

PROCESS THEOLOGY
FOR EVERYDAY PEOPLE

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I.

What is Process-Relational Theology?

Each one of us sees the world through certain theological, spiritual, and experiential lenses. These lenses shape what we see and how we interpret the events of our lives. These lenses are so intimate that we often assume reality is exactly as we see it. Our images of reality—the lenses through which we see reality—arise from many factors such as: family of origin, personal chemistry, unconscious memory, level of education, social and political context, and faith tradition. While some lenses are healthy and life-affirming, others diminish our sense of value, limit our possibilities, and alienate us from God, nature, our bodies, and other persons.

Religious traditions affirm that our images of reality can—more or less—approximate the deeper realities of life. In fact, a healthy religious tradition provides us with:

- A vision or picture of reality
- A promise that we can experience that reality
- Practices that enable us to experience the realities that our faith tradition or theology describe

Accordingly, our visions of God and the world shape our character and inspire certain forms of behavior.

Human life, according to the tenets of most religious traditions, is not static, but mutable. Persons may experience “conversions,” “great awakenings,” and “enlightenment.” We can change our visions of reality and, thus, change our values, behaviors, and perceptions by our beliefs and practices. As the apostle Paul affirms, “be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” (Romans 12:2) Doctrines, rituals, community support, and

daily faith practices shape—and transform—our images of reality and eventually our actions. We think ourselves into new behaviors and act ourselves into new beliefs!

Process-relational theology affirms a unique vision of Christian faith. Process theology reflects a creative and dynamic interplay of scripture, Christian tradition, reason, experience, and the best cultural thinking and science of our time. (This is the traditional Wesleyan quadrilateral, plus one factor, culture as a fifth source of divine revelation and religious reflection.) Process-relational theology invites us to explore reality in terms of dynamic, lively relationships that apply to every possible experience. According to the parent of modern process theology and philosophy, speculative philosophy, or metaphysics, resembles the flight of an airplane: it begins on the ground with concrete experience, soars into the heights of generalization, gaining perspective on reality, and then returns to the ground of concrete experience with new interpretations of the world.

The words “process-relational” describe the heart of this lively and inspirational vision of reality. Initially articulated by thinkers such as Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne, Bernard Loomer and later by theologians such as John Cobb, Schubert Ogden, and David Griffin, process-relational theology makes the following affirmations:

- *Relationship is primary and essential to reality.* We are not isolated atomic beings. Rather, each moment arises from its experience of its environment. The environment, including the occasion’s most recent personal past, in the case of humans, is the material out of which each occasion “creates” its momentary experience and gift to the future.
- *Reality is dynamic—living beings are in a constant process of creative transformation.* Experience is dynamic; what is

unchanging is embraced by the changing. While both eternity and process are real, process embraces and makes concrete the eternal within the world of time. The greater possibility for change and growth, the more evolved the creature—living persons are more “alive” than rocks because their complexity enables them to embrace more reality with greater experiential insight and sensitivity.

- *Experience is universal, and not limited to human life.* Existence implies experience, although existence does not necessarily mean consciousness. For example, a fetus experiences her mother and a cell experiences its environment—it values certain things and avoids others, even though it is not yet self-conscious. For example, we now know that pre-natal experiences shape a child’s future. Process thought also tells us that non-humans, whether dolphins or cicadas, also experience the world in unique ways.
- *Experience and value are intimately related.* Although “life is robbery” (Whitehead), our recognition of the reality of experience calls us to a “reverence for life.” (Schweitzer) Although rocks and trees lack centers of experience, they are composed of sentient elements. They are loosely joined “societies of actual entities. We are not alone in the world, but part of a universe of experience, ranging from the simplest to most divine forms of experience.
- *Freedom is real, but conditioned.* To exist is to experience the world from a unique perspective. Each moment of

experience embraces its environment, and shapes that experience in its own way. Even the simplest organisms have an element of novelty, since despite their repetition of their environment, they alone experience the world in *this* place and time. In each moment, we are able to choose again—shaping our responses in new ways. Our choices shape the data of our experience in novel ways. Each moment of experience is a creative synthesis of the world from which it arises. Though our freedom as humans is always conditioned by the past, as embodied by our own past as well as the world from which we emerged, we are never victims of our environment and past history. From a Christian perspective, we can assert that in partnership with God, we can experience personal and social transformation.

