Process Theology is a 21st century theological approach based upon the "process philosophy" of Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) and Charles Hartshorne (1897-2001).

It is an effort to articulate a theology and understanding of the world that is less *mechanistic* (cause and effect) and moves more towrads an *organisimic worldview* (where everything is connected and in relationship).

It seeks to move beyond the limits of dualistic thinking about God and the universe. black and white, cause and effect, that behavior and behavior change are predictable, and can theoretically be fully understood through the use of systematic, objective empirical research methods of observation. It seeks to be more dynamic than static. Rather than being rooted in a dualistic, ormodern worldview; it seeks to speak from apost-modern Organismic worldview.

The Organismic worldview differs from the mechanistic worldview in that it defines individuals, as active agents making choices that are oriented towards the future (Shoemaker). Individuals control their lives, rather than the environment controls their lives.

As you read, and try to understand the theological construct ask yourself if this this seems more like how you experience the world, or if it seems to be too much of a stretch?

Process Theology

A Basic Introduction

C. Robert Mesle

with a concluding chapter by
John B. Cobb, Jr.

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Introduction

God is love.

1 John 4:16

The ground then for this book is the conviction that a magnificent intellectual content...is implicit in the religious faith most briefly expressed in three words, God is love, which words I sincerely believe are contradicted as truly as they are embodied in the best known of the older theologies.[1]

"Process theology" is the name for an effort to make sense, in the modern world, of the basic Christian faith that God is love. That is not an easy task. It requires that we rethink the nature of both God and the world.

Why should we need a new theology? Because of evil; modern science; modern studies of scripture and revelation that confront us with their human, historical origins; increased contact with the other world religions; feminism; and our ability to destroy the world through pollution and nuclear weapons. Over the years, I have become convinced that process theology confronts each of these realities with answers that make far more sense than most traditional views of God. Although process theologians frequently address environmental, economic, political, and social problems, it seems appropriate for this introduction to focus on the concept of divinity that underlies and motivates such work.

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[1] Charles Hartshorne, *Man's Vision of God* (Archon books, 1964), p. ix. Like most process theologians, Hartshorne now avoids sexist language—like *Man* in this title.

The largest part of this book discusses process theism—a way of rethinking the concept of God as the divine Subject who loves, wills, intends, and acts in nature and human history. We might say that this God is a divine being, but this is likely to cause as much confusion as clarification. Process-relational theists share Paul Tillich's insistence that we must not think of God as one being (however powerful, etc.) among others, whom we might or might not happen to encounter. But process theists do not share Tillich's view that God is Being-itself (or even creativity-itself).

Rather, they conceive of God as a being in the sense that God is the subject of God's own experience, is conscious, loves, intends, and acts. But as will become clearer through the course of this book, God's experience includes the experience of every creature, and every creature's experience necessarily incorporates, in each moment, an experience of God. Thus the vision of how God and the world are interwoven does not neatly fit into either the traditional or Tillichian ways of thinking. It is to remind readers of this fact that I will speak of the process God as the divine Subject. Also, it is important to speak of a process-relational theism as distinguished from the many modern theologies and religious naturalisms that speak of "God" in terms of human love, natural processes, and so forth.

Of course, not all process theists think alike. In the interests of simplicity and brevity, I will simply ignore the technical disagreements between process theologians and focus on the more widely held ideas. The view presented here is my own effort to describe the form of process theism that makes the most sense to me. My goal in Parts I through III is to explain process theism as simply and clearly as I can, so that you the reader may consider for yourself whether it makes sense to you.

Also, I should acknowledge that this book is written primarily for a Christian audience. This is only an expression of my own inadequacy. I don't think I understand other religious communities well enough to have confidence that I can address these thoughts directly to their concerns and perspectives. It should be emphasized, however, that there are Jewish process theists and non-Christian Unitarian process theists, as well as Buddhists and others who are in serious dialogue with process-relational thought. And certainly not all process naturalists would think of themselves as Christians. So if this book should come to the attention of non-Christian readers, I hope they will see that its intent is to address issues that are human, interreligious, and global, and to do so with as great an openness as possible to the values of non-Christian people and religions.

The Meaning of "Traditional" or "Classical" Theology

Throughout this book references will be made to "traditional" or "classical" views of God. Obviously, two thousand years of Christian theology have produced a wide range of understandings of God. Nevertheless, I think it is reasonable to point to a mainstream tradition familiar to most Christians. In the traditional or classical view, God is omnipotent (has all the power there is, can do anything God wants that is not self-contradictory), is omniscient and eternal (stands outside of time so as to see all of time at once, and hence knows the "future" infallibly), and is absolutely unchangeable in every respect. Also, many modern Christians would say that God limits God's own power so as to allow room for human freedom. While I could say more, this should be pretty familiar. So I beg the pardon of those who are keenly aware of the diversity of Christian theology, but hope my approach is seen as reasonable for an introductory book of this type.

The Hard Part: Rethinking Philosophical Foundations

The appeal to common human experience is basic to process thought. The phrase *common human experience* really has two meanings. It partly refers to "ordinary" experiences such as feeling pain, grief, or joy, tasting chocolate, seeing colors, or getting angry. But it also refers to those dimensions of experience that are absolutely universal because they are necessary elements of any experience at all. Process thinkers work hard to derive their beliefs from these experiences. In this respect, many people find that they shared process ideas all along. This makes it easy to explain. At the same time, however, process theology rests on some ideas about the nature of reality that are fundamentally different than those of traditional theologies. If we stayed only at the surface, we could avoid talking about those differences and keep things simple. But that would be bad theology.

It is a simple historical fact that ancient Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle have had a profound impact on Christian theology—perhaps as much impact as the Bible has had. But we are rarely aware of the philosophical assumptions about reality that underlie our traditional theologies. People who have never heard of Plato or Aristotle have nevertheless inherited rough forms of their ideas. And it is impossible to make truly fundamental theological revisions without challenging those Greek origins. That will gradually become obvious as you read this book.

When you ask "How does God act?" most traditional theologies have no answer. "He just does!" But process theology is exciting and intellectually responsible precisely because it does try to talk about how God acts in the world. It is by setting the idea of God within a comprehensive view of reality that process theologians are able to address with greater clarity the difficult questions that confront us today. To understand those answers, however, it will gradually be necessary to undertake the challenging task of rethinking our basic views of reality. We must examine the nature of time, power, freedom, and the relationship between minds and bodies.

My strategy is to begin with a very simple overview that is essentially a list of key ideas. Then, still avoiding the most difficult philosophical issues, I want to paint a more connected picture of what I like best about process theology. Only then will we turn our attention to a careful examination of specific issues.

My Motive: Process Theology as an Ethical Model

Is process theology true? Does the God it describes really exist outside our human imaginations? I do not know. Indeed, I think of myself as a process naturalist, and will explore this briefly in Part IV. Why, then, do I defend process theism so passionately in these pages?

First, process theology could be true. It makes sense. It embraces and works with the confusing facts of life, suffering, ambiguity, scientific insight, religious pluralism, feminism, and ecology, while traditional theologies seem to me to view these as embarrassments to be accommodated or explained away. Process theology seems to me to be consistent with itself and consistent with the world I experience. Traditional theologies, in my view, are not. So process theology deserves serious study. It makes sense. It may be true.

