

INCARNATION: IN WHAT SENSE IS GOD REALLY “WITH US”?¹

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PERSONAL NOTE:

I write as a theologian with a philosophical interest and with an affinity to process thought in particular. For me, process thought has offered a lifeline in an ongoing quest to find a more “adequate” concept of God — one more promising than prevalent classical and popular alternatives. God, of course, is and remains a Holy Mystery incomparably greater than all our best concepts of God. Nevertheless, it is important to articulate concepts that, at least, gesture in good directions. Whitehead spoke of the “brief Galilean vision” that has “flickered uncertainly through the ages.”² It is my belief that this vision is more credible, more religiously viable, and more morally adequate than what many popular and traditional notions have offered. It is a vision of God that is more worthy of its Subject and more “worshipful.” As a theological conversation partner, process thought has been a welcome source of illumination and correction — even a breath of fresh air — for me as a theologian. In the presentation that follows, I am taking a theological “adventure of ideas.” I believe such adventures are warranted and even essential to progress in theology. As Victor Lowe has pointed out, “Theology, like metaphysics, is dead when it ceases to be a continuing business.”³

I. INTRODUCTION

The present eco-crisis makes it imperative that we find ways of living with and within the natural world that are more just, participatory and sustainable. Our primary challenge may be *theological*. Ideas of who God is, how God is related to the world, how the world works, and who we are as human beings all shape how we interact with the natural world. Those engaged in eco-justice work often observe that drawing out the statistics on global warming or species extinction or habitat destruction — the “data of despair” — does not seem to motivate the needed changes. The problem is not a matter of information but rather a matter of *orientation*. What is needed is a fundamental reorientation — a “conversion to the earth,” as Rosemary Radford Ruether put it. Our callous disregard and rapacious ways in relation to the natural world may be a symptom of not knowing our place within this wider environment. Perhaps what is needed is a more *down-to-earth* understanding of who we are as human beings.

1 An earlier form of my presentation was delivered at the 2015 Tenth International Whitehead Conference held in Claremont, California on “Seizing an Alternative: Toward an Ecological Civilization.” Proceedings of the philosophical work group have since been published in a collected volume. The presentation as delivered there is: Anna Case-Winters, “Coming Down to Earth: A Process-Pantheist Reorientation to Nature”, in *Conceiving an Alternative: Philosophical Resources for an Ecological Civilization*, ed. David Conner and Demian Wheeler (Process Century Press, 2017). The current presentation also incorporates earlier work from my article, Anna Case-Winters, “God Will Be All in All: Implications of the Incarnation”, in *Seeking Common Ground: Evaluation and Critique of Joseph Bracken’s Comprehensive Worldview*, ed. Marc A. Pugliese and Gloria L. Schaab (Marquette Univ. Press, 2012).

2 Alfred N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (Free Press, 1978), 342.

3 Victor Lowe, *Understanding Whitehead* (John Hopkins Univ. Press, 1962), 92.

The interaction of Christian theology with the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead has proven transformative precisely in the areas where a reorientation is needed. This interaction can help to overcome common habits of thought that are theologically and ecologically problematic. Perhaps the most problematic habit of thought in classical theism is the assumption that God is completely separate from the world. This way of thinking yields both a desacralization and objectification of nature which make disregard for the well-being of the natural world more thinkable. Process panentheist approaches, in conversation with incarnational theology, can illuminate a path toward reconnecting God and the world. A stronger conviction of divine presence in the natural world precludes the possibility of seeing the world as a world of mere objects. The world is resacralized, and it is reinvested with what might be termed “subject” status. Christian theology of the incarnation has an inherent capacity to convey “God with us” in the world of nature. However, the profound meaning of the incarnation has not been fully realized due to elements of classical theism which obscure its coherency and its religious viability. Process insights can offer correctives here as well.

A more extended conversation between Christian theology and process thought can be seen to be fruitful in rethinking the relation of God and the world and the deeper meaning of incarnation. These two foci are crucial elements in reorienting human sensibilities concerning the following:

II. SEEING GOD IN RELATION TO THE WORLD: THE CHALLENGE OF RESACRALIZING

In the interest of upholding divine transcendence, classical theism has carefully derived divine attributes *over against* the attributes of the world of nature. God is not the world or anything in the world. Intended as a proper apophatic reserve, this way of thinking has hardened into a binary opposition between God and the world: the eternal vs. the temporal, the changing vs. the unchanging, and so on. God has, in effect, been *structured out* of the natural world, and the world has been desacralized.

