Something new under the Sun: forty years of philosophy of religion, with a special look at process philosophy

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1 **Abstract**   Looking back over the last 40 years of work in the philosophy of religion
2 provides a fascinating vantage point from which to assess the state of the discipline
3 today. I describe central features of American philosophy of religion in 1970 and
4 reconstruct the last 40 years as a progression through four main stages. This analysis
5 offers an overarching framework from which to examine the major contributions and
6 debates of process philosophy of religion during the same period. The major think-
7 ers, topics, positions, and controversies are presented, analyzed, and critiqued. In the
8 concluding section I offer a critical analysis of the state of the field today based on the
9 results of these historical analyses.

13 Once upon a time there was a generation of philosophers of religion who were trained
14 to do good, solid analytic philosophy. Around us the sixties were happening. We
15 marched in the streets, read radical literature, formulated radical thoughts; probably
16 some inhaled. But the philosophy in which we were trained was something different.
17 In graduate classrooms our Eisenhower-era professors were uncompromising in their
18 demands that we master formal logic and strict analytic argumentation. The heart of
19 philosophy, we knew, lay not in philosophy of religion but in the core courses we
20 were being prepared to teach: logic, epistemology, analytic metaphysics, the history
21 of philosophy (especially British Empiricism), philosophy of science, and perhaps a

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²² smattering of ethics or social–political philosophy. Any philosopher worth his salt, we
²³ were told (and I use the male pronoun intentionally—that's what they said), would
²⁴ utilize these core disciplines to guide him and to set the criteria when he turned to
²⁵ debates in the philosophy of religion.

²⁶ We were quite sure we knew what good philosophy of religion was—just as pre-
²⁷ cisely as we knew what was philosophy's enduring canon. Idealism had been refuted
²⁸ by G. E. Moore in a *Mind* article in 1903; Nietzsche was too poetic and aphoristic to be
²⁹ taken seriously; Continental philosophy was second rate because it contained no real
³⁰ arguments. We laughed over Carnap's famous collection of "meaningless" sentences
³¹ from Heidegger and tried to find out own examples:

³² What is to be investigated is being only and – *nothing* else; being alone and further
³³ – *nothing*; solely being, and beyond being – *nothing. What about this Nothing?*
³⁴ …*Does the Nothing exist only because the Not, i.e. the Negation, exists?* Or
³⁵ is it the other way around? Does Negation and the Not exist only because the
³⁶ Nothing exists? …We assert: *the Nothing is prior to the Not and the Negation.*
³⁷ …Where do we seek the Nothing? How do we find the Nothing? …We know
³⁸ the Nothing. …*Anxiety reveals the Nothing.* …That for which and because of
³⁹ which we were anxious, was 'really' – nothing. Indeed: the Nothing itself – as
⁴⁰ such – was present. …*What about this Nothing? – The Nothing itself nothings.*
⁴¹ (Carnap 1959) (For many of us, *das Nichts nichtet* was about all the German we
⁴² knew.)

⁴³ Finally, although we were interested in the philosophy of religion, we knew better than
⁴⁴ to introduce any explicitly theological concerns into the discussion, for that would be
⁴⁵ professional suicide. (Look again at Alvin Plantinga's major publications prior to
⁴⁶ 1980.) Logic was on its throne, and all was well with the world.

⁴⁷ Now fast forward 40 years. Our Eisenhower-era mentors have long since passed
⁴⁸ away, and their writings are no longer widely read. Analytic philosophy today does
⁴⁹ not stand as the undisputed king and standard-bearer for all professional philosophy.
⁵⁰ Indeed, even the battle between analytic and Continental philosophy, once a cen-
⁵¹ tral concern in the profession, no longer dominates the field. Beginning in 1973 and
⁵² continuing for well over a decade, the tone of the Yale philosophy department was set
⁵³ by the combat between two venerable, battle-to-the-death foes: Ruth Barcan Marcus,
⁵⁴ representing modal logic, and John E. Smith, representing pragmatism and the philos-
⁵⁵ ophy of religion. In 2010 American philosophy is pluralist to the core—as thoroughly
⁵⁶ pluralist as it once was exclusivist.

