PROCESS THEOLOGY AND PERSONAL SURVIVAL

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Every pastor and theologian knows that most modern people face a dilemma when asking the question about personal survival. On the one hand, few people, even in our secular culture, have given up the hope that their lives will amount to something beyond the grave. Furthermore, Christians continue to use the symbols of resurrection and immortality, at least at funeral services if not occasionally from the pulpit. On the other hand, most modern Christians, regardless of how unsophisticated in the ways of recent philosophy and theology, know—or at least feel intuitively—that there are serious problems surrounding the idea of personal survival.

Thoughtful Christians have been shaken by the charges that such a belief mitigates against the creation of a better world here and now, that the world view and philosophical anthropology supporting such an idea have collapsed, that the traditional symbols which have answered such a question no longer have any clear meaning, and that the question about the final destiny of man and the cosmos is in principle unanswerable. Those familiar with contemporary theology realize that although eschatological language is frequently used, the meaning of that language in relation to the specific question of personal survival is at best unclear and at worst deceptive, such as in much existentialist theology.

Anyone who has ever thought at all about the threat of death knows that the threat can be met only when one is clear about what he actually believes about personal survival as well as when one is aware of what psychological and social aids he has in confronting the fact of death. Here dishonesty ("I don't really believe in personal survival but the idea makes me feel better") is ultimately useless. Therefore, one of the requirements of contemporary theologians is to be clear about their answers to the question of personal survival. If personal survival is either reconceived or denied, contemporary theologians must say so and say why.

Any adequate thinking about personal survival as a theological (as opposed to a psychological or sociological) question must, we are assuming here, meet two criteria. It must be Christian, i.e., compatible with if not derivative from what is perceived as the central witness of

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Christian faith. And it must be modern, i.e., able to speak powerfully within an acceptable world view of our age.

Our purpose here is to examine one contemporary theological view on personal survival, the view of process theologians. We shall discuss 1) the meaning of personal survival from within their framework, 2) criticisms of their view, and 3) defenses of their view. Our thesis is: that although process theology faces significant problems from the point of view of most classical Christian theology, both in general and in relation to the specific question of personal survival, it is nevertheless a fully adequate Christian and contemporary view of survival.

The Framework for "Objective Immortality"

The most serious mistake that can be made in any discussion of personal survival is the failure to recognize the fact that any evaluation of the idea of personal survival depends wholly upon the ontological, theological, and anthropological assumptions of the critic or defender.

Ontology. What is the ontological view of process philosophy insofar as it applies to the question of personal survival?[1] The initial assertion is that reality is ultimately process or becoming (change), not being. As a result of this assumption the usual metaphysical priorities are inverted: Becoming includes (but does not exclude) fixed being; that is, there are abstract and persisting elements within change. Being does not include some entities which change and thus are less than real.

Why does process philosophy make such an assumption? The basic reason is that all process philosophers take the systematic analysis of our experience as human selves to be the clue to the nature of reality. From this starting point they conclude, by applying the paradigm universally, that the final real things in the universe are not hard, impenetrable, billiard-ball atoms of matter, but rather the successive actual occasions of experience.

The application of this model implies that the universe is ultimately (1) becoming inclusive of being and (2) panpsychical. (1) It is becoming in the sense that the ultimate individuals of the universe (actual occasions) come into being, have their moment of subjective immediacy, and perish. The universe is "built up" when actual occasions are grouped together by "prehensions" into "societies" of varying degrees of organization and unity. Societies of actual occassions, such

[1]The vision we are outlining here is primarily that of Charles Hartshorne. See *Reality as Social Process* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1953), *The Divine Relativity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), and *Man'sVision of God* (Chicago: Willett, Clark, 1941). The other great expression of the process vision is A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1929).

as molecules, atoms, cells, tables, and lions, become enduring objects of one degree or another. (2) Reality is panpsychical in the sense that the psychical features of experience, namely, feeling, subjective aim, and aesthetic appreciation of unity in diversity, are not exclusively characterisctics of human societies of occasions but to one degree or another are characteristics of every occasion in the universe. One can see, therefore, how in process philosophy value is objective and universal in the sense that every occasion in the universe embodies aesthetic fulfillment.

