

From What, to What, and How? A Process Soteriology  
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The meta-narrative of Christian soteriology answers three functional questions: from what are saved, to what, and how? Of these, the “how” of salvation remains a problematic area of Christian theology. A review of atonement theories produces major critiques concerning the nature of God, the appeal to supernaturalism, and the nature of human appropriation. Behind these criticisms lies an overarching question, namely, how does God act in the world? This was not so pressing a question as long as the dominant metaphysic of Western culture—scientific naturalism—made an exception for the deity. But ever since this supernatural portal was closed traditional theology has lacked a metaphysic that adequately allows for divine activity in a thoroughly natural universe. In response, theological discourse, especially in liberal Protestantism, has made a category shift from ontology to epistemology. That is, salvation is described as a shift in perspective that leads to moral transformation.

#### THE EASTERN DOCTRINE OF THEOSIS

Recently, the West has also seen a revived interest in the Eastern doctrine of theosis. Translated as deification or divinization, theosis is a salvation doctrine that describes how human beings are created in the image of God and are expected to grow into God’s likeness—a process of assimilation or

transformation whereby human beings come to participate in the divine nature and enjoy the principle benefits of that nature; namely, goodness and immortality.

The central supposition of theosis is that the incarnation of the divine Logos in Jesus of Nazareth constituted a union of divine and human natures that effected real change in humankind and resulted in an objective salvation that human beings appropriate through a union with the incarnate Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit.

This doctrine comes to full flower in the theologies of Athanasius and Gregory of Nyssa. Athanasius describes a kind of generic human nature in which all individuals participate. Consubstantiality between human beings means that the union of human and divine in one being constitutes a similar union for all. Thus when Christ unites within himself the divine and human natures, this substantial union accomplishes, in principle, the redivinization of all humanity. Gregory writes that by incarnating into a particular body, Christ assumes human nature itself—a generic essence shared by all humanity. Thus the Logos can deify all of humanity in one act of assumption. Individual salvation is then accomplished by means of the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist.

Unlike atonement theories, this God does not need to be appeased, either for affronted honor or wrath. The goal of this God is not primarily punishment or even forgiveness, but human participation in the divine nature. What emerges, therefore, is the image of a generous God, one who wishes to share

the divine attributes with humans and, through a union of divine-human natures, aided by the sacraments, has provided a means by which this can be accomplished.

Theosis is notable as an ontological doctrine. The being of Christ and the work of Christ are one and the same: the two-natures doctrine is itself salvific, and the efficacy is in the substantial union of divine and human—effected once in Jesus Christ and immediately manifest in all humankind. Where the difficulty arises is in the metaphysical system itself, which despite its metaphorical appeal remains thoroughly supernatural. The ancient attempt at material explanation is laudable, but theosis still depends upon a divine-human figure, supernaturally imbued sacraments, and the operations of a Spirit—all of which exist outside the categories of nature. To accept the doctrine on its own terms would necessitate a completely different worldview, requiring wholesale flight from scientific materialism and return to an ancient cosmology. To avoid this problem, recent attempts to appropriate theosis have gutted the cosmology and made key category shifts: from ontology to epistemology; from ontological transformation to moral transformation. But an epistemologically construed salvation does not allow for the ontological change that is at the heart of the deification promise.

A process soteriology resolves this problem. It offers a model for ontological change that neither resorts to supernaturalism nor reduces transformation to morality. God is not a supernatural agent, but an actual entity dynamically related to other actual entities. God and the world are

interrelated and interdependent, thus God's action in the world is not transcendent but integral. Process theology provides the metaphysical—but nonsupernatural—framework for a God who is perpetually present and active in every moment, such that transformation is not an abstraction or a metaphor or a moral turn in behavior, but a concrete reality, actualized in the moment and aimed at inclusive well-being. It reformulates the principle questions: from what, to what, and how.

#### FROM WHAT ARE WE SAVED? INCARNATION

In Whitehead's model, reality is described in terms of successive, concreting moments, each of which begins with incarnation—that is, a divine aim that “points that occasion toward an ideal possibility for its satisfaction” (Cobb, *Christian* 96). This initial aim of God includes a graded set of possibilities that are relevant for that occasion, but successively deviate from God's idealized aim. As the occasion determines itself, it incorporates or rejects these possibilities, along with data from the past, eventually achieving its own unique synthesis. As Whitehead writes in *Religion in the Making*: “The world lives by its incarnation of God in itself” (156).

