This essay is about how traditional philosophical and theological ideas are reformulated as a result of understanding reality as process.

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**Process Thought**

Process is a way thinking about change—and not only that things change, but how. By process we refer to the stages by which something changes. These can be sequential and predictable, as in the process of growth, dying, death. In addition, some processes also require procedures, things that are done to further the process. Manufacture is process in this sense, as is cooking. In all cases, each stage is temporal and temporary. Each moves toward an anticipated end. Process involves time.

But apart from sequence and temporality, there is also process at and within every stage. There are multiple entities—actually beyond numbering and measuring—that are interacting in each moment. In this respect process points to the complexity of reality.

The claim by process thinkers, however, is that process itself constitutes what is real. The primary focus is not of what is, but on what is happening.

The philosophy of process is a venture in metaphysics, the general theory of reality. Its concern is with what exists in the world and with the terms of reference by which this reality is to be understood and explained. The guiding idea of this approach is that natural existence consists in and is best understood in terms of processes rather than things—of modes of change rather than fixed stabilities. For processists, change of every sort—physical, organic, psychological—is the pervasive and predominant feature of the real.

Process philosophy diametrically opposes the view—as old as Parmenides and Zeno and the Atomists of Pre-Socratic Greece—that denies processes or downgrades them in the order of being or of understanding by subordinating them to substantial things. By contrast, process philosophy pivots on the thesis that the processual nature of existence is a fundamental fact with which any adequate
metaphysic must come to terms. (Nicholas Rescher, *Process Metaphysics: An Introduction to Process Philosophy*, pp. 7-8.)

**A Very Short History of Change**

That reality is essentially process is principally a twentieth century idea. But it grew out of nineteenth century thought, when time was dramatically introduced into discussions of reality. In the case of Darwinism (*Origin of Species* was published in 1859), species were no longer understood as fixed and changeless, but capable of continuing changes over time. In the highly influential philosophy of Hegel (1770-1831), development exists within ultimate reality (for which his term was Mind or Spirit, German Geist) and concrete instances within nature and history are essential components of that development.

Twentieth century thinkers who denied fixed realities and explored reality as constituted of change include especially the American Pragmatists (Charles Sanders Pierce, 1839-1914; William James, 1842-1910; John Dewey, 1859-1952) and the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941). There were many others, including the French Jesuit evolutionist and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955). Analogous insights have occurred in the sciences—for example in quantum mechanics and the discussions of the uncertainty principle.

In one sense, certainly in western thought, the question had always been what to think about change. The larger intellectual tradition, at least until the rise of empiricism in the seventeenth and eighteen centuries, had acknowledged the presence of change, seen it as a problem, and invented ways of getting around or beyond it. Plato (427-347 BCE), for example, had held that there are changeless Ideas or Forms (knowable only by direct intuition, and not through observation) of which everything we sense is no more than a manifestation, subject to alteration, decay and death. As such what we sense are illusions, which our bodies mistake for reality. The Ideas and Forms alone are dependable.

Another attempt to deal with change was made by Aristotle (384-322 BCE), a student of Plato. For one thing, he claimed that the world of matter is not an illusion. Every entity contains within what it is (that is, within its irreducible substance), both form and matter. He invested matter with an importance that Plato had denied. This opened the door to observation as a way of knowing. Another claim he made had to do more specifically with change. Every substance in its actuality (Act) includes potential to move to a stage of development beyond its present state. These changes continue until the entity reaches its final and intended stage. The acorn goes through a series of changes until it has become an oak tree. Being was adjusted to include becoming. Only God is complete actuality (Actus Purus) without any potentiality.

These two Aristotelian claims—that matter is important in defining what is real and that becoming is a natural function of reality—were without influence in the west (it was a different story with Islamic thinkers) until the twelfth century. Prior to that time Platonism in its various forms (including especially the Neo-Platonism of Plotinus [204-270 CE]) prevailed. In the twelfth century, in what is called the Nominalist controversy, the idea that universals (such as Plato’s Ideas or Forms) are real and exist independently of anything material was challenged. Thinkers such as Abelard (1079-1142) denied that universals were real. Only individual entities were real, and universals are only terms of convenience (that is, names) for the shared characteristics of a group of observable concrete entities. Once again, this opened the door to observation as a basis of knowledge.

This led eventually to empiricism, the method by which all knowledge results from sensory impressions on the mind—the *tabula rasa*. There were medieval Islamic and Renaissance Italian versions of this, but the great empiricists were British and included Francis Bacon (1561-1626), John Locke (1632-1704), and David Hume (1711-1776).

The other claim, that becoming is natural, reappeared principally with the rediscovery of Aristotle in the thirteenth century, and especially in the work of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). He adapted Aristotle’s view that all things actual contain potential to become another actuality, though always directed toward a set end. The acorn may go through stages, but all toward the actuality of the oak tree.
Heraclitus (ca 500BCE), who lived before both Plato and Aristotle, is generally credited with being the first to reflect on change, and his conclusion was that change is the nature of reality. What constitutes reality is the conflict of opposing entities which nonetheless exist with one another in what he called the “coincidence of the opposites.” Everything is in flux (“no one can step twice into the same river”). In many ways, as recent commentators have suggested, Heraclitus was the first of the process philosophers.

Alfred North Whitehead

Be that as it may, process philosophy per se is most often identified with the work of the British and Harvard mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947), whose Gifford Lectures were published in 1929 as *Process and Reality*.

Whitehead used a number of terms to suggest that what is real is process and not things. One such idea is “actual occasion” or “actual entity.” The idea insinuates that reality is social and historical. It is social, in that at any given moment (or “actual occasion”) a number of entities are interacting, influencing, and being influenced in ways that define what they are and, more importantly, what they are as integral to what is going on.

This interaction is the product of what Whitehead calls the entities’ “prehension,” which suggests “grasping” and “being grasped” in the “actual occasion.” Each “actual entity” affects other entities and the totality of what is happening, and is affected by them. Also each entity in its own way can be creative (Hartshorne is quoted as saying, “To be is to create”), bringing to bear something new—or put another way, there is an element of self-determination and self-expression in each “actual entity” and “actual occasion.” All of these interlocking ideas are what he used to indicate the social nature of reality (which is why Whitehead preferred his thought to be called “the philosophy of organism”). The term he uses to indicate this form of social reality is “nexus.”

…a nexus is a set of actual entities in the unity of the relatedness constituted by their prehensions of each other, or—what is the same thing conversely expressed—constituted by their objectifications in each other. (*Process and Reality* [corrected Edition], p. 24.)

There is also the historical nature of process. The becoming of these “actual occasions” Whitehead calls “concrescence.” They do not last, except through memory and by affecting future other “actual occasions.” Process describes the way one occasion perishes and how another succeeds it. This process establishes the importance of time, and is historical in nature.

