

“Creative/Responsive/Loving/Jesus:
Mining Process Theology for Resources for an Open and Relational Christology”

By

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Prepared for the Open and Relational Theologies Consultation for the American
Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, Fall 2008.

This paper seeks to examine some of the affinities between process theology and open and relational theology, with relation to Christology. In examining the topic, I would *like* to share Tom Oord’s claim that “a glance at the core notions of Open theism when compared with the core notions of process theologies suggests that affinities are many and the prospect for mutual transformation promising.”¹ (Aside: Later in the paper, I will examine my own reluctance to whole-heartedly believe that claim). One of the more interesting prospects for transformation is in the doctrine of Christ – who and what Jesus Christ was and is. It is interesting to note that much of the open and relational theology movement has not dealt with Christology proper. Providence, God’s power, prayer, theological method, science and religion, and even (to a lesser degree) religious pluralism have been reflected upon, but there have been few (if any) specific treatments of the doctrine of Christ. Process theologians, on the contrary, have made Christology a central focus of their work. This paper will explore the work of various process theologians on the doctrine of Christ to see if their work can be useful for constructing an open and relational doctrine of Christ.

¹ Oord, in *Handbook of Process Theology*, 259.

Let us first turn to the open and relational theologians to see if a preliminary doctrine of Christ can be distilled from their works. As mentioned above, there are no specific treatments of Christ from any of the leading open and relational theologians. In the papers presented in the past to this consultation, only one had the word “Christology” – in the subtitle. Another had the word “logos,” also in the subtitle. There are several articles that critique open and relational theology for having an “inadequate” Christology – an “adequate” Christology being defined in terms of creedal orthodoxy. But there are no major articles or books which offer a large-scale treatment of open and relational Christology.

It would NOT, however, be fair to assume that Christology does not play a role in the thinking and activity of open and relational theologians. On the contrary, Jesus and Christ are central to many of their arguments about other theological topics. As one example, when talking about the Biblical support for open theism, Richard Rice makes his case by appeal to the fact that “Jesus’ life most clearly revealed the nature and character of God” and that “[n]ot only what Jesus taught about God, then, but he way he manifested God in his treatment of people, in particular the undeserving and the unwanted, provides powerful indications that God is deeply sensitive and responsive to human experience.”² Again, he notes that “the center of Christian faith, the life and death of Jesus, thus supports the idea that God is intimately involved in the creaturely world and experiences it in a dynamic way.”³ Rice uses these Christological capstones as the final touch on his argument that the Bible supports the ideas of open theism.

In the same way, Clark Pinnock uses Christological examples to point to the

² Rice in *The Openness of God*, 43

³ Rice, in *The Openness of God*, 45.

adequacy of open theism in the area of systematic theology. For example, he points to the fact that God's dynamic interrelatedness with the world was "...present in theology, particularly in dealing with a subject like the incarnation," noting that "the doctrine of the incarnation requires nuanced thinking about God's immutability."⁴ In addressing the power of God in another context, he also points out that "God manifests his power paradoxically in the cross of Christ..." and that the cross "reveals that love rather than almighty power is the primary perfection of God."⁵ Again, who Jesus Christ is and what he does, the classical formula for Christology, are seen as definitive for discussions of the divine nature and power. Christology is once again seen as the final word on the subject.

One final example from the area of open theism's philosophical reflection will make this point as well. William Hasker, in discussing the inadequacies of the doctrine of God's timelessness, criticizes the view from a variety of considerations of Christian life and spirituality – how can God act or know "as the scriptures say he does? ...How can respond when his children turn to him in prayer and obedience?" And here Hasker delivers the *coup de grace* "And above all, if God is timeless and incapable of change, how can God be born, grow up, live with and among people, suffer and die, as we believe he did as incarnated in Jesus?"⁶ Once again, Christology is an interpretive key for other matters – philosophical questions of time and change.

In all of these examples as well as countless others, there is both substantive and rhetorical weight given to Christology as normative for interpreting other theological topics. Why, then, has there been no extended reflection on the topic itself? This is especially puzzling in light of the fact that creedal Christology is dependent on an

⁴ Pinnock, in *The Openness of God*, 106.

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⁶ Hasker, in *The Openness of God*, 128.

understanding of “substance,” and given the orientation of open theologians to an ontology of events. Why no sustained open and relational Christology? Why has this topic not been given the same theological overhaul as the doctrine of God, or providence, or science and religion?