God		World
Eternal		Temporal
Unchanging (immutable)		Changeable
Not subject to suffering (impassible)		Subject to suffering
Necessary being		Contingent in being

A welcome alternative to this approach is to be found in Whitehead’s “dipolar theism” (and Hartshorne’s later interpretation of “dual transcendence”). Rather than setting up metaphysical polarities and assigning one pole to God and the other to the world, divine perfection is reconceived as embracing both poles, manifesting each attribute in the way in which it is most excellent to do so. God can be both unchanging in the sense of divine (loving) faithfulness and changing in the sense of divine (loving) responsiveness. Divine transcendence and divine immanence can both be maintained.

Another element of Whitehead’s system that may move toward the needed resacralization is the proposal that God’s relation to the world is internal rather than external. In classical theism, it was assumed that while the world is *internally* related to God (and therefore can be affected by God) this relation was not reciprocal. God is only *externally* related to the world and is unaffected by the world (impassible). Embracing God’s internal relation with the world opens the prospect of mutual influence and mutual indwelling. In a sense, every reality can be seen as co-constituted with the divine. Divine reality includes and does not exclude material reality. God is genuinely “all in all” (I Cor. 15:28). This is even now the case and not something deferred to the eschaton.⁴ One may speak, even now, of the “indwelling presence” (*shekinah*) of God in the world of God’s “glory” (*kavod*) appearing in our midst. Mayra Rivera puts it this way, “glory is the trace of the divine relationship woven through creaturely life and its relationships. It is

4 Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (Columbia Univ. Press, 2015), 52.

the cloudy radiance of the ungraspable excess that inheres in ordinary things — something that manifests itself, that gives itself.”⁵

In another promising reconsideration, process thought refuses the traditional absolute divide between “Creator” and “created” — the traditional “infinite qualitative distinction.” In its place, Whitehead introduces the category of *creativity* — shared creativity. God may be thought of as the “chief exemplification” of creativity, even as the leader of the creative advance, but not as having a monopoly on creativity. Creativity characterizes all actual entities. As the Ground of Order and the Ground of Novelty, God, in a sense, makes creativity possible, but the stark separation between Creator and created does not apply. As Whitehead proposes, “It is as true to say that God creates the World as that the World creates God.”⁶

Perhaps the most decisive step toward resacralization is process pantheism. God is in the world and the world is in God, yet God is more than the world.⁷ Whitehead put it this way, “It is as true to say that the World is immanent in God, as that God is immanent in the World.”⁸ In the work of reframing the incarnation, pantheistic approaches have much to offer. Pantheism, simply put, is the view that “God is in all things and all things are in God” from the Greek terms πᾶν “all things” ἐν “in” θεοῦ “God”. It affirms “God immanent in the world and the world immanent in God without loss to the independent status of either God or the world.”⁹ As Arthur Peacocke defines it, it is “the belief that the Being of God includes and indwells all things in the cosmos, while not being reducible to these things.”¹⁰ God is *really present* “in, with, and under” but always more than the world. There is an immanent transcendence or a transcendent immanence in the divine life, in relation to the cosmos. The whole philosophy of organism, he said, “is mainly devoted to the task of making clear the notion of ‘being present in another entity.’”¹¹ With this step all else falls into place. The world is effectively resacralized.

Among the pantheisms on the horizon, I think there is greater promise in the process approach. It does not so easily fall into *pantheism* (God is all there is) on the one hand or *pancosmism* (the world is all there is) on the other.¹² In this genuinely relational approach, both the alterity (otherness) of the world and the transcendence of God are preserved.

The world is not divine; it is *other than* God — “not God.” The alterity of the world is preserved, and pantheism is avoided. In a relational framework this alterity is essential — else there is no real relation with a genuine other, only a divine self-relation. The world, dependent on God as the Ground of Order and Ground of Novelty, still has its own semi-autonomous unfolding. There is another attendant consideration, in connection with the eco-crisis which is the presenting problem of this paper. If God is all there is, then it is meaningless to speak of human ethical responsibility for the eco-crisis. Whatever is done is God’s own doing.

God who is pervasively present in world process is *more than* the world. In this way divine transcendence is upheld and pancosmism is avoided. In a process-relational framework God’s transcendence does not consist in being absolutely separate from all else, but in being supremely related to all that is. Hartshorne has described God’s relation to the world as “surrelativity.”¹³ God is supremely relative, inter-

5 Mayra Rivera, “Glory: The First Passion of Theology”, in *Polydoxy: Theology of Multiplicity and Relation*, ed. Catherine Keller and Laurel C. Schneider (Routledge, 2011), 177.