Second, however, and just as important, I teach the value of process theology because it has good ethics. Process theology has taught me a better way to think about what the idea of "God" means. Frankly, I find the ethics of the traditional God quite appallingly erratic and often demonic. In the Bible, and in much of Christian thought, God has been described as directly willing and causing great evils: war, slavery, plague, famine, and even the hardness of human hearts. At the very best, God has been depicted as standing by and allowing needless suffering that "He" could easily have prevented. To defend our ideas of God, we are driven to turn our ideas of good and evil inside out to explain why it is really good for God to allow such great suffering.

Process theology has taught me that there is simply no reason to let our old ideas about divine power force us into a corner where we must persuade ourselves that gross evils are really good. It has presented me with a model of a God who is genuinely loving in a straightforward and intelligible sense. The God of process theology does everything within divine power to work for the good.

Many modern theologians would very rightly point out that any vision of divinity or even of nature that humans create must be understood as a model or myth. Process theology, in this sense, is a thoroughly modern "myth" precisely to the extent that it creatively draws upon and leads the way in the very best of our modern struggles to envision the nature of reality, the meaning of love, and the depths of the sacred as we experience it all today.

So even if the God of process theism should turn out not to exist, or even if there is no divine being at all, even if we find it more helpful to think of the entire venture as the creation of myths or models, I am convinced that process theology deserves our most serious attention. The ethical model that process thought shows us can transform our whole way of thinking about religion, life, and values. I urge you to reflect on it with an open mind and open heart.

Because I take the unusual step of including a chapter (Chapter 17) that genuinely challenges the theology presented in this book, it seemed important that process theology have the last word in the strongest way possible. I was delighted when John B. Cobb, Jr., whom I view as the preeminent process theologian, agreed to write a concluding chapter for the book. Specifically, he agreed to reflect on three fundamental questions. Why do we need God to make sense of the world in the process-relational vision? What difference does the process God make in the world of our experience? What other contributions can process thought make beyond those discussed in this book? Dr. Cobb addresses these questions with his usual clarity, insight, and wisdom.

Alfred North Whitehead, upon whose insights much of process thought is founded, offers sound advice for the journey upon which we are about to embark.

> There remains the final reflection, how shallow, puny, and imperfect are efforts to sound the depths in the nature of things. In philosophical discussion, the merest hint of dogmatic certainty as to finality of statement is an exhibition of folly.[2]

Whitehead agreed with Plato that any such effort gives us at best a "likely story." Still, the quest itself deserves and requires passion, just as life deserves and requires conviction and openness alike. Journey with me for a while, even if I exhibit some folly.

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[2] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: As Essay in Cosmology* (The Free Press, corrected edition, Griffin and Sherburne, editors, 1978), p. xiv.

Process Thought: An Overview

Before embarking on a long journey, it is usually helpful to check a map for a preview of where you are going. The more territory the map covers, the less it tells you about each step along the way. The details of highway exits and back streets, and especially the beauty of the scenery, await later discovery. Still, the large road map is helpful to get us oriented.

This overview is intended to fill that function. It gives you a very condensed survey of the terrain of process thought but without the detailed explanations, arguments, or deeper struggles. As you read through the book, you may wish to return to this overview periodically as these broad statements acquire depth and meaning in your mind. By the end of the book, you should be able to see the larger, beautiful world that this map so briefly sketches for you.

The Process Vision

All things flow. Reality is relational, through and through. Reality is a social process.

Freedom is inherent in the world. To be an individual—whether a human mind or an elementary particle—is to be self-creative. But each individual must create itself out of all that has gone before. Past decisions both provide and limit present possibilities. Within these limits, the future is open.

Experience is rich and complex. The clarity of sense experience is grounded in deeper but vaguer experiences of our relatedness to the world process. Adequacy to this wealth of experience is the ultimate test of our ideas.

The world is rich with life. The universe does not center around human beings, and we are surely not the only creatures to experience pain and pleasure. "Dominion" has proved a tragic theological model for understanding our ethical relationship to this world. Instead, we must come to see ourselves as participants in a complex and fragile web of relationships in which each creature has some value.

Process Theism

God is love. That is, God is the unique Subject, whose love is the foundation of all reality. It is through God's love that all things live and move and have their being. God is the supremely related One, sharing the experience of every creature, and being experienced by every creature.

God's power in the world is necessarily persuasive, not coercive. God acts by self-revelation. God, who is the source of our freedom, *cannot* coerce the world.

Jesus, too, had freedom. He chose to be fully responsive to God's call and love. His life and death thereby revealed the character of God's love and God's call to each of us.

Because God loves perfectly, God suffers with the world, calling us in each moment through divine self-revelation, sharing a vision of the good and the beautiful. God *cannot* overrule our freedom, but awaits our free response, constantly and with infinite patience seeking to create the best that can be gotten from each choice we make.

God is omniscient, knowing everything there is to know, perfectly. But this means knowing the future as open, as a range of possibilities and probabilities, not as fixed or settled.

God is co-eternal with the world and shares the adventure of time with us. There has always been a world of some sort in which God has been creatively active.

God is omnipresent. Every person (indeed, every creature) in every moment is experiencing God as the ground of both order and freedom. God at once makes freedom possible and calls us to choose the good, to choose God's vision for the world. Thus God works in the world by continual and universal self-revelation.

But our experience of God is inherently interwoven with our experience of the world, so that these shape each other. God struggles to reach us through the dark glass that obscures our vision. Thus revelation is omnipresent and ongoing, but always ambiguous.

Similarly, God is the ground of the world's becoming. In nature as in history, God acts in the world by self-revelation. But here, too, the power of God is inherently interwoven with the power of the world.

Every event reflects both the power of God and the power of the world. The world may be more or less responsive to God, but there are no separate events in our world standing outside the laws of nature and history at which we can point and say, "God alone did that."

Part I

A God Worthy of Worship

CHAPTER 1

Love, Power, and Worship

It matters if someone loves us. There is no human experience more fundamental to the Christian faith and tradition than the transforming wonder of being loved when we least deserve it. It is the very heart of the New Testament gospel that the life and death of Jesus reveal the unconditional, gracious love of God. “By this the love of God is made manifest among us…,” “While we were yet sinners…,” “Beloved, if God so loved us…” “We love because he first loved us.”

In process theology, God is constantly, in every moment and in every place, doing everything within God’s power to bring about the good. Divine power, however, is persuasive rather than coercive. God *cannot* (really *cannot*) force people or the world to obey God’s will. Instead, God works by sharing with us a vision of the better way, of the good and the beautiful. God's power lies in patience and love, not in force.

This is not to say that God is "weak" or finite. Process theologians argue that we have simply misunderstood the nature of divine power. A person can lift a small stone. So we think that God, with infinite power, must be able to lift infinitely large stones. A parent can yank a careless child from in front of a car, so God must be able to part the Red Sea and save the Israelites.

But we have hands and God does not. Or rather, when hands are needed, God must rely on the hands of creatures to do that work. Our power is of a kind that arises from our existence in small, organic bodies with eyes, ears, hands, and a nervous system. So while we can lift rocks and yank arms, our power is severely limited in time and space. God has no body like ours (although we might think of the entire universe as God's body). God has no hands of God's own with which to lift and pull. So God cannot do some of the things we can do. God's power is of a kind radically different from ours in most ways—though not without some points of contact. God's power is infinite, everlasting, and universal. God's power is the power that enables all of reality to continue its creative advance, that makes creatures free, that shares the experience of every creature and is experienced by every creature. God's creative power sustains the universe. So God's power is infinitely greater than ours, and very different. Yet, it is only through the creatures of the world that God has hands.