Theology. Most process philosophers argue that the universe could not exist without God. God envisions possibilities and preserves values. However, the process view of becoming as the inclusive category distinguishes the process view of God significantly, although not totally, from classical theism. God is not the one exception to the metaphysical system, thus existing in his aseity totally independent from the universe in every way. Instead, he is, as Whitehead says, the "chief exemplification" of the categories and principles. This means, specifically, that, becoming must be introduced into the concept of the being of God and that the permanence and change in God must be reconceived within the category of becoming. The divinity of God is not his independence from the universe. His divinity is his supreme exemplification of the togetherness of permanence and change.

The only way to conceive of God within the process framework is as "dipolar." There is one pole or side of God's nature which is absolute (not dependent) and there is another pole or side which is relative (dependent). The best way to understand this polarity is to understand ourselves as dipolar. In one aspect (abstractly) I exist precisely as an identity which exists through all change. In another aspect (relatively) I exist only as a concrete person deeply related to others as a feeling, thinking, and acting self. The dipolar concept applied to God does not mean that he is finite. Rather, God is the divine person who alone is the supremely perfect example of the two poles.

God is absolute, therefore, not in the sense that he exists in unchanging independence of the universe but in the sense that he is the existent whose existence depends on no other being. He is necessary, everlasting, and perfect (omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient) in whatever sense it is meaningful (not self-contradictory) to speak of him as perfect. God is, on the other hand, relative in the sense that he is the one whose actuality is relative to all other beings. God is the supremely perfect relative existent. He affects all other beings by envisioning the relevant possibilities, and is affected by all other actual

beings. Thus God's knowledge and memory are perfect, but they are perfect insofar as his perfectly adequate knowledge and memory change as reality changes. Each of his successive experiences depends upon and includes what actually happens in the world. God literally grows as his experiences and his perfect knowledge and memory of actual occasions grow. As the supremely concrete being, his absoluteness and changelessness are abstractions from his inclusive change.

Anthropology. Insofar as process philosophers elaborate a doctrine of man, they emphasize two ideas that have a special bearing on the question of life after death. (1) We have noted that in the process framework every actual occasion is an experiencing subject as well as an object. Man is a society of occasions who is distinctive insofar as feeling, freedom, willing, intention, enjoying, and deciding are conscious. Each of these experiences is of value in itself and in its contribution to the process. (2) Although all subjects experience, there is a hierarchy of the grades of subjects. The character of the higher, namely, the richness in complexity and novelty, is different in kind as well as degree from the lower. In man consciousness is the decisive difference. This qualitative difference leads some process philosophers to speak of the psyche or soul of man. The soul is not a substance but an aspect of the psychophysical organism. The soul, however, is not simply a function of the body or the mind. It is, specifically, "that society composed of all the momentary occasions of experience that make up the life history of the man."[2]

Within this ontology, theology, and anthropology, what is the meaning of death for man? All occasions and societies of occasions are finite. Man's finitude is his fragmentariness; he is not the entire universe or the everlasting deity. Death, however, poses a peculiar threat for man at two levels. (1) There is the threat that one day our existence will cease. Some day the last page will be written in the book of our life. (2) There is the threat of the perpetual perishing of occasions during our life-time. And perpetual perishing is the threat of loss or insignificance. It is the threat that my life will make no difference ultimately to anyone.

What is the process answer to the threat of death and ultimate loss of the person? The crux of the process answer is the claim that death is not sheer destruction. Death is the termination of existence. But termination and loss are not identical. This claim hinges on the distinction between continuing reality and retained actuality. Process philosophy requires the latter but not the former. The threat of death

[2]John Cobb, *A Christian Natural Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), p 48.

is answered by the everlastingness of my actuality, not the endless continuation of my existence.

