churches name other sacraments, and that some Protestant traditions practice baptism and the Lord's Supper non-sacramentally. But my tradition affirms these two.

What makes this paper a senior project rather than a thesis is that for about a year I have been attempting to fold process thought into my preaching, sacramental practice, and teaching. Herewith I will explain some of the things I have done homiletically and sacramentally. Teaching is also an important pastoral ministry, but anything that can be preached can be taught, so I will not include a separate section on teaching. I am presenting a "Readers Digest" version of process-oriented sermons I have preached, omitting most transitions, illustrations and material not related to the main thrust of my project. Thus, they "read rough" compared to their original versions. I am not trying to prove my eloquence, but to show how I reflected process thought in attempting to overcome the dissonance between scientific materialism and theism. Also, I beg the reader to bear in mind that no single pastoral treatment of these topics can cover every point, nor usually cover all of any particular point.

A. Human Freedom: Gen. 3:1-6

1. Introduction. I preached this sermon on March 7, 1999. The text opens with the serpent's conversation with Eve in Eden and ends with Eve and her husband eating the forbidden fruit. This sermon fits my intention to close the cosmological dissonance of parishioners. It affirms science

but denies that science is the only valid method for understanding the creation story. As a process-oriented sermon, it affirms human freedom and denies that God has monopolistic power.

2. The Sermon.

Assurance that science is valid. For almost two hundred years it hasn't been intellectually respectable to understand the Garden of Eden story as literal history. One of the challenges of Christianity has been to respond to scientific discoveries in ways that preserve the truths of Christian proclamation. Science is a wonderful thing, but it usually doesn't help us grapple with sin, evil and death. The Eden stories are not science, but we don't have to take them scientifically to take them seriously. They are profoundly true in a way that science is not. Their themes are freedom, temptation, sin, judgment and redemption.

God made the world and put Adam in it. He commanded Adam, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die."

Freedom is real. Obviously, Adam has freedom to obey God or not. He is not a robot. God's command not to eat from the tree means that he can eat from it if he decides to.

The theodicy problem with God having absolute power. It doesn't hold water to say that Adam had free will only because God decided to let him have it. That view says that God has absolutely all the real power and we have none at all. God simply chooses to permit sin, suffering and evil to exist, even though he could whisk them away at the drop of a hat. This view elevates God's *power* at the expense of his *love*. The problem with this view is that it makes the whole sorry mess of sin and evil solely God's fault. He could have stopped it, but didn't. That's divine dereliction of duty *if* it is true that our freedom is wholly dependent on God's sovereign permission.

Freedom as inherent in existence. In fact, there is nothing in the creation story indicating that human freedom is something God grants us. The Bible takes it for granted that our free will is part of the fact that we exist. There is no hint in Scripture that God actively granted it to us or that he could remove it if he wanted to.

God's initial aim as related to human freedom. God takes our inherent freedom quite seriously, or else he would not have given such exacting instructions about the tree and its fruit. God is not giving us freedom, he is trying to limit it. God knows human freedom must have limits for humanity to flourish. The life of Adam and Eve in the Garden is, at the beginning, one of intimate fellowship with God. Working the garden and taking care of it, they have a fulfilling career with fantastic benefits. There is one tree they may not eat from, though they can if they decide to. There may be no limit on what we can do, but God knows there should be limits on what we should do. As the Apostle Paul pointed out, just because something is permissible doesn't mean it is desirable.

Sin as nonconformity with God's initial aim. This entire bloody century, with its world wars, death camps and hydrogen bombs proves that we cannot handle unbounded freedom. We need a forbidden tree in the center of our worldly garden to remind us there are some things that are supposed to be off limits because God knows better than we do.

(Section in which the conversation with the serpent and the eating of the fruit is retold.)

Past events are not deterministic, freedom is re-emphasized. The serpent didn't twist their arms. Temptation is not to be confused with coercion. 'I couldn't help myself' gets nowhere with biblical writers. Adam and Eve were free agents who could have said no. Our freedom is a wonderful yet frightening thing. Yet, inevitably, we make decisions apart from God's intentions, willfully or ignorantly. Such is the human condition.