- *God is the primary example of the dynamic, relational, creative nature of life.* God is not an exception to the nature of reality, but the prime example of interdependence, relationship, and creativity. The living God shapes and is shaped by all things. God is not aloof, but is present in every situation, providing creative possibilities in the context of the emerging universe. God's power is not coercive but relational in nature. God works within the lively, dynamic, relational world to bring forth the highest possibilities for freedom and creativity among creatures. God is the ultimate source of the evolutionary process. As the current motto of the United Church of Christ proclaims, "God is still speaking."

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Questions:

- 1) How do you understand the nature of freedom? What is the role of the past in shaping the present? In what ways do we transcend past experiences?
- 2) Reflecting on your understanding of scripture: do you recognize any themes of process-relational thought within the scriptural witness—relationship, dynamic change, freedom?
- 3) What does it mean to speak of having a “relationship” with God? What does it mean from God’s standpoint? And, from our own standpoint? Have you experienced God in your life?
4. Do you think nonhumans are able to experience the world? What difference does it make if non-humans are also centers of experience? Can nonhumans have a meaningful relationship with God?
- 5) What does it mean to suggest that the universe influences every moment of your experience?
- 6) If relationship is primary, how does this shape our religious practices?
- 7) If the world is dynamic and evolving, how does that shape our understanding of truth and doctrine?

II.

A Process-Relational God

We begin with a thought experiment: When you think of God, what images come to mind?

How we envisage God is important. If God is the ultimate reality, then the goal of the spiritual life is to become like the God you worship. How we view God shapes the way we think of power, health and illness, the nature of truth, and friends and enemies.

Speaking about God is always challenging. The theologian Karl Barth once spoke of theological reflection about God as being similar to painting a bird in flight. Another image of our knowledge of God speaks of sight-impaired persons and an elephant. Each person thinks that the part of the elephant they touch is the elephant's true nature. This image is helpful in terms of our knowledge of God, except for the fact that a living elephant—and also a living God—is constantly moving. We have to race at top speed to stay in contact with the elephant. No description can ever encompass a living elephant or living God.

Theologians and spiritual guides describe God in terms of the polarity of *apophatic* and *kataphatic*, that is, on the one hand, no language can describe God (God is beyond language and transcends our experience) and, on the other hand, everything points to God (all words and experience reveal something of the holy).

Process-relational thought describes God in terms of dynamic relatedness. God is the ultimate relational being—God shapes every experience, providing each moment's experience with a wealth of possibilities, luring each moment toward wholeness and beauty. God also receives every experience and is shaped by the evolving universe.

Traditionally, the words omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence have been used to describe God's relationship with the world. Although these terms come from the influence of the Greek philosophical tradition rather than the biblical traditions, they express God's ultimacy, sovereignty, and uniqueness. Process theology provides novel ways of describing divine experience and power in ways that preserve the deepest insights of the Christian theological tradition. Process theology invites Christians to explore the meaning of words like "eternal" and "unchanging" from new perspectives.

Omniscience (all-experiencing) relates to God's experience of the world. Process theology takes omniscience seriously. God truly experiences the world. To experience is to be shaped by what we experience. As omniscient, God is shaped by all things. Everything truly makes a difference to God. For example, when we pray, our prayers make a difference to God and bring something "new" into God's experience. God weaves our prayers with the events of the world in order to bring about the best possibilities. Without our prayers and good thoughts, God cannot be fully active in our world. Non local in nature, our prayers create a field of resonance, a positive environment around those for whom we pray, that opens the door to greater revelations of God's presence and power.