6 Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 21.

7 Following Nicolas of Cusa, it is best to think of this as an enfolding rather than an enclosure. His pantheism “destabilizes any picture of a container-God.” Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 113.

8 Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 348.

9 Joseph A. Bracken, *Society and Spirit: A Trinitarian Cosmology* (Susquehanna Univ. Press, 1991), 159.

10 Arthur Peacocke, *Paths From Science Towards God: The End of all Our Exploring* (Oneworld Publications, 2004), 51.

11 Alfred N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (Macmillan, 1926), 50.

12 For example, the emanationist pantheism of Sallie McFague’s proposal (“the world as God’s body”) may be leaning toward pantheism. Gordon Kaufman’s proposal that God is the (non-agential) “serendipitous creativity in the bio-historical process” leans toward pancosmism. For the full argument see Anna Case-Winters, *Reconstructing a Christian Theology of Nature: Down to Earth* (Ashgate, 2006), 19–43.

13 Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* (YUP, 1948), 88.

nally related to all that is. In this way God is “all in all.” This is a transcendence that includes rather than excludes relation.

Process approaches provide a vision of authentic relationality between God and the world that resacralizes the world. The implications for valuation of the natural world and exercising ecological responsibility follow from this new sensibility. Four particular contributions shape this new sensibility:

- 1) Dipolar theism allows for a derivation of divine attributes that embraces the metaphysical polarities rather than assigning one pole to God and the opposite pole to the world.
- 2) The embrace of internal relations in place of external relations opens the prospect for both mutual influence and a mutual indwelling of God in the world and the world in God.
- 3) The traditional absolute divide between Creator and created is replaced by a wider concept of creativity which both God and the world share.
- 4) Process panentheism articulates divine presence in world process in a way that upholds the alterity of the world and the transcendence of God.

These steps are a significant advance toward the needed resacralization of the world. These steps also help to illumine central Christian insights around incarnation. In Christian tradition, the possibility of seeing God as genuinely in relation to the world has always been implicit in the doctrine of the incarnation. Here we see the emblematic expression of “God with us.” However, elements of classical theism sometimes obscured Christological affirmations to the point that they lost coherence and religious viability. Here we will trace some of the difficulties the traditional doctrine of the incarnation has faced and then indicate how the process contributions put forward above may point the way toward a more coherent and more religiously viable articulation of central Christological claims. A better articulated understanding of incarnation, will also serve in the revaluation of the natural world needed for ecological thinking and acting.

Traditional Christology has had significant difficulty in articulating its ancient affirmation expressed in the definition of Chalcedon: “truly God, truly human ... two natures in one person.” This claim has seemed at best paradoxical, at worst contradictory. How is it possible to make a non-contradictory affirmation of these Christological convictions? The challenge of coherency is heightened by the assumed “polar opposition” between God and all else. As discussed above, this opposition is structured by assigning of metaphysical contraries to God and the world in binary opposition. The “infinite qualitative distinction” between Creator and created makes any joining of divine and human difficult to imagine.

Continuing to affirm the Chalcedonian definition of “truly God, truly human ... two natures in one person” in the face of the assumed incoherence has led to various distortions. Many Christians have settled for either a “Christology from above,” deemphasizing the human or a “Christology from below,” deemphasizing the divine. These approaches risk Docetism on the one hand and Adoptionism on the other. There has also been historic division over whether to emphasize the two natures (as Calvin did) or the one person (as Luther did). It seems one must choose. Attempts to articulate a unity-in-difference have lacked plausibility. The proposal of a *communicatio idiomatum* (communication of the attributes), for example, has seemed like “smoke and mirrors” to many. An unfortunate habit of parceling out attributes of the two natures has arisen. Joseph Bracken notes that, “It was necessary to distinguish within Jesus between that which was divine in him (the second person of the trinity) and that which was merely human.”¹⁴ The capacity for suffering, notably, was assigned to the merely human.

Process approaches can help toward a more coherent affirmation of the insights of Chalcedon through several distinctive contributions. Concerning the issue of “two natures,” Chalcedon affirmed, “two natures unconfused, unchangeable, undivided, and inseparable.” If these divine and human natures are thought of in terms of “substance,” as classical theism has done, the problem seems insurmountable. It seems that if the divine Logos is to be present in Jesus of Nazareth, then some part of his human na-

14 Bracken, *Society and Spirit*, 28.

ture must be displaced.¹⁵ How can two substances be both unconfused and inseparable? This is where theologians frequently just throw up their hands and say “mystery.” While the doctrine of God is mystery through and through, we “misplace the mystery” when we use this to cover over contradictions we have ourselves created.