Neither does freedom mean we are entirely self determined. Even so, the whole fault does not rest only in ourselves. Adam and Eve sinned, make no mistake. But they didn't make it up all by themselves. The serpent is not a figment of their imaginations. There is an external reality to evil. Evil exists outside us as well as within us. The sin and evil of the world are not just 'in here,' they are also 'out there.' Temptation is not a purely psychological condition. It comes from outside. We cannot vanquish evil only by our own efforts because it is not completely within our control.

B. Sermon on Theodicy

1. Introduction. This sermon grapples directly with the problem of bad things happening to people. The text is Luke 13:1-9, which records a conversation Jesus had with persons who claimed that some Galileans had died because they were sinners. Jesus directly refutes that notion and then tells the parable of the man who wanted to cut down his barren fig tree.

In this sermon I acknowledge that actions have consequences, but attempt to refute the idea of retributive justice, that God sends evil upon persons as a consequence of sin. This sermon also promulgates the idea that self determination is not a property only of persons, but also of inanimate creation. That is, there are random events in the world which should not be attributed to a higher, causal order. They result from the self determination inherent in events. I preached this sermon on March 15, 1998.

2. The Sermon

Acknowledgment of causal schemes. A fellow three days ago lost control of his pickup truck and it went off a bridge. The news reports said he was driving more than seventy miles per hour in a fifty-five zone. He's in critical condition at Vanderbilt hospital. Maybe if he hadn't been speeding he wouldn't have wrecked, right? Often, tragedies and misfortunes don't seem to make much sense unless we understand them as the logical consequences of what people have done.

The implication of retributive justice. In Jesus' day many people thought that if you suffered misfortune or disaster, it was because you were sinful. God punished sin directly, they thought. If you got run over by a runaway oxcart, it wasn't because the oxcart driver was careless. It was because God used the oxcart to punish you for some sin.

Denial of divine retribution Some people reminded Jesus one day that Pilate's soldiers had killed some Galilean Jews who were offering sacrifices. Jesus denied that the Galileans were killed because they were worse sinners than others. Jesus reminded his hearers that eighteen people had been crushed to death when a tower at Siloam collapsed and fell on them. Their guilt, Jesus said, was no worse than anyone else's.

Subjective aim as randomness. The persons died at Siloam because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time, it seems. They suffered random death for no apparent reason, but certainly not because they were bad people. "You think they died because God punished them," Jesus is basically saying. "But no, it is because stuff happens and there are random events in life."

Shift away from the "tyrant ideal" of power. It's a mighty small God who has nothing better to do than tumble buildings onto people for unknown sins. That's no God at all, not one worth worshiping and serving, anyway. Fortunately, that's not the God Jesus knew and revealed in his preaching and his life.

God's initial aim as best possibility. Jesus tells the parable to explain God. At the beginning of the parable comes the characterization of a false god, the sort of god who sends soldiers to kill worshipers, the god who is not Jesus' God at all. This figure bears an axe, ready to send wood chips flying. But the gardener, who represents the God whom Jesus knows, shuts the axe-wielder out of the picture. The god of retribution is silenced and turned away. Instead of destruction, the gardener gives life and care and nourishment.

God's good aim continues in every moment. Where there is barrenness of spirit or love, or where there is barrenness of suffering or despair, there is God, kneeling beside us, turning the soil of our lives, giving water and growth. What else can God do with us? Next year, if we bear only a single fig, the gardener will smile.

C. Sermon on Prayer

1. Introduction. This sermon is an overtly functional look at prayer. In classical theism, God's mind is already made up and the future is already determined. So what can prayer do and why does prayer work? My experience is that parishioners tend to answer these questions in self-referential terms: "I pray not to change things but to change me," is one answer I remember well (prayer as self-psychotherapy). Or, "I pray to ask God to give me the peace to accept his will." This statement really means that those who pray know they have no recourse except to submit to God's power. God's will in this classical theist view is not the opening of possibilities for significantly free events to follow. It is the power to overwhelm human needs, desires and dreams. Prayer, then, is really nothing but a verbalization of hopes that our desires happen to coincide with God's immutable intentions.