Still, even though all “actual occasions” are merely transitions from what was (the past) to what will be (the future), they have intrinsic value. Here the important ideas of “experience” and “enjoyment” take center stage. Reality as experience means that no entity stands outside reality, observing it. Knowledge comes only from participation in reality. This can lead Whitehead to claim that consciousness (reflection and such) follows experience, not the reverse. This is in its own way a dynamic version of empiricism.

Whitehead uses the idea of “enjoyment” as a core concept of process. Enjoyment is the feeling an entity has in being and being connected and being creative that comes in every momentary “actual occasion.”

Two questions (there are others). First: since every entity is involved in process, do rocks have feelings, the way Whitehead uses the word “feelings”? Put another way, does an inanimate entity “prehend” in Whitehead’s words? The answer is yes, though “feelings” and “prehension” do not necessarily involve consciousness.

In Whitehead's philosophy, every actual entity has a physical and a mental pole….The physical and mental poles are aspects of every real being (actual entities) but they are not real beings themselves. It is also important to note that, for Whitehead, human consciousness is a higher form of mentality but not the only form. Thus, Whitehead does not claim that every real being is a conscious entity. As with Leibniz, Whitehead recognizes a continuum of mind-like qualities ranging from very primitive feelings.
to the most advanced form of self-awareness. Whereas Leibniz speaks of every real being—he calls them monads—as having apperception and appetition, Whitehead speaks of every actual entity as prehending, or grasping or taking account of, its environment and as striving to realize the subjective aim of coordinating its prehensions in some determinate fashion. Whitehead uses the word “feeling” as a synonym for prehension… (Viney, 3.1)

The other question: if each “actual entity” is not a substance but a process, what actually continues, the way a substance does? This reflects a concern Paul Tillich had:

…becoming would be impossible if nothing were preserved in it as the measure of change. A process philosophy which sacrifices the persisting identity of that which is in process sacrifices the process itself, its continuity, the relation of what is conditioned to its conditions, the inner aim (telos) which makes a process a whole. (Systematic Theology, Volume One, p. 181.)

Whitehead uses terms such as “enduring object” and “society” to suggest the entity that continues. “Society” when applied to an individual entity indicates that the entity is not only a collection of a variety “actual occasions” but an order of such experiences. Memory is the device by which these experiences are carried forth.

In short, Whitehead characterizes occasions as marked by complexity and temporality, and sees occasions as most indicative of reality. While his ideas have been utilized by thinkers in a number of fields (including philosophy itself), they proved especially attractive to theologians. This was particularly true of the faculty at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago from the late twenties, and notably in the work of Henry Nelson Wieman and Charles Hartshorne. Subsequently two of Hartshorne’s students, Shubert Ogden at Perkins School of Theology (Southern Methodist University) and John B. Cobb, Jr. of the Claremont School of Theology, have been the most diligent exponents of process theology. Cobb and David Ray Griffin founded the Center for Process Studies at Claremont in 1973. Independently of the Chicago influence, Norman Pittenger of the Episcopal General Theological Seminary in New York City was a major voice of process theology. Uptown at Union Theological Seminary, Daniel Day Williams (a student of Wieman at Chicago) became a leader in the movement.

Process and God

Whitehead talked about God. Indeed, the last chapter of Process and Reality is entitled “God and the World.” But not all process thinkers follow him.

Naturalistic processists…see… cosmic macroassets explicable in a nature-immanent way, and view the world as a self-sufficient and self-managing system. The organismic and evolutionary tendencies of process thought offer useful resources to the latter position. (Rescher, pp. 155-156.)

There are indeed process philosophers who are theists—who “see God as a major player in the realm of cosmic process, accounting for the world’s order and intelligibility, its creative dynamism, and its teleological normativity” (Rescher, p. 153).

At the same time, process thinkers who use the word “God,” do so in a way that is unlike what is usually meant by the term. For them God is not a cosmic moralist, judging, rewarding, punishing, even forgiving unacceptable human behavior and attitudes. God is not the unchanging and passionless Absolute, essentially uninvolved in the world and unaffected by it, and distracting human minds from it. God is not controlling power, with a mysterious plan and in control of everything that happens. God is not the sanctioner of the status quo, primarily interested in order. God is not male, as most religious language maintains. (Cobb and Griffin, Process Theology, pp.8-9.)

If God is any or all of these, process thinkers and even process theologians are atheists. They explicitly reject this general view of God. If this is the case, why do they use the word? Is the word “God” so much a part of the traditional vocabulary concerning reality, that they are simply accepting it and redefining it? If that
is the case, given the unacceptable connotations of the word, why not avoid it? Or is there some aspect of process that calls out for the word “God,” and none other will do?

“Continuity” in process might qualify. Not all things continue, but process itself does. In that sense process endures where individual processes and “actual occasions” do not, and endurance is the ground of process. Rather than “the ground of being” (Tillich), God is “the ground of hope” (Cobb). Or, if there is such an aspect of process, it has to do with “possibility” and “novelty.” Every “concrete actuality” and “concrete occasion” dissolves immediately and new ones occur, bringing memory of prior experiences and in a new constellation and set of interactions. In each new occasion there are also new possibilities, and the question is from whence do they come? Is there inexplicable creativity?

And there are, beyond the mere interaction of entities, new entities, which process thinkers call “novelties.”

The present experience decides, in terms of its simultaneous aim at its own enjoyment and its self-expression beyond itself, precisely how to incorporate the elements available to it. It might be thought that the creative response merely involves a modified arrangement of elements already realized in the past, but this is not the whole truth. Novel elements, previously unactualized in the world, are also incorporated.

…One aspect of God is a primordial envisagement of the pure possibilities.

…This means that the divine reality is understood to be the ground of novelty. (Cobb and Griffin, pp. 27-28.)

…God is that factor in the universe which establishes what-is-not as relevant to what-is, and lures the world toward new forms of realization. (Cobb and Griffin, p. 43.)

Is it part of reality, these thinkers ask, that such factors as “possibility” and “novelty” are more than natural? If so, and the word “God” will not do to indicate them, what word will?

Of course it must be admitted that there are persons and thinkers who are so uncomfortable with the word “God” (for a great variety of reasons) that nothing in this description of process will require its use. For some, the existence of God is not needed. It is a form of what William James called over-belief. For some it is a form of superstition or illusion. For some it represents inhibitions to free inquiry and the work of science.

Others, obviously more comfortable (for other reasons) with talking about God, approach things differently. They work to see how process allows a fresh look at traditional ideas about God.

One of the tangles that Christian theology has been caught up in over the centuries is whether God can create the world and act in history. Some said yes and some said no. The issue exposed a tension in Christian thought about God, stemming from two world views that informed the idea.