Many people, however, respond initially to process theology by saying that a God who does not have the power to control the world is not really God. Perhaps that is an understandable reaction given our tradition, but I urge you to think past that idea. Is it the power to lift rocks that earns worship? Fundamentally, is it the *power* or the *love* of God that leads you to love God, to worship God, to be willing to commit your life to God's service?

What does it mean for God to be worshipful? Obviously there are many forms of worship. People have worshiped gods out of pure fear, offering sacrifices to appease divine wrath. People have thrown virgins off cliffs, cut the hearts out of slaves, and even murdered their own children out of fear of the gods' anger. (Such gods, of course, are always among us in such forms as war, greed, poverty, and ignorance.) I cannot speak for you, but while sheer wrathful power may force my obedience, it cannot win my loving worship.

Apart from fear, people can also worship in the sense of experiencing awe. This can be more healthy. Certainly most of us stand awestruck before the beauty of the heavens, the majesty of the mountains, and the delicate art of butterflies. Remember, however, that tornadoes are also awesome. Nuclear explosions are awesome. Great evil can be awesome.

For me, the only kind of awe that is authentic worship is the awe inspired by great goodness or value. My reason is simple. To worship properly is to center our lives around something, to see it as the proper focus of our ultimate commitment. Raw power may evoke my fear and even my awe, but not my worship. My worship awaits something, or someone, worth giving my life to.

What kind of God, then, is worthy of worship? If I were to worship any God at all, it would be the ground not merely of existence but of goodness. It would be a God who calls me to be the best I can be, to give the best I can give, to share in a great good work. And a Christian God must surely be one who sets the standard with infinite love.

Process theology is not exclusively Christian. Yet it is no accident that it arose among Christian theologians. On the one hand, you will find in this book many criticisms of the Christian tradition for idolizing power rather than love. At the same time, however, it remains true that Christianity is a religion built around a symbol of sacrificial love—not of coercive power. If Christ is worthy of worship, it is surely not because Jesus could lift large rocks, but because he could touch people's lives, and transform them toward greater love and joy.

It would be a mistake to think that the God of process theology is weak. But process theology attracted me because it forced me to understand that it is goodness, not coercive power, that is worthy of ultimate commitment—of worship. Ethically, God is worthy of love because God is perfectly loving.

Like a friend, but in a way no other friend can, God shares our every experience, our joys and sorrows, our hopes and fears. God is with us in our moments of greatest guilt and despair, yet God's love for us never wavers. In each moment, God takes in our feelings and decisions and responds to them by calling us to redeem from those experiences whatever good can be gotten, and to move from them in directions that can, in the future, yield much greater good.

The difference between traditional views of God's love and power and the process view can be illustrated by two different translations of Romans 8:28. (Please forgive me here for considering this passage without regard for its context. I am not claiming that Paul was a process theologian.)

> We know that all things work together for good to them that love God...(KJV).

> We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him...(RSV).

The familiar KJV translation clearly offers a guarantee about outcomes. All things will work for the good, at least for those who love God. But the RSV rendering is rich in other ideas. God *works* for the good. This is not a guarantee that good will always happen. It is a guarantee about God's character. God works for the good. Where? *In everything.* Process theologians mean this with great seriousness. God works in everything there is to bring about the good. And especially, God works *with* all people (indeed, all creatures) who will respond to the divine call. We could go even further and say that God works with everyone and everything, but the RSV passage at least suggests that God calls for cooperation.

After all, if God were in complete control, what need would God have of our service? It seems obvious that our human religions almost always assume that there is work for us to do, that God is calling us to work *with* God in the world. Certainly Jews and many Christians have understood that building the kingdom is a cooperative effort between God and people.

The battle between good and evil is a real one. God cannot guarantee the outcome within this world. What can be guaranteed is God's steadfast love and constant working for the good. God will be with us in each moment, sharing our struggles, sharing our experiences of sin and suffering, and loving us in the midst of them all.

CHAPTER 2

God's Love and Our Suffering

It is commonplace for us all to try to prevent or relieve needless pain and suffering. If a person next to us stumbles and starts to fall we automatically offer a steady hand in support. If someone has a headache we offer aspirin. Parents take their children to be immunized against diseases. We often have no qualms about interfering with the freedom of others in order to prevent needless pain. If a child starts to run in front of a car we will stop her if we can. If we see someone attempting to rape, mug, or rob someone, we will try to stop him, at least by calling the police. If we don't help we will feel guilty.

Everyone knows that painful events *sometimes* work out for the best. Sometimes they can help us grow and mature, teaching us to avoid worse evils and to deal with the suffering that life inevitably will hand us. Given the harsh world in which we live, there is a need for some kinds of learning through pain.

But we also know that not all suffering is needed or valuable. Most of life's suffering produces more harm than good. If a person trips and breaks an arm, or even just skins a knee, he may be more careful in the future, but we still wish we had reached out in time. If someone is raped, abused as a child, or gets cancer, she will no doubt learn something important about life. But no one is glad that these evils exist or wants to experience them for educational reasons. And certainly we do not think that the value of freedom is so great that it justifies allowing rapists, muggers, or murderers to commit their crimes at will. Rape permanently damages the rapist as well as the victim, and both ultimately lose some of their freedom. Indeed, such violent crimes generate fear that assaults the freedom of every member of the society.

Sometimes bad things do become good. I agree that this is true. Indeed, no one affirms more earnestly than process philosophers and theologians that life is complex, interrelated, and ambiguous, and that the meaning and value of events can change dramatically over time. This may be suggested by an informal scale of five responses people might have when looking back from a distance on earlier events that were at the time painful.

1. I'm glad it happened! However painful at the time, that experience taught me a great deal and led me to explore whole new ways of living. The lessons I learned from that event have far outweighed the problems.

2. It was a difficult experience, but I think it was for the best.

3. Well, I've learned a lot from that experience, and I'm a better person in some ways because of it. But if I had a choice, I still wish it hadn't happened.

4. It was a terrible experience. I have learned to live with it and have tried to use it as a learning experience but it will always be something I deeply regret.

5. It was horrible! Nothing can ever make up for the suffering I endured and still endure.

These are merely suggestive of a continuum of human responses to painful events. Some of these are fairly common, others more rare. An excellent example of number 4, or perhaps even of number 5, is found in Rabbi Kushner's book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. The book arose from Kushner's experience with his son, Aaron, who died the tragic death of rapid aging disease. Part of the power of the book, I think, lies in Kushner's refusal to be glad about what happened to his son. Toward the end of the book he writes,

> I am a more sensitive person, a more effective pastor, a more sympathetic counselor because of Aaron's life and death than I would ever have been without it. And I would give up all of those gains in a second if I could have my son back. If I could choose, I would forego all the spiritual growth and depth which has come my way because of our experience, and be what I was fifteen years ago, an average rabbi, an indifferent counselor, helping some people and unable to help others, and the father of a bright, happy boy. But I cannot choose.[1]

However difficult it is to define evil or badness as philosophical concepts, we all know that bad things happen in this world. We dare not call them good lest we say that the fight against them is misguided.