In contrast, this sermon promotes a process view that prayers are events that become, in turn, constitutive events in the actual occasions of things or persons prayed for. Thus, an actual occasion is different with prayer than without. Because the possibilities God presents are directly related to the event-history of the occasion, the set of possibilities for any occasion is different with prayer than without. Therefore, possibilities are opened with prayer that remain closed without it. In prayer, persons can genuinely affect events. Since I omit analogies and illustrations here, this sermon reads more academic than its entire text really is. I preached it on Feb. 14, 1999.

The biblical text is James 5:16: "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective."

2. The Sermon

Events constitute other events. There is cause and effect in the world. Everything that happens results from causes and influences which went before. Within each event there are many previous events which combined to create it.

God's initial aim explained as God's will. In every event, no matter how enormous or small it seems to us, there is the will of God toward the good. We call it grace.

God's initial aim is panentheistic and wholly good. The grace of God is everywhere, in all times, in all places, and in all circumstances. God's grace is everywhere, even in the most desperate times and places. God's grace is always nestling within all the other events that make up every moment. In every moment, God's will is toward the best outcome possible.

Subjective aim as power of self determination. But God's grace can be resisted. God's grace is not coercive. Some level of self determination is built into creation. In human beings, we call it free will. God's grace influences but does not overwhelm our freedom.

Prayer as a constitutive event for possibilities. Prayer is raw material for God's grace. In prayer God connects our faith with the things and persons prayed for. We participate in God's work in prayer. In prayer we seek to help influence events to conform to God's good will. God receives our prayers and fits them into all the influences working within each moment.

"Prayer changes the world. God works with what is, in order to lead the world toward what can be. To pray is to change the way the world *is* by adding that prayer to the reality of the

world."⁷⁸ Prayer changes what is possible for the future. There is a future possible with prayer that is not possible without it. There are "redemptive possibilities" for the world that cannot be reached without prayer. Prayer provides keys for God to open doors that God cannot unlock otherwise. We pray to help God accomplish the best outcome possible given the circumstances of the situation we are praying about.

Prayer itself has an initial aim, too. Not every prayer is useful to God. God's will is only for the good. If we pray for something not good, then that prayer is useless to God for influencing events to his will. As we continue to pray we open ourselves to God's grace. We gain greater understanding of God's will. In James' terms, we become more righteous. Our prayers become more conforming to God's will in the prayers themselves. They become more powerful in the sense that they are aligned with God's will for the person or thing prayed for. Righteous people pray powerful prayers. Prayer is something we do that God uses to affect other things.

Divine relationality in prayer. We count on God to hear and respond when we pray. God counts on us to pray. God needs us to pray. Our prayers become tools in God's hands to shape the world for the Kingdom of God. We're all in this world together, you and I and God. God needs our prayers to work his grace fully. So prayer is not empty speech. Prayer is just as fundamental to the makeup of the universe as atoms. God's power needs our prayer to bring the full potential of grace into each moment.

D. An Advent Communion

1. Introduction. The bread and wine of the Eucharist call to mind the evil Jesus suffered during his passion. They are also overtly incarnational symbols. Jesus declared them to be his

⁷⁸Suchocki, 220-221.

broken body and blood of the new covenant. For this reason a short look at process Christology is in order here. Suchocki says that incarnation "is coherent in process thought." Given certain conditions, "it would be possible for one person so to reveal both the nature of God and the nature of what we are called to be as human beings that we would call this person 'Immanuel, God with us.'"⁷⁹ Jesus can be held to have been without sin because he always conformed to God's initial aim in each actual occasion. Thus, process metaphysics allows for human nature and divine nature to co-exist in one person.