In speaking of divine knowledge, God's knowledge does not create the future, nor does God know the future in advance. God knows all possibilities as possible, and all actualities as actual. God's knowledge is everlasting—everything we do is treasured by God. We truly can do something beautiful for God.

God's experience of the world is constantly changing and growing. Our lives are our gifts to God. One aspect of ethics involves what we contribute to God's experience of the world. While process

thought affirms that God's experience is constantly changing, process thought also asserts that there are certain constants in the divine nature: God's love, aim at beauty, and completeness of experience is unchanging.

Often theologians have glorified changelessness and eternity as the highest religious values. In contrast, process theology asserts that a changing God, who can occasionally be "surprised" by the world is a truly living God, who initiates new possibilities to shape a changing world.

God experiences both the pain and joy of the universe. Our pain truly matters to God, our prayers shape the divine experience. As Whitehead asserts, God is "the fellow sufferer who understands."

Omnipresence (all present, everywhere present) suggests that wherever we are, God is present. This is the wisdom of Psalm 139, "if I ascend into the heavens, you are there; if I descend into the depths, you are also there." God is present as the primary influence in each moment, life, and in the evolutionary process. God's awareness is universal – we experience God in terms of God's ideal for the moment and God's experience of the universe, even when we are not aware of God. Spiritual practices are intended to bring to consciousness what is ever-present, though constantly variable, in our experience – the Living God "in whom all things live and move and have their being."

The nature of divine presence leads to the question of God's power, typically understood in terms of *omnipotence* or *omni-activity*. To exist is to make a difference. The question is: what difference does God make in our lives and in the world? Often the words "God's will" are used to describe God's power in the world. According to some theologians, God's power is all-determining: either by divine action or divine permission, God brings all things about. God is, accordingly, the

source of all good and evil. Others, such as Rick Warren's *Purpose Driven Life*, affirms that God plans all the details of our lives "without our input."

In contrast, process thought sees divine power as relational rather than coercive. God works within the ecology of life to bring about the best possibilities. Like a good parent, God sets the stage for freedom and creativity in God's creation.

Good parenting leaves space for growth: in like fashion, God's power leaves room for creaturely freedom.

God does not determine all things. God works gently in the evolutionary process to bring about more complex creatures, capable of experiencing greater and more intense forms of experience and beauty. Causation in a process universe is never unilateral, but multi-factorial and relational. God is one of the factors, not the only factor, in each moment of experience. God's power is that of the ideal, of loving companionship, not sovereign determinism. Our input truly matters to God. By aligning with God's vision for our lives, we open new possibilities for divine action. By turning away from God, we limit what God can do in our lives. The future is open, but God will also be present in every future moment, seeking the highest possibilities for each and every creature.

To summarize, process-relational theology makes the following affirmations about God:

- *God is present lovingly in every moment of life.*
- *God seeks beauty, complexity, and wholeness in each moment of life.*
- *God's truly experiences the world: God's experience is shaped by the world.*
- *Divine power is relational, and not coercive.*

- *Each moment arises from many factors, the most significant of which is God's presence in that moment.*

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Questions:

- 1) How do you understand God's power in your life and in the world?
- 2) How do you understand the power of prayer? Do your prayers make any difference to God?
- 3) How do you understand the causes of sickness and tragedy? What role does God play in health and illness?
- 4) How do you respond to Whitehead's affirmation that "God is the fellow sufferer who understands?"
- 5) Where do you experience God's presence in your life? Where do you experience divine possibility?

III.

Jesus the Healer

Progressive Christians are conflicted about Jesus. We are scandalized by those who proclaim that Jesus is the only way to salvation. We are equally troubled by those who see Jesus as a completely supernatural figure, untouched by the realities of pain, aging, conflict, and human finitude. We rebel against dualistic understandings of Jesus that assert that Jesus was in some way omniscient or omnipotent, or was merely a human body in which a divine cassette was somehow inserted.