All of this is common sense. We confirm it by our actions and thoughts many times a day. It is very rare for us to regret that we kept someone from injuring themselves or others, thinking in hindsight that they would have been better off for the pain. It is far more likely that we will feel guilty for having failed to help when we could.

There are, of course, times when we must allow people to take risks. Children learning to ride bicycles must finally be allowed out of their parents' protective reach. But you will certainly understand and approve when I tell you that when our children were learning to ride their bikes I did plenty of running. Whenever possible I kept them from falling. And even now I warn them to be careful. Allowing children to crash into the cement and gravel does not help them to learn how to ride. It only creates pain and fear and slows down the learning process. If I could, I would attach a magical device to our kids' bikes that would make it impossible for them to ride out in front of cars and trucks. But I can't, and neither can God.

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[1] Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (Schocken Books, 1981), p. 133f.

Indeed, if you and I could, we would make the world be very different. Did you know that modern medicine has actually eliminated smallpox, a disease that killed millions of people in the past? It's true. And at least in the more developed nations, it is rare for anyone to get diseases like measles, typhoid, typhus, tetanus, malaria, diphtheria, or polio. If you and I could, we would gladly snap our fingers and eliminate cancer, AIDS, MS, and all the other diseases we could think of—even the common cold. Wouldn't we?

The big question, then, is: Why doesn't God do these things?

It is true, of course, that God's values are not exactly the same as mine. I am selfish and self-centered and shortsighted in ways that God would not be. So no thoughtful person confines God to a merely human perspective. All the same, it seems pretty obvious that if words like *good* or *loving* apply to God even remotely like they apply to people, then God must want to prevent broken arms, cancer, and rape as much as we do—indeed, far more because God's love is greater.

Given the appropriate qualifications just mentioned, process theologians assume that God's love is very much like ours, only infinitely greater. God fully shares the pain of the person with the skinned knee. In fact, God even shares the experience of the damaged cells themselves, as well as the more complex and conscious pain of the person. So God hurts with us. God, then, has far more motive than we do to prevent or ease suffering in the world. Allowing for that portion of the world's pain that may finally produce greater good, there is still a whole world full of needless and terrible suffering God would wish to prevent.

Why then doesn't God prevent suffering? Process theology answers that God wants to, but cannot. At least, God cannot do so simply by willing it. Although, as we will see later, there may ~~be some direct role~~ God can play, God's primary role is to draw us to be more active in preventing suffering. God has no hands but ours.

We have not yet discussed just *how* God can act in the world, except to say that God's role is persuasive rather than coercive. Pending clarification (Part II), we can still say something very important about God's love and God's action in the world. *God is constantly doing everything within divine power to prevent and ease needless and destructive suffering.* That, after all, is what we would expect from someone who is perfectly loving.

In a moment I want you to compare that with traditional theism. But first, we must address another problem.

Understanding "Logical Consequences"

People often hold contradictory beliefs. Imagine that someone says they have exactly two apples in one hand and two in the other. You might say, "So you have four apples." Imagine how you would feel if they replied, "I never said I had four apples!" They might say, "I believe I have two apples and two apples, but it is entirely unfair of you to say that I would ever claim to have four apples. I don't believe that at all." You would feel frustrated at their failure to see the obvious implications of their own words.

In the same way many people are frustrated when traditional Christians don't seem to acknowledge the obvious implications of their beliefs about God. We sometimes hear testimonies of how (people believe) God saves one person's life in a plane crash. They then sing praises of the divine power and goodness. But why didn't God save the 104 people who burned? Aren't we forced to say that since God loved them all and could have saved them all, God's allowing 104 people to die in flames was as much an act of divine love as was saving the one? So it must have been *good* from the divine point of view to let the people die or else God would have saved them, too. People rarely say that, but it seems to add up.

Or imagine a rape. If any human being was there and in a position to prevent it we would call it an act of love to prevent the rape. Preventing the rape would be a good thing. Yet, if God is all powerful, God could have prevented it in any of a thousand ways. Perhaps the Holy Spirit could just touch the potential rapist's heart with a small sense of compassion that turns him away from the crime and sets him on a different life path, saving the victim and her family from a lifetime of anguish. Or God might do something more dramatic, rather like the apostle Paul's conversion experience. God apparently chooses not to do this. Why not? Does God love the woman and the rapist? Of course, we say. So God's choice must be motivated by love for them. So if, in God's infinite wisdom, it is loving to allow the rape, it must be (from the divine point of view) a good thing for God just to stand by and allow the woman to be raped. What is loving and even morally required of human beings is the very opposite for God. Again, people rarely say it that way, but doesn't it add up?

If we believe that God is all-powerful we are driven against all our best values and common sense (whether we mean to or not) to argue that rape, famine, plague, child abuse, and cancer ultimately must be *good* in God's eyes or else God would have prevented them. At the very best, we are driven to say that it is good for God to *allow* us to rape, starve, abuse, sicken, enslave, drug, and destroy ourselves and each other in the name of freedom. We are forced by the old idea of God's power to say that what is morally *right* for *us* (protecting the innocent, healing the sick) is morally *wrong* for *God* to do (except one time in ten million when God graciously performs a miracle). Or, traditional views of God force us to say that *what is loving for God* (to allow torture, disease, war, and natural disasters that God could prevent) *is unloving of us*. I cannot tell you how strongly I reject that whole way of thinking, and I believe they are all logical implications of traditional theology—whether people ever say them or not.

Can you imagine that Jesus would have just stood by and done nothing while a woman was raped? I think that Jesus would have done everything within his power to help the victim. (No doubt he also would have been concerned to help the potential rapist, to cause him to "go his way and sin no more.") If you think that Jesus would have helped, and that Jesus revealed divine love, then surely you can see why it doesn't make much sense to say that God *could* stop it but stands by and does nothing because it is somehow the loving thing to do. If it isn't loving for you or me, or for Jesus, why would it be loving for God?

One common answer is that God limits Godself in order to preserve human agency. That is, God *could* prevent evil but *allows* it as a necessary part of human salvation. Morally, I believe this answer just doesn't do the job. It might cover a few cases, but not very many. Allowing evil we could prevent is almost as sinful as directly causing it, as our laws and consciences tell us. There is such a thing as criminal neglect. If a parent allowed a child to burn herself horribly or drink poison or get hit by a car, saying, "It's the best way to learn," we would be appalled. I find it equally appalling that people should attribute such behavior and values to God.

Young children are inclined to believe that their parents can do anything. It is painful for them to learn otherwise. But as a parent, I used to dread the thought that my children might think I *allowed* them to get hurt or sick when I actually was doing all I could to prevent it. Might not God feel the same way? Might not God be deeply hurt by our constant proclamations that terrible evils are "God's will" or are "allowed by God for a greater good"? Surely, if, as process theologians believe, God is doing everything God can to prevent suffering, and if God shares our suffering with us, it must add insult to injury for us to constantly "defend" God by preaching that God really allows such horror out of God's vast wisdom and love.

It is probably a good thing that most of us don't really act on our theologies all that much. Can you imagine someone deciding to follow God's example (in the traditional view) by assuming that whatever God allows must ultimately work for the best? They would never try to prevent pain, error, or even sin. They would assume that skinned knees and concentration camps all work for the best. They would see nothing at all as ultimately evil. Any person who actually *acted* on that belief would surely be locked up as criminally insane.