The Christians who denied that God could create and act in history did so because they drew assurance from the changelessness of God. For them, God was immutable (changeless), complete, independent, needing nothing, unaffected by anything. These were Greek concerns, expressed in Platonism in its various forms and apparent in most of the early Christian writers—examples are Justin Martyr and Origen. One of the so-called Gnostic texts characterized God as follows:

"The Monad is a monarchy with nothing above it. It is he who exists as God and Father of everything, the invisible One who is above everything, who exists as incorruption, which is in the pure light into which no eye can look.

"He is the invisible Spirit, of whom it is not right to think of him as a god, or something similar. For he is more than a god, since there is nothing above him, for no one lords it over him. For he does not exist in something inferior to him, since everything exists in him. For it is he who establishes himself. He is
eternal, since he does not need anything. For he is total perfection. He did not lack anything, that he might be completed by it; rather he is always completely perfect in light. He is illimitable, since there is no one prior to him to set limits to him. He is unsearchable, since there exists no one prior to him to examine him. He is immeasurable, since there was no one prior to him to measure him. He is invisible, since no one saw him. He is eternal, since he exists eternally. He is ineffable, since no one was able to comprehend him to speak about him. He is unnameable, since there is no one prior to him to give him a name. (*The Secret Revelation of John.*)

It followed that God’s changelessness would be threatened by God’s creating changeable entities and by acting in history. Creation and history must be an accident or mistake (as in some of the so-called Gnostic creation stories),

Other Christians drew assurance from the idea that God indeed created a good world and was active in its management. They were mainly concerned that there may be many gods in conflict with one another, and it was important for them that there was only one such creator and governor. This view of God was more akin to the biblical view—God was struggling against chaos to create order, experimenting with the creation, interacting with human beings

An attempt to resolve this dilemma was the idea of the Logos, first mentioned by Heraclitus and developed by the Stoics. The Logos (Greek for Word) was the rational order that informed the natural and social structures of the world. It had a transcendent (universal and changeless) aspect and one that was imminent (present in the world). The idea was widely used by Christians, and appears as early as John’s Gospel:

> In the beginning was the Word (Greek, Logos), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.  
> He was in the beginning with God.  
> All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. (John 1.1-3)

But was that possible, given the immutability of God? Was the Logos divine in the way God was divine?

This finally issued in a controversy in the fourth century when a church leader named Arius, seeking to preserve the immutability of God, claimed that the Logos was not divine in the sense that God is divine. The Logos, according to Arius, was “made,” not “begotten.” “There was when (the Logos) was not.” It was largely to answer Arius, that the Council of Nicaea was convened in 325 CE. This creed resulted, along with a condemnation of Arius’ teaching:

> We believe in one God  
> the Father almighty,  
> maker of all things both seen and unseen.  
> And in one Lord Jesus Christ,  
> the Son of God,  
> begotten from the Father,  
> only begotten,  
> that is, from the substance (Greek, ousia) of the Father  
> God from God, light from light,  
> true God from true God,  
> begotten not made,  
> of one substance (Greek, *homoousion*) with the Father,  
> through whom all things came to be,  
> things in heaven and things on earth;  
> Who because of us men and because of our salvation  
> came down and became incarnate,  
> becoming man,  
> suffered and rose again on the third day,  
> ascended to the heavens,
and will come to judge the living and the dead.
And in the Holy Spirit.

And as for those who say:
"there once was when he was not", and "before he was begotten he was not",
and that he came into existence out of nothing,
or who assert that the Son of God is of a different hypostasis or substance,
or is created, or is subject to alteration or change—
these the Catholic Church anathematizes.

Actually the dilemma persisted. Each version of God had its continuing supporters. In general, the Eastern churches preferred understanding God as changeless, while the West (Roman) held onto the involvement of God in creating and managing the world.

The God of process thought is both. Both changeless and changing, absolute and relative. Often this has been stated simply as a paradox. Cyril Richardson, one of my professors in seminary, repeatedly claimed that the first two persons of the Trinity refer to the transcendence and immanence of God. What both Whitehead and Hartshorne did was to clarify what that means—that is, in what respects God is changeless and in what respects God is changing, and in what way they interact and affect one another. They portrayed God as dipolar (not bipolar!) to indicate two poles which require each other, interact with each other, and affect each other.

They develop this idea in slightly different way. Whitehead speaks of the two poles or characteristics as primordial and consequent.

The primordial nature is God's envisagement of all possibilities… It is called “primordial” because it represents what could be in a sense not tethered to the actual course of events. … The consequent nature is God's prehensions of the actual processes of the world. Conversely, it is the world's influence on God. It is called “consequent” because it is consequent upon, or dependent upon, the decisions of non-divine actual entities (Whitehead calls them actual occasions). The consequent nature is the record of all achieved fact, a perfect memory of what has been—Whitehead speaks of the “objective immortality” of the world in God. The two natures work in concert in the process of God's interaction with the creatures. The deity receives the world of actual occasions into its experience; then, comparing what has actually occurred with the realm of pure possibility, God informs the world with new ideals (new aims), customized for each actual entity, for what realistically could be achieved. It is God's relevance for the world as a “lure for feeling,” urging the creatures to strive for whatever perfection of which they are capable. (Viney, Donald, "Process Theism", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

Hartshorne expressed a similar dipolarity using the terms existence (or essence) and actuality. By the first he means the enduring characteristics that cannot be lost—only God cannot cease to be; other entities can. By actuality he means the time-bound experiences by which God is changed. The analogy used is of a person who continues to be, while changing the form in which the person is affected by different circumstances.

An interesting variation of the question of changelessness and change in God is what it means to say that God loves (which both Cobb and Griffin [Chapter 3, especially pp.43-47] and Viney discuss). If love involves compassion—experiencing the pains and joys of the one loved, and being affected by the loved one’s actual needs, then in traditional theology, God cannot love. Love would involve God’s being affected, which God cannot be. The answer that such thinkers as Anselm and Thomas Aquinas offered was that God loved in doing good works for creatures without having feelings for them. In a sense God does good without any awareness of the actual needs of the recipient. Human love is superior to that. Process theology maintains that God is involved in creation and is changed within “actual occasions,” while in no way endangering the ability of God to continue.
There is another set of divine attributes—other than immutability and impassivity. God is said to be all powerful (omnipotent) and all-knowing (omniscient). These presented other problems, which process theology addresses and to which we will turn later. Briefly, one is the well known observation that God cannot be both all-powerful and good. If God is omnipotent and does not prevent evil, God is not good. If good and does not prevent evil, God is not omnipotent. Another attribute that presents problems is the omniscience of God and its relationship to free will and contingency.