Progressive Christians also struggle with supernatural understandings of Jesus as a divine miracle worker, who could arbitrarily violate the laws of nature at will. Still, progressive Christians recognize that a purely naturalistic understanding of Jesus is inadequate and that we must somehow redefine our understanding of nature to include non-local causation (action at a distance), psychic phenomena, and healing energy. A deeper naturalism makes room for the healing acts, reflective of the deeper insights of the gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry. The growing insights of the new physics and mind-body medicine open the door for fresh understandings of Jesus' healing ministry.

While progressive Christians recognize the relativity of life, including the scriptural pictures of Jesus, process theology also realizes that there is a continuity between the gospel portraits of Jesus and the historical Jesus. Totally deconstructionist or one-dimensional naturalistic visions of the gospel fail to address the lived experiences of first-century followers of Jesus as well as the profound interdependence of mind, body, and spirit, and the divine immanence within "natural" process. [Many of the most devastating critiques of Jesus' healings and the resurrection (Spong and Crossan), for example,

seem to be based on Enlightenment metaphysics, rather than the insights of process-relational theology or the new physics, both of which allow for surprising acts of God arising from “natural” causes.)

Theologians have reminded us that for Jesus to be meaningful for us, he must 1) be “more” than we are, but he must also 2) be like us in nature and experience.

Our Christology, or understanding of the Jesus as the Christ, is grounded in our understanding of God. Today, we must find creative and holistic ways to understand the ancient affirmation that Christ was “fully human” and “fully divine.”

Process theology affirms that divine revelation is universal. God is present as the source of each moment of experience. God provides each moment of experience with possibilities for self-actualization and contribution to the self-actualization of others. Since all things are inspired by God, Jesus is not an exception to God’s universal aim at beauty and wholeness. But, a personal God can also be variable in influencing the world. God is not a homogenous force; but is dynamically, intimately, and uniquely present in all things. As personal, God can choose to be more present in some events and moments than others. This was surely the case in God’s choice of Jesus as healer and revealer.

Process theologians affirm that God is present in Jesus of Nazareth in a unique way. God chose to be present in the conception of Mary’s child and God chose to be uniquely present in the life of Jesus. Yet, Jesus was not a passive recipient of divine power and revelation. While God’s grace and power inspired and enlivened Jesus, Jesus’ openness to God enabled him to become a clear, dynamic, and powerful embodiment of God. (This, no doubt, was also true of Mary, whose openness to God is seen as prerequisite to bearing God’s holy

child.) In the interplay of God's intimate presence and Jesus' receptive and creative response, we find the meaning of the ancient words, "fully human, fully divine." Jesus' full humanity and divinity are one, and are revealed in his lively manifestation of God's passion for healing and wholeness.

As a relational being, Jesus experienced the fullness of the world's pain and imperfection. Yet, his multidimensional and often ambiguous experience did not lure Jesus away from experiencing God's passion in each moment of his life. Jesus was "oned" (Julian of Norwich) with God, even in his times of growth and temptation. As the Gospel of Luke notes, Jesus grew in "wisdom and stature." Even the highest manifestations of God's presence in the world are characterized by constant intellectual and spiritual growth.

The incarnation of God in Christ is the supreme manifestation of God's presence in all things. Process Christology is often described as a "logos theology," following the insights of the first chapter of John's gospel and certain early church fathers. With John's Prologue (John, chapter one), process theologians see the divine word (dabhar, sophia, logos) as the creative and life-giving power in all things. This "true light" shines in all things, not just in human life or Christian experience. As theologian John Cobb affirms, Christ is the principle of "creative transformation," that is, wherever beauty, love, and justice emerge, the power present in Jesus of Nazareth is its source. I would add that "wherever truth and healing are found, Christ is its source, regardless of what names are invoked, Christian or otherwise."

