6 – Eternal Security from the Perspective of Process Theology

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A. Process Theology and Foreknowledge

Process theology is a view of God, creatures, and the God-world relationship that emphasizes becoming rather than being. It takes its metaphysical cues from the work of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne in particular, and exhibits affinities to Bergson and Teilhard. Process thinkers find the impassible, simple, and unchanging God that Greek metaphysics bequeathed to Christianity in its first centuries to be inadequate to the Biblical witness, which speaks of God in reciprocal, dynamic, and complex language.

Accordingly, in what Hartshorne has termed a "neoclassical theism," God is reconceived as immanent in a shared dimension of reality (including a shared timestream) with creatures, rather than as transcendent in the sense of "qualitatively other" or distant. Creatures—human and otherwise—are not merely free because God has self-limited God's power or allowed creaturely freedom, but are free intrinsically, because it is the very nature of existence itself to be

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free. Hence, the actions of free creatures co-create each future moment with God.

It is impossible for the future to be foreseen or determined ahead of time, because the freedom of each creature at each moment builds the future. Foreknowledge is impossible because the future contains no actualities to be known—only possibilities (which can be known in a probabilistic manner). Like everyone else, God must wait to see what happens—although unlike everyone else, God knows perfectly the probable outcomes of each moment! God's power, then, is not coercive—to shape the future by force—but persuasive: to present possibilities, flavored with the divine value towards beauty and what Whitehead termed "intensity of feeling," to each creature at each emerging moment. God's perfection is perfect relationality (to be internally related to every possible other). Process thinkers assert that this is the metaphysical unpacking of the Gospel statement that "God is love."

B. Process Theology and Soteriology

Taking up the question of the eternal security of the believer in this process context requires us to be clear about the definitions, or perhaps redefinitions, of the terms in question. The first topic that needs to be considered is salvation, since the phrase "eternal security" tacitly contains its continuation "in salvation." What we are talking about is the secure status of salvation for the believer who at any time attains this status—the safety of the believer from the peril of dropping out of the number of the saved. What kind of soteriology, then, emerges from process theology? This question in turn raises others: What do we need to be saved from? What is the meaning of sin, death, and the Devil for process theologians?

In this article I have time for only a brief sketch of these large topics, enough to give a sense of how process thinkers have approached the questions; I refer the reader to the bibliography for in-depth treatments. I should also note that process theology is a fairly young movement, and while there are important systematic works in the field, a variety of interpretations and critiques currently carry on a vigorous conversation around these matters. There is no single dominant process orthodoxy. What follows should be interpreted as the attempt of one theologian to lay out an adequate,

interesting, but by no means final synthesis, with some areas being more speculative than others.

Looking for clues to the identification and nature of sin, Christians have traditionally asserted that it is that which separates us from God. This definition follows from the treatment of sin in the Hebrew Bible, where it is first connected with impurity or uncleanness, without a clear distinction between ritual and moral impurity. In the eighth century, we first hear the voice of the prophets drawing that distinction: sin, they assert, is moral failure, and this is what sets our faces away from God. Jesus certainly falls into this tradition, with his radical redefinition of the demands of the law as moral principles rather than ritual prescriptions, and Christianity has ever returned to those teachings of Christ for periodic liberation from legalism and ritualism.

Process thinkers deny that any creature can ever be separated from God in a metaphysical sense. God plays a crucial role in the coming to be of every moment of time, in the life of every creature. The separation, then, cannot be ontological, but it can be spiritual. Following a tradition of liberal theology and the social gospel, many process theologians find sin in the structures of human life that limit possibilities and impose their own heteronomous systems of value. To that insight I would add the individual sin of solipsistic autonomy: the rejection of one's resources in relationship in favor of a narrow self-interest. A meaningful relationship with God is openness to God's lure to possibilities of the creation of value that are unavailable to us in our reliance on private resources. To be saved from sin, then, I define as to be rescued from the limitation of possibilities, whether this arises from one's location in claustrophobic social structures that squeeze out novelty in favor of conservation and repetition, or from one's personal decision to shut out the multitude of voices in favor of the echo chamber of self-regard.

Few if any process theologians would affirm that we need to be saved from a literal Devil—a supernatural agent of evil—but most would agree with Paul Tillich's emphasis on the demonic as a real, effective category in our world. The demonic might be conceived as the evil that flows from creatures and societies—those deeds and structures that actively seek the destruction of beauty, goodness, and truth. Because freedom is intrinsic to existence itself, the possibility

of the demonic cannot ever be removed from existence. God works continually to save us from the effects of the demonic by isolating evil agents, minimizing the harm that can be done by their actions, and reducing the number of "descendents" or "disciples" exposed to those evil value systems. We can work with God to achieve the same ends.