Process theology objects to a number of divine characteristics embraced by Christian Platonism in its several forms (such as aseity, immutability, incorporeality, simplicity, impassibility, oneness). This is because these characteristics insinuate that God is not involved in the world. On the other hand, process theology has shown an interest in another set of attributes that do suggest that God is aware of and involved in creation and history.

Traditionally God has three attributes—omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. The last, that God was everywhere present, proved no problem for process theology. Indeed, for process theology, it was not only that God was in every “actual occasion” as the presence of possibility and novelty, everything was in God—panentheism (an old and widespread idea, used by Whitehead and especially by Hartshorne). But omnipotence and omniscience called for reflection and reformulation.

Process and God’s Omnipotence (the Problem of Evil)

In the case of the omnipotence of God, the position of process theology is pretty straightforward: God is not all powerful. The title of one of Hartshorne’s books is *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (1984).

Whitehead remarks that some medieval and modern philosophers got into the unfortunate habit of paying God “metaphysical compliments”—that is to say attributing properties to God that seem to make the divine more worthy of devotion but that are contrary to sound metaphysical reasoning…In a deliberate play on J. B. Philips’ classic *Your God is Too Small,* Tyron Inbody sums up the criticism of traditional accounts of divine power by saying, “Your God is too big.” (Viney, 5)

This is because for process theology God is involved in process, and is affected by process. For Hartshorne God’s actuality (as distinguished from God’s existence) is constantly changing as a result of the “actual occasions” in which God is present, active, and altered. God cannot impose God’s will. God’s activity is characterized by process theologians as “persuasion” rather than “coercion.” God cannot force things to happen.

However, there are ways in which God is absolutely powerful. God creates process, and nothing can resist process. God creates order, even within process, and while the form order takes is different in different “actual occasions,” order itself always prevails. God is constituted by possibility and novelty—indeed, by creativity. God is the “lure” towards what is not yet. As such God is ever-present and ever-active, if not all-powerful (omnipotent) in the sense of determining everything.

Actually the idea of the omnipotence of God, when it was finally analyzed in the medieval period, was shown to have qualifications and exceptions, as Linwood Urban has summarized (*A Short History of Christian Thought* [1986], pp. 191-194). God can be thought of as all-powerful, if what “all-powerful” is made clear. For example, as Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century pointed out, even an all-powerful being cannot “bring about a contradictory state of affairs. God could not create something uncreated or cause a past event not to have been.” Otherwise, God is omnipotent.

But a more recent and perhaps more difficult question has been put forth concerning the omnipotence of God:

Could an omnipotent being create beings over which he had no control? It would seem that he could not, because then he would not be omnipotent. But if such is the case, then he could not create beings
with free will, or create a state of affairs in which sub-atomic particles or mutations of genes are subject to change (Urban, p. 191).

Some have suggested that “omnipotent” be redefined to mean “the ability to create many different kinds of things,” in this case a world in which God controls everything and a world in which God cannot control everything. But that is a stretch, it seems to me.

An older answer is that God is all-powerful but has limited that power to allow human free will, which requires a reason for the exception. One answer is that persons learn and improve by making choices, including bad choices. But when a choice involves the suffering and death of millions, free will as a factor in learning proves to have an inordinate price tag.

The question of the extent of (and limits to) God’s power is unavoidably tied to the question of the presence of evil. In his modern day version of the Book of Job, the playwright Archibald MacLeish has Nickles (his version of the Satan figure) sing to himself:

I heard upon his dry dung heap
That man cry who cannot sleep”
“If God is God He is not good,
If God is good He is not God…

Put another way, if God is all-powerful (omnipotent), God could prevent evil. If God is good, God would prevent evil. Evil exists—therefore there is no God or at least God is not all-powerful or God is not benevolent. Or, as the Book of Job suggests, humans cannot understand.

Process theology comes to the problem of evil in several interrelated ways. One way is in acknowledging that “good” and “evil” are closely related—what is gain always is also loss, for example, and the opposite is often true. Perfect order is at the same time complete loss of creative freedom. Put another way, both disorder and triviality are forms of evil, and order is often achieved with triviality. Also, both “good” and “evil” are the product of process, and not the work of any one entity (even God) within it. In this way, both human evil (e.g., the holocausts and global warming) and natural evil (the 1755 Lisbon earthquake and climate change) collapse in different respects into one another.

In short, process theologians acknowledge that process involves risk, with the possibility and even probability of inordinate suffering along the way—but always with renewed order and fresh beginnings. There is actually no alternative. Even if there were, they would prefer the adventure of creativity to the boredom of safety. Viney (5) quotes William James from the closing pages of Pragmatism:

Suppose that the world’s author put the case to you before creation, saying: “I am going to make a world not certain to be saved, a world the perfection of which shall be conditional merely, the condition being that each several agent does its own “level best.” I offer you the chance of taking part in such a world. Its safety, you see is unwarranted. It is a real adventure, with real danger, yet it may win through. It is a social scheme of co-operative work genuinely done. Will you join the procession? Will you trust yourself and trust the other agents enough to face the risk?

Viney also points out that process theologians are more interested in aesthetics than in order. (This by the way was maintained by such early nineteenth thinkers as Schleiermacher in On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers and Kierkegaard especially in Fear and Trembling). What one is aware of precedes and encompasses what one does.

If a perfectly good deity would have the motive to overcome discord and wickedness, it would also have the motive to avoid triviality and boredom. This is especially the case in the universe conceived by process theism where feeling (prehension) is a metaphysical category. The etymology of “aesthetic” is aesthesis, which means feeling, and process thought emphasizes that aesthetic values are fundamentally values for an experiencing subject. Moreover, the experiencing subject, in most cases, is
not human. This fact is evident not only by looking at the contemporary world with its countless varieties of species, but also when one considers the nearly unfathomable stretches of time on this planet when humans did not exist… Process metaphysics provides for an aesthetic theory that recognizes objective criteria of value such as unity amid contrast and intensity amid complexity…. The long process of evolution can be charted on a curve of ever increasing varieties and complexities of organisms with augmented capacity for valuable types of experience. As Cobb and Griffin note, the escape from triviality meant an increased risk of discord… (Viney, 5)

**Process and God’s Omniscience (the Problem of Contingency)**

The claim that God is omniscient (all-knowing) presented its own questions for traditional theology. That God could know everything in a static world did not present a problem and was not discussed. The problem was that things change and events occur, either by chance or as result of human decision. Could God know ahead of time what was going to happen? Could God be surprised? In short, did God’s omniscience include foreknowledge? And if God had foreknowledge, could human decisions (and free will) be possible?

Unlike the omnipotence of God, God’s omniscience (all-knowing) received attention early. Urban again (pp. 181-189) has a good summary. Aristotle anticipated process theology’s ideas on the subject in showing that knowledge of the future is limited to what is possible, not what is certain. Certainty at best can be characteristic of knowledge of past or present events, never of future events. Of future events knowledge is limited to what is possible (and impossible)—or, though Aristotle did not suggest it, what is probable though not certain. Foreknowledge of future events is impossible.