Fortunately, most of us do not let the traditional "solutions" to the problem of evil direct our ethics. If we did we would think that if God sees it as wise and loving to allow children to be crushed by trucks, then we should, too. But after all, our theologies do have *some* impact on our lives. My very grave concern is just this. To whatever extent people actually let the old solutions to the problem of evil affect their lives, those ideas undermine their resolve to make the world a better place.

Glaring examples of this can be found regarding the nuclear arms race. Some fundamentalist preachers have publically declared that nuclear war will bring about the coming of the kingdom of God and the return of Jesus. If that is so, if nuclear war is really a good thing, why don't we rush out and push the button?

Such a theology, in my view, suffers from the sickness of despair. Confronted by actual and potential evils beyond our emotional and intellectual grasp, we defend ourselves by saying that God has them in hand and either causes or allows them for some good reason. Heaven help us if the leader of a nation with nuclear weapons ever acts on such theology.

Process theology preserves our obvious commonsense values. It acknowledges the crucial distinction between good and evil (however blurry that may be at times) and affirms that God works with all of God's resources for the good and against evil. Our love, at its best, really is like, or at least analogous to, God's love.

We should not behave like the God of classical theology. We should not stand by while people suffer evils we could prevent. But we *should* act like the God of process theology, doing what lies within our power to prevent evil and ease suffering. And when we cannot prevent suffering, we should so far as our human weakness allows, share it sensitively.

CHAPTER 3

Love, Power, and Relatedness

Process theologians insist that reality is relational, through and through.

Think of someone you love very much. How would you feel if she broke an arm? Won an important award? Broke a promise? Saved someone's life? If you loved her even more, would you share her feelings more or less fully? Think of someone who loves you very much. Has he shared your feelings of joy, sorrow, grief, and triumph? Has he expressed his ongoing, steadfast love in different ways, responsive to changes in you?

In our common human experience it is inescapably clear that love means being related to and affected by those we love. Process theologians believe that these experiences are important guides to understanding divine love. God loves perfectly.

So God must be the *supremely related* One, who shares *fully* the experience of *every* creature, who is at once fully steadfast and fully responsive.

Oddly enough, this obvious feature of God's love has long been denied. One of the earliest ideas to be formally declared a heresy by Christians was "Patripassianism," the belief that "the Father suffers." Given that Christianity is founded on the life of one who "bore our griefs and carried our sorrows," who "suffered and died" on the cross, and whom Christians have declared to be the fullest revelation of God to us, it seems incredible that Christian theologians should deny, for nearly twenty centuries, the belief that God suffers. What made them do it?

Christian theologians denied that God suffers largely because of their understanding of God's power. They believed that God's perfect power put God completely outside of any relationship with the world that might affect God in any way. Understanding why they believed this is crucial to understanding almost every problem this book will address.

Unilateral Power

Think of ordinary examples of power. First, think of kids in a tough neighborhood. The toughest (most powerful) kid can beat up all the others and is beaten up by none. The weakest kids are beaten up by all the others and beat up on none. In between is a hierarchy descending from the most to least powerful. Because this same kind of social structure is seen in chickens, it is often called a "pecking order."

Try sports. The most powerful football team scores easily and is rarely scored upon. Try money. The few richest people have the most power. They can tell other people what to do, but the others cannot tell the richer people what to do. The poorest people, of whom there are millions, can't tell anyone what to do and are at the mercy of those who are richer. Armies provide the clearest examples. Generals give orders to majors, majors to sergeants, and sergeants to privates, but not the reverse. Such institutional hierarchies are designed for efficiency rather than creativity, but they rarely provide either one.

In short, our ordinary approach to power is this: *Power is the ability to affect others without being affected by them.* We can call this *unilateral power* because it runs only one direction, from the top of the hierarchy down to the bottom. Furthermore, power and social value go together. The more powerful you are the more you are treated as a valued member of the gang, the team, the company, the society, or the army.

Just as important, our ideas of power fit our ideas of reality. Often the more powerful something is—especially the more power it has to resist being affected by anything—the more real it seems to us. Shadows and clouds seem less real to us than iron bars and mountains. The power to resist change enables things to endure, and the power to endure makes things seem more real.

There is a direct connection, it seems to me, between these views of power, value, and reality and our fear of pain and death. People who are tortured are totally at the mercy of others. Victims are at the bottom of the hierarchy. Pain and death are the ultimate human cases of being affected and changed. We cling to what we hope will save us from pain and death—from being affected. We admire, envy, and want to unite with those who seem to have such power.

Think of the "macho" man who is strong, in control, impervious to pain. We have traditionally valued such male models, turning to them for protection and security. It instantly becomes obvious why "real men" don't cry. To cry is to admit that one is affected, vulnerable, related. In the traditional way of thinking, to be related, vulnerable, affected, emotional, sensitive, caring, nurturing—in a word, feminine!—is to be weak, not valued, even somewhat unreal. No wonder Hebrews and Christians have thought of God as Father.

In Western philosophy, this whole set of ideas has been reflected in the idea of a "substance." Substances, in that view, are the most real things. A substance is that which endures unchanged through change. It is that which exists independently, needing nothing but itself in order to exist. (Doesn't that sound like financial security? Doesn't it sound like someone who never has to be afraid? Don't you want to be like that?) Two prime cases of substance are God and the (divinely created) human soul.

Strictly speaking, of course, God was declared the only true substance. Only God has perfect unilateral power. God has absolute power to control everything. God also has absolute power to resist being affected by anything. Indeed, God is *almighty*, having *all* the power there is. This is central to the traditional or classical view—the notion of divine omnipotence as perfect *unilateral* power.

The concept of unilateral power can certainly be found in the Bible, but it was the Greek philosophers who honed the idea of perfection. Although their ideas about divinity were very different from ours in most ways, they still laid down fundamental ideas that later Christian theologians accepted. They were good systematic thinkers, and carried through with honest consistency this idea of perfect unilateral power. If God has perfect unilateral power, then God is utterly unaffected by the world—perfectly unchangeable. Nothing at all can change the divine in any way.

The Greek philosophical models were art and math. A beautiful statue can affect the viewer. It can fill us with the desire to be braver, more merciful, more noble in spirit. It affects us. Yet the statue does this without being affected by us at all. It does not pity us, love us, or get angry with us. The same is true in a different way with math. They saw triangleness, squareness, and 2+2=4 as eternal, perfectly unchangeable truths that order the world. We cannot violate their order, yet they do not "give orders." They do not weep or laugh or shout. They are utterly beyond being affected by the world. They are beyond passions, beyond changes of knowledge, changes of mood, or changes of intention. They never act. They are beyond love.

The Greek philosophers understood all of this, and their ideas about God reflected it. They saw that "God" could order the world both in structure and morals without ever being affected by it. So they envisioned the ultimate reality as eternal, unchangeable, passionless.

Yahweh, the God of the Bible, was described as very powerful, too. And in many respects Yahweh's power was unilateral. But Yahweh was also very changeable, filled with passions like anger, jealousy, wrath, sorrow, and even repentance. Yahweh was often depicted as changing his mind in response to the pleadings of Abraham, Moses, and others. Especially, Yahweh was filled with love, was deeply affected by his creation, was in constant relationship with the world. Yahweh was often pictured as being cruel, even erratic, but almost always as involved, related, and caring about creation.