⁵⁷ Make no mistake about it; I do not glorify this past. Who could wish for a return
⁵⁸ to the days of "The Smoker," the heart of the Old Boys' Network—that ballroom
⁵⁹ at the APA Eastern Division, permeated by the smell of booze and cigarette smoke,
⁶⁰ where (male) professors would walk their (male) doctoral students around the tables,
⁶¹ share drinks and jokes with the chairs of the various search committees, and the phi-
⁶² losophy posts for the coming academic year would be filled? Access to positions of
⁶³ power, which determine who teaches and who publishes what and where, were tightly
⁶⁴ controlled by a relatively small group. But that practice clashes with the ideal of phi-
⁶⁵ losophy: to explore the reasons for and against any claim in any context. Surely we
⁶⁶ stood in those days further from Habermas's "ideal speech situation" (Habermas 1990,

2001); many groups had limited or no access to the table of discourse. Is it any surprise that the questions being debated fell into such a (relatively) narrow range of topics?

The democratization of philosophy has made major strides since 1970. But has the quality of argumentation in philosophy of religion declined as a result, as is sometimes claimed? I remember listening to Bill Alston after an APA session about a dozen years ago, when he was bemoaning the loss of quality in our field. The standards are slipping, he complained; when core assumptions and standards for quality are not shared across the discipline, it is no longer possible to do really rigorous work in the field.

I suggest that this criticism misses two crucial considerations. First, the highly constrained background assumptions that make rigorous analytic argumentation possible come with a downside, namely, the exclusion of a wide range of alternative assumptions. What one gains in rigor one loses in comprehensiveness. Philosophy of religion in 1970 had not yet confronted the depth of this tension and the opportunity costs of what was being omitted as "unphilosophical." Second, those with open and inquiring minds will discover impressive rigor and argumentation in thinkers whose work lies far outside the canon with which we worked in 1970. Think of the argumentative rigor in the great debates across the six classical schools of Vedantic philosophy, or the sharp arguments of the philosopher Karen Warren in her impressive volume, *Ecofeminist Philosophy* (2000).

Features of the profession in 1970

It is interesting to reflect on what were the core assumptions and practices of philosophy of religion in 1970:

- The field was fundamentally Christian. Whether one thinks of leaders in the field such as Richard Gale, Al Plantinga, Nick Wolterstorff, William Wainwright, Keith Yandell, Nelson Pike and others, or one peruses widely used textbooks in the philosophy of religion such Baruch Brody's *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion: An Analytic Approach* (1992), first published in 1974, one sees that the bulk of the attention was paid to arguments for the existence of God, the nature of God (usually as seen by Christian authors), the problem of evil, divine revelation, and occasionally the question of divine action. The famous 1959 symposium on "Theology and Falsification" (Flew, Hare and Mitchell), which heavily influenced philosophy of religion for about a quarter of a century, focused philosophers' attention on the question of whether religious language was inherently meaningless.
- The challenges of Heidegger, Bultmann, and the "demythologization" project received less attention than one might have expected, as did the phenomenology of religion, probably because of their reliance on Continental philosophy. Looking back through the first few decades of *IJPR*, I am not surprised at the under-representation of philosophical questions arising out of other religious traditions; we already knew that comparative philosophy is a more recent (and highly welcome) development. But it's a bit surprising that classical metaphysics did not play a more central role; and philosophical treatments of the work of even highly influential theologians of the time (e.g., Paul Tillich) are notably absent.

- When authors stepped outside the framework of predominately Christian questions, it was often the question of unitive mysticism that concerned them, as in the work of Evelyn Underhill, W. T. Stace, and of course William James. Exceptions—one thinks of the Wheaton philosopher Stuart Hackett and his interest in Eastern religions (Hackett 1979)—only prove the rule. Although Ian Barbour had begun to launch science/religion as a distinct field of study (Barbour 1966, 1974), this work received less attention from professional philosophers than one would have expected. Hume's critique of religion, and the conflict between empiricism and religious belief more generally, received far greater attention.

- Many philosophers, such as Alvin Plantinga, may have been influenced by their Christian belief and practice. But it was only with the advent of "Reformed epistemology" (Plantinga and Wolterstorff 1983) and the "Anselmian" program in the philosophy of religion (Morris 1987) that the philosophers' theological commitments became topics of explicit discussion, gradually launching the distinctive program in (orthodox) Christian philosophy of religion that has played such a visible role in our field in the last 20 years or so. (The formation of the Society of Christian Philosophers in 1978, and the success of SCP's journal, *Faith and Philosophy*, certainly contributed significantly to this switch as well.) Prior to the Anselmian program, and with some important exceptions, the debate centered on making progress on some of the classic proofs: among many others, Plantinga (1974) on the ontological proof; Rowe (1975) on the cosmological proof, followed later by Craig (1979); and Swinburne (1977, 1979) on the teleological argument.