Process thought offers an alternative, urging that we not think of reality in terms of “substance” but rather as “process.” Bracken has demonstrated, a creative rethinking in this direction advances the present discussion.¹⁶ The process of being a divine person may be integrated with the process of being a human person without confusion or separation. The Incarnate one is co-constituted by divine and human processes just as God and the world are “interpenetrating fields of activity.”¹⁷ Accepting the process reorientation provided in “internal (not external) relations” and “process (not substance)” ways of thinking, new possibilities open up for understanding the incarnation for understanding how God can be “in” a human being without compromising his/her humanity. “In the fullness of this internal relation, humanity is brought to perfection.”¹⁸ There is no longer any need to choose between a Christology “from above” and a Christology “from below.” Nor is it necessary to parcel out the attributes between the divine and the human natures.

In addition to challenges of coherency, challenges of religious viability present themselves. If the Chalcedonian statement cannot be coherently affirmed, there are implications for faith and life. The incoherence calls into question confidence that in Christ we see both “true God and true human being.” People make the “from above” or “from below” choice. Each of these choices is problematic for the life of faith.

On the one hand, if we do not see “true human being” in Jesus the Christ, then his life cannot serve as a model for our own. If God’s presence in him is ontologically different from God’s presence in the rest of us, then we cannot be expected to be like him.¹⁹ We might be moved to worship this person (as divine), but we cannot really be expected to follow him. The “reign of God” that Jesus preached ceases to be the focus of our attention, and “the cult of Jesus” takes center stage. He becomes a mere object of devotion rather than a companion in the struggle of the reign of God.²⁰ If we are able to see “true human being” in Jesus, the Christ, then he could be an exemplar for us and the calling to follow in his way would be viable and compelling. Ethical implications and obligations follow. Karl Barth put the matter provocatively when he insisted that the question is not whether Jesus the Christ is human but whether we are. This is the case because it is only in Christ that we see the “true” human being, the one lives in fullness of covenant relation with God (unobscured by sin) and therefore in right relation to all else.²¹ This true humanity is opened up for us in him and as future possibility and destiny however imperfectly realized in our situation of sinfulness. These insights illustrate the theological importance of the affirmation of true humanity.

On the other hand, if we do not see “true God” here, then our view of who God is and how God is related to the world cannot be significantly shaped by what we see in Jesus, the Christ. Some of our deepest theological insights cannot authentically be affirmed if we do not see “true God” in the incarnation. The suffering love we see there cannot be allowed to shape our view of God’s nature and activity in world process. We cannot really acknowledge, as Barth did, that because of Jesus Christ, we know about the “humanity of God.”²² The deeper implication of the incarnation — that God is (already) in, with, and for

15 John B. Cobb and David R. Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Westminster Press, 1976), 104.

16 Bracken, *Society and Spirit*, 48–57.

17 Bracken, *Society and Spirit*, 159.

18 Marjorie Suchocki in Joseph A. Bracken and Marjorie H. Suchocki, eds., *Trinity in Process: A Relational Theology of God* (Continuum, 1996), 60.

19 Bracken, *Society and Spirit*, 28.

20 Choan-Seng Song, *Jesus and the Reign of God* (Fortress Press, 1993), 17.

21 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (T&T Clark, 1956), 222–25.

22 Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (1960), 49–51 “When we look at Jesus Christ we know precisely that God’s deity includes and does not exclude His humanity... His deity encloses humanity in itself... In his divinely free volition and election, in his sovereign decision, God is *human*.”

the world — is obscured. These are central claims of faith and they are grounded in the belief that in the incarnation we see “true God.”

Another religious viability issue presents itself when the incarnation is taken to be an “exception” to God’s ordinary way of being and acting — the problem of exclusivism.²³ As mentioned above, process thought challenges the habit of seeing God and God acting as the “exception” to all metaphysical principles and proposes instead that we should see God as their “chief exemplification.” This proposal helps us to rethink exclusivism. Is God’s self-revelation *only* in Jesus of Nazareth and not in other times and places? Catherine Keller asks whether the incarnation must be “an exclusive revelation of God in the final or competitive sense usually meant by identifying Jesus as the ‘only son of God.’”²⁴ Such a view is deeply problematic in interreligious encounters. In our religiously pluralistic context it hampers efforts toward mutual understanding, faith sharing, and common work for the common good. If we could understand the incarnation as a profound exemplification of God’s ordinary and ongoing presence and action in the world — rather than as an exception to it — then we might be delivered from exclusivist claims. It becomes possible to affirm God’s presence and self-revelation in Jesus, the Christ, with the full wealth of conviction, without presuming that this is the only locus of divine presence and self-revelation. We may say that in him we see one who is “wholly” divine without claiming that he is “the whole” of the divine. Taking this standpoint, Christians may be genuinely open in interreligious dialogue to receive as well as to share good news of God with us. Might there not be what Laurel Schneider has called, “promiscuous incarnations?” If *God is genuinely indwelling all things*, as in panentheism, then there is always already a kind of “*pan-carnation*.”²⁵