Put another way, foreknowledge denies the existence of chance or human free will. If what happens by chance is known to happen beforehand, it is no longer what is meant by chance. Even more so, if what is done by free will and choice is known beforehand, it too is no longer free.

Traditional thought on knowledge and contingency, especially as applied to God, did not accept these conclusions. Augustine, as Urban points out, held that prior knowledge of an event does not cause the event to occur. If that is true, however, the foreknowledge is only coincidentally related to the event—the event could have turned out differently.

Still, Augustine’s position prevailed, as least as the basis on which others attempted to deal with the dilemma. How could God know future events without determining them? One influential answer, proposed by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, is that “God knows future contingents not as future, but timelessly” (Urban, p. 184). One analogy is of God on the top of a mountain with a view of all the paths leading upward (with hikers who know the trails segment by segment). God views all time as a completed whole instantaneously. Another analogy would be of a screenwriter who has the completed script in front of him (and so knows everything that is going to happen and be filmed) and actors who are only given the script scene by scene (and so do not know what happens next or how the story ends). But can hikers force a redrawing of the map or actors force a rewriting of the script by improvisation? What then of foreknowledge?

The subject continued to fascinate thinkers, philosophers and theologians alike. Of special interest is William of Ockham (1290-1349), who more than most held to the attributes of God we have been discussing. Urban quotes him,

…the determination of the uncreated will [i.e., God’s will] does not suffice, because a created will can oppose the determination [of the uncreated will]. Therefore, since the determination of the [created] will was not from eternity, God [could] not have certain cognition of the things that remained [for the created will to determine]. (Urban, p. 185)

Ockham concluded that God could not know every future event. Nonetheless, he believed that God was omniscient, though “it is impossible to express clearly the way in which God knows future [events]” (Urban 186).
And so it goes. Urban cites the influential work of Alan Plantinga (especially *God, Freedom and Evil* [1974]) who talks in terms of multiple possible worlds and only one actual world—an idea I do not understand (and fortunately, I am not alone: see Urban, p. 187 note 72). Viney discusses the work of the sixteenth century Jesuit Luis de Molina, who delineated different kinds of knowledge in addressing this quandary.

According to process theology, God knows everything that can be known. But what can be known is limited. The details of the future cannot be known, simply because they do not yet exist. Still, God does know everything about certain aspects of future events (just not the details, which always have yet to be decided in “actual occasions” by “actual entities,” including God). It is called God’s omniscience because what it represents what exceeds and is unavailable to the other “actual entities,” even in their aggregate. What God knows is everything that has been previously decided or actualized—God’s memory is complete and universal, and provides God’s contribution to the present “actual occasions.” This knowledge is combined with God’s knowledge of possibility—that there is possibility generally and the limited possibilities in the present “actual occasion.” And God knows what “new thing” is possible.

**Process and God’s Incarnation (the Nature of Divine Immanence)**

It is one thing for process theology to claim that God (denoting certain sustained realities) is present in the world (as defined as “actual occasions”)—that God is immanent as well as transcendent. It calls for further clarification as to how God is present.

In Christian theology, this has to do with creation and incarnation. Both are attributed to the Logos. God creates through the Logos. According to the Prologue to John’s Gospel, “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (John 1.3). The Nicene Creed (325) says in the second article, of the Son:

- the Son of God,
- begotten from the Father,
- only begotten,
- that is, from the substance (Greek, *ousia*) of the Father
- God from God, light from light,
- true God from true God,
- begotten not made,
- of one substance (Greek, *homoousion*) with the Father,
- through whom all things came to be,
- things in heaven and things on earth;

Also, and somewhat more to the point, the Logos becomes flesh, as the Prologue to John’s Gospel claims (“And the Logos [or Word] became flesh and lived among us,” John 1.14). The Nicene Creed states,

- Who because of us men and because of our salvation
  came down and became incarnate,
- becoming man,
  suffered and rose again on the third day,
  ascended to the heavens,
  and will come to judge the living and the dead.

Historically, the nature of the incarnation meant two different things, largely resulting from two distinctive ideas of what “salvation” meant. For one group of Christians, characterized by scholars as the School of Antioch, “salvation” meant being delivered from a world of disorder, a state originating with the disobedience of the first humans.

18 Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. 19 For just as by the one man’s disobedience the
many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous. (Romans 5.18-19)

This deliverance is accomplished by a new humanity that complies with the expectations of order. This meeting of expectation with compliance is accomplished in Jesus Christ, who is both divine (expectation of order) and human (freely given compliance). The extreme version of this achievement is called adoptionism (that is, the man Jesus is adopted as Son of God because of his obedience, as at his baptism). A more acceptable version of adoptionism was advocated by Nestorius, who suggested that the convergence of divine expectation and human response occurred at conception. But there were always two natures, and ultimately two wills. This view of the human dilemma required it.

For the second group, characterized as the School of Alexandria, the human problem was understood differently. The Alexandrians were Platonists and especially neo-Platonists. For them the situation was that human beings had forgotten who they were within the unchanging and unified reality. Humans had wandered off into fascination with changing things and with the sheer multiplicity of it all. What was needed was a reminder, a visitation by means of the Logos from what is changeless and unified, to lure the lost home. It was the Logos that was needed; the body was no more than a pedagogical device. That was the incarnation: the Logos made flesh. One version of this incarnational theology was called docetism (from the Greek dokeo, to seem: the Logos only “seemed” to have a body). The extreme was held by Apollinaris, who taught “one nature of the Divine Logos, and that made flesh”. The insinuation was that the Logos replaced the human mind in the new humanity.

A variation of the Alexandrian view was that the human race had been beguiled and was now held captive by the forces of fragmentation and multiplicity. The Logos established residence, so to speak, in humankind in such a way that these forces lost control of the species.

3. And like as when a great king has entered into some large city and taken up his abode in one of the houses there, such city is at all events held worthy of high honor, nor does any enemy or bandit any longer descend upon it and subject it; but, on the contrary, it is thought entitled to all care, because of the king's having taken up his residence in a single house there: so, too, has it been with the Monarch of all. 4. For now that He has come to our realm, and taken up his abode in one body among His peers, henceforth the whole conspiracy of the enemy against mankind is checked, and the corruption of death which before was prevailing against them is done away. For the race of men had gone to ruin, had not the Lord and Savior of all, the Son of God, come among us to meet the end of death. (Athanasius, On the Incarnation, 9)

In this version, however, it was essential that full humanity be assumed, including the mind—what is not assumed, they said, cannot be recovered. But the Logos was still the only active power.