The history in four phases

I suggest that the major trends in the philosophy of religion over the 40-year period we are considering (1970–2010) correlate in interesting ways with developments in epistemology over the same time span. Suppose we represent this movement as a series of four stages—recognizing, of course, that all historical narratives are rational reconstructions. In 1970 philosophy of religion was dominated by analytic epistemology and its core position. All the major philosophy departments in the country were in the hands of analytic philosophers. Surveys that ranked the top five departments would invariably include only the famous analytic departments; Harvard, Yale, Pittsburgh, UCLA, and UC Berkeley often topped these lists. Nor was this judgment merely a tautology; prestige, power, and money really did accrue to the top analytic departments, and far less so to the great Continental departments such as Penn State, the University of Chicago, Northwestern, UC Davis, and others.

In phase two one began to see signs of an organized and increasingly effective opposition. At the time it was called the "pluralism" movement; one of the early leaders was the Emory University Philosophy Department. By the mid-1980s protests were being heard within the APA, challenging the dominance of the Association by analytic philosophers and asking for equal rights for other forms of philosophy. A sort of Affirmative Action program was launched, with echoes of the Civil Rights movement, and APA programs began more clearly to reflect the broader range of interests within the profession. Not surprisingly, more doctoral students began to specialize in other

152 schools of philosophy as a result; new journals were launched; and publications by
153 American philosophers in these other fields increased.

154 In the third phase professional philosophy in the U.S. became increasingly balanced
155 between Anglo-American analytic philosophy and other philosophical schools. The
156 major departments tended to have strong representation in Continental philosophy as
157 well as analytic philosophy. This had immense repercussions for the philosophy of
158 religion, as we will see in a moment.

159 In the fourth phase, the present, this entire debate, which once dominated the Ameri-
160 can philosophical landscape, is no longer the center of attention in the profession. Many
161 philosophers pride themselves on approaching philosophy of religion from a variety
162 of philosophical traditions. Indeed, the list of traditions is not limited to the traditional
163 areas (analytic, historical, Continental) but has vastly increased in scope. Today a phi-
164 losopher may have been trained primarily in French post-structuralist thought (say,
165 Derrida to the present period). But she might combine this expertise with any one of
166 a large number of other approaches as she reads, teaches, and publishes, linking her
167 post-structuralism with Heidegger, or the Frankfurt School, or postcolonial thought,
168 or Buddhism, or Wittgenstein, or environmental philosophy, or psychoanalysis, or
169 eco-feminism, or Greek philosophy, or ethics …the list goes on and on. Moreover, her
170 discussion partners will tend to *expect* this wide range of connections; they may well
171 value her work based on the "out of the box" connections that she is able to draw.

172 In short, we have made significant strides towards the democratization of philoso-
173 phy during these 40 years. Of course, the changes have also brought with them some
174 major challenges. Consider the impact of this four-stage process on philosophy of reli-
175 gion. It is less of a caricature than one might think to say that, in 1970, "philosophy"
176 meant analytic philosophy, "religion" meant (more or less orthodox) Christianity, and
177 "philosophy of religion" (at least "the philosophy of religion that mattered") was by
178 and large defined by a set list of canonical topics within that intersection set. Today
179 the coverage of topics within the profession is clearly broader, and many of us would
180 say it is now more adequate. "Philosophy" can mean a wide variety of topics drawn
181 from wide variety of traditions; "religion" now extends to all the religious traditions
182 of the world; and "philosophy of religion" has virtually no privileged path within this
183 union set of all philosophies and all religions. The author must pick his or her way
184 through the virtually unbounded terrain of this new overlap set.