Incarnation is an instance of transparency to ultimate reality — not an exception to it. Peacocke has observed that, “The Word which was before *incognito*, implicit, and hidden, now becomes known, explicit, and revealed.”²⁶ What we see in the incarnation is echoed in the sacrament of communion. “Jesus identified the mode of his incarnation and reconciliation of God and humanity (“his body and blood”) with the very stuff of the universe when he took the bread, blessed, broke, and gave it to his disciples...”²⁷ Bracken, summarizing approvingly the earlier work of Gustave Martelet who believed that “the far deeper truth about the doctrine of the Real Presence is that not just bread and wine but all of creation including the world of nature, are collectively becoming the Body of Christ.”²⁸ Bracken views this as a progressive integration into the divine field of activity with the passage of time. Taken seriously, a notion of divine *real presence* in incarnation and reiterated in sacrament must entail a revaluation of all material reality as open to and indwelt by the divine.

Another insight of process thought proves helpful for the Chalcedonian affirmation of “truly God, truly human.” Process panentheism assumes that God is (already) in all things. This view has the potential of resolving the apparent contradiction inherent in the claim that God was “in” Jesus of Nazareth. The world’s presence in God and God’s presence in the world is already the reality and it is made visible in the incarnation. What happens in the man, Jesus of Nazareth, is emblematic of what is *already the case* about the whole of creation.

For Christian theology, this view unveils — among other things — the deeper meaning of incarnational theology. Whitehead offered that, “The world lives by its incarnation of God in itself.”²⁹ Arthur Peacocke, who also speaks from a panentheist perspective, expressed the meaning of the incarnation in this way,

The incarnation can thus be more explicitly and overtly understood as the God *in whom the world already exists* becoming manifest in the trajectory of a human being who is naturally in and of that world. In that person the world now becomes transparent, as it were, to the God in whom it exists: The Word which was

23 Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Fortress Press, 2008), 151.

24 *Ibid.*

25 Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 118.

26 Peacocke, *Paths From Science Towards God*, 154.

27 Peacocke, *Paths From Science Towards God*, 149.

28 Joseph A. Bracken, *Christianity and Process Thought: Spirituality for a Changing World* (Templeton Press, 2006), 102.

29 Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 149.

before *incognito*, implicit, and hidden, now becomes known, explicit, and revealed. The epic of evolution has reached its apogee and consummation in God-in-a-human-person.³⁰

In this sense when we speak of “the incarnation” we are describing an instance of transparency to a deeper reality — a place “where the light shines through.” The meaning of Christian theology of incarnation has not yet been tapped for its deeper significance in conveying God’s pervasive presence in world process with all its implications for our valuation of material reality.

In Jesus of Nazareth there is a responsiveness to divine initial aims, such that in him we are able to see what God intends and is doing everywhere and always. We see that God is in, with, and for the world. God’s intentions and actions for each and for all become transparent in Jesus the Christ. Here is a place “where the light shines through.” As Allan Galloway put it, “Once we have encountered God in Christ, we must encounter God in all things.”³¹ This necessarily reshapes how we think about the natural world.

III. SEEING THE WORLD AS COMPOSED OF SUBJECTS IN RELATION: OVERCOMING OBJECTIFICATION AND ANTHROPOCENTRISM

This alternative understanding of God “in all things” has the potential to radically reshape our thinking about the natural world, its value, and the role of human beings in it. Present habits of thought and practice seem to think of the natural world as a world of mere objects with human beings as the only subjects. This reinforces a dangerous anthropocentrism that has made the current exploitative, destructive patterns of behavior more thinkable. Some traditional ways of thinking about incarnation actually play into this anthropocentric mindset. If, for example, the incarnation is viewed as a kind of emergency measure on God’s part to address the problem of human sinfulness, this fuels anthropocentrism implying that it really is “all about us.”