I think the answer fundamentally lies in the fact that, by and large, open and relational thinkers tend to come from the ranks of evangelical Christianity. As Tyron Inbody points out, evangelical Christians tend to accept (relatively uncritically) as normative the statements of the New Testament about who Jesus was and also tend to accept (again, relatively uncritically) the Christological formulations of Nicea and Chalcedon.⁷ Additionally, given the interest in soteriology to the exclusion of almost all else in thinking about who Jesus is and was, evangelicals often take this doctrine as “settled” rather than look upon it as needing explication or revision. Succinctly, for the evangelicals that make up most of the open and relational theists, the doctrine is closed. I think that much of what draws open theists to their positions on God’s power, or providence, or relation to the world, however, would also benefit a re-examination of Christological assumptions and formulations.

Process theology, on the other hand, has spent much time and effort on Christology. Indeed, most of the major thinkers of the movement have, because of the twin poles of Christian identity and a philosophical commitment to process thought,⁸ produced works on Christology. From the earlier works of Meland, Wieman, and Pittenger, to the more extended treatments of Cobb, Griffin, and Suchocki, who Jesus

⁷ Note Inbody, *The Many Faces of Christology*, pp 69-89, see also Stephen T. Davis, “Jesus Christ: Savior or Guru?” in *Encountering Jesus: a debate on Christology*, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988, 39-59.

⁸ For example, one of Norman Pittenger’s many books is called *Process-Thought and Christian Faith* – the “and” italicized by the author.

Christ was and is and what he did and does has remained an important emphasis in process theology. We will examine each of these thinkers briefly in order to “mine” their thought to see how it fits with an open and relational view, and then see if we can construct a preliminary open and relational Christology.

It is not too much to note that two of the foundational figures in process thought, Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, were both the sons of Anglican clergyman. Christianity, especially in its Anglican forms, has always had a profound influence on 20th and 21st century process thinking. Indeed, for both Whitehead and Hartshorne, their own work in metaphysics and social thought have “Christological keys,” in that they hold that the Christological doctrines of the church have metaphysical implications that are only seen more fully later, and indeed are the place at which their own metaphysical principles are seen most clearly.⁹ Even with their own basis in explicitly Christian thinking, however, neither Whitehead nor Hartshorne offer enough specific Christological reflection to be appropriated by open and relational theists. It fell to their successors in process theology to do the Christological work that can be of value to open and relational theologians, and thus we will examine those successors more closely to see what they have to offer.

The first generation of process theology was based at the University of Chicago and rooted not only in process thought but also in “modernist” Christianity. As such, it will probably not have much that will be appropriated by an open and relational Christology. Henry Nelson Weiman and Bernard Loomer, while certainly Christian in their thinking and work, are also “modernist” to the core and their work reflects those

⁹ See Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, Part V, and also Hartshorne, *Reality and Social Thought*.

commitments as well. Weiman's characterization of Jesus as the catalyst for the "creative event of Christianity" which revealed the "source of human good," while clearly based in Jesus life, death, and resurrection, will probably not have too much to say to evangelically-oriented thinkers. Most will not want to say that "what rose from the dead was not the man Jesus; it was creative power."¹⁰ In the same manner, Bernard Meland's attempt to "express the full Christian evangel within the contemporary idiom [of modernity]"¹¹ is also thoroughly couched in (old-fashioned) modernist terms. Thus Meland's point that "The Christ event was a revelatory moment in history, summoning the motives, the intellectual vision, and imagination of men [sic] to a new center of focus"¹² which creates a new form of culture and "new social energy" will probably be seen by open and relational theologians as less than the full expression of Jesus' person and work. However sensitively observed and creatively described, Jesus was for these thinkers a man among men, specially revelatory of God's intention towards all people, and even in some sense bringing God's will about, but not "very God from very God," or "of one substance with the Father."

The work of Norman Pittenger is a curious exception here. For open theists with an incarnational, Anglo-catholic orientation, Pittenger will probably be a revelation. He is somewhat of an "in-between" figure in process thought – not trained at Chicago or Claremont, Anglican rather than Methodist, and primarily oriented to an Anglo-American church audience rather than an American academic one. His grasp of the developments in process-oriented thought in the Church of England, for example, is important.¹³

¹⁰ Wieman, *The Source of Human Good*, in *Process Theology*, ed. by Cousins, 223.

¹¹ Meland, "The New Creation," in *Process Theology*, ed by Cousins, 192.

¹² *Ibid.*, 193.

¹³ See Pittenger, *The Word Incarnate*, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959, 172-173; and *Process-thought And Christian Faith*, New York: The MacMillan Company, 1968,

Additionally, his ease with talking about the person and work Christ in a context in which Christian faith and language are the norm (rather than the exception or something to be explained) could make it easy to share his insights into the person and work of Christ. For those open and relational theists who share those orientations, he will be very useful in talking about an open and relational Christology. In many senses, Pittenger's work is a straightforward incarnational Christology described in relational terms.¹⁴ There is much to recommend it to open and relational theists. Some political considerations (Pittenger supported consecrated unions for gay people in the church as early as the 1970s, for example) may make it difficult for his work to be appreciated and appropriated by those in more conservative evangelical contexts.