Jewish Christianity began with Yahweh as its model of God. But Christianity very soon became a religion of Gentiles. The New Testament texts were all written in Greek! Gentile Christians naturally began to think of God in the Greek categories familiar to them. It is for this reason that they felt forced to deny, to declare as heresy, the idea that "the Father suffers." To suffer, they believed, is to fall prey to the worst of those mortal weaknesses that God must be above. For nearly two thousand years Christian theologians have been trying to merge the Greek and biblical ideas of God. I believe they have never succeeded.

If God cannot suffer, cannot be affected in any way, then God cannot love. To love is to be affected. But perfect unilateral power is the power *not* to be affected. To love is to enter into intimate relation with others. But perfect unilateral power is the power to be independent—*not* related. To love is to feel all the passions of joy, sorrow, grief, fear, hope, and triumph that bind us to each other, that make life so dynamic and changeable. But perfect unilateral power is the power to be *unaffected* by such changing passions. A God with perfect unilateral power cannot love in the sense in which we love.

Christians always have affirmed God's love—but in what sense? Partly, of course, ordinary people rarely think about it and have a more naively biblical view of God. They pray to God expecting God to respond, to act, to feel. But even ordinary people no doubt appeal to the absolute eternity and unchangeability of God when they want to assure themselves of their own immortality, or explain why God fails to act on their behalf.

More systematic theologians finally arrived at the conclusion that God loves us without passions. God is rather like the statue. We may feel that it is looking at us in a loving way, but it does not feel love. More strongly, God may, out of sheer overflowing goodness, do good things for us, but not because God *feels* sorrow or pity or compassion.[1]

Perhaps the details of these arguments seem puzzling. Perhaps you wonder why anyone would think that way. But it is true that the idea of perfect unilateral power led directly to the conclusion that God cannot suffer, cannot feel for the world, cannot love in the human sense of entering into genuine, *mutual relationships* with the world.

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[1] For an excellent discussion of this, see chapter 3 of *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* by John B. Cobb, Jr., and David Ray Griffin (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1976).

Relational Power

Process theology operates on an entirely different model of power, reality, and value. Relatedness is primary.

In process thought, relational power is the ability *both* to affect *and* to be affected. But being affected does not mean being passively controlled by others. Relational power involves three stages.

First, relational power is the ability, the *power*, to be open, to be sensitive, to be in relationship with the world about us. Obvious examples are those whose intelligence enables them quickly to grasp complex ideas and events around them; artists who see the richness of colors and hear subtle combinations of sounds; poets who revel in the wealth of words spoken; parents who are sensitive to the feelings, struggles, fears and hopes of their children.

Second, relational power is the ability to be self-creative. It is the capacity to take in a wide range of ideas, feelings, influences, and experiences and create one's own thoughts and feelings and decisions out of them. Self-creativity is the ability to integrate the world into a unified self, rich in relationships but unique in response.

Finally, relational power is the ability to influence others by having first been influenced by them. It is the power of loving parents to act toward their children in a way that takes sensitive account of the needs and desires of their children, while yet looking beyond the childish perspective. It is the ability of the good teacher to understand the questions and insights and limitations of the students so as to help them learn in appropriate and creative steps.

Gandhi is a wonderful example of relational power. Rather than sit in a tent with the wealthy and "powerful" few, he went to live with the many, to share their work and eat their food, to understand by participation with them their fears, hungers, and dreams. Yet, he had a vision larger than theirs, a sensitivity to the British that was more compassionate than theirs. Especially, he had the capacity to suffer, to be affected by all of those about him, without losing himself. He did not unilaterally shut the others out. Instead, he relationally took them all into himself and created a vision that took account of them all. It is for this reason that the people chose to follow him. He led them by creating a dream in them that reflected their own hopes but called them to larger vision.

Obviously, Jesus also lived out relational power. Paul's insight was crucial—that it was the *crucified* Christ, the Christ who redeemed through suffering, who revealed both the wisdom and *power* of God (1 Corinthians 1:18–24). Regretfully, I think, Christians have thought that this power was not enough. Many have suggested that Jesus could have called down twelve legions of angels if he had wanted to. But twelve legions of angels exercising unilateral power, however great, could not have made a single soul more loving, could not have redeemed the woman taken in adultery, could not have produced the fruits of the spirit that are "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22b–23a). We would never have said of twelve legions of angels wielding swords, "by their wounds we are healed."

Summary

It is important to make a distinction between two different meanings of the claim that God is unchangeable. Process theologians certainly affirm the Christian tradition that declares that God *is* love, that God could never stop loving, or love us less on one day than another. In biblical language, God's love is steadfast, sure, trustworthy. In this sense, God's love is certainly unchangeable.

In another sense, however, it would make sense to say that God's love is perfectly changeable. That is, God's love is fully responsive to the world. In each moment, God shares the experience of every creature and responds to that creature in a way appropriate to it. So while it is probably more helpful to say that God's love is *responsive*, we should recognize that we depart from much of the Christian theological tradition when we affirm this. Traditionally, it has long been denied that God could be genuinely responsive, because responsiveness is a kind of change, and it was held that God could not change in *any* respect.

Probably you have always believed that God was affected by the world, that God was responsive and active and in the conclusion that God cannot suffer, cannot feel for the world, cannot love in the human sense of entering into genuine, *mutual relationships* with the world.

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Probably you have always believed that God was affected by the world, that God was responsive and active and in relationship with us, sharing our experiences and reacting to them. Probably, with regard to God's love, you were a process theologian all along.

In Part II, I will explain in what way process theologians believe that God's love is the foundation of all reality.

CHAPTER 4

Freedom, Time, and God's Power

Does God experience time? If so, how? Strictly speaking, most theologians have said that God experiences no passing of time. God exists in a timeless eternity. In different words, all of time is spread out before God like a picture, so there is no difference between past, present, and future. Where did this idea come from and what does it mean for human freedom?

Aristotle, a Greek philosopher, shared the idea that God has perfect unilateral power, and so described God as the "Unmoved Mover." God caused the world to move and change, but God was totally unaffected—unmoved—by the world. Aristotle also saw a very important implication of this view of divine unchangeability. He held that God had no knowledge of the world.

Knowledge, experience, and activity are fundamental features of anyone's identity. Aristotle recognized that the world is constantly changing. If God has knowledge of the world, then God must constantly be having new experiences and new knowledge. Indeed, every moment will bring a whole world of new information—new experiences—to God's awareness. And if we allowed this world of new experiences to be flooding into God's life in each moment, we might also feel compelled to imagine God as actively responding to that knowledge.

Remember that in the Greek idea of perfect unilateral power, God was absolutely unaffected by anything. Obviously, they thought, God could not be engaged in any such dynamic relationship as knowledge of a changing world would necessarily involve. Aristotle held, then, that God had no knowledge of the world.

Christian theologians could not follow Aristotle's path, but they recognized his problem. The solution they chose was essentially to deny that the world changes. (Our experience of change would then be a kind of illusion.) That would allow God to have knowledge of the world without having knowledge of change and so without being changed.

Think again of that traditional image of time with which we began—as a vast picture spread out before God. God sees all of time as fully present, fully actual, fully settled. The picture, like a tapestry, might tell a story with a beginning and end. But the end of the story is already there, painted in complete detail, never to be altered.