The chief Christological problem for process thought "is not to explain how Christ can be both human and divine, but to explain why Jesus of Nazareth is a unique manifestation of God with us."⁸⁰ In other words, process theology can explain how a person can be fully God and fully human, but comes up short explaining why Jesus is the only one. Michael Peterson says process thought precludes the traditional idea that God took special initiative in the person of Jesus. "God was present in Jesus in the same way He is present in all humanity," in ideal possibilities which are available to everyone, says Peterson. But this Christological formulation is "too weak. It relinquishes the concept that a holy and transcendent God originated a special plan of salvation through history, which culminated in the absolutely decisive person of Jesus."⁸¹

Peterson's objection is cogent but probably surmountable, although I won't try to counter it here. The communion service below illustrates a few process concepts more than declares them. When I devised this communion service for Advent 1997 my principal concern was probing

⁷⁹Suchocki, 91.

⁸⁰Ibid., 91-92.

⁸¹Michael L. Peterson, "Orthodox Christianity, Wesleyanism, and Process Theology." Wesleyan Theological Journal, Vol. 15, No. 2, Fall 1980.

theodicy from a more or less Christocentric basis. Readers will recognize that the theological frame is not purely process. There are some orthodox formulations as well as Trinitarian ones.

I deliver this service standing behind a table. On the table are a glass pitcher of water, a glass mixing bowl, a small bag of flour, a Bible, a packet of yeast and the ordinary elements of communion.

2. The Communion Service.

In the first section I use images of God's creative acts from the waters of creation related in Genesis 1. I relate them to God's judgment in Noah's deluge and the promise of the rainbow, then tell of the water of Jesus' baptism. Jesus' ministry was bracketed by water. He was baptized in the waters of the River Jordan and then anointed by the Spirit of God. As Jesus hung on the cross, a Roman soldier plunged his spear into Jesus' side, and out of his body came blood and water. It is with water that we are baptized. Water is the seal of God's covenant with us. (*Uncover glass pitcher of water.*)

I relate the bread of communion to the manna that the Lord "rained down from heaven" for the Hebrews as they fled Egypt. That story illustrates that God is the sustainer of life. In process thought that statement is literally true, since it is only by the presentation of moment-by-moment possibilities that our hearts move from one beat to the next. Thus, in the giving of bread we can understand the divine sustaining of life.

By the time of Jesus, the Jews had come to understand that the word "bread" meant not only food consumed at mealtimes, but the Word of God. They knew that while bread gives life to the body, it is the Word that gives life to the spirit and soul of human beings. What we call the Ten Commandments the Jews call the Ten Words, the revelation of how God wishes people to live together in faith and community. "Hear, O Israel," they began their worship an admonition to

attend to the word of God. Manna and the Word of God were both necessary to their survival as people of God. So we use flour and Scripture to show how God's grace provides the needs of body and spirit. (*Uncover flour and Bible.*)

John 1:14a: The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

The Word is the life of all people. God is not helpless in the face of human sin or suffering. Jesus of Nazareth was the embodiment of God's love. God's love is God's redemptive purpose and redemptive ability. God desires to save, God can save, and by God we are saved. God's salvation is found in the person of Jesus called the Christ, the Word become flesh. Luke says that the spirit of God came over Mary and the power of the Most High overshadowed her. So the holy one she bore is called the Son of God.

We have no idea how the spirit of God and the power of God found their way into Mary's womb to have life in the baby Jesus. Luke isn't trying to give us a biology lesson, but proclaiming the supremely generative act of God in the person of Jesus, and the life of God in Jesus.

So let's take this flour, which makes us think of the word of God, and pour it into this bowl. This flour symbolizes the sustainment of life for God's people. Now, let's take this water, the elemental stuff of creation. In water we are baptized, just as Jesus was. Let's add the water to the flour.

Luke 13:20-21: Again he asked, "What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into fifty pounds of flour until it worked all the way through the dough."

It is possible to make bread without yeast, as the Hebrews did before they left Egypt. Unleavened bread is held in high regard by the Jews and is eaten every Passover meal. In the New

Testament yeast is used to symbolize not good things, but bad things. Paul said that bread without yeast was bread of sincerity and truth.