While those earlier process theologians worked out their Christological formulations in light of the theological modernism and Church politics that were their context, the later ones thought about Christology in relation to existentialism, liberation movements, feminism, and the philosophy of religion, as well as more sustained reflection on relational philosophy (mostly their own reflection, in the case of Cobb, Griffin, and Suchocki). Schubert Ogden, for example, constructs and maintains an almost entirely existentialist Christology, contrasting it with liberation and other Christologies. Open and relational theologians will probably have as much use for Odgen as they have for Rudolf Bultmann.

With Cobb, Griffin, and Suchocki, however, we come to the most sustained and explicit Christological reflection in the world of process theology. Cobb's *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, along with his revisions in *Encountering Jesus: A Debate on Christology*,

pp. 6-10

¹⁴ Pittenger, Norman. *The Word Incarnate*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1959.

constitute the definitive statement for many process theologians. In naming Christ as creative transformation or as the Logos, Cobb takes himself one step beyond Wieman's notion of Christ as the creative advance of human society, and affirms Christ as creative transformation *as such*, in all aspects of reality. Cobb also rethinks the notion of Christ as creative transformation in that Christ is also the suffering one *and* is also Sophia, the wisdom of God. Cobb explicitly interprets these reformulations as making his own Christology more Trinitarian.¹⁵

Another classic process Christological formula is that of David Griffin. A *Process Christology*, based on Griffin's dissertation, is both an historical and a systematic re-grounding of the doctrine of Christ in modern theology and process thought. After discussing Christologies from Schleiermacher through Bultmann to Tillich and H. Richard Niebuhr, Griffin characterizes Jesus as "God's decisive revelation," understood as such because "the vision of reality expressed through his sayings and actions is the supreme expression of God's character, purpose, and mode of agency, and is therefore appropriately apprehended as the decisive revelation of the same."¹⁶ Griffin holds, *contra* the existentialism of Ogden, that Jesus is God's supreme act not only because we recognize him as such, but because he *really is* God's supreme act.¹⁷ Note, however, that Jesus differs from other human beings, with Schleiermacher and other moderns, to such a degree that it amounts to a difference in kind. Indeed, there is a striking continuity between Jesus being the one in which the God-consciousness is supremely felt and the one in which the divine aims are fully realized. In this sense, Griffin's view is as

¹⁵ See Cobb, "Christ Beyond Creative Transformation," in *Encountering Jesus*, p. 153.

¹⁶ Griffin, *A Process Christology*, 2nd Edition, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990 (1973), pp 231-2.

¹⁷ Here is where Griffin's rationalism leads him to make what seem to me to be unverifiable statements.

thoroughly modern as those of Meland and Wieman before him.

There is much within Griffin and Cobb's views that will be hard for open and relational theologians to appropriate. The identification of Christ with "creative transformation," however it is couched in terms of the *Logos* or creative suffering, will probably sound too much like Weiman or Meland to have much resonance with many in the evangelical camp. Griffin's Schleiermacherian solution of making the difference between Jesus and the rest of humanity a difference in degree of the consciousness of God or of the divine aims will also probably also be met with a chilly reception. Most open and relational theologians will want their Christ to more fully participate in the divine life than Griffin's. However, there are several emphases in both Cobb's and Griffin's doctrines of Christ that can be appropriated by open and relational thinkers. First, the general process notion of God is one of realism (as Cobb noted in his first address to this consultation in 1994) – and God's activity in Christ is real as well – both in Christian life and in the world more generally. Indeed, Cobb's Logos/Sophia incarnational Christology shares with Pittenger the more classical Christian notion of God's general activity in the world (for Cobb, creative transformation, however couched) as not only revealed by Christ but as effected by Christ as well. Griffin, too, shares this notion of Christ as an ongoing, active presence in the world.¹⁸ This ongoing affirmation of Christ's active presence in the world is one that open and relational theologians will certainly affirm and perhaps develop further.

Another aspect of Cobb's Christology of creative transformation that will be of interest to open and relational theologians is his insistence on taking seriously not only the biblical accounts of Jesus, but also the history of the doctrine of Christ and the

¹⁸ See *A Process Christology*, 242.

associated issues at stake in the discussion, while interpreting them in light of an open view of God and God's activities. For example, his insistence on understanding orthodoxy as right doctrine, rather than "the beliefs that have been most commonly held and insisted upon by the greatest number of respected past thinkers of the church"¹⁹ and his strong defense of orthodoxy in this sense can also be appreciated and appropriated in terms of an open and relational Christology.