A more modern image might be a phonograph record. Imagine the blank piece of black vinyl set into a press. The master disk is pressed down on the blank and—pssst!—the grooves are stamped onto the record. All of the "music" is stamped out at one instant, the last bar at the same moment as the first. In some respects, that is a good image for how Christians have said God created time—all at once, in a single instant.

When the record is put on to play and the needle set in the groove, music comes out in sequence. If we think of ourselves on the tip of the needle, we can see why it seems to us that time moves from beginning to end. There is a sense in which it does move for us. Notes suddenly leap out and then fade to be replaced by others. Time seems to us to pass, but from God's point of view, it does not.

As both of these images suggest, the classical tradition has been able to grant God total knowledge of the world of "time" while yet protecting God from any change, because ultimately the world does not change. To be fully consistent, we must also deny that there was any time before God decided to create time, or before God did create it, or between God's decision and action. These, too, are part of God's timeless eternity. God has eternally decided to create, and has eternally created. So we can see that in the classical view all of time has actually existed for God in a timeless, absolutely unchanging eternity. Only in this way can we retain God's perfect unilateral power to remain totally unaffected by the world.

It should be obvious now why so many Christian theologians have held a doctrine of total predestination. Although this is not the only reason why this doctrine has been affirmed, it is sufficient by itself to have driven consistent and honest theologians to that conclusion. The end of the story is just as finished, just as actual, just as present to God as is the beginning. Nothing can change. Nothing can be different than God created it as being from all eternity. God knows eternally with absolute and unchanging infallibility what you are doing in this piece of the picture right now. It is all "now" to God.

Martin Luther may have been among the most honest of Christian theologians in holding that given the classical Christian view of God human beings must have no freedom. But many Christians have not understood this or have been reluctant to admit it. They have wanted to claim that we still have freedom. How have they done this?

Often we think of freedom as simply doing what we want to do. That is the sense in which Christian theologians have been able to affirm that we have freedom despite God's perfect foreknowledge. Suppose God predestined us both to sin and to have wanted to sin. We might then claim that we sinned "freely" (we did what we wanted to do) even though we could not have done otherwise, because God predestined us "both to will and to do" the sin.

Obviously, however, this is not the sense in which we usually speak of freedom. In the important moral sense, freedom is the ability to choose between two or more options, as to sin or not to sin. Unless an option is a real possibility, is really open to us, we would say we are not free to choose it. If the traditional Christian views of God's power and of time are correct, there is no such thing as freedom of choice. We could never do anything other than what God has predestined us to do.

There is another way in which some Christians have tried to reconcile God's perfect foreknowledge with human freedom. They say that God can know something without causing it. Often, it is observed, we know what people around us will do just by knowing them well. People are predictable, and the rest of the world is even more predictable. So why can't God, who knows us perfectly, be able to foresee perfectly what we will freely choose to do?

If we set this in the context of the whole view of God's power and the traditional understanding of God's relationship to time, including the affirmation that God is the sole creator of the world of time, then it is obvious that this whole line of thought is irrelevant. In the classical tradition there is no difference between what God wills and what God knows and what God causes. It is all the same.

Nevertheless, let us consider the idea that God foreknows without causing our choices. It is obviously true, after all, that we often know what will happen without causing it ourselves. So let us imagine God for a moment as purely an observer of the world, having no causal power at all. Couldn't God have infallible knowledge of the future, even of our free choices?

No, not if we are truly free. Think again about our ability to predict the future. We have some power to predict because the world is partly determined. Laws of nature limit our options. There is much that we are not free do to. God could certainly have perfect knowledge of those limits. Further, the past—our genetic heritage, our education, our own choices, all our experiences—strongly inclines us to act in certain ways. The past shapes the future. The fact that we can predict the future at all depends on all these limitations on our freedom. If the past *totally* determines the future, if heredity and environment, for example, combine to completely control our actions, then there is no true freedom and God can perfectly predict the future.

But the whole idea of freedom is that the past does *not* totally control the future, but only shapes it. Given my past, there may be a 75 percent chance that I will choose to eat the sausage and eggs I have planned for tonight's supper. There is a 15 percent chance that I might join my in-laws for supper, a

5 percent chance that I may skip supper to make up for eating too many snacks while I write this afternoon, and several other possibilities I cannot even think of right now. What ~~freedom means is~~ that I really do have genuine choices in front of me and that I really could do different things even though some are more likely than others.

If this description of reality is correct, then if God has perfect knowledge of the world and of me, God will know exactly what all of the possibilities are and how probable they are. But even with perfect knowledge God could not know what I will choose in the future because that choice has not yet been made and it is a real choice. For God to predict perfectly, based on perfect knowledge of the past, the past must totally determine the future "choices." That is, they wouldn't be real choices at all.

Think of it this way. Suppose I am trying to decide whether to have sausage or soup for supper. If we say that God knows I will choose sausage, and that it is impossible for God to be wrong, then aren't we saying that it is impossible for me to choose the soup? We don't have to say that God caused anything. But there must be some way in which God has that knowledge. It may be that the world is a deterministic world in which the past totally controls the future. It may be, as Christians have traditionally said, that all of time is eternally present to God—that my "choosing" the sausage is an eternally settled fact. But whatever the reason, perfect divine foreknowledge means that real freedom is impossible.

Process theologians believe in freedom. They believe that ~~while the past does have a powerful impact~~ on the present and future, there remains room for genuine freedom. Also, as we have seen, they reject the whole approach to unilateral power that originally drove Christian theologians to deny the passage of time. So in process theology, divine omniscience—God's perfect ~~knowledge—~~means that *God knows everything there is to know*. But the future does not exist yet, except as a range of possibilities that have not yet been chosen.

In process ~~theology, time is~~ not ~~like the grooves~~ stamped onto a record. Instead, time *becomes*, like music improvised by a jazz combo. The musicians have some idea where they are going, and the choices they have made so far suggest directions for the future. But the whole point of improvisation is that they are making up the music as they go. They can change keys, change tempo, suddenly shoot off in response to a new idea. After playing seven notes of a scale they may choose *not* to play that eighth note, but leave a silence and start off in some totally new direction.

Following the image of the world as a jazz combo, we might play with the idea of God as the lead flute player. God has power to shape the music by God's own choices of what notes to sound. To the extent that the other players are sensitive and *choose* to follow God's lead the revelation of God's musical vision has power to shape the becoming of time. But the insensitivity of the world and the world's choice to create its own music mean that the music is not always what God would choose.

Freedom and Grace

The Christian struggle with freedom is also deeply tied to the historical debate over grace and works.

At its very best, the concept of grace is rooted in the human experience that people must be loved if we are to become loving. Long before we *do* anything to merit love, we depend on the love of parents and friends to touch our lives. As we grow older, we discover that there are moments in our lives when it seems beyond our power to care for others. We may be so filled with pain, anger, fear, insecurity, or hate that we only want to strike out at others. If we are lucky, we find people who love us so much that they are willing to bear the burden of our selfishness, and love us anyway. The more we learn about ourselves, the more we learn that the quality and quantity of love we are able to give surely reflect the quality and quantity of love we receive. The love of others empowers us to love. This is the essence of grace. And in Christian experience, God is the supremely loving other.