Retained actuality can and obviously does mean retained in the memory of other men, namely, social immortality. For several reasons, however, this kind of immortality is inadequate to meet the full threat of death. (1) No human being will or can retain the full richness of my experiences. (2) The memory of my actuality will fade more and more as time passes. Therefore, the only adequate memory can be by an individual who is not subject to the incurable ignorances of perception, understanding, and memory. Specifically, the only adequate immortality can be God's omniscence of our actuality during our lifetime.

The process ontology, theology, and anthropology all converge to determine the meaning of immortality.[3] We can never be less actual than we have been to God. "Omniscience and the indestructability of every reality are correlative aspects of one truth."[4] Within the process framework immortality means that my experiences, intentions, feelings, joy, sorrows, goals, and decisions, because they have also been experienced fully by a related and perfect God, are retained as they were forever in the memory of God. This retention of my full actuality in the everlasting memory of God is referred to as "objective immorality." Those events have so much entered into and become part of God in his related aspect, providing new possibilities, that they are integral to the divine life itself. In most process views this participation *is* man's immortality.

This doctrine, of course, does not answer either affirmatively or negatively the further questions of "subjective immortality," namely, the question of whether I as an experiencing subject survive my death. At this stage of our discussion we must say that the question of personal survival is an open question and that some process theologians are examining ways in which it might be conceived and defended within the process framework. However, if there is "a process view," that view is objective immortality.

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[3]The major process discussions of life after death are A N Whitehead, "Immortality," *Science and Philosophy* (New York Philosophical Library, 1948), pp 85-104, and *Religion in the Making* (New York Living Age Books, 1926), pp 110-111, Charles Hartshorne, *The Logic of Perfection* (LaSalle Open Court Press, 1962), chapter 10, and "A Philosopher's Assessment of Christianity," in *Religion and Culture*, edited by *Walter Leibracht* (New York Harper and Brothers, 1959), pp 175-178; John Cobb, *Christian Natural Theology*, pp 63-70, and *God and the World* (Philadelphia Westminster Press, 1969), pp 99-102, and "Whitehead's Philosophy and a Christian Doctrine of Man", *Journal of Bible and Religion*, XXXII, No 3 (July, 1964), 215-220, Shubert Ogden, *The Reality of God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), chapter 8, and Norman Pittinger, *Process Thought and Christian Faith* (New York Scribner's Sons, 1968), pp 75-84

[4]Hartshorne, *Logic of Perfection*, p 253

Criticisms of the Process View

We will discuss three specific objections to the process view of objective immortality.

1. The idea of objective immortality makes no sense apart from the doctrine of the dipolar nature of God. However, one of the persisting criticisms of process theology is that the doctrine of the relative God is not a proper Christian understanding of God.[5] Specifically, the process God is not the absolute, unconditioned God of Christian faith, the only kind of God who, because unaffected by death and nonbeing, is both worthy of worship and capable of recreating everlasting life out of death. The Christian God is the unique exception to every metaphysical category and so can act uniquely in a way that is not guaranteed or provided by the doctrine of the becoming God.

In regard to the question of personal survival, the Christian appeal is to the promise of recreation, an assurance that is not strictly provided by the process framework but is promised in Scripture and guaranteed by the understanding of God derived from unique Christian revelation. The core of this particular criticism of process theology is that any doctrine of God that is Christian as well as philosophically coherent must understand God as in some sense outside the categories and therefore as capable of recreating a personal identity that is not derived from the categories of the process.

2. Another criticism of the process view of survival is a specific application of the general criticism that process philosophy does not take seriously enough the problem of evil. Namely, process theology does not take full account of the ambiguity and tragedy in the universe generally and the problem of sin and death in man particularly.[6] There can be no doubt that process philosophy is not nearly as optimistic and insensitive to the fact of evil as some thoughtless critics have portrayed it to be. Nevertheless, the process view of the inevitability of false starts and resistence in the creation of value is not identical to the Christian view of the extent of corruption both in the universe and in man. In most Christian theology, especially in its classical and modern

[5]See, for example, John Wild's review of *The Divine Relativity in Review of Metaphysics*, II, No. 6 (1948), 65-77 and his "The Divine Existence: An Answer to Mr. Hartshorne," *Review of Metaphysics*, IV, No. 1 (1950), 61-84. Also Hugo Meynell, "The Theology of Charles Hartshorne," *Journal of Theological Studies*, XXIV, Part I (April, 1973), 152-157.