The doctrine of atonement traditionally describes the ways in which Jesus "saves us," overcomes our brokenness, or enables us to experience God's passion for our lives. For evangelical Christians, the cross is seen God's vehicle for atonement— "Jesus died for our sins,"

evangelicals proclaim. Process thinkers affirm that God transforms the world through suffering love (God is the fellow sufferer who understands), but they also assert that Jesus' death was not a sacrifice for our sins or that Jesus was predestined to die in our place. God did not compel Jesus to die, or use his death as a ransom for our sins or a means to restore God's injured honor. Rather, Jesus transforms us by inspiring us to embody his ideals in our lives, by sharing in our suffering, and by providing pathways for growth. In a relational universe, the impact of Jesus' life still influences humankind, empowering, inspiring, and calling us to healing and wholeness. The way of the cross calls us to identify with the suffering of others and to commit ourselves to the healing of the earth and our human and non-human companions.

Process theology emphasizes Christmas (incarnation) and Easter (resurrection and new life) as well as Good Friday (the cross) in understanding Jesus' mission. In the spirit of Christmas, process theology affirms that revelation is universal. Jesus' healing power and wisdom is implicitly at work in all things. Further, Jesus may be experienced in many diverse ways, depending on the need or the context. The true light, coming into the world, enlightens all things. Death and suffering are not final, but may be transformed and revitalized through God's aim at creative transformation. There are no absolute dead ends in the process understanding of God's saving work in Jesus Christ.

Process theology also affirms that God seeks healing and salvation in all things and through many media, not just the Christian tradition. Christians can affirm the God is present in Christ in a saving and healing way without denying divine revelation and salvation in other religious traditions. The presence of world religions, accordingly,

is not a result of human sin, ignorance, or pride, but reflects God's inspiration in every culture. In the divine-human adventure, God provides insights and energy appropriate not only for each moment of experience, but for the world's diverse cultures. Today's global spirituality provides a unique opportunity for mutual enrichment and growth among the world's religions. As John Cobb affirms, "Christ is the Way that excludes no Way."

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Questions:

- 1) How do you understand the uniqueness of Jesus?
- 2) Do you think Jesus is the only path to salvation?
- 3) What is the most important truth for you to share about Jesus?
Can you imagine sharing this truth with another?
- 4) What is the meaning of Jesus' death?
- 5) How do you understand the miracles and healings of Jesus?

IV.

PROCESS SPIRITUALITY

“Religion is what a person does with his (or her) solitariness . . . if you are never solitary, you cannot be religious.” (Alfred North Whitehead)

Today, many persons would substitute the word “spirituality” for “religious.” They assert, “I am spiritual but not religious.” They believe that spirituality involves our lively personal relationship with the holy, while religion relates to moribund creeds, rules, and congregations.

For process theology, spirituality is both individual and social in nature. If reality is relational, then we can't be spiritual without profoundly immersing ourselves in the ambient universe. We are all part of the intricate and dynamic body of Christ. Spirituality enables us to experience God's presence in the multi-faceted ecology from which our lives emerge each moment of the day.

At the heart of process spirituality is the affirmation that God is present in every moment of experience and every encounter. All things reveal the holy. God speaks to us in and through all things, including our own experiences. Spiritual formation is the process of experiencing God in the ordinary and extraordinary moments of life. With the Benedictine monastic tradition, process theologians find God in greeting a stranger, taking care of tools, logging on to your computer, answering the telephone, and checking your e-mail. You are also a revelation of God, for God inspires each moment of your life. You and all things, “live and move and have your being in God.”

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The Hebraic scriptures tell the story of Jacob's dream—one night Jacob dreamed of a ladder in which angels ascended and descended, moving from heaven to earth and back to heaven again. Jacob awakens and exclaims, "God was in this place—and I did not know it." Spirituality enables us to encounter God in this and every place.

As we look at the story of Jacob's dream, it is interesting to note that the angels were, first, ascending and, then, descending. Revelation is not other-worldly, nor does it draw us away from this world. It arises from our concrete experience of God's wholeness/holiness in the here and now of historic, relational, and embodied experiences. Encountering God calls us to love God in this world, rather than deferring issues of justice, peace, and self-realization to the afterlife.