Revised understandings of how God is in relation to the world and deepened insights into incarnation set us on a good course for a different kind of relation with the natural world. Two necessary steps along the way are overcoming both anthropocentrism and the objectification of nature. Again assistance may be found in process-relational approaches and particularly Whitehead’s introduction of his “philosophy of organism.” Exploring these contributions will also illumine certain streams of thought already present in Christian theology that may be more consonant with the reorientation needed.

If we view the world in a *relational* framework, the practical outworking is that we begin to ask relational questions. When any particular course of action is advocated as good, we ask: Good *in relation to what?* Good *in relation to whom?* We are pushed to consider the effects of our actions upon all those others to whom now know we are internally related and thus utterly connected. Pursuing purely selfish interests is revealed to be an irrational habit of thought and action — living *as if* we were autonomous individuals and not co-constituted by our relations. Living life *incurvatus en se* (curved in on ourselves), as Augustine put it, is a *dis*-orientation and an alienation.

Thus reoriented, we may begin to see things *whole* — existing in a complex pattern of relationality in which we are all co-constituted. A corollary of seeing things whole is the ethical imperative toward *making things whole* in the sense of healing. We may seek to heal the damage that has been done and reverse the *dis*-integration of ecosystems and social systems. The whole ecojustice project is an insistence that we affirm the integrity of nature and therefore make the connections.³²

30 Arthur Peacocke, “Articulating God’s Presence in and to the World Unveiled by the Sciences”, in *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Pantheistic Reflections on God’s Presence in a Scientific World*, ed. Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke (Eerdmans, 2004), 154.

31 Allan D. Galloway, *The Cosmic Christ* (Nisbet, 1951).

32 In the North-South global conversation, for example, people from the northern hemisphere are accused of not making the connections between ecology and economics when they insist on preserving the rain forest without acknowledging the economic needs that impinge upon persons living in and near the rainforests, needs that motivate them to turn rainforests into pastures and farmlands. To think in this way is to *disintegrate* ecosystems from social systems and economic systems. Economics has to enter the picture; it is the other half of the *eco*-crisis. For a substantive discussion of economics and process thought see

Jürgen Moltmann makes the point that theology has contributed to the present ecological crisis through the “subjectification of the human being” and the “objectification of nature.”³³ In classical theism we declare a human monopoly on spirit. Among other things, anthropocentrism places the human being in a transcendent — even God-like — relation to nature, thereby lifting the human being right out of the natural world as a spiritual creature in a material world. Such a view assigns only instrumental value and not intrinsic value to nature and thereby permits and may even promote its exploitation. Nature becomes (to borrow Emily Townes’s phrase) “a permissible victim.”

A genuinely non-anthropocentric eco-justice ethic will base the call to preserve and protect the natural world in its *intrinsic* value, not in its value to us. When we seek to motivate care by remarking upon how dependent *human beings* are on “*our* natural environment” and “*our* natural resources,” those are anthropocentric, instrumentalist valuations and motivations. It would be far better for us to insist upon the *intrinsic value* of species, ecosystems, and the biosphere.

Whitehead insists that, “value is inherent in actuality itself.”³⁴ Whitehead’s philosophy of organism takes an interesting step of proposing that all entities have both physical and mental poles (in varying degrees). This is probably one of his most misunderstood adventures of ideas. Whitehead is working with a meaning for “mentality” that is not anthropocentrically defined and does not require cognition or even consciousness or sentience; it is simply the “capacity for experience.” Griffin’s suggestion of “panexperientialism” may convey the meaning better than “panpsychism,” a misleading term sometimes employed. Each actual entity in its own coming to be is a subject and has intrinsic value. Process thought admits to degrees of intrinsic value relative to capacities for sentience, but this represents a continuum with no absolute divide.

In an interesting aside Griffin reintroduces *extrinsic value*, in terms of value to the larger ecosystem — “ecological value.”³⁵ He offers a disconcerting observation that if we take into account “ecological value,” some creatures (like plankton, worms, bacteria, etc.) that may not be capable of the richest experience may in fact have great value in the ecosystems. Human beings, on the other hand, who are capable of the richest experience, may have little ecological value. “In fact most of the other forms of life would be better off and the ecosystem as a whole would not be threatened, if we did not exist.”³⁶ The Gaia hypothesis goes so far as to suggest that we are like harmful bacteria to the organism that is earth, and it needs to eliminate us! We are “a danger to ourselves and others.” A bit unsettling, that!