We now turn from Cobb and Griffin to the thinker with the most to offer to open and relational thinkers in terms of Christological reflection – Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki. In her *God Christ Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology*, Suchocki takes the essential vision espoused by Griffin and Cobb (there is no substantial difference, except perhaps in clarity, between them) and couches it explicitly in terms of Christian experience, life and doctrine. Speaking of the dependence of Christian theology upon the Bible, she points out that process theologians have often left "this dependence implicit, primarily drawing upon it explicitly when illustrating the unique compatibility between its philosophical vision of God and dynamic, relational biblical vision." She then goes on to show her own theology's explicit dependence on the "biblical notions of Jesus."²⁰ This more Bible-oriented focus of her work, and the way in which the biblical understanding of Jesus permeates her process view of God is one area where open and relational theologians can learn much from this process thinker. Another area where Suchocki's more Biblically-oriented process thought can share with open and relational theists is in her emphasis on love and justice. These certainly are themes that she shares with Griffin and Cobb, but for Suchocki, again, they are more explicitly related to Jesus. In

¹⁹ Cobb, "Beyond Creative Transformation," 174.

²⁰ Suchocki, *God Christ Church*, 88.

Suchocki's formulation, the orientation of the Hebrew Scriptures to justice, and the stories about Jesus oriented to love within that framework of justice, ground her Christology in both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, and will thus resonate more with open and relational theists.

In addition to her emphasis on love and justice as revealed and incarnated in Jesus life, she also explicitly talks about Jesus crucified: "we cannot adequately account for the judging and transforming power of the love manifested in Jesus without looking at the cross, too, as a revelation of God."²¹ What, then, is revealed by the cross for Suchocki? It is the constancy and the strength of God's love: "God in love endures the pain of death, and ... God's love is unconquered by death."²² In addition to testifying to the strength of God's love, the cross also reveals the pain of God: "The dreadful truth revealed in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is that the world crucifies God."²³ The attention to the reality of tragedy and pain in the world and in God, and the continuing love of God in the midst of that pain is something that can also be effectively mined by open and relational theists.

The final section in Suchocki's *God Christ Church* that will be of interest to open and relational theologians is in her emphasis on the resurrected Christ as deeply important for understanding the person and work. Intriguingly, she notes that the resurrection is less spoken about than its effects,²⁴ especially in the ongoing presence of Christ in the church. She also holds that the scars of Jesus show that pain and death are not totally overcome, but are present in the resurrection. And, additionally, she notes that while the resurrection is hidden, "the results of it are given to the world through the

²¹ Suchocki, *God Christ Church*, 103.

²² *Ibid.*, 106.

²³ *Ibid.*, 110.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

providence of God for the world.”²⁵ One final description will show why Suchocki’s view will be fruitful for open and relational Christology: “Jesus expresses the nature of God through his life, crucifixion, and resurrection, taking the revelation progressively deeper until finally we are led, not simply to a description of God but to the mystery of God as God. And that mystery is an inexhaustible love, manifested in a power that both confirms and transforms the world.”²⁶ An open and relational Christology will do well to take into account such a view that maintains God’s universal love, God’s ongoing care for the world, and the open future that are the strength of open and relational theism in general.

Suchocki can be thought of as the Pittenger to Cobb and Griffin’s Meland and Wieman – speaking the language of Christianity as the norm, rather than something to be explained to the modern or postmodern world. I expect that much of the ability of open and relational theists to appropriate the categories and work of process theologians will depend upon how such work can be characterized – as growing out of the Christian tradition, or out of forms of modern or postmodern thought. I do not know if process thought is irrevocably tarred by the liberal brush for evangelicals. This is why I am less optimistic than Tom Oord about the possibilities of mutual transformation – although, as I mentioned, I would *like* to share such a view.²⁷

I am running out of time, and I am not going to achieve the constructive open and relational Christology that this paper points towards in this session. I do, however, offer

²⁵ Ibid., 115.

²⁶ Ibid., 117.

²⁷ See, for example, Gary Dorrien’s essay where he characterizes process thought as primarily liberal and progressive, and conservative evangelicals as primarily espousing conservative orthodoxy. Dorrien, Gary, “American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, Decline, Renewal, Ambiguity,” <http://www.crosscurrents.org/dorrien200506.htm>.

three emphases that come out of this encounter with process thought that must be dealt with in any adequately created open and relational Christology:

First, an open and relational Christology must deal with what the suffering, related Christ says about divine power. As crucified, is Christ revelatory of who God *is*, or who God is *for us* (but not in God's own self)?

Second, does a suffering, related God who tends not to intervene in the world, as revealed in Christ crucified, lead us to think that God *will* finally overcome evil? Or is it more that such a God can possibly transform evil, or that evil *can* be overcome?

And, third, what does God as revealed in Christ crucified and risen mean about the uniqueness of Christ? Must Christ be unique to save us? What does, in an open and relational view, Christ's saving power mean for us and others?