185 The impact is well known to those who follow the field today. Though overall it
186 is positive, it has brought downsides as well. When papers across such a wide range
187 of topics are presented at a single conference or in an anthology, it is frequently
188 difficult to find conceptual common ground. It becomes difficult to develop serious
189 dialogue between widely divergent papers; participants may talk past one another, fail
190 to acknowledge common criteria of evaluation, or settle on the lowest common denom-
191 inator. More often, the field splits into highly specialized topics. If most members of
192 the Society of Christian Philosophy are evangelical Protestants or traditional Catholic
193 thinkers, it becomes possible to find common ground. Discussions of liberal Protes-
194 tantism take place in other venues, such as the "Theology and Religious Reflection
195 Section" section of the AAR. Other productive discussions happen around the work
196 of specific philosophers of religion and the schools they have spawned: John Cap-
197 uto, Mark C. Taylor, John Milbank, J. L. Schellenberg, latter-day Wittgensteinians,

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Marxist theories of religion, and of course philosophies of religion that are tied to a specific historical epoch, religious tradition, or set of ethical concerns.

The example of process philosophy of religion

Process philosophies have a long history, of course. One could seek their origins in Heraclitus or Empedocles; one could note parallels in the emanation metaphysics of Plotinus and the Neoplatonic school; one could trace the increasing emphasis on temporality in Lessing, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and their followers. As a school in contemporary philosophy of religion, however, process philosophy traces back to the work of Alfred North Whitehead, particularly his 1929 *Process and Reality*, and its influence. Whitehead and Russell's *Principia mathematica* had a major influence in logic and the philosophy of mathematics, his work in the philosophy of education had major advocates (e.g., Brumbaugh 1982; Brumbaugh and Lawrence 1985), and his philosophy of science continues to receive significant attention (e.g., Eastman and Keeton 2004; Epperson 2004; Cobb 2008).

But without question Whitehead's major influence has been within the philosophy of religion. By the late 1940s there was a strong Whitehead school at the University of Chicago Divinity School. During the 1950s and 1960s, when Yale was widely heralded as the nation's leading philosophy department, several of the key figures were Whiteheadians, including Paul Weiss and William A. Christian. Since then process philosophers have made significant contributions to a wide variety of debates within the philosophy of religion.[1]

The starting point for process philosophy is usually the metaphysical framework advanced in *Process and Reality*. According to this metaphysic, reality consists of moments of experience or "actual occasions." Actual occasions "prehend" the contents of previous occasions both physically and mentally. But each actual occasion, in a process Whitehead calls *concrescence*, also synthesizes its input into a unique perspective on the world. Thus each actual entity, as it concludes its process of becoming, bequeaths to the world a new synthetic perspective; as Whitehead put it, "The many become one and are increased by one" (1978, p. 21). The idealist tendency of this metaphysics is clear: reality is synthesized in the experience of each individual unit of reality; in some sense, reality *just is* the sum of these experiences.

This tendency may explain the attraction this metaphysic has had for philosophers of religion. God is an actual occasion (or perhaps a series of actual occasions) and is describable using the same metaphysical principles exemplified by all other finite occasions. But Whitehead's God is also different in some fairly noticeable respects. God's "primordial" nature includes the valuation of all possibilities and thus acts as a sort of axiological ground for all reality, that is, for all subsequent moments of experience. By contrast, God's "consequent nature" prehends, values, and retains the experience of all other occasions. God becomes the "fellow sufferer who understands."

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[1] For an overview of the literature in process philosophy and theology, see the online bibliographies at the Center for Process Studies, http://www.ctr4process.org/publications/Biblio/Thematic/, accessed May 22, 2010.

237 Whitehead realized that some sort of cosmic retention was crucial if a thoroughgoing
238 process metaphysic was not going to devolve into nihilism. He wrote,

239 The ultimate evil …lies in the fact that the past fades, that time is a "perpetual
240 perishing." Objectification involves elimination. The present fact has not the
241 past fact with it in any full immediacy. The process of time veils the past below
242 distinctive feeling. There is a unison of becoming among things in the present.
243 Why should there not be novelty without loss of this direct unison of immedi-
244 acy among things? In the temporal world, it is the empirical fact that process
245 entails loss: the past is present under an abstraction. But there is no reason, of
246 any ultimate metaphysical generality, why this should be the whole story. (1978,
247 p. 340)

248 God preserves the results of all past experience, though not that experience in its
249 subjective immediacy. No perspective is lost.