However, God does not force the occasion to accept the divine aim. Integration of the aim into the occasion's reception of the past is a self-organizing, self-determining process, that is, an entity has the capability to include or eliminate possibilities for its own becoming. Without this, past data would determine its own value for the occasion and reality would be one

endless repetition. Alternatively, God's aim would be imperative, and the occasion would be irresistibly obligated to actualize the divine aim.

Whitehead accommodates this ontological freedom with the notion of positive and negative prehensions. In principle, the whole of the past is available to each becoming moment as a constitutive, or prehended, datum, but the occasion will definitely include or definitely exclude each potential contribution. In the case of a more complex occasion, this is complicated by the number of possibilities in its conceptual grasp. When we are able to feel, or take into ourselves, more elements from our past, the result is greater intensity. As conscious entities, the intensity increases because we are also able to feel more possibilities, thus holding conflicting propositions: it could be this, not that. In this case, elements may contradict each other.<sup>1</sup> The optimum outcome of these clashes is mutual enhancement of the opposing elements, which occurs when a larger context is discerned within which oppositions are turned into contrasts. The richness and variety of elements harmonized within the unity of a moment result in the greatest realized value for the occasion, which both increases our enjoyment and adds value to the world. It also increases God's enjoyment, for the greater harmony and intensity thus produced become part of the divine consequent nature.

But if greater variety and complexity are possible for every entity, based on our self-actualizing choices, then our ontological freedom ensures that the reverse is also possible. The data do not determine their value for us; God's initial aim is God's feeling for what is best for that moment and for the future;

it is not an irresistible command. Thus a person may be unable to convert contradictions into contrasts, resulting in an inhibition of one or both elements. In this event, there is less complexity, less variety, less intensity—and therefore less enjoyment.

By realizing God's aim, a person adds novelty and intensity to the world. But we can also limit the data we incorporate. We can ignore God's ideal for that moment and "choose" a lesser aim from the graded set of other relevant possibilities, even restricting ourselves to simple repetition of the past. We may inhibit the aim by way reducing it to background, or we may definitely exclude the aim in such a way that the experience of its destruction becomes part of us. However it occurs, the result is that nothing new is added to the world, and the relevant possibilities for the next moment are fewer. If process theology describes the way in which God is continuously incarnating in the world, then the diminishing of relevant possibilities in effect limits the incarnational possibilities for actualizing God's aim. The possibilities can become so limited that no good choice is possible—certainly not anything that resembles God's desire for the world. The result is thus a reversal of incarnation, expressed here as *excarnation*—the successive limiting of possibilities such that the only remaining choices are merely relevant—and not a reflection of what God wills for creation.

This condition can be argued from the tradition (Augustine's "penal state" of humankind, Luther's "bondage of the will"). In *The Function of Reason*, Whitehead refers to the cumulative effect of this situation as "fatigue" and "life

tedium,” resulting in “mere repetition.” In *Religion in the Making*, Whitehead has another name for the cumulative effect of this continual rejection of the initial aim: he calls it diminishment. “Every act leaves the world with a deeper or fainter impress of God.”<sup>2</sup>

If we apply this language to the particular society of dominant occasions that Whitehead calls the soul, then we have a soul with diminishing possibilities. In Christian theological terms, to consistently aim lower than the ideal is to miss the mark—which is the biblical definition of sin (*hamartía*).<sup>3</sup> The result is that in each moment, the relevant possibilities ordered and presented by God become fewer, and the soul experiences a “fainter impress of God.” It is this state that I am calling excarnation.<sup>4</sup> The consequences of this state are experienced existentially, affectively, and soteriologically as evil, suffering, and determinism, with determinism as especially common, for as the soul closes itself to God’s aim, it closes itself to novelty and is increasingly determined by the past.

Excarnation manifests itself in multiple ways, but is perhaps easiest to grasp in conditions such as addiction or post-traumatic stress disorder—situations in which the impaired psyche is caught in a cycle of repetition and reenactment, focusing on a restricted range of data from the past and shutting out any new data. Excarnation also manifests itself corporately, such that governments or societies may so effectively ignore God’s aim that they limit the relevant possibilities for those in their midst, as happened in Nazi Germany or the African slave trade. Excarnation describes an existential condition that

includes sin (individual and corporate, the sinner and the sinned against), psychic damage with its consequent impairment, and more generalized suffering, whether material, mental, or spiritual. In human beings, excarnation describes a state of diminished relevant alternatives and greater exclusion of the “urge toward novelty.” With fewer possibilities from which to choose, we become captive to mere repetition. Our ontological state is characterized by loss of freedom and the determinative power of the past. In this condition, perspectivalism cannot save us: it does not address the real problem.