[6]See Langdon Gilkey's contrast of the "Christian vision" of things to the "process vision" in his review of Cobb's *Christian Natural Theology* in *Theology Today*, XXII, No. 4 (January, 1966), 538-545, and his review of Ogden's *Reality of God* in *Interpretation*, XII, No. 4 October, 1967), 447-459, and his "Process Theology," *Vox Theologica* (January, 1973), 24-25. James Ross has made severe criticisms of Cobb's view of evil in his review of Cobb's *God and the World* in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, XXXVIII, No. 3 (September, 1970), 310-315.

existential forms, the universe is not as rational as process philosophers assume, and man's life and destiny are threatened by a fundamental cleavage in reality.

Applied to the question of personal survival this criticism implies that process theology does not take death seriously enough. The disruption of the universe is so great and the distortion of man is so fundamental that the threat of death is not only the termination of current reality but the threat of nothingness, i.e., the threat that ultimately nothing and so loss prevail. Thus the Christian cannot hope for any kind of survival which is guaranteed by the process of becoming. Becoming is ultimately so distorted and threatened that only a God not affected in his being and so not threatened by nonbeing can retain the actual threat by the power of a special recreation of life out of death. The "naturalness" of survival, whether objective or subjective, is inconsistent with the Christian understanding of evil.

3. The process view of immortality does not guarantee personal survival. However, anything less than personal survival is less than an adequate Christian view of life after death. Belief that values are preserved cumulatively in the everlasting and infallible memory of God adds importance to my life here and now. But it ignores the more important question of life after death, namely, whether the survival of the person himself as a subject of new experienece and value is to be affirmed. Objective immortality and subjective immortality are two different ideas, and the latter is the basic Christian idea.

Furthermore, one of the central promises of the Christian gospel is personal survival. Regardless of whether one takes immortality or resurrection, or some confused and confusing combination of them, as normatively Christian, the central Christian affirmation concerning life after death is personal survival. Thus we find one more respect in which process philosophy is inadequate as a resource for Christian theology.

Defenses of the Process View

The above criticisms of the process view of survival and the theological assertions on which that view depends, can be answered in the following ways.

1. The process concept of the dipolar God is coherent, adequate, and Christian. The concept is *coherent* in the sense that God is understood as one rational category (a unique and necessary individual) within a system of reality that is rational. Rational here means both that the concept of God is not logically contradictory (and for most is

indeed logically necessary) and that reality as a whole is a universe of aesthetic harmony (unity in diversity). God is willing and capable of acting in a way consistent with the operation of the universe; he is not willing or capable of acting in a way fundamentally discontinuous with the operation of the universe. How a rational God can act in a rational universe can be explained only by means of the dipolar concept. Thus there is no possibility or need of God acting supernaturally to recreate an individual identity that is not required or permitted within the scheme.

The dipolar God is *adequate* both philosophically and religiously. He is adequate philosophically precisely because he is, in his absolute nature, God, in every way it is logically meaningful to speak of God as absolute and perfect. The dipolar God, who remembers everlastingly achieved value, human and nonhuman, is religiously adequate precisely because only a related God either can or desires to retain as important the values of man. This is the God who is worthy of worship and commitment because he is (1) the perfect being (2) who is affected by what man is and does. The religious adequacy of the dipolar concept of God is supported by the fact that the religious experience is dipolar in character, namely, the worship of the one who is both worthy of worship and desirous of worship.