Too often, however, Christians have found themselves setting grace and works against each other, so that more grace means less human responsibility. Consider the view of total divine predestination. In this case God is fully in control—exercising perfect unilateral power—and we can claim no credit for our salvation. We thus avoid any grounds for human boasting, and God deserves total credit for any good we receive. Pure grace. Now suppose that some small step in our road to salvation depends on us—perhaps our free decision to

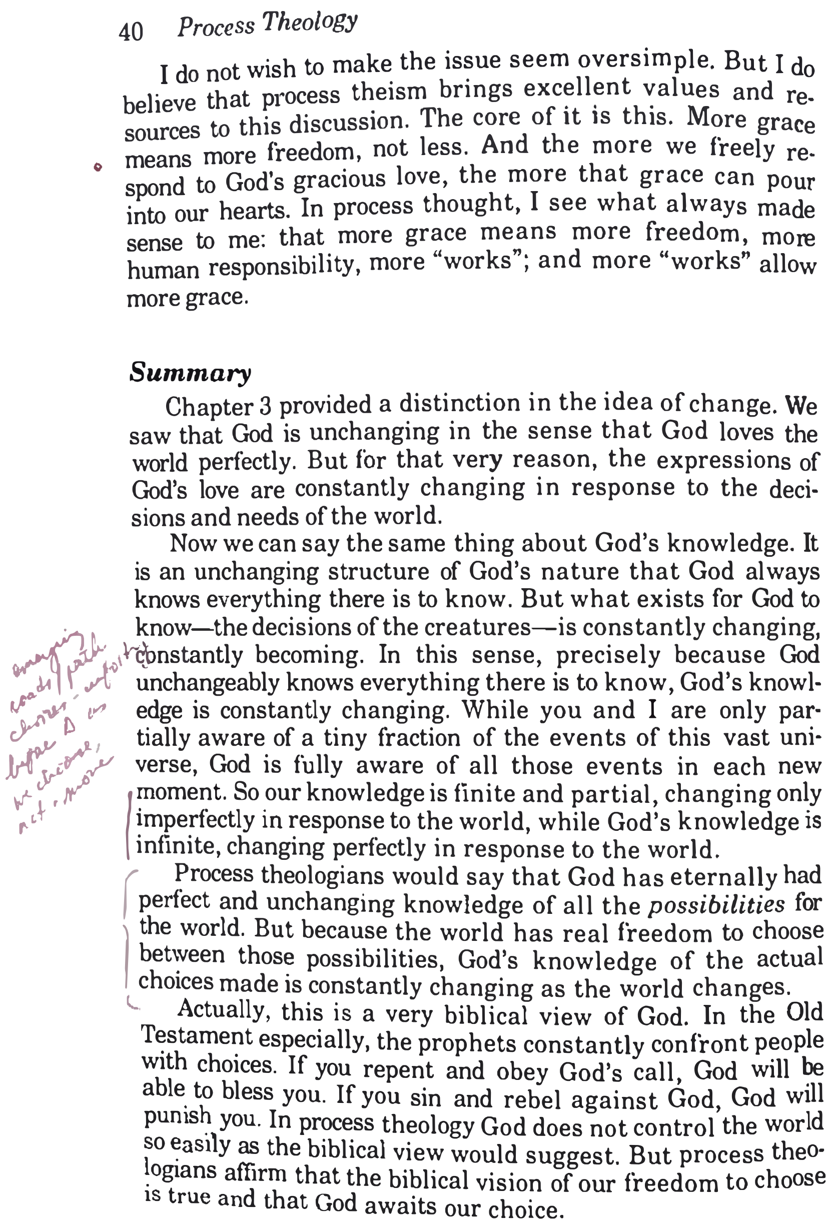
believe in Christ. If this step really depends upon us—is a truly human "work"—then we seem forced to say that God is not fully in control, and that we can pat ourselves on the back for "meriting" at least some of the credit for our own salvation. Suddenly, human pride rears its ugly head and the divine victory over evil is no longer assured! So Christian theology beats a hasty retreat back to pure grace. In such a framework, grace and works seem opposed to each other: more works means less grace; more grace means less works.

Some causes for this narrow vision of grace relate to the concept of unilateral power we have discussed. Where doctrines of total predestination have triumphed, *grace* has meant that God alone determines our fate. If God's judgment upon us could be contingent upon our free decisions then God seemed weak, out of control. If God *needed* or benefited from our love, then God seemed incomplete, dependent, and perhaps even selfish—buying our love with gracious admission into heaven. By totally divesting human beings from any role in their own salvation, it seemed to many that God could be praised more highly for being all-powerful and utterly unselfish (gracious) in love.

If, however, we conceive of salvation as quality of life, then it seems obvious that grace ~~and works go together. If, as Paul~~ says, "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Romans 5:5b), then the natural response is for that love to spill out of our lives into the lives of others. Being filled with love, we become more loving. And as we *choose* to love, we open ourselves further to let that love pour into our hearts, further empowering us to become still more loving. While divine grace always comes first, before human decision, they ultimately work together.

mutuality

In process theology, divine power *creates* creaturely freedom rather than destroying it. It isn't "grace vs. works" but "works because of grace." Process theology embraces the confession of 1 John 4:19: "We love because [God] first loved us." Indeed, in process theology, every creature in the universe is continually experiencing the divine love. This love is the very foundation of freedom and of love within all creatures. This gracious—unmerited—love is continually poured into all creation. The choice lies with us how we will respond. We have the power to accept or reject that love and the call it involves. But this power to choose is itself a gift of grace.



40 *Process Theology*

I do not wish to make the issue seem oversimple. But I do believe that process theism brings excellent values and resources to this discussion. The core of it is this. More grace means more freedom, not less. And the more we freely respond to God's gracious love, the more that grace can pour into our hearts. In process thought, I see what always made sense to me: that more grace means more freedom, more human responsibility, more "works"; and more "works" allow more grace.

Summary

Chapter 3 provided a distinction in the idea of change. We saw that God is unchanging in the sense that God loves the world perfectly. But for that very reason, the expressions of God's love are constantly changing in response to the decisions and needs of the world.

Now we can say the same thing about God's knowledge. It is an unchanging structure of God's nature that God always knows everything there is to know. But what exists for God to know—the decisions of the creatures—is constantly changing, constantly becoming. In this sense, precisely because God unchangeably knows everything there is to know, God's knowledge is constantly changing. While you and I are only partially aware of a tiny fraction of the events of this vast universe, God is fully aware of all those events in each new moment. So our knowledge is finite and partial, changing only imperfectly in response to the world, while God's knowledge is infinite, changing perfectly in response to the world.

emerging
roads / path
choices - unfolding
before Δ as
we choose,
act & move

Process theologians would say that God has eternally had perfect and unchanging knowledge of all the *possibilities* for the world. But because the world has real freedom to choose between those possibilities, God's knowledge of the actual choices made is constantly changing as the world changes.

Actually, this is a very biblical view of God. In the Old Testament especially, the prophets constantly confront people with choices. If you repent and obey God's call, God will be able to bless you. If you sin and rebel against God, God will punish you. In process theology God does not control the world so easily as the biblical view would suggest. But process theologians affirm that the biblical vision of our freedom to choose is true and that God awaits our choice.

What do you think?

What do you like, or what makes sense in all of this to you in your experience of life, God, and faith?

What do you disagree with, or doesn't make sense to you in your life experience?