250 Charles Hartshorne tended to give this metaphysic a distinctively rationalist twist,
251 whereas the thinkers of the "Chicago School" read it in a more empiricist and naturalist
252 fashion, even when they were doing theology. In works such as *A Christian Natural*
253 *Theology* (1965), Hartshorne's student John Cobb balanced the two strands, while also
254 extending the results more deeply into Christian theology, interreligious dialogue, and
255 the philosophy of science (Griffin 2004; Cobb 2008). This emphasis on developing a
256 coherent metaphysical account and extending it to a wide range of social, political,
257 and cultural issues can be found in books by process philosophers such as Lewis Ford,
258 Robert Neville, Brian Henning, Daniel Dombrowski, Don Viney, Jay McDaniel, and
259 David Ray Griffin.[2]

Atheist, naturalistic, and agnostic strands in process philosophy of religion

261 Process philosophy represents a complex resource for philosophers of religion in part
262 because it has been put to use not only by theists but also by agnostics and atheists,
263 not only by classical theists and panentheists but also by naturalists, not only by those
264 affiliated with specific religious traditions but also by perennialists and philosophers
265 with more purely metaphysical interests.

266 We briefly examined the bipolar theism that Whitehead advocated at the end of
267 *Process and Reality* and that Charles Hartshorne and his followers elaborated in many
268 later publications. But scholars have also noted that many features of Whitehead's
269 theism were only introduced in the final stratum of the composition of *Process and*
270 *Reality*.[3] His magnum opus was followed by two major works, *Modes of Thought* and
271 *Adventures of Ideas*, in which theism plays little to no discernible role. Thus by the
272 1960s one can find strong advocates of an atheist process metaphysics.

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[2] For a useful summary of process philosophers, see Browning and Myers (1998). The best single sum-
mation of process philosophy of religion is David Ray Griffin, *Reenchantment without Supernaturalism: A
Process Philosophy of Religion* (2001).

[3] Lewis Ford worked out the layers of composition in *The Emergence of Whitehead's Metaphysics* (1984).

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These thinkers affirm a metaphysics of creativity as Whitehead's major contribution to philosophy, and then argue that Creativity has as much claim to ultimacy in Whitehead's writings as does the notion of God. Creativity *could be* an attribute of God, but it can also be taken as a basic metaphysical principle independent of God. (Consider the parallel: some Platonists locate the forms within the mind of God; others postulate that the exist in an independent realm, as in Penrose's or Popper's third world.) If this argument is successful, the notion of God becomes optional for, if not actually counter-indicated by, Whitehead's notion of Creativity. Sherburne made this argument in (1967), and one finds something like the same move in Gordon Kaufman's *In the Beginning—Creativity* (2004), in which he makes Creativity his final theological resting place.

In recent years atheism has been less of a focus, and the greater emphasis has fallen on defending process thought as a kinder, gentler form of naturalism. David Ray Griffin has led this charge (though certainly not without allies) in a number of publications, the most notable of which is his *Reenchantment without Supernaturalism*. Griffin distinguishes the form of naturalism dominant in contemporary science and, for example, the New Atheists—he calls it naturalism$_{sam}$—from the non-reductive naturalism to which process philosophy gives rise—naturalism$_{ppp}$. Naturalism$_{sam}$ is *sensationalist, atheist, and materialist*. That is, it accepts the representationalist and empiricist theory of knowledge that gradually emerged in British Empiricism from John Locke to David Hume and that unintentionally constructed an increasingly high barrier between the agent and the world she seeks to know.[4] Atheism is assumed in standard modern naturalism, but the God it rejects is a supernatural God who stands over against, and even tends to negate, the natural order. Finally, naturalism$_{sam}$ accepts the Hobbesian assumption that all that exists is "matter in motion"; it thus perpetuates the materialist metaphysic that dominated much of modern European thought.

In contrast to naturalism$_{sam}$, Griffin advances an alternative view, naturalism$_{ppp}$, which is *prehensive, panentheistic, and panexperientialist*. Instead of the exclusively external relations presupposed in modern empiricism, Griffin affirms the Whiteheadian doctrine of "prehension," which presupposes internal relations between the knower and the things that she knows. Instead of atheism it affirms panentheism: all is contained within the divine, though God is also more than the world. And instead of materialism, it affirms that all units of reality are themselves occasions, moments of experience.[5]

Of course, critics may dismiss Griffin by arguing that "theistic naturalism" is a contradiction in terms and that one cannot, Humpty-Dumpty like, make a venerable philosophical term such as "naturalism" mean just anything. Still, the remarkable influence that Griffin's work has had turns in part on the sense that the modern battle between naturalism and supernaturalism (a distinction foreign to medieval philosophy) is locked in a stalemate that neither side can break. Famously, Whitehead sought to conceive God not as "an exception to all metaphysical principles" but as "their chief exemplification" (1978, p. 343). Of course, there is more than one way to break the

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[4] Richard Rorty famously made a similar point in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979).