All of this came to a head in the fifth century, culminating in the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The teachings of both Nestorius and of Apollinaris were condemned. It was decided that the incarnation resulted in one person in two natures, which decided little in resolving the underlying differences. The two views continued.

Process theology has shown appreciation for both Christologies, though of course from a process perspective. On the idea that there are in the incarnation two realities, one divine and the other human, interacting, process theology sees in every “actual occasion” the presence of possibility and novelty seeking a productive response from the “actual entities” involved. And on the other model, of the divine appearing to rescue the human from bondage to powers of fragmentation, they like the idea of order and novelty appearing in every “actual occasion” to break the powers of disorder and what they call triviality.

There is a difference. Process involves change occurring in all participating entities, including God. Process thinkers sometimes discuss this in the context of Leibnitz’s idea of monads—that reality is made up individual things that may affect one another without changing one another. What they say is that Leibnitz’s monads “have no windows.” Process entities “have windows.”
What is not clear is the manner in which God is permanently changed as a result of incarnation and interaction with those entities which are not God. One “pole” does not change, of course—what Whitehead calls God’s “primordial nature” and Hartshorne calls God’s “existence.” But what of God’s “consequent nature” (Whitehead) and “actuality” (Hartshorne)? How are they changed? An answer is that in the “actual occasion” God is made aware that possibilities and novelty are limited by the other “actual entities,” and records those limits. (In a completely different context, Carl Jung redefines the incarnation to mean that God makes a move to learn what it means to exist in the presence of unlimited power.)

Of course historically there was also another version of the incarnation, dealt with by Anselm (1033-1109) in *Cur Deus Homo?* The assumption behind his very influential treatment is universal human guilt—which for Anselm is the solitary or at least predominant human problem. It had been dealt with earlier, but always in a way that was subordinate to larger issues. An example is Augustine, for whom the human problem is inordinate self interest or pride. In any case, this version of the incarnation—dealing with the guilt of humanity—permeates western Christian thought, both Protestant and Catholic. And it is an issue in which process theology shows little interest. What would guilt look like in process?

For process theology, divine immanence generally and incarnation more specifically function in the context of creativity. Christ is the great liberator, not only from human oppression, but from the unnecessary limits on imagination. Sin is overcome in the succession of “actual occasions”—but the sin Christ counters is not disorder (disobedience) or forgetfulness and ignorance or pride or guilt or (yet another version) anxiety. It is unawareness of what is happening and a failure to respond creatively and responsively—what Whitehead characterized as “anaesthesia.”

Two footnotes. One is the claim by Christians that it is only through Jesus that salvation of any sort is available. This claim is rooted in the Gospel of John throughout, and principally in 13.6-7

> 6 Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. 7 If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

This is of course offensive to non-Christians, and scholars sensitive to this offense have addressed it in numerous ways. One is given by Elaine Pagels in her the excellent essay in *Beyond Belief; “Gospels in Conflict: John and Thomas.* She maintains that this claim, and indeed the entire Gospel of God, is not made to non-Christians, but to adherents to the Gospel of Thomas, where Jesus is pictured as a fellow searcher, not the sole avenue to truth.

Process theology’s interest in Jesus is as the human being who was unique in his awareness of the Logos—an approach that goes back at least to the work of Schleiermacher in the early nineteenth century.

Second, there is a movement to free Jesus from all of this talk of divine incarnation—the various and renewed searches of the historical Jesus. Some want to rescue Jesus from Christianity. Others see Jesus (especially as he appears in the Gospel of Matthew) as a good Jew, perhaps as a teacher of the type of Hillel. Amy Jill Levine is a major voice in this effort. Others portray Jesus as a political zealot, or at a minimum as a counter-culturalist.

**Process and Human Existence (the Problem of Anthropocentricism)**

For process theology, there is no such thing as human nature. There is only human existence. That is, whatever else is meant by “human,” it is individual and distinct, existing only in specific “actual occasions,” which are socially and historically specific.

To say that there is no human nature, only human existence, is a reminder that process thought developed at the same time as existentialism. Whitehead’s *Process and Reality* was published in 1929. Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, in 1927. John Cobb perceptively writes of existentialist thought:
Central to existential thought is the formal doctrine that existence precedes essence. What we are as human beings is not decided by God, by society, or by our personal past. We decide in the act of existing. We may try to evade the radical responsibility that this places upon us, but such evasion is itself a decision as to what we are. Furthermore, there are no preestablished rules that either factually or normatively govern our existence. Each situation is unique. If we choose to apply a rule, that is the choice for which we are responsible. There is no predetermined end toward which we are directed. The future is radically open. We create the future in our decision. We are responsible for the future. To all this a Whiteheadian agrees.

Furthermore, our existence is radically contingent—we might not have been. There is no preexistent plan that includes us and assigns us a role in the scheme of things. In Heidegger’s words, we experience ourselves as “thrown” into the world. It is in this arbitrary situation that we must assume responsibility for ourselves. With this, too, a Whiteheadian can agree. (Cobb and Griffin, p. 81)

In any “actual occasion” it is the existent human individual or community that is present and participating. This is what lends to its being part of a creative endeavor. At the same time, and this is an answer to the observation that existentialism is centered on the human situation, in process the existent human is interacting with all present organic and even inorganic “actual entities.” Reality is socially dynamic in nature. This, as we shall see in the next session, permits process theology to have an ecological dimension.

Reinhold Niebuhr stated in the opening sentence of The Nature and Destiny of Man that “Man has always been his own most vexing problem.” At any rate, at least since the time of Augustine in the fifth century and its western part, Christian theology has been fixed on the question of human nature. The main questions have revolved around what it can and cannot do, how it got messed up (the doctrine of the Fall), what it is like now (infested with inordinate self interest or original sin—or not!), and how it can be healed.

Process theology does not see humanity as a problem unto itself. Insofar as it focuses on sin at all, it is about “missing the mark” (the meaning of the Greek word usually translated “sin”). Sin is lack of awareness of what is happening in the “actual occasion,” with all its unique limits and possibilities. It has reemphasized the place of the individual human being in reality, but transposed it into a participant in a social and historical creative process.

**Process and Nature (the Ecological Crisis)**

You would think that “nature” would be a natural for process thought. But what traditionally is meant by “nature”—that is, a part of reality that exists for human sustenance and satisfaction—does not exist as such. Indeed, human beings are part of nature, not separate from and mastering nature. In fact, everything is “nature.”

And, as we might expect, not only does “nature” include everything, it is perpetually innovating.