As Whitehead follows through on the insights of his philosophy of organism, the old spiritual-material dichotomy dissolves. There are no pure spirits, and there is no “dead” matter. There are only material beings (sentient and non-sentient) with varying capacities for experience. The important point is that in Whitehead’s philosophy of organism, interiority extends all the way down to the submicroscopic. “Wherever there is actuality of any sort, it has a spontaneity and capacity for prehending its environment, albeit in a non-conscious way.”³⁷

“By virtue of their capacities for inwardness or subjectivity ... all deserve respect and care on their own terms and for their own sakes, not simply for their usefulness to human beings.”³⁸

Earth community is, as Thomas Berry has insisted, “a communion of subjects.” The human being, in this way of thinking does not have a monopoly on subject status. As John Cobb often says, “process theology does not commit monopoly.” Process-relational philosophy of organism challenges habits of thought that would treat the natural world as a world of separable objects. It also challenges the anthropocentrism

John B. Cobb and Herman E. Daly, *For The Common Good: Redirecting the Economy toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, & a Sustainable Future* (Beacon Press, 1994). Whitehead’s relational ontology is suggestive for conceptualizing and interpreting in ways that make these connections.

33 Jürgen Moltmann, *Creating a Just Future: The Politics of Peace and the Ethics of Creation in a Threatened World* (SCM Press, 1989), 25.

34 Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 100.

35 David R. Griffin, “Whitehead’s Deeply Ecological Worldview”, in *Worldviews and Ecology: Religion, Philosophy, and the Environment*, ed. Mary E. Tucker (Orbis Books, 1994), 192.

36 Griffin, “Whitehead’s Deeply Ecological Worldview”, 203.

37 Jay McDaniel, “Process Thought and the Epic of Evolution Tradition”, *Process Studies* 35, no. 1 (2006), 78.

38 McDaniel, “Process Thought and the Epic of Evolution”, 70.

that grants human beings a monopoly on subject status. These corrections from process relational ways of thinking can help redirect us toward a more theologically and ecologically sound understanding of the world and ourselves.

There are within Christian theology alternative visions of incarnation that are more companionable with the corrections process thought is offering. Two in particular will be illumined here: deep incarnation and cosmic Christology.

Niels Gregersen's work on "deep incarnation" envisions the nature of God's incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth in ways that connect it to the larger natural world rather than separating from it or limiting it to human beings as such.³⁹ He proposes that incarnation "reaches into the depths of material existence." In this way, "the eternal Logos embraces the uniqueness of the human but also the continuity of humanity with other animals, and with the natural world at large." The choice of the Greek term *sarx* (for "flesh") in John 1:14 ("the word became flesh and dwelt among us") conveys a much broader concept than "the word became human" might have done. *Sarx* is the Greek term that would be used to translate the Hebrew (*kol-bashar*, "all flesh") and would imply the whole reality of the material world. For contemporary readers, it would include everything "from quarks to atoms to molecules, in their combinations and transformations throughout chemical and biological evolution."⁴⁰ This wider embrace of the natural world in the incarnation has far reaching implications. It is commonly said of the incarnation, "If this is God, then thus is God." A key implication which Gregersen draws out is that because the incarnation is a coming-into flesh of God's eternal Logos, in and through the process of incarnation, "God the creator and the world of flesh are conjoined in such depth that God links up with all vulnerable creatures, with sparrows in their flight as well as in their fall..."⁴¹ Thus the suffering in the natural world is also God's suffering and must be understood from this vantage point, no longer from an anthropocentric point of view.

There is another stream of thought in Christian theology that resonates well with process insights. "Cosmic Christology" provides yet another form of resistance to anthropocentrism and objectification of nature. In traditional Christology's the predominating understanding of the meaning of the Christ event has seemed to be limited to the work of redemption, and the work of redemption has been limited to "saving souls" and getting to a better world. Such a narrowing has led to an "acosmic" Christianity. However, within the broader Christian tradition there are alternatives which see the Christ event as embracing the whole of creation. This long-standing tradition is found in a number of biblical texts.⁴² It is also prominent in notable theologians of the early church (Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria) and 12th and 13th century theologians (Franciscans, Bonaventura) and predominates in Eastern Orthodox theology even today. In medieval Franciscan theology for example, the incarnation is no afterthought or emergency measure on God's part to deal with human sin. The incarnation lies in the primordial creative intent of God.