So we might wish to leave out the yeast here. But no, the kingdom of God includes yeast. Jesus was born into a world of sin and evil which surrounded Jesus from beginning to end. Herod killed all the male babies in Bethlehem to get rid of Jesus, but failed. Nonetheless, what Herod could not do, Pilate did do.

The Kingdom of God which Jesus established lives in a world leavened throughout with yeast. The yeast of sin and evil have worked themselves all through the world. But it is in the world we are called to be the Kingdom of God.

So we will add yeast to the bowl.

When we mix all these things together, they can't be pulled back apart. When we are done, we have bread. Here we have a metaphor for the will and work of God. Somehow, God was in Jesus reconciling the world to God. Just as in bread we have water and flour joined together in one loaf, in Jesus we have humanity and deity living in one person.

Jesus is the bread of life the word of God embodied. If we try to live only on ordinary bread, we will die. But here is bread from heaven, which we may eat and not die. This bread is Jesus' body, broken for you. If we eat this bread we will never hunger: Jesus is the living bread from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever. This bread is his flesh, which he gave for the life of the world.

E. Summary

No one pastoral strategy will close the gap between the world views of the people pastors serve. Most people in a church don't come into close contact with their pastor, anyway, or at least not often. Typical Protestant churches have a sizable percentage of worshipers who rarely have

pastoral contact other than at the worship service. Preaching and sacrament may reach the largest number of parishioners, but will probably not cause a world view shift unless they are reinforced over long times. For church members' world views to be shifted, which I obviously think is important and desirable, the clergy's world view will almost certainly have to change first. Such a change itself will be no easy thing in a multitude of ways. Much of pastoral ministry does not obviously support either world view over the other. Ministries of presence, compassion and justice don't seem clearly to prop up one scientism or theism at the expense of the other.

Yet pastors of all ages with whom I have conversed about the world view disjunction have strongly affirmed that theological resolutions are needed. As part of my ordination requirements, just last month I appeared before the dozen pastors who make up my own District Committee on Ministry in the UMC's Tennessee Conference. When asked about this project I explained what I was exploring. The committee members enthusiastically endorsed what I was doing. One member, pastor of a church with 2,000 members, named this issue as one of the most serious issues working within his church's membership, from a pastoral perspective, affecting every aspect of the church's ministry.

To integrate process thought into contemporary pastoral ministry will not be easy. Process thought is not widely known within the UMC. The most vocal theological reformers in the UMC today are conservative and oriented toward classical theism, though more out of reaction to theological liberalism than scientism. I present some thoughts on process thought within the Methodist tradition in the appendix.

Every church has an existing theological frame through which all new theological insights will unavoidably be filtered. This frame may be formally stated and official or it may be informal, perhaps even unwritten. Some churches emphasize doctrine more than others, so polity issues will

likely arise if a process-oriented theology would call for reformulations of historical doctrinal statements. Pastors who wish to use process thought as a way out of the cosmological status quo must be patient and expect to be opposed. Most of all, they should not be strident even if they believe, as I do, that the issues concerned are urgent. The goal is not to replace something old and "wrong" with something new and "right." The task is ever pastoral, to encourage, exhort and lead people to renewed ways of understanding the world and how they relate to God and one another in it.

IX. CONCLUSION

The scientific way of knowing is powerful, reliable, and relatively easy to teach. Science has resulted in means both to inflict misery and promote human flourishing. Yet science's very power has become an idol. Its mastery over the world has become pseudo-religious, self-validating and self-sustaining, sought for presumed inherent worth. Science is so powerful it has led to a world view that excludes any validation of reality other than one amenable to science.

The sharpest point of disjunction between scientific materialism and Christian theism is at death, suffering and evil. It is not clear that science has been an unqualified good for people grappling with those issues—pastors are familiar with many parishioners who loathe the idea of dying hooked up to medical machinery. Sufferers ask themselves where their suffering fits in with reality as they understand it. Scientific materialism offers precious little as an answer.