In this regard as in others, Teilhard de Chardin was a typical process philosopher. For him, “the universe is no longer a State but a Process.” As Teilhard saw it, nature everywhere strives to produce something new in this world’s scheme of things. Nature is not something fixed and given; it is “a world that is ever being born instead of a world that is”—change, development, and evolutionary emergence are the world’s only pervasive and enduring features. We live in a world centering on a specious present that is ever in transit from a realized past to an open future “Every particle of reality, instead of constituting a self-contained point in itself, extends from the previous fragment to the next along an inevitable thread running back to infinity.” And not only do natural processes produce “things,” it is their no less contribution to bring into being new types (species) and new patterns of order (laws). The evolutionary origination of new kinds is operative not in the biological realm above but throughout nature—at every level of detail and size (micro and macro alike). (Rescher, Process Metaphysics [1996], p. 90.)
In maintaining this analysis, process thought corresponds to evolutionary theory.

Evolution…provides a clear model for how processual novelty and innovation comes into operation in nature’s self-engendering and self-perpetuating scheme of things. Evolution, be it of organism or of mind, of subatomic matter or of the cosmos as a whole, reflects the pervasive role of process which philosophers of this school see as central both to the nature of our world and to the terms in which it must be understood. Change pervades nature. Process at once destabilizes the world and is the cutting edge of advance to novelty. And evolution at every level—physical, biological, and cosmic—carries the burden of the work here. (Rescher, p. 99)

In process thought evolution describes how what happens at one level becomes the basis for what occurs at the next.

The development of enduring individuals at the level of electrons, protons, neutrons, etc., provided the necessary condition for the emergence of atoms. The atoms in turn provided the necessary condition for the appearance of molecules. These in turn were necessary ingredients in the emergence of the living cell…Each stage…presupposes the previous stage. Each novel advance was possible only after the previous novel advance had become stabilized into a pervasive Also, only a limited advance is possible at each stage—it is not possible to jump directly from stage one to stage four; stages two and three have to come between. (Cobb and Griffin, pp. 66-68)

So nature both perpetuates itself and reinvents itself. Here a number of issues arise. For one, some process thinkers claim that what is reinvented are also the laws of nature.

…from the time of Pythagoras, various philosophers have taught that while the world’s phenomena may be ever-changing, the laws that govern the comportment of these changes are stable and fixed once and for all. Following the lead of C. S. Peirce, process metaphysics firmly rejects this contention. As it sees the matter, process invades the world’s law-structure as well; the laws of nature, too, are merely transitory stabilities that emerge at one phase of cosmic history only to lapse from creation and give way to variant modes of operation in the fullness of time….Even the so-called laws of nature are themselves little more than islands of relative stability in a sea of process. (Rescher, p. 91)

There is also the question whether these innovations have a direction, or are simply random. Those who affirm direction see evolution moving from simpler to more complex entities, and indeed claim this to be progress as well as process. Greater complexity in turn provides for, or even requires, ordered harmony on the one hand and greater intensity on the other.

The two variables involved in the degree of enjoyment are harmony and intensity. Obviously, for experience to be enjoyable, it must be basically harmonious; the elements must not clash so strongly that discord outweighs harmony. Also, for great enjoyment there must be adequate intensity of experience. Without intensity there might be harmony, but the value enjoyed will be trivial. Intensity depends upon complexity, since intensity requires that a variety of elements be brought together into a unity of experience. To bring a variety of elements into a moment of experience means to feel these elements, to prehend them positively. Now, the more complex an actuality is, the more elements from its environment it can feel, and thereby take into itself. The simpler occasions of experience must exclude from feeling more of the potential values in the environment. This is why intensity depends upon complexity, and hence why the higher grades of enjoyment finally depend upon complexity. Furthermore, a complex actuality is possible only on the basis of an ordered environment. This is why order is promoted for the sake of increased enjoyment. (Cobb and Griffin, pp. 64-65).

The claim of direction is given an explicit expression in Teilhard de Chardin’s idea of the Omega Point—that is, as things diversify themselves in novelty, they reach greater levels of complexity, until they converge. “Everything that rises must converge,” he wrote. (Flannery O’Conner used the phrase as the title of a short story and it was then used for a posthumous collection of her stories. I always think of Henry Adams’s
In any case, this understanding of nature runs counter to the variety of ways nature is portrayed by the Bible and Christian thought. For one thing, in the Bible the entities of nature are the creation of the deity, and demonstrate its workmanship. Also, the entities of nature exist primarily for the sustenance and security of humans, and indeed are subordinate to them.

In any case, the dominant Biblical position has been read as a mandate for humans to use nature for their purposes—a charter to exploit non-human reality. This is more assumed than made explicit, but is reflected in Freud’s comment when he characterized civilization (in part) as “all the knowledge and capacity that men have acquired in order to control the forces of nature and extract its wealth for the satisfaction of human needs” (The Future of an Illusion, p. 6.) It is very apparent in the eventual wedding of western Christianity with capitalism and industrialization. Oscar Handlin gives an excellent sketch of what this meant to a European peasant coming to industrial America (The Uprooted [1951], Chapter Four). Within the focus of Chicago, a similar shock is expressed by Jurgis in Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle (1906). William Cronon’s Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West [1991] chronicles the impact of Chicago on nature in the
form of the depletion of the great forests—and especially the white pines—and the bison herds. The assumption was that nature existed for humans, who were not part of it.

Process theology rejects the traditional Christian understanding of nature. It does not hold that humans are other than part of nature. It does not hold that nature is subordinate to humans, and exists solely for their sustenance and satisfaction. It does not hold that the deity created nature “out of nothing”—nature existed from the beginning “with God.” Nature exists and works with God, both to preserve itself and to change itself.

This gives process theology a distinct way of appraising the “ecological crisis.” A variety of distinctions play a part. To begin with, reality has value both as something to be preserved and as something to be profoundly enjoyed. Both ordered harmony and increasing intensity are present in process. Preservation or survival raises the question of “environment”—the essentials required. Enjoyment assumes the development in complexity, and its possibility and requirements, especially interdependence. A similar distinction has to do with an entity’s instrumental value and its intrinsic value. Do some entities have greater instrumental value than others? And do some, because of their complexity, have greater intrinsic value? Are humans more valuable than mosquitoes? In terms of process and the ecosystem, can any part say to any other part, “I have no need of you”?

14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15 If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 21 The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” 22 On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; 24 whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, 25 that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. (I Corinthians 12.14-26)

**Process and Eschatology (History and the Future)**

People who say such things (theorists in religion) say that Christianity is an historical religion. There are other options, and some (indeed, most) versions are only incidentally historical—e.g., those which have an unchanging norm for insight or behavior, with history simply recording success or failure, with little or no reference to past or future.

For some, Christianity is not historical or related to time at all. For them, there is no present, much less past or future. Christianity (and it not alone among the religions) provides occasions in public worship or private meditation or in any case in individual experience, for what modern theologians call the Eternal Now. In the Now, nothing need be added or remembered or anticipated: in it, the full depth and breadth of reality is experienced. The correlated term is ecstasy. It is what is meant by being in God. It is what mystical experience is about, or even what Abraham Maslow meant by “peak experience.”

