

“Surprising God: Prayer, Partnership, and the Divine Adventure”
Bruce Epperly
Lancaster Theological Seminary¹

I.

As a practical theologian, I am interested in how our beliefs take shape in everyday life. I believe that good theology integrates: 1) an affirmative, hopeful, and convincing vision of God and the world; 2) a promise that our deepest beliefs can be experienced as we grow spiritually and ethically; and 3) practices that enable us to experience the theological vision that we affirm. The faith we affirm is profoundly concrete and can be matter of life and death for persons and the planet. Accordingly, our theological visions must always be tested in relationship to the concrete practices and experiences of faithful persons as well as seekers. They must be tested in terms of whether they inspire reverence, gratitude, and a heart-felt “yes” as we contemplate the universe and our role as companions in God’s holy adventure.

As I ponder the practical implications divine omniscience as it relates to prayer, two questions surface: 1) What can we expect of God? and 2) What can we expect of ourselves? Our understanding of the scope of divine knowledge as it relates to past, present, and future events, conditions our vision of divine creativity in relationship to our own lives. Since divine knowledge and power are intimately connected, our understanding divine omniscience shapes our attitudes toward our own responsibility and creativity. It also shapes our understanding of such primal spiritual practices as prayer.

A primary tenet of the classical theological tradition is the affirmation that God cannot be surprised by anything we do, think, or feel. Classical theology asserts that God

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knows the plot lines of our personal story before we were even conceived. God knows, and has planned, every detail of our lives from our gender, family of origin, ethnicity, and pivotal encounters without our input.² God holds past, present, and future in an eternal and unchanging now. From this perspective, nothing new happens to God! Nor can we add anything to God's experience or effectiveness in the world by our actions and prayers, simply because our lives in their entirety are already a matter of divine self-awareness.

Nothing, large or small, catches God by surprise, adds to, or thwarts God's purposes. Our task is simply to act out our divinely-appointed role in accordance with God's perfect, eternal, and unvarying plan. Creaturely creativity is ultimately an illusion, limited to coloring within the lines that God has already drawn for our lives. Any personal initiative – if such is metaphysically possible - is sin!

II.

In its many and varied forms, prayer is central to the spiritual adventure. Put simply, "Christians pray," and so do Jews, Muslims, and even non-theists. Described by Ann and Barry Ulanov as "primary speech," prayer cannot be fully defined by any particular structure, pattern, or theological system. Still, prayer reflects our desire to join God in the actualization of a transformed self and a transformed world.

As a child growing up in a pious Baptist home, the magnet motto "prayer changes things" confronted me each time I opened the refrigerator door. Nurtured on revival meetings, midweek prayer services, and faith healers on television, it was clear to our evangelical community that our intercessory prayers made a difference to those for whom

² The most popular version of the classical perspective can be found in the Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

we prayed. We prayed fervently and expected life to change for ourselves and others as a result of our prayers. We assumed that prayer brought something into the world that would not have happened apart from our prayers. While we did not assume we were forcing God's hand, we believed that our prayers mattered to God, to the ones for whom we prayed, and to ourselves. Prayer was the most potent change agent in the world.

In contrast, the classical image of divine omniscience suggests that our prayers change nothing. God knows everything that will happen in advance as concrete, complete, and actualized. What is future for us is always completely present for God. The results of what we pray for are already determined in eternity in the intersection of divine knowledge and power, both of which are equally primordial in God's nature. God's plan cannot be diverted, by our petitions and intercessions. Our prayerful input is of no practical consequence to God's work in the world, since what we pray for has, in fact, already happened in God's experience and *will* happen in our temporal world though it may appear to unfold in time from our finite perspective. Accordingly, if God already knows the outcome of that for which we pray and has, in fact, decided the outcome in advance, our prayers truly make no difference to God's life or the lives of those for whom we pray.

While persons who hold traditional visions of divine omniscience and omnipotence continue to pray, their prayers cannot tip the balance between life and death or healing and illness, but merely join in affirming what has already come to pass in light of God's eternal and creative vision. But, is this all that prayer means to those for whom prayer is a daily heartfelt practice? And, can such a passive understanding of prayer be

sustained over the long haul? Does it say “yes” to our personal piety or to God’s loving presence in our moment by moment experiences?