The Celtic tradition speaks of "thin places," in which the divine reveals itself in ordinary life. Process thought affirms that all places are "thin places" where we can experience the holy.

Process spirituality immerses us in the world and in the body. Many forms of spirituality deny the importance of embodiment. In contrast, process spirituality invites us to see God in the very cells of our bodies: the heavens declare the glory of God and so does our immune system. Our bodies are the "temple of God." Healthy spirituality enables us to "glorify God" in our embodiment. The body is inspired and the spirit embodied.

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Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel affirmed that authentic religious experience is grounded in the experience of "radical amazement." Spiritual formation enables us to experience the wonder of each

moment and every task. God reveals Godself as the deepest reality of each moment of experience.

Process theology asserts that reality is dynamic as well as relational. Accordingly, spirituality involves immersion in, rather than escape from, the flux of life. As the source of creative transformation and cosmic evolution, God's revelation is also constantly changing. God's presence in our lives—God's call to wholeness and beauty—changes, albeit incrementally, from moment to moment. "God is still speaking" and we are most attuned to God when we embrace new and creative images of God and ourselves. Spiritual growth awakens us to new and creative encounters with God—relationally, vocationally, institutionally, and politically.

God's own creativity calls us to be creative. We are not meant to be passive in our acceptance of God's will. Rather, we are challenged to do something new and beautiful for God. Spirituality involves adventure, not repetition. Process theology asserts that God likes surprises, too!

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There are many paths to consciously experience the divine. Process theology affirms that, at the deepest level, we all experience God. Process theology invites us to create various forms of "Christian yoga" to respond to the experiences and gifts of different personality types, age groups, ethnicities, and religious and liturgical styles.

Spiritual practices such as prayer and meditation awaken us to God's intimate presence and enable God to be present in new and surprising ways. We can also pray with our hands in service and in healing touch. Imaginative prayers (*lectio divina* and Ignatian spirituality) awaken us to God's ever-expanding revelation in our lives. The many-faceted Christian practices bring to consciousness the ever-

present divinity whose constant inspiration is often overlooked in the busyness of everyday of life.

In our spiritual lives, we are called to be innovative, and to employ ancient spiritual practices in new ways. In a constantly changing world, we are most faithful when we adapt these practices to respond creatively to our particular time and place.

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Listen to your life. Listen to the deeper voices amid all the other voices. Listen to your dreams, to hunches, intuitions, synchronous moments. God is still speaking...in each and every moment of life.

Look deeply at others. See the holy speaking through them to you! See God within and beneath their lives and actions.

Breathe deeply. Experience God breathing through you!

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Questions:

1. What spiritual practices nurture your life?
2. What does it mean to say "God is still speaking?" Where have you experienced God speaking in your life?
3. What does it mean to "love God in the world of the flesh?"
(W.H. Auden)
- 4) What does it mean to be a "practical mystic?" In what we are mystical experience and ethics related?

V.

What does it mean to be saved?

Process theology sees revelation as both universal and personal. God works to bring wholeness in every situation. But, God's passion for wholeness, beauty, and justice is always contextual and shaped by the many factors from which each moment of experience emerges.

For many Christians, salvation is a static event, something we have to await upon our death. These Christians assert that there is a dualism between this life and the next. This lifetime is the "front porch" of eternity. Our true goal is heaven, while earth is merely a preparation for the life to come. From this perspective, the God who seeks to save us in this life gives up on us at the moment of death. They also see the boundaries and means of salvation as clear and distinct – faith doctrine, participation in the sacraments, individualistic ethics, and other-worldly language.