But theorists say that Christianity is an historical religion. What they mean is that Christianity is founded on historical events (“suffered under Pontius Pilate”), assumes history has meaning, and believes that history has an end (“He shall come to judge the living and the dead”).

What it means to say that Christianity is founded on historical events is by no means clear, though at a minimum it has to do with Jesus. What it does not mean is that it is founded on universal truths or abstract principles—though even here the picture of Jesus drawn in the so-called Gnostic texts suggests otherwise (in the Gospel of Thomas, for example, Jesus is a fellow student seeking truth). What it does mean is that in the
“life, death, and resurrection” of Jesus something happened that redefined the past and altered the future. That something decisive happened is certain for Christians, but what happened has been given different interpretations (with no agreement). Was it that Jesus manifested a new humanity, or liberated life, or a focused life, or an ordered life, or a life fully conscious of unlimited possibility? Was it “once for all” or constantly recurring (as in the various versions of Jesus Christ being present in the Eucharist or Mass)? Whatever it was, it had to do with concrete and historical events.

In a sense, its recurring nature affirms the conviction that history has meaning. Still, it is one thing for meaning to be manifested, or a defining moment to occur, in time. It is quite another for it to happen through time. For it to happen in time means that a specific, time-bound set of entities interacted to produce specific, time-bound result. H. Richard Niebuhr, in The Responsible Self (published posthumously in 1963), analyzed this brilliantly—how two specific entities (persons or groups) respond to one another as interpreted by each, in the context of several social relationships, full of memories and anticipations, experienced as under the threat of death or the promise of life. Reality is given definition in time, out of disparate components, unlike any other reality of any other time or setting. There is no other reality. For Christians, this is one of the meanings of calling the Church the Body of Christ: it points to the radical historical nature of what Jesus does. In time.

(This way of thinking, that reality is time specific, it needs to be added, is the work of others, both Christian and not. It permeated the thought of the early nineteenth century theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, the influential historian Wilhelm Dilthey, and the hermeneutician Hans-Georg Gadamer. I have come to realize that this was how I was trained to approach the history of theology, or more precisely, historical theology.)

But it is another thing to claim that reality in any of its manifold forms is developed through history. The best known effort is Augustine’s City of God, in which he presents the history of the world from a Christian perspective—which as he sees it is a history of the two civilizations, one based on love of God and the other on love of self. It was, however, Georg F. W. Hegel (1770-1830) who included process (development and not just change) within the godhead and insisted that concrete instances within nature and history were essential components of that development.

Hegel spoke of God as Spirit, by which he meant that God is a living and developing reality. The changes in God occur in a triadic process: God as pure subject (that is, existing in and for itself, with no dependence on any outside object or reference) articulates itself as something distinct but not different from itself, then becomes a wedding of the two and in doing so achieves self-consciousness. This process Hegel located in the nature of thinking or logic itself, most famously expressed in the way a thesis contains within itself an antithesis which is reconciled in a synthesis (which then becomes a new thesis). Theologically, he saw this process reflected in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity (especially as proposed by Augustine).

If “spirit” is not an empty word, then God must be grasped under this characteristic, just as in the church theology of former times God was called “triume.” This is the key by which the nature as spirit is explicated. God is thus grasped as what he is for himself within himself; God [the Father] makes himself an object for himself (the Son); then, in this object, God remains the undivided essence within this differentiation of himself within himself, and in this differentiation of himself loves himself, i.e., remains identical with himself—this is God as Spirit. Hence if we are to speak of God as spirit, we must grasp God with this very definition...Thus it is just the definition of God by the church as a Trinity that is the concrete determination of God as spirit; and spirit is an empty word if it is not grasped in this determination. (1824 Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion)

Not only did Hegel move from the idea that God is unchanging and immutable, he made another major change. He claimed that the process by which God articulates itself is a process in which the articulation is in and through the finite or the concrete or the determinate. This is a departure from Platonic thought, in which the concrete or finite is at best a shadow of reality and at worst an illusion.

Hegel was especially interested in history as the process by which God discovers itself or is conscious of itself. Sidney Hook claimed that for Hegel, history is the “autobiography of God.” But what constitutes
history is human consciousness working itself out through freedom expressed in the development of cultures. “Thus history, through national cultures, is the process of the Spirit progressing to its own self, its own cumulative concept of itself, from nation to nation” (Robert S. Hartman, 1955).

As to the question how human consciousness or self-consciousness is an active participant in the process of God’s development or emerging self-consciousness, Hegel has more than one answer. At times he seems to minimize any active human self-consciousness in the process. For example, he can speak of the Spirit working itself out, simply using changes in human culture or religion: something like the potter constantly reworking the clay. At other times he can speak of the Spirit allowing human changes based on human self-interest, which then the Spirit uses in its own end of self-development: something like the statement of Joseph to his brothers, “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.”

But his main emphasis is that the process by which human self-consciousness is being worked out is the same as that of the divine, working in tandem. Human consciousness contains within itself an awareness that there is something more than what is present in any one time or culture. It attempts to give expression to that “more” by representing it in a new cultural or religious form. But because even this new representation contains within itself consciousness of something more, it resists itself and is moved toward yet another attempt at formulation. When a people consider its representation as absolute and final, that consideration is something akin to sin and even demonic. In such instances, the Spirit simply moves on to and through another culture. As this goes on, it is not only human consciousness that is becoming more aware, but the Spirit (or the living God) itself. So the process of self-discovery by God and humanity is the same process. Hegel saw this expressed in the Christian doctrine that in Christ there is both the divine and the human.

Does process in history have a goal, some ultimate resolution? Christians in various ways have had an interest in the end of history, and these interests come under the title of eschatology (from the Greek for “last” and “study”). There have been throughout Christian history a number of instances of prediction of the end, and there have been several versions of the times leading up to and culminating in the end (notably in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century in the Scofield Bible) The imagery comes mainly from the so-called apocalyptic literature within the Bible, and principally the Revelation of John—most benignly in Revelation 21, “I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.”

Process theologians are both enamored with and wary of history as a vehicle of process. For example, they think that each “actual occasion” is progress over its antecedent, insofar as it represents an increase in harmony and intensity. And they think that these increases may have cumulative value, eventuating in something like what Teilhard meant by the Omega Point. But the actual content of that end, they do not think can be known or conceptualized—and that is because each “actual occasion” is altering the content of what is possible next. While they confirm the value of each “actual occasion” for what comes next, they are more interested in the dynamics of the present. Emphatically, they do not affirm causality or anything like a plan. They are interested in process.