[5] For a briefer exposition of this view, see David Ray Griffin, *Two Great Truths: A New Synthesis of Scientific Naturalism and Christian Faith* (2004).

315 stalemate. The "open panentheism" that I defend in *Adventures in the Spirit* is not
316 identical to the orthodox Whiteheadian position that Griffin is proposing.[6] In arguing
317 for the finite–infinite distinction in a (roughly) Hegelian fashion, I rely on essential
318 distinctions between God and finite agents that Griffin does not endorse. Still, we
319 are parts of a broader movement in recent philosophy of religion that is seeking to
320 undercut, and I think is succeeding at undercutting, the harsh natural–supernatural
321 distinction that has tended to place religion at such odds with science.

322 The naturalism–supernaturalism distinction is also left behind in recent work that
323 seeks to synthesize process philosophy with contemporary French post-structuralist
324 thought, especially Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze.[7] In this work, however, the
325 very distinction between constructive and deconstructive philosophy (or theology)
326 is challenged. Wedding Whitehead, the systematic metaphysician, with Derrida, the
327 deconstructer of systems, makes for a surprising match—especially given that the
328 best-known process thinkers of the previous generations were highly systematic in
329 their approaches (Hartshorne, Cobb, Griffin, Ford). Yet Whitehead's late work in par-
330 ticular offers strong evidence that he placed process over systematicity; and the recent
331 work by Keller and Faber may well represent the most philosophically sophisticated
332 work in process studies published in the last several years.

333 The role of a process agnosticism in the philosophy of religion should be mentioned
334 in closing. Sometimes this agnosticism represents a transition point for philosophers
335 who are disillusioned with classical theism and the arguments on its behalf, yet who
336 have reasons not to settle into a doctrinaire atheism. Sometimes agnosticism attracts
337 naturalists who have become disillusioned with reductive materialist naturalism but
338 who are skeptical about the metaphysical commitments necessary for full-fledged
339 theism. For others, however, it becomes a resting place, a settled *via media* between
340 an untenable traditional theism and an untenable reductionist naturalism. A brilliant
341 example of this process agnosticism can be found in "On 'Wide Sense Agnosticism'
342 and Process Theism" by Herczog (2008), whose tragic death from cancer a few months
343 ago cut short her dissertation work on this topic.

Process philosophy and Christianity

345 From the beginning philosophers of religion recognized that Whitehead's theism
346 diverges from classical theism. Hartshorne decided to call it "neoclassical" theism,
347 and "process theism" eventually became the standard term. A variety of orthodox and
348 evangelical philosophers of religion challenged process theism for being inadequate
349 to core requirements of orthodox theology and Christian practice: process theology is
350 not (sufficiently) Trinitarian; a God who takes up all finite experience within God's self
351 cannot be protected from the challenge of the problem of evil; Whitehead's "objective
352 immortality" is not sufficient for the Christian hope, which presupposes subjective

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[6] See Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit* (2008), e.g., chapter 11, "Open Panentheism and Creation as *Kenosis*."

[7] Probably the most significant authors in this area are Faber (2008) and Keller (2003, 2008). Keller has also organized and edited and important series of anthologies under the title "Transdisciplinary theological colloquia."

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353 immortality; the uniqueness of Jesus Christ cannot be adequately conceived in the
354 context of process theology; a God who persuades but does not coerce cannot be
355 counted on to "bring all things unto himself"; and prayer becomes impossible without
356 a more robust understanding of miracles.

357 In a complex and sometimes technical philosophical dispute played out over some
358 three decades, process theologians responded to each of these charges. Many authors
359 in Bracken and Suchocki (1997) argued for one or another form of process trinitar-
360 ianism. The problem of evil is not more pronounced in the Whiteheadian context,
361 but instead the rejection of omnipotence in process thought is the *only* way to avoid
362 making God culpable for unnecessary suffering (Griffin 1976, 1991). In *The End*
363 *of Evil* (1988), Marjorie Suchocki provided a sophisticated defense the possibility of
364 subjective immortality within a Whiteheadian framework; a more recent anthology has
365 offered defenses, elaborations, and criticisms of her attempt (Bracken 2005). Numer-
366 ous volumes have defended the compatibility of process theology with the biblical
367 documents, with religious practices such as prayer, and with core motifs of Christian
368 theology.[8]