This concept of God is much closer to the *Christian* God than is the concept of classical theism. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (the caring, acting, suffering, and so related deity) is, indeed, as Pascal said, not the God of the classical philosophers (the one who exists in his aseity independent of the world in every respect.) The God who is independent of the world but who is also related to the world in the sense that he and the world depend on each other for their full being and so make a difference to each other is precisely the Christian view of God. Regardless of the philosophical and theological probems that surround the concept of the dipolar deity, the one accusation against the concept that cannot be sustained is that the dipolar God is incompatible with the biblical and/or Christian view of God.

2. Process theologians do not take seriously the problem of evil in both its cosmic and human dimensions.[7] However, most of them deny the claims (1) that evil is not "natural" in the universe and (2) that Christians must understand the problem of evil as so overwhelming that an ultimate resolution of the problem is required and that the resolution requires something beyond the process.

[7]For some process discussions of evil see Hartshorne's *Man's Vision of God*, pp. 30, 195-198; Cobb's *God and the World*, chapter 4; Pittinger's *Process Thought*, pp. 31-33, and Peter Hare and Edward Madden, "Evil and Persuasive Power," *Process Studies*, II, No. 1 (Spring, 1972), 44-48.

Ambiguity, tragedy, and destruction are inevitable from the process point of view. The reason for this judgment is that, if continuing development of value is more basic than achieved value, then the very conditions that make good possible, namely, free self-development and social relations, also make evil possible. In a universe in movement error is inevitable. Evil is not a fundamental corruption of a perfect universe; it is the missed aim, the refusal to move forward, the elements of recalcitrance in a growing universe. Sin, the human form of evil, is simply the disproportion between man's limited motives and acts, on the one hand, and the service of the God he acknowledges, on the other hand.[8]

How can process theologians be so "optimistic" in their attitude toward the fact of evil? Even though this viewpoint is not equivalent to evolutionary progressivism (indeed, the viewpoint may also be accused to being "pessimistic" in the sense that no final optimistic outcome is guaranteed), there is little sense of the "ultimate threat" of evil, sin, and death that one finds in some other forms of Christian faith. The process view is supported by a basic assumption: the universe is rational enough not to be totally disrupted by chance or freedom at any level, including the human. That is, the universe is not and cannot be threatened by nonbeing or nothingness.[9] Furthermore, the threats of evil and death as "ultimate threats" are meaningful, both rationally and existentially, only within a categorial scheme of being (absolute perfection) threatened by nonbeing (change and so perishing as an inferior mode of being).

There is nothing essentially Christian, and nothing to be gained for the persuasiveness of Christian faith, by claiming that evil is so fundamental a threat to the universe and to man that only a transcendental being through a discontinuous act can rescue them. The Christian claim is that there is life through or out of death. The process framework provides the categories for an interpretation of that claim. The threat of death is overcome not by proving or positing the everlasting existence of a finite subject but by understanding evil, sin, death, and survival as doctrines dependent for their meaning on the dipolar doctrine of God and the Christian witness to this God in his power to lure and preserve value from any occasion in the process.

3. All of the process theologians referred to in this essay are open on the question of personal survival. Most argue that process philos-

[8]Cobb, "Christian Doctrine of Man," p. 210.

[9]See, for example, Huston Craighead, "Nonbeing and Hartshorne's Concept of God," *Process Studies*, I, No. 1 (Spring, 1971), 9-24; Charles Hartshorne, "Could There Have Been Nothing?" *Process Studies*, I, No. 1 (Spring, 1971), 25-28, and *Man's Vision of God*, chapter 7.

ophy does not guarantee subjective immortality; neither does it clearly prohibit belief in the idea. Some, such as Norman Pittinger, argue that if process theologians are to affirm belief in personal survival, they will have to draw on distinctively Christian resources and add these to statements that can clearly be made on the basis of process philosophy.[10]

There are some arguments from within the process framework itself for the *possibility* of subjective survival. The claim is that the usual philosophical arguments against the possibility are overcome by process philosophy.