III.

Process and open and relational theologians affirm an alternative vision of divine omniscience that grounds our understanding of prayer in terms of novelty, surprise, and significance both for ourselves and for God.³ In an open-spirited vision of divine knowledge and creativity, God knows the past and present completely as actual, and the unexpected future as possible, evolving, and even surprising. Divine perfection, as Charles Hartshorne noted, is not unchanging completeness or static self-awareness but God’s self-surpassing experience of all things. The lively God constantly changes in the interplay of divine decision and empathy.

From the perspective of process and open and relational theologies, divine power involves maximally influencing the world in each moment so that creation in its multi-faceted complexity might achieve the optimal beauty, justice, and order congruent with creaturely freedom and creativity. Divine activity and knowledge is temporal and dynamic, not eternal and unchanging. God influences all things, shapes the broad spectrum of our lives, and provides visions of possibilities appropriate for each moment, but leaves the exact details to our own creativity. We are not puppets of an inexorable divine purpose, but God’s partners in the co-creation of God’s holy adventure. The living God is constantly adjusting the world of possibilities in order to support the realization of

³ The term “open and relational theology” relates to a group of evangelical Christian theologians who believe that the future is open both for ourselves and God. God’s trustworthiness is found in God’s fidelity and love rather than a pre-determined future. However, in contrast to most process theologians, open and relational theologians believe that God has the ability to act unilaterally under certain conditions. In contrast, process theology holds that divine action is always relational, contextual, and naturalistic in nature. God always works within a world that exerts a freedom that even God cannot compromise.

justice and beauty in the emerging concreteness of our world. Accordingly, deviation from God's highest purposes is not always bad or inferior to what God has planned. God's vision is not monolithic and linear, but ambient and multi-dimensional in nature. God rejoices in the variety and uniqueness of creaturely responses to the divine vision! Coloring outside the lines is both anticipated and appreciated by God, first, because God willingly embraces the joy and risk of creativity and, second, because a novel universe enables God to be more creative in bringing forth new and unexpected possibilities, even beyond what might have previously envisaged in the artistry of God's own primordial vision. When God does a "new thing" in the world, this means that new and unexpected possibilities and actualities, emerge that may surprise God and call God to new adventures with us.

IV.

Classical, process, and open and relational Christianities all claim to understand God's nature not only in terms of love but also in terms of the philosophical "omni" words – omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence. In the trinity of divine experience, the meaning of each of these "omni" words shapes – and is shaped by - our understanding of the others. For example, theologies that affirm that God knows everything from beginning to end in one all-encompassing vision typically affirm that God also causes all things to happen, either by action or permission. We are so completely driven by the purposes of this "over-functioning" God that we have no room to create on our own.

Process and open and relational theologies understand these “omni” words in a very different way. If God knows the future as possible rather than actual, then God’s influence is congruent with and supportive of creaturely freedom and creativity. New things happen in time and space that God neither fully causes, permits, or knows in advance. God’s influence is but one of many factors conditioning each emergent moment of experience. God creates in real time in real interactions with the real world. Though present in every encounter, God gives us space to create and grow.

In my own vocation as a professor, I often joke with my students, “I write the syllabus over the break, and then you show up, and everything changes.” The more novelty and commitment the students bring to class, the more effective and inspiring teacher I become. An abstract syllabus comes alive with possibilities in the classroom’s interplay of call and response. In a similar fashion, the living God is constantly revising God’s cosmic syllabus as a result of the input of each emerging moment of experience. God is the one to whom accidents are always happening, as Hartshorne notes, and out of those accidents surprising creativity arises.