369 The rich conceptual overlaps between process theology and "open theism" or "free
370 will theism," starting in the 1990s, have spawned significant new work in philosophical
371 theology.[9] A number of projects in this area today are being coordinated by Thomas
372 Jay Oord, whose work seeks to integrate process philosophy and orthodox Christian
373 thought. Oord's conferences, and sessions on "Open and Relational Theology" at the
374 American Academy of Religion attended by up to 500 people, have produced several
375 new anthologies with important new work (e.g., Oord 2009).

376 The partnership between open theists and process thinkers reflects the (to my mind
377 accurate) sense that there is significant common ground between the Whiteheadian
378 view of God and the understanding of God in the biblical documents:

379 the love of God for the world …is the particular providence for particular occa-
380 sions. …By reason of this reciprocal relation, the love in the world passes into the
381 love in heaven, and floods back again into the world. In this sense, God is the great
382 companion – the fellow-sufferer who understands. (Whitehead 1978, p. 351)

383 Both open theists and process thinkers challenge the idea of a God of unlimited power,
384 whose pre-ordination of all events and predestination of all souls make it difficult to
385 defend a robust notion of human self-determination and make human existence appear
386 more like a puppet show. And both groups can appeal to common christological state-
387 ments: "To say that Jesus was God, then, ought to mean that God himself is one with us
388 in our suffering, that divine love is not essentially benevolence—external well-wish-
389 ing—but sympathy, taking into itself our every grief" (Hartshorne 1953, p. 147).

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[8] Examples include Lewis Ford, *The Lure of God: A Biblical Background for Process Theism* (1979); Lull and Cobb's process interpretation of Romans (2005); and Catherine Keller's *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (2003). I found over a dozen volumes on process and prayer; see e.g., Pittenger (1974).

[9] E.g., Clark Pinnock and others in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Under-standing of God* (1994); John Sanders's *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence* (2007); and David Basinger's *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment* (1996). Process and free will theism are both represented in Cobb and Pinnock's collection, *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue between Process and Free Will Theists* (2000).

The greatest tension between the two groups, I suggest, arises with the question whether the limited nature of divine power is an essential feature of God (or of the God–world relationship), or a voluntary self-limitation on the part of God. Open theists and Christian panentheists generally defend the claim that the creation of all things was a free decision by God and thus reflects divine grace and providence. This is also our core reason for affirming a creation *ex nihilo*. On this view, God is essentially all-powerful, but God freely self-limits the divine power in order to allow for real agents to exist and to have a genuine role in co-determining their future. This view has come to be known as the "kenotic doctrine of creation," drawing from the notion of self-emptying (*ekenōsen*) in Phil. 2:5–8.

Process philosophers reply that any such self-limitation would be a contingent and arbitrary move. If it results from a free divine decision, no adequate philosophical account can be constructed to account for it. Moreover, a God who arbitrarily limited God's power could also just as arbitrarily choose to exercise it again at some future point of time. Much more philosophically satisfying, they argue, is a conception of God according to which it lies in God's essential nature to persuade rather than coerce. God is essentially, and hence eternally, limited by a world. For this reason, orthodox process thinkers share Whitehead's resistance to creation *ex nihilo*. God has always been accompanied by *some* world or universe, even though it may have been different worlds in different "cosmological epochs." This limitation on the divine power is an essential feature of God; like every other actual occasion, God could not coerce even if God wished to. Put differently: because God as an existing entity is essentially similar to other entities, the limitation on divine power presupposed by genuine (bi-directional) interaction with others is a metaphysical given. This explains the famous six symmetries at the end of *Process and Reality*:

It is as true to say that God is permanent and the World fluent, as that the World is permanent and God is fluent.

It is as true to say that God is one and the World many, as that the World is one and God many.

It is as true to say that, in comparison with the World, God is actual eminently, as that, in comparison with God, the World is actual eminently.

It is as true to say that the World is immanent in God, as that God is immanent in the World.

It is as true to say that God transcends the World, as that the World transcends God.

It is as true to say that God creates the World, as that the World creates God (Whitehead 1978, p. 348).