#### TO WHAT ARE WE SAVED? ABUNDANT LIFE

If inhibition results in diminishment—both for the ourselves and for our relevant future—then the ability to incorporate contradictions by harmonizing them results in mutual enhancement and increased possibilities for enjoyment. But of what does this enjoyment consist, and what does it mean in a Christian context? In *The Fall to Violence*, Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki reformulated sin as “the unnecessary violation of the well-being of any aspect of existence,”<sup>5</sup> and in so doing, she proposed the concept of inclusive well-being as a criterion against which to measure sin. Whitehead makes frequent reference to enjoyment, beauty, peace, harmony, adventure, and zest.

These Whiteheadian notions, combine with Suchocki’s “inclusive well-being,” have a biblical counterpart in the idea of “life abundant” found explicitly in John 10:10b: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” It is also found implicitly throughout both testaments in the

overarching themes of justice and love. “Life abundant” reorients salvation to here and now. It is a criterion for life in the present, for material existence—material not in the sense of worldly goods, but in the sense of flesh and bones, of embodiment. The criterion of abundant life requires a soteriology in, of, and on Earth. It is a salvation that occurs—in Hartshorne’s phrase—in God’s body, because there is, literally, nowhere else to be. Salvation takes place in God’s embodiment of the world—which includes the objective immortality of occasions in the consequent nature of God—but it also takes place in the world’s embodiment of God—in the world’s reception of God’s everlasting aim for beauty, truth, goodness, and peace, for inclusive well-being . . . for life abundant.

#### HOW ARE WE SAVED? THEOANTHROPOSIS

When excarnation is the state *from* which we are saved, then incarnation is logically the state *by* which we are saved. Incarnation, in classical theism, describes the presence of God in a single human being, at a particular point in history. Incarnation is, in fact, the prior category to all Christian doctrine, which teaches that the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is the beginning of salvation. It is the crucial point from which all soteriological doctrine flows. In a very real sense, then, salvation IS incarnation, but in a process metaphysic, the notion of incarnation expands: incarnation is God in the now, actualized in the moment. Just as excarnation is not limited to a one-time event in the past, so does incarnation imply more than a one-time event in the past. Incarnation,

in the form of God's initial aim, is ingredient in every actual occasion, every "drop of experience."<sup>6</sup> Incarnation is not a one-time event, but an ongoing reality, and salvation is not a past event to be appropriated in faith, but a dynamic process endlessly offered, endlessly experienced, moment by moment, leading to the flourishing of creation, or life abundant.

In classical theism, incarnation is understood as God's initiative, thus the initial move was from God to the person of Jesus. Thereafter, however, the focus of salvation discourse is upon the human movement to God. But a process metaphysic locates God incarnationally—and necessarily—in the world. If the doctrine of theosis is a metaphysical explanation for how human beings participate in the divine nature; then the Whiteheadian model provides an explanation for how God participates in creation, in every becoming occasion. The distinction is a subtle but important one. It reverses the directional movement of theosis and is thus more aptly named a *theoanthroposis*—the movement of God into every moment of experience, an ongoing incarnation that expands salvation discourse to something that occurs naturally in all of creation, to all of creation, all of the time. "Theoanthroposis" signifies both an appropriation and transformation of theosis, whereby the ontological character of the Eastern doctrine is affirmed, but a distinction is made between the historical doctrine and a constructive effort at a new understanding of salvation. The term acknowledges its debt to—but differentiates itself from—the Eastern doctrine.

As noted, a person is under no obligation to include the divine aim in the constitution of itself. We can ignore God's incarnational presence. We can actively exclude God from our self-constitution, and the result is excarnation—a "fainter impress" of God in our lives. But no matter what we choose in this moment, God is present in the next moment, however faintly. There is no occasion—there is no world—without God. At every moment, God is present as a constitutive factor in our becoming: *salvation is incarnation*. God is present with a set of possibilities, unique to us, based on the relevant past.

One of the characteristics of excarnation is the stronger influence of the past in constituting the present, thus if a new trajectory can be found in an individual's own "forgotten" past, it will include the lure of identity and be more persuasive for the person. Such a route can be constituted by following what Whitehead calls the "scar" of negative prehensions—excluded possibilities that we may have rejected but are nonetheless present in God's ongoing experience of the world. Theanthroposis also describes the process by which these "lost" aims—the might-have-beens—are received into God, refashioned, and re-presented to us as resurrected possibilities, along with God's vision for how best they can be realized in our current circumstances. The aim received *now* may evoke a memory of the past, but also include a new way to consider it.

