

Introduction to Radical Orthodoxy and Process Theology Session

Opening comments by James K.A. Smith, *Calvin College*

This session is a sort of “love child.” The idea was conceived when Tom Oord and I were part of a seminar on altruism at Claremont School of Theology (where they’ve been known to do a little process theology). The more Tom and I talked, the more I sensed a deep resonance between his process sensibility and my own “postmodern Augustinian” sensibility—sometimes described as “Radical Orthodoxy.” One might say that we were looking to exorcise similar demons.

In particular, we became more and more curious about what felt like overlapping ontologies—not identical, but sharing similar concerns. Indeed, it seemed to me that the title of David Ray Griffin’s book, *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism*, could have been the title of the book in the Radical Orthodoxy series. Moreover, the “theologies” of process thought and Radical Orthodoxy seemed primed for serious engagements with science.¹

However, it was also clear that there were very significant differences—not only with respect to ontology, but even more glaringly concerning the doctrine of God and ecclesiology. Despite these differences, we found that scholars from both ‘camps’ were interested in talking to one another. This session, we hope, will be the beginning of a longer conversation.

Opening Comments by Thomas Jay Oord, *Northwest Nazarene University*

I am pleased to co-chair this session with Jamie. I believe it marks the beginning of a conversation of great value.

My first serious introduction to Radical Orthodoxy came from reading Stephen Long’s chapter on Radical Orthodoxy in a Cambridge University Press book on Postmodern Theologies edited by Kevin Vanhoozer. Subsequent to that introduction, I’ve read Jamie’s book, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, and several books by John Milbank.

I began noting the remarkable number of common convictions between process theology and radical orthodoxy as I read Stephen Long’s chapter. Here is the list I constructed:

¹ For further discussion, see the papers by Thomas Jay Oord (<http://www.metanexus.net/conference2006/papers.asp#Oord>) and James K.A. Smith (<http://www.metanexus.net/conference2006/papers.asp#Smith>) presented to the 2006 Metanexus conference, “Continuity + Change: Perspectives on Science and Religion.”

Some convictions that Process Theology shares with Radical Orthodoxy:

both seek to overcome liabilities and inherent problems of modernity.

both resist the notion that our knowing reality is entirely subjective and not at least in part shaped by reality external to our minds. Both reject a Kantian idealism.

both find momentary allies in postmodern deconstructionism.

both believe that theology *really* matters.

both find problematic modern metaphysics of presence and suggest alternative proposals.

both reject the overdependence upon language as our only means to reality.

both develop theological doctrine while discussing politics, economics, and ethics.

both see the need to reaffirm particular aspects of tradition.

both see the need for reason, a reason that is not privatized or entirely subjective.

both see peaceableness as a primary category for existence.

both are skeptical of the radical dualisms of reason and revelation, nature and grace, theology and philosophy.

Some differences:

Process Thought regards progress as possible but not inevitable. God can really do a new thing and this can really be expressed in new language. Radical Orthodoxy involves the dissolution of the category of the new.

RO nurtures a specifically Christian ontology, aesthetics, and practical philosophy. Process Thought acknowledges the location of the one doing philosophy, but it supposes that ontology, aesthetics, and philosophy are not the sole domain Christianity.

RO affirms creation ex nihilo and suggests that God's gifting and creating is the giving of Godself, although creating that which is not God. Process thought denies creation ex nihilo while supposing that there are genuine others whom God creates and with whom God relates.

Process Thought offers a deeper critique of the tradition, especially the ontological and metaphysics aspects of the tradition formed and informed by Greek metaphysics. This is especially pertinent to language about the Trinity, the hypostatic union, creation ex nihilo, and other ancient Christian language formed and informed by ancient metaphysics. Radical Orthodoxy denies being dependent upon the metaphysics assumed by Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, and others.

COORD'S NOTES FOR THE INTRODUCTIONS OF SPEAKERS

Anthony (Tony) D. Baker is assistant professor of theology at Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas. Baker taught religious studies at the joint campus of Indiana and Purdue universities in Indianapolis before joining the seminary faculty in 2004.

Baker's academic interests center on theological critiques of modern and postmodern culture, and his publications include articles on Darwinism, German philosophy, and Russian Orthodoxy. Baker was a student of John Milbank and a Doctoral Fellow of the Center on Religion and Democracy during his studies at the University of Virginia. He is currently at work on a book entitled *Christian Perfection and the Perfect God*.

Catherine Keller is professor of theology at the Theological School of Drew University. She writes and teaches on subjects pertaining to systematic, process, ecological, postcolonial and feminist styles of theology.

After a seminomadic childhood, undergraduate studies in theology in Heidelberg, Germany, and an M.Div. from Eden Seminary in 1977, Keller pursued doctoral studies at Claremont Graduate School. After 3 years as Assistant Professor at Xavier University, Keller moved to Drew to offer seminars in the reconstruction of Christian doctrine.

Keller is the author of *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism and Self, Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World*, and *God and Power: Counter Apocalyptic Journeys*. I have personally been most influenced by her 2003 book, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*. In it, she explores the chaosmos of the biblical creation narrative, especially in Genesis 1 and in Job. Her writing is truly provocative as she explores continental philosophy, Augustine, Karl Barth, feminist thought, Derrida, Moby Dick, Deleuze, and panentheism, among many, many other topics.

Alasdair John Milbank is professor in the department of theology at University of Nottingham. He has previously taught at the Universities of Lancaster, Cambridge and Virginia.

Milbank's theology is interdisciplinary, but he typically seeks to resist the idea that secular norms of understanding should set the agenda for theology. Milbank addresses major figures in social theory, economics, and the social sciences, all the while noting the failings of secular accounts of reality. In their place, he promotes the sense that Christianity offers a rich and viable account of the whole of reality.

Milbank is the author of several books, including *Theology and Social Theory*, *The Word Made Strange*, and *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*. He is coeditor of a book that I personally have found particularly helpful as I have studied the Radical Orthodoxy movement. The edited

book is titled, *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, and his coeditors are Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward.

John B. Cobb, Jr. is an [American United Methodist theologian](#) and widely known as a leading proponent of [process theology](#). Cobb is the son of missionary parents, and after attending various colleges and universities, he completed his doctorate at the University of Chicago. Cobb taught for a short time at [Candler School of Theology](#) of [Emory University](#) and then more than 40 years at [Claremont School of Theology](#). While there, he co-founded the [Center for Process Studies](#).

Cobb's theological work is multifaceted. He has written on major themes such as Protestantism, cosmology, ecology, religious pluralism, Christology, postmodernism, economics, Wesleyan theology, natural theology, and the Church. He has written more than forty books, but I want to mention four that have been especially formative for my own thinking: *A Christian Natural Theology*, *God and the World*, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, and *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today*.

With regard to the last book on Wesleyan theology, I don't quite know what to make of the fact that all four of our presenters today have been members of denominations in the Wesleyan Tradition, either Methodism or the Church of the Nazarene. Maybe they might like to comment on this in the discussion time which will follow John Cobb's presentation.