The need to fit suffering into a canopy of understanding is a religious need. The classical theism, overt or latent, of most Protestant churches can provide a powerful religious view but it does so at the expense of people's experience. Wars still rage, women are still raped and children still get sick and die, all in a world claimed to be under a wholly good God's total control.

Classical theism may provide people with an interpretive grid for evil, but it denies they have any

real freedom or power. But the power of scientific materialism is highly evident in their daily lives. They are caught in a scientific-religious Catch 22. If they want meaning, they have to look away from science, which gives them freedom, toward religion, but classically theist religion provides them meaning by taking away their freedom.

Scientific materialism is the dominant world view today. Its power and reliability justly make its legacy firm. Science does reveal reality, just not all of it. The theological task is to preserve its best virtues, overcome its ontological reductionism and provide a compelling religious vision for people. I believe that process thought presently provides the most potentially fruitful means to do so.

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APPENDIX: METHODISM AND PROCESS THOUGHT

Methodists bemoan losing more than three million members in the last thirty years. Most growing denominations or non-denominational congregations in America are theologically conservative, that is, oriented toward classical theism. So hungry for meaning are people that many are willing to surrender their sense of power to attain it, especially in our scientific-materialist society which increasingly isolates people from one another. I realize that this statement may strike readers as dangerously close to accusing growing churches of "lousy theology," a sour grapes look at their growth. That is not my intention. My point is that Methodism should do a better theological job to meet the religious yearnings of people who go to church. (We are also generally not reaching out to the unchurched, but that is a whole other topic and senior project.) We should present our members with both a stronger religious meaning and validation of their freedom. As John Culp writes, "If Wesleyan theology is to be more than a theological curiosity piece, it must come to grips with modern thought."⁸²

While Methodism has no theological content that is Methodism's alone, it has aspects characterized by distinctive Wesleyan emphases. One well-known feature of Methodism's means of theological thinking is the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral. The Quadrilateral was how Dr. Albert C. Outler analyzed Wesley's approach: "We can see in Wesley a distinctive theological method, with Scripture as its pre-eminent norm but interfaced with tradition, reason and Christian experience as dynamic and interactive aids."⁸³ It was, Outler wrote, Wesley's genius that he added experience to the Anglican triad of Scripture, reason and tradition. The Quadrilateral makes

⁸² John Culp, "A Dialog with the Process Theology of John B. Cobb, Jr." Wesleyan Theological Journal, Vol. 15, No. 2, (Fall 1980), 6.

⁸³ Albert C. Outler, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Wesley," Wesleyan Theological Journal Vol. 20, No. 1, (Spring 1985), 3.

possible a hermeneutic of retrieval and preservation of the church's historic doctrinal affirmations to engender "discernment of Christian truth in ever-changing contexts" and "encourage serious reflection across the theological spectrum."⁸⁴

Methodism's theological open door to process thought is that some of its distinctive emphases seem amenable to it, and that the denomination has a formal means to stretch its theological legs to adapt to new contexts. There are elements of Wesleyanism and process thought that are "friendly" to each other, especially God's power in grace and human experience.

A. Grace.

One aspect of the Wesleyan tradition is a particular stress on the grace of God. "Grace pervades our understanding of Christian faith and life. By grace we mean the undeserved, unmerited, and loving action of God in human existence through the ever-present Holy Spirit." Methodism asserts that God's grace is omnipresent and influential throughout all creation, "even though suffering, violence and evil are everywhere present." Methodism stresses "prevenient grace," a divine love that encompasses all humankind and "precedes any and all of our conscious impulses."⁸⁵

In Methodist terms, the ever-present influencing presence of God is grace. Methodism has held that grace is resistible by human beings. Grace calls for human beings to respond, but does not overwhelm human free agency. "Without God's grace, we cannot be saved; while without our (grace-empowered, but uncoerced) participation, God's grace *will not* save."⁸⁶

⁸⁴ The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 1996. (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1996), 63.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 60ff.