Thus in every moment of our lives, God is incarnating in us, redeeming, transforming, re/membering us, and re/presenting us to our selves.

WHITHER CHRIST?

In a process soteriology, divine incarnation is ongoing and nonexclusive, yet Christianity makes the faith claim that Jesus Christ is essential to salvation. Where, then, is Jesus? Traditional claims for the uniqueness of Christ are problematic in the process model, for Whitehead specifically rules out ontological exceptions. Thus several process theologians have argued that Jesus was not ontologically unique, but unique in his realization of the divine aim, such that God was “supremely, yet objectively, immanent in Jesus.”<sup>7</sup> But where is the efficacy in this claim?

Cobb has argued for Christ as the principle of creative transformation. I suggest that Jesus is a person who lived and died in ancient Judea, but “Christ” is a complex of eternal objects that can enter the subjective immediacy of a concurring occasion. In this subjective immediacy, Christ is felt not simply as an objective datum, but as a living possibility. Thus there is a truth encoded in the signifier “Jesus Christ.” Embedded in the two names is a polarity strategy wherein “Christ” signifies the metaphysical principle of creative transformation; “Jesus” refers to the actual, particular being in whose life and transformed death this principle was uniquely and compellingly—but not exclusively—actualized. Following Whitehead’s ontological principle, if “Christ” is a principle, then to be anything other than a pure possibility—to be at all efficacious—it must be actualized. God, as the source of all possibilities, produces the initial aim for each becoming occasion, but it is the actualized aim that creatively transforms the world. Jesus of Nazareth transformed the world; he did it as the Christ; that is, as the realized aim of God. The crucial

point, however, is that what is true of Jesus is also true in principle of all of us—as the biblical witness states. We are all capable of incarnating God, and thus realizing the Kingdom of God now, in our lives and in the world. Thus it is not so much that Jesus reveals God *to us*, as he reveals God *in us*. Metaphysics is the “back story” of the Christian narrative; salvation is in moment, in the choice to be “realizers of the aim”—or as Luther stated, “little Christs” to one another—agents of creative transformation in the world. Jesus/Christ demonstrates both the method and the promise of salvation; namely, the continuing actualization of the divine aim. And to the extent that we actualize “Christ,” as the principle of creative transformation, in each moment of our lives, then in the subjective immediacy of those moments, Christ is alive.

#### A PROCESS SOTERIOLOGY

In sum: a process soteriology offers a metaphysical foundation for a proposed revision of the Christian meta-narrative of salvation, from its ancient formulation—we are saved from death, to eternal life, by a process of transaction (atonement) or transformation (theosis)—to the following: we are saved from excarnation, to abundant life, by a process of theoanthroposis. Process theology provides the metaphysical—but nonsupernatural—framework for a God who is perpetually present and active in every moment of existence, such that transformation is not an abstraction but a concrete reality, actualized in the moment and aimed at inclusive well-being.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Whitehead describes this as a condition in which: “the conjunction in one synthesis of the various prehensions introduces new contrasts of objective content with objective content.” See *AI*, 252.

<sup>2</sup> Whitehead, *RM*, 159.

<sup>3</sup> The notion of excarnation also works in Marjorie Suchocki’s revision of the initial aim (see note 3), in that there are fewer emergent possibilities, resulting in a “fainter impress of God.” It also emphasizes a sinner’s “penal state” because the loss of alternatives reflects an ontological reduction in freedom.

<sup>4</sup> The term is admittedly somewhat misleading, but only in the same way that “incarnation” is misleading: the noun form implies a one-time, complete-in-itself event, whereas in a process model incarnation is ongoing. In the same way, excarnation does not describe a complete absence of God, but an ongoing situation—a continual process of diminishing possibilities.

<sup>5</sup> Suchocki, *God Christ Church*, 66.

<sup>6</sup> “The final facts are, all alike, actual entities; and these actual entities are drops of experience, complex and interdependent” (Whitehead, *PR*, 18).

<sup>7</sup> Peter N. Hamilton, “Some Proposals for a Modern Christology,” in *Process Philosophy and Christian Thought*, edited by Delwin Brown, Ralph E. James, Jr., and Gene Reeves (Indianapolis & New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1971).