Two examples will suffice. First, even wihin the Whiteheadian framework, the human soul is a member of the human society of occasions, and thus seems to have no other existence. However, there is no ontological impossibility that it could exist apart from the organism.[11] The soul is not limited to the intimate relations of the organism. It may continue or be renewed, especially if one conceives of this survival as only further and not infinite survival. Second, the problem of individual identity is not insurmountable.[12] The soul is not a single entity but a personally ordered society of entities. There never is absolute personal self-identity through time; there is only some element of continuity through change. All that is required for personal survival is that the element of continuity survive.

There are, furthermore, some *affirmative* process arguments for subject immortality. One is that life is cumulative, and many potentialities are lost when a person dies. It seems wasteful for life always to begin over again with a new individual.[13] Further, because God is love and because the achievement of greater good through human agency is itself a good, may not the achieved good include also the agency by which it was achieved?[14]

The problems, however, of confidently affirming the actuality of personal survival from within the perspective of process philosophy are serious. The reality of God is no evidence for personal survival. And the existence of the soul is no evidence for its survival of bodily death. Further, the problems of imagining how the soul, if not an indivisible substance, might survive bodily death and where the soul might survive, even if one replaces Newtonian concepts of space, time, and substance with Whiteheadian concepts, require such unincom-

[10]Pittinger, *Process Thought*, p. 82.
[11]Cobb, "Christian Doctrine of Man," p. 219, and *Christian Natural Theology*, p. 65.
[12]Cobb, "Christian Doctrine of Man," pp. 219-220, and *Christian Natural Theology*, pp. 71-79.
[13]Hartshorne, *Logic of Perfection*, p. 261.
[14]Pittinger, *Process Thought*, pp. 81-82.

bered imagination that few process theologians have dared to risk such a program. The tentativeness of these speculations so far, of course, is no decisive argument against the belief in personal survival. However, serious philosophical questions must be raised about how personal survival can be affirmed and why personal survival should be affirmed given the process view of the universe. Process philosophers, so far, have found no compelling positive answers, even for themselves, to either question.

Process theologians do accept the fundamental Christian attitude on the question of personal survival. What is the fundamental Christian conviction? It is the belief, derived both from the biblical and theological literature and the Christian religious experience, that God is the fundamental reality in the universe, that he loves and cares for the creation, and that man's goal is to worsihp and serve God.

Because of this central religious conviction, process theologians tend to argue that even if personal survival were defensible as a possibility on philosophical grounds, there are distinctively Christian objections to the affirmation of the usual ideas of personal survival.

One objection is an exclusively theological one. If finite persons survive, their survival must be finite, because everlasting survival is a characteristic only of God. A second objection is a religious one. The concern for and belief in personal survival is too easily an ego trip, a belief that my value must be experienced forever by me if it is to be genuine. The belief in personal survival may be the final denial that I am finite and the subtle claim that value cannot exist apart from my experience of it.

The second objection rests on the conclusion that the affirmation of personal survival is neither a necessary nor a central Christian belief. The central Christian concern is the worship and service of the one God who is alone the foundation of our and all other existence. Any concern that side-tracks this worship and service of God is not Christian. Man's goal is not subjective immortality but the service of God.

The common process view on survival has been stated succinctly by Shubert Ogden. The Christian promise is that

> whatever happens to us, here or hereafter, in this world or in the next—if there be one—, our lives are lived not simply for a human future, our human posterity. They are always lived in the presence of God. We live our lives literally as contributions to his glory if we live them in faith. And they have an abiding sig-

nificance that enables us to say with the Apostle Paul that death has no longer any victory.[15]

Conclusion

The process doctrine of survival is adequate because it meets our two criteria of adequacy. It answers the threat of ultimate loss within a framewore that is modern. It is a Christian answer because it expresses the fundamental Christian perspective on the goal of human life. The process view ought to be discussed more widely as an authentic and believable Christian view in our era of renewed interest in this question. As one student said, "I find the immortality and resurrection views easier to understand but harder to believe."

[15]Shubert Ogden, "What Is Process Theology?" *Thesis Theological Cassettes*, P. O. Box 11724, Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, Side Two.