Conclusion

Given the nature of Whitehead's work, process philosophy was from the beginning committed to engaging in systematic metaphysics in the grand style. Aesthetics, philosophy of education, and social–political philosophy have been topics of discussion since the 1960s. In other respects, however, process philosophy of religion since 1970 has shared many of the same trends that we have seen in the field as a whole. The earlier years showed a predominance of analytic methods and argumentation. Philosophical

and theological frameworks, once more sharply distinguished, have been allowed to cross-fertilize. Practical concerns receive more attention than they did 40 years ago. Likewise, cross-cultural dialogue, comparative philosophy, and interreligious discourse now play a much larger role. Today there are major schools of process thought on each continent. By far the greatest influence is in China, where there are now 18 university centers for process philosophy and where many government and university leaders explicitly link the future of "postmodern China" to Whitehead's thought.

Stepping back for a moment from the specific case of process thought, I want to ask: what about the future of the philosophy of religion? What threats are raised by broader cultural changes, changes external to our field? And what opportunities do they offer to professional philosophers?

Consider first changes in the public square. Over the last years, the so-called New Atheism has become culturally dominant in English-speaking intellectual circles (and beyond), which has led to a marked change in the perceived status of religion. There were times over the last decades, at least *within* our field, when the atheist voices (Kai Nielsen, Anthony Flew, and others) were enough of a minority that they were seen more as helping pro-theistic philosophers of religion to do their work better than as undercutting them. Philosophical skeptics such as Peter K. Unger were genteel challengers. After all, most of us were from the same class (and race and gender), and we shared an admiration for crisp prose and sharp argumentation with our opponents.

Not so with the New Atheists. The new challengers have little competence, and even less interest, in philosophy. Even the few philosophers among them tend to substitute rhetoric for good arguments: if atheists are "the brights," then by implication theists are morons (Dennett 2006).

But the protests in our academic journals tend to fall on deaf ears. Overall, the advent of New Atheism has tended further to ghettoize professional philosophy of religion. Many of us take pride in the specialized nature of our discipline, the background knowledge it presupposes, and the sophisticated arguments that we compose. But the truth is that our field no longer has much influence on the broader cultural understandings of religion. It is as if we have bequeathed the debate in the public square to more popular voices.

This move is worrisome for several reasons. Academic publishing is in crisis; as people invest their reading hours in blogs and internet-based content, book sales plummet. With specialized academic publishing becoming financially unsustainable, more and more journals are forced to give up their paper publications and to go to online editions only. All signs are that this trend will continue and intensify. Yet without refereed journals and specialized books, it is hard to imagine philosophy of religion continuing in anything like the form that we have know it over the last 40 years.

Closely related to the crisis in the publishing industry is the growing crisis in the humanities. This is not the place to discuss the decreasing number of students enrolling in classic humanities majors and the increasing use of adjunct professors to cover courses in philosophy (and other humanities) departments. In 1970 it would have been unthinkable that classics departments would close and that Greek and Latin would no longer be taught. Twenty years ago it was unthinkable that philosophy departments would be viewed as esoteric and not financially sustainable.

Most of us believe that reflecting deeply, philosophically, on the nature of religious belief and practice is inherently valuable; such reflection offers guidance for society as a whole as it seeks to comprehend and respond to human religiosity. When society decides to richly fund the humanities, we will be ready. But in a time of economic scarcity and educational cutbacks—and there are no signs that this time will soon pass—it is up to us to justify the value of what we do. That means allowing the questions that we teach and write on to be motivated not only by internal disciplinary concerns (what experts care about), but also by the questions that the broader society views as the most urgent and important. It is not hard to list what these are: questions of the connection between religion and religious violence; the relation of religion and science; religion and atheism; theology and popular religious belief; miracles and the problem of evil; religion and the environment; and the religious resources for addressing fundamental ethical dilemmas, such as medical ethics and bioethics, the ethics of war, and so forth. In short, justifying our work to a broader audience involves paying more attention to the issues of religion in the contemporary world—how religious belief and practice are affecting society today.

Of course we must bring historical resources and great philosophical texts to bear on these questions; that's what we do best. But the study of technical philosophical issues without connection to the contemporary situation will fail to win the necessary support for and impact of what we do. Without it, the discipline is in danger of falling into an increasingly monastic existence: a small circle of specialists pursuing the traditional debates for decades (or centuries?) until the world again recognizes how important our work is and gives it the attention we feel it deserves. Surely that is not a recipe for success.

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