Process theology sees life as a whole. While process theologians do not emphasize heaven, they see a continuity between earth and heaven. Our this-worldly experiences and actions contribute to the quality of our lives beyond the grave. In this way, process theology avoids the Marxist critique of religion as a "opiate" that turns persons' attention from the challenges of injustice and oppression in this lifetime to a perfect sphere in eternity. What we do in this life matters eternally; it also contributes to the eternal journey of our fellow beings.

For process thought, lively transformation is "more real" than timeless and static eternity. This world is neither better nor worse than our post-mortem existence; it is simply different in nature. Embodiment is not inferior to spirituality. The ecological nature of life

suggests that even spiritual entities are “embodied,” that is, they interact with an environment of other spirit beings.

God is equally present in this world and the next, although the impediments to knowing God may be overcome in “heaven” beyond the grave. In the “heavenly realm,” we can grow in spirit and relatedness without fear, defensiveness, or obstruction.

Process thought takes the image of resurrection seriously, although not literally. Resurrection of the person affirms that any post-mortem state we can imagine embraces, transforms, and heals our earthly life. We do not “lose something” in the afterlife, rather what dies as physical is raised as spiritual in the most holistic sense of the word. (I Corinthians 15) Further, process theology, in the spirit of the images of the body of Christ and shalom, sees post-mortem existence as communal rather than individualistic in nature.

Salvation, or wholeness, is universal and can be found through the beliefs and practices of every religious tradition, including new spiritual movements and the experiences of non-believers. Although process theology affirms that salvation is universal, salvation is not automatic. Rather, the same creativity and freedom that exist in the earthly sphere will also exist beyond the grave. Personal identity, beyond the grave, means that our current lives are not lost, but will be in a process of transformation beyond the grave. We will grow and evolve, forgiving and being forgiven, coming to terms with our past earthly life, as our spirits expand to embrace God’s passion for our lives. The afterlife is a time for growth, transformation, and enlightenment in a realm in which our quest for wholeness-in-community is unambiguously supported. God’s aim at healing in this life is carried out in the next life, but without hindrance or impediment. God’s attitude toward us does not change at the hour of our deaths.

“If all are saved, what good is Christ?” asks the conservative Christian. “Don’t we need the threat of hell to bring persons to Christ?” Christ, embodied in Jesus the healer, inspires us to wholeness in this life and the next. Our attitude toward Christ matters. In awakening to Christ’s loving presence, we become open to God’s passion for our life. As the Eastern Church affirms, “God became human so that humans might become divine.” Christ is alive, and inspires us to have the “mind of Christ.”

“If we do not believe in hell, why would we do the right thing or believe in God?” asks the fundamentalist Christian. In contrast, process theology asserts that faith is not a rescue operation, but our openness to larger dimensions of reality. We believe in God not to escape hell, but to experience God’s love in this lifetime and share this love with others. Indeed, experiencing God may challenge us to reject the norms of our culture, even those held by persons of faith, to follow God’s passion for our lives.

Noted preacher Ernie Campbell once asserted, “there are only two kinds of persons in the world – those who are in God’s hands and know it; and those who are in God’s hands and don’t know it.” Faith opens us to awareness of God’s eternal care and presence in our lives. Faith opens us to embrace God’s power in our lives and in the transformation of the world. Indeed, if God is omni-present and omni-active, every place is “heavenly.” Faith helps us discover God’s nearness in all things, including our own experience.

What shall we hope for in the human adventure? Process theology sees life as dynamic and evolving. Neither ourselves nor the cosmos is ever complete. Our post-modern adventure involves growth in stature – the self expands to embrace the whole, to see its own wholeness and well-being as connected with the well-being of all

things. In contrast to those who see salvation as dualistic and individualistic – as involving a dualism of saved and unsaved – process theology sees salvation as embracing all things, as a continuing adventure that will eventually include all things.

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Questions:

- 1) How do you visualize life after death?
- 2) Do you think we spiritually evolve in the afterlife?
- 3) How do you understand “salvation?” Can persons be saved outside of the Christian tradition?
- 4) Can there be good behavior without the threat of this and other-worldly punishment?