This open-spirited vision of God challenges us to re-imagine divine omniscience as God’s knowledge of all things up to this moment as actual, but everything stretching into the future as potential. The evolving nature of divine knowledge raises questions such as: Does God know all the possibilities for the universe in advance? Does God like being surprised? Is God open to true novelty, not only in terms of the concrete world, but in terms of the emergence of possibilities that God had not previously imagined?⁴

⁴ Most process theologians speak of God’s “primordial nature” in terms of God’s vision of every eternal object, or possibility, that may be embodied in the unfolding of the universe. For such theologians, there can be no new possibilities, beyond those envisaged by God. In contrast, I believe that in the concrete movement of creation, there has never been an abstract or timeless primordial vision; rather, the realm of

Process theology often appears to imply that any deviation from the initial aim is a fall from a higher to a lower good in the gradation of relevant possibilities, thus, implicitly devaluating creaturely creativity. What if our deviations from God's initial aim, or the array of divine possibilities that God presents to each arising occasion of experience, represent our own unique and concrete gifts to the universe and to God and, as such, should not always be judged as deficient or inferior to God's plans for that moment? This is not a matter of doubting divine wisdom, but welcoming the wonder of creative and concrete interdependence in a lively, evolving, and surprising universe in which we may build on God's vision in ways God had not fully anticipated.

In an open-ended universe in which change is real, our prayers create a novel and energetic field of force that injects new life and wholeness into the universe and the divine. Our prayers bring forth new possibilities for healing that enable both God and others to experience life in its abundance. Our prayers truly make a difference to God and the world, and enable God to be a "different" and more effective God as a result of our commitment to justice and wholeness. New options and energies become available in the interplay of God and the world that may be factors in healing and transformation.

V.

A God who knows everything in advance fails the test of theological practice, not only because it renders essential religious practices such as prayer futile and meaningless, but also because it renders God narrow, boring, and uninteresting not only to ourselves

possibilities has always existed in the dynamic interplay of God's vision and the evolving world. From this perspective, new occasions may call for the emergence in real time of new possibilities within the divine experience and the world. These new possibilities emerge in relationship to pre-existing possibilities and exist in a continuum with previous possibilities as well as possibilities that may emerge in the future.

but to Godself. A God who knows everything and wills everything in an “eternal now” can learn nothing, create nothing, and relate to nothing. As eternal and complete, God cannot even do anything new. Unable to change course of God’s eternally-chosen decisions, the classically-omniscient God is trapped by the eternal consequences of God’s own “perfect” and “unchanging” knowledge and decisions. Like the protagonist of the film “Ground Hog Day,” this God must review over and over the same events throughout eternity. Ironically, a God who neither fully knows nor controls the unfolding of the universe is more powerful and alive than a complete and unchanging God.

Divine faithfulness is not a matter of unchanging perfection of experience, but creative and loving agility, and adaptability to a lively universe. New things happen to God that invite God to interject new possibilities and energies into the world. A lively God, like a lively person, initiates novelty to match the novelty of the universe. God is surprised but also surprising, birthing a matrix of new and creative possibilities, in the intricate dance of multi-faceted creativity that characterizes each moment of experience and the evolving adventure of a universe of billions galaxies and billions upon billions of stars!

A surprising God is constantly growing in experience, creating and recreating, and creating again. Ironically, the “finite” God of process theology is more all-embracing than the “infinite” God of traditional theology. In fact, the God of traditional theology is truly “finite” due to its inability to change or grow in its experience or impact on the world. Conversely, process theology’s “finite” God is “infinite” in its unlimited impact and constantly self-surpassing growth in relationship to the evolving universe.

One of my teachers Bernard Loomer spoke of the need for a God of adequate size or stature, who embraces the fullness of a lively universe within God's ongoing experience. Such a surprising God has adequate stature, because this God has all the love, imagination, power, and patience to embrace and shape the lively novelty and interdependence of all things. This lively and transforming God calls us to abundant life and creative transformation as God's willing, able, and creative partners in envisaging and bringing about a new heaven and a new earth for God and for ourselves. This surprising God inspires our gratitude, even as God calls us to say "yes" to life and to our calling as God's creative and surprising companions in transforming the world by our prayers and acts.

Bruce Epperly is Professor of Practical Theology and Director of Continuing Education, Lancaster Theological Seminary. (bepperly@lancasterseminary.edu)