In this interpretation, Christ is related to the whole of creation prior to any role in redeeming humankind. The divine *logos*, is related to the very structure of the universe. Christ is the Word through whom God created all things, the one who was "in the beginning." (John 1). Cosmic Christology assumes the entire cosmos is included in the divine purposing; it is not just a context for the outworking of the redemptive drama of human beings. The goal of all creation is its relation in union with God — *theosis*. Christ's work is redemptive precisely because this union, which is intended for all, is manifest in him. "He became as we are, that we might become as he is" (Irenaeus). The symbol of Chalcedon expresses who the Christ is understood to be — "truly God, truly human united in one and the same concrete being." In doing so, it is at the same time expressing that union with God toward which all things are drawn. Salva-

39 Niels H. Gregersen, "Deep Incarnation: Why Evolutionary Continuity Matters in Christology", *Toronto Journal of Theology* 26, no. 2 (2010), 174.

40 Gregersen, "Deep Incarnation", 177.

41 Niels H. Gregersen, ed., *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology* (Fortress Press, 2015), 17.

42 Such as Corinthians 8:6; Ephesians 1:13-14; Colossians 1:15-20; Philippians 2:6-11; Hebrews 1:1-4; John 1:1-14.

tion, understood in this light is not exclusively or even primarily about salvation of human beings from their sin. It is about God bringing to completion what God has begun in creation. Themes of fulfillment and consummation take center stage. “God creates so that a (final) life-giving synthesis of God and world might be realized.”

Both “deep incarnation” and “cosmic Christology” enlarge the scope of God’s connection with and purposes in the natural world. These approaches challenge the more limited anthropocentric reading and do not allow a division between human beings as subjects and the rest of the natural world as composed of mere objects.

IV. CONCLUSION

Distinctive insights of process-relational approach have been explored here with the intent of showing how they may help to reconnect God and the world and to see the world as composed of subjects in relation with one another and with God who is genuinely “with us.” Particular elements have proven especially helpful in this regard: dual transcendence, internal relations, shared creativity, panentheism, and philosophy of organism. These themes have illumined and clarified key theological insights into the God-world relation. At the heart of the natural world is an openness to the God who “enfolds and unfolds”⁴³ it — the God who is “all in all” (I Cor. 15:28). If taken seriously, this view implies a “real presence” of the divine in the natural world. What is made visible in incarnation and reiterated in sacrament is a cosmic incarnation — the whole world is “a place of grace.”⁴⁴

The human being is decentered. Instead of being *incurvatus in se ipsum* (“curved in” on ourselves) we are reoriented, turned outward to care for the wider world that God pervasively indwells. This necessarily changes the way we understand and treat the natural world.

In conclusion, at this stage in our history, it is incumbent upon human beings to find ways of living that are more “socially just, ecologically wise and spiritually satisfying, not only for the sake of human life but for the sake of the well-being of the whole planet.”⁴⁵ I am convinced that our challenge in doing this is primarily theological. There are parts of our inheritance from classical theism that take our thinking about God and the world and the human being in problematic directions — both theologically and ecologically. Process relational approaches offer a helpful corrective that might assist the needed reorientation. Classical theism contributed to the desacralization of nature. By contrast, Whitehead’s concept of God reinvests the natural world with divine presence and interactivity. Transcendence is maintained, but it is *relational* transcendence that gives place to a genuine other. The problem of anthropocentrism embedded in the tradition — with its subjectification of the human and objectification of nature — is also challenged by Whitehead’s system. His philosophy of organism provides a way of seeing the natural world as composed of subjects.

Though I am no “orthodox Whiteheadian” (perhaps that is an oxymoron), I am convinced that the insights traced here from process thought can help Christian theology — illumining, clarifying, and sometimes correcting our doctrinal developments. We need a new theology of nature to help us find ways of living with and within the natural world that are more just, participatory and sustainable.

Whitehead once said that, “it is a disease of philosophy when it is neither bold nor humble, but merely a reflection of the temperamental presuppositions of exceptional personalities.”⁴⁶ We are not urged to become Whiteheadians, but rather to make progress in this work, using our own constructive imaginations to address the challenges of our own context. Those challenges are as grave as they are urgent; we are hearing a compelling call to action. There is a fundamental reorientation needed if we are to have a chance of finding a “just and sustainable conviviality.”⁴⁷ My hope is that we may be humble enough to

43 Nicolas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, Book II:3.

44 Joseph Sittler, *Called to Unity: Creation and the Future of Humanity* (Lutheran School of Theology, 2000), 52.

45 McDaniel, “Process Thought and the Epic of Evolution”, 80.

46 Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 17.

47 Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 52.

come out of our anthropocentrism to a more down-to-earth sense of ourselves. Presented here with a genuine alternative that chooses life and supports the flourishing of all, may we be bold enough to seize it.

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