⁸⁶ Maddox, 19, emphasis his.

By no means can Wesley be seen as a "proto-process thinker." However, process thought is congruent with the Wesleyan understanding that God works within human freedom. Process theology claims that it is not God alone who has all the power: each component of the universe has inherent, experiential, creative power. God "therefore cannot unilaterally determine the events in the world."⁸⁷

The Wesleyan understanding of grace forms a key nexus between Methodism and process thought. It conforms rather well to process theology's understanding that God affects persons "not by determining them from without but by persuading them from within. . . . The divine power is persuasive not coercive."⁸⁸

B. Experience.

Wesley's emphasis on experience was an attempt to locate persons' conversion experiences and subsequent divine assurances of grace within a formal framework of theological understanding.⁸⁹ That is, Wesley wanted to validate as real both the quiet call of God, as to the boy Samuel in the temple, and the thundering call, as to Paul on the Damascus road. In the modern world view, knowing means sensory knowing. Any other kind of knowing, consciousness, for example, and "the organizing and theoretical creativity of mind [and] self constitution" is not knowable through science, and thus in the view of modernity, not real.⁹⁰

But in process thought, sensory perception is a derivative form of perception, not the basic form. Accordingly, humans do indeed perceive and experience in a nonsensory way, and can

⁸⁷ Hartshorne, 65.

⁸⁸ Griffin, 65.

⁸⁹ Outler, 5.

⁹⁰ Gilkey, Nature, 16.

thereby perceive God. "In those rare moments in which this constant apprehension of the divine reality rises to consciousness, we enjoy the 'experience of the holy,'"⁹¹ which Methodism specifically affirms. Wesley reported just such an experience at Aldersgate Chapel in 1738: "My heart was strangely warmed," he recorded in his journal. The Aldersgate experience of the holy specifically led Wesley formally to integrate such kinds of experience into his theological framework. Methodist doctrine, then, "officially" allows for process thought's validation of nonsensory knowledge.

C. Scripture.

Although Wesleyanism and process theology can shake hands at some points, they do not fit together precisely at all points. For example, the role of Scripture does not seem to fit well. Methodism formally holds a high opinion of Scripture that may not be very amenable to process thought, in which "the possibility of God's infallible inspiration of a book or institution is denied."⁹² Even so, the stringent biblicism of some Protestant traditions, such as literalism, is not found in Methodism. Neither has Christian fundamentalism ever been at home in the UMC, probably because Methodism formally recognizes that biblical hermeneutics are formed by the tradition of the believing community that seeks to interpret Scripture. God's inspiration in the Word is not considered frozen in scriptural text.⁹³ Indeed, Wesley himself considered anyone who claimed to need no book but the Bible a "rank enthusiast," holding that Scripture is the primary, but not sole Christian authority; particular Scripture must be interpreted according to "the analogy

⁹¹ Griffin, 66.

⁹² Ibid., 65.

⁹³ Discipline, 76.

of faith," by which he meant a "connected chain of spiritual truths."⁹⁴

Two of the doctrinal sources of authority in the UMC remain Wesley's Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament and four volumes of his sermons. Wesley incorporated them to provide the incipient Methodist movement with doctrinal sources that were both stable and flexible. "Holy Scriptures stand first and foremost, and yet subject to interpretations that are informed by 'Christian Antiquity,' critical reason and an existential appeal to the 'Christian experience' of grace, so firmly stressed in the Explanatory Notes."⁹⁵ However, even with the considerable leeway allowed in Methodism in dealing with Scripture, I am far from sure that process thought fits well.

There are other points at which congruence between process thought and the Methodist tradition is not easily apparent. I mentioned earlier that a process Christology has a long way to go before its likelihood of acceptance is high. There are many other theological issues to be worked out, but it is beyond the scope of my project to explore them. So I will simply close with my heartfelt thanks to you for your instruction and guidance during my time at Vanderbilt.

⁹⁴ Maddox, 37, 38.

⁹⁵ Outler, 2.

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