Death is not in itself an evil or something to be overcome for process thinkers. In fact, perishing—the end of the activity and subjectivity of creatures—is a constant fact of existence. As soon as each moment of existence is decided, with one possibility of its reality enacted and all others left behind, it is "dead" in the sense that it is no longer becoming. It is "brute fact," Whitehead says. But it is also "immortal," because it has become part of the changeless past. In this existence of perpetual perishing, the death from which we need salvation is not simply the end of subjective life. Instead, it is the triviality of our lives, their merely local effect, their tendency to lose power over time, that translates to "death" in the process sense. As long as something is effective, it is "alive," not subjectively but objectively. If it becomes ineffective, it is dead. Salvation from death is the eternal effectiveness of our lives, accomplishments, decisions, and contributions of value to the world.

C. Process Theology and Mechanism of Salvation

Having sketched the realities from which we need to be saved, I now turn to the mechanism by which God saves us from the limitation of possibilities, evil agents, and the extinction of our effectiveness in the world. Whitehead describes God as an entity with two "poles" or aspects: a mental pole and a physical pole. Creatures share this nature as well. When I undergo the process of becoming, I move from my physical pole—the factual data of the past, exerting causative pressure upon each emerging moment—to my mental pole—the decision of order and valuation that I impose on that data. According to Whitehead, God's process is reversed. God moves from God's mental pole—a primordial decision that orders and values all possibilities—to God's physical pole—the factual data of free creatures, which God preserves in alignment with God's eternal will.

My salvation, then, occurs in three connected phases in my process of becoming. First, God presents me with possibilities ordered and valued in the primordial divine decision. This

presentation of possibilities enters my view at each moment along with the factual data from my past. God offers me a vision of the meaning of that data for my present moment, and of the ways I might creatively transform that data into a future pulsing with life, beauty, and intensity of feeling. Without this divine influence on the initial stage of my process of becoming, I would be limited to the viewpoints available in my particular time and place. Surrounding myself with the causative influences of my past, I am prone either to slavishly accept without question the values of a powerful but provincial datum (my family, my community, the institutions that give shape to my life), or to consult only my own selfish interest as I arrange my world around myself at its pinnacle and center. With the lure of God's will, a viewpoint both universal and ubiquitous, I am freed from the limitation of my finite location and its resulting narrow worldview.

Second, God enables me to ascend to the honor of co-creator of the future. Without an infusion of order and purpose into the process of becoming, no progress can be sustained. All our individual efforts toward beauty and structure would be doomed to frustration, because without the divine work, their direction would be haphazard, chaotic, efforts along one vector immediately cancelled by efforts along another. Our isolation of purpose—similar to the situation of the "windowless monads" Leibnitz described—prevents meaningful coordination, unless God's influence is common to all, luring us in particular directions. The future I make, then, exhibits order, structure, and the possibility for even greater order and structure building moment upon moment. My contribution is far from trivial—it is decisive. God's action provides the framework within which my creativity takes root and takes flight.

Finally, God eternally preserves and re-presents to the world my achievements of value. For many process thinkers, this is the meaning of "eternal life." Rather than the subjective existence of a continuing center of consciousness, eternal life is the everlasting effectiveness of my life, and the beauty I created, in the universe. I am not forgotten, nor is the result of my creativity allowed to die out by dilution, diffusion, and erosion through the repeated aggregations of data in an infinite series of becomings. The result—the decision or "fact"—created in each moment of my existence is embraced by God's physical pole and oriented in accordance with God's eternal

will (the primordial mental pole of the divine). Thus included in God's everlasting becoming, my self affects the entire future by influencing the possibilities offered by God to the next emerging moment.

D. Process Theology and Eternal Security

What then do process thinkers make of the traditional doctrine of eternal security? As I stated above, for many process theologians the assurance of eternal life—in the sense of a subjective continuation of my stream of conscious existence—is a moot doctrinal point. Orthodox defenders of the doctrine often have as their aim the guarantee for the converted of a home in heaven after earthly death. Eternal security, at its root, is the assurance that "no power in heaven, on earth, or under the earth, can separate us from the love of God" (Romans 8:39)—meaning that the regenerated believer cannot fall away back into damnation.

While the terms *salvation* and *damnation* certainly have a different resonance for process theists, and the guarantee of a heavenly home has no place for those process thinkers who reject the postmortem, everlasting subjectivity of each individual, the underlying intent of the doctrine continues to be affirmed in a Christianity informed by process categories. The pedagogical force of eternal security is two-fold. First, the doctrine asserts that God keeps God's promises. In the Hebrew Bible, God enters into covenants with Noah, Abraham, David, and others; these suzerainty covenants (following a common Near Eastern model) involved promises by both parties, but were dictated unilaterally by the greater party, and cannot be dissolved unilaterally by the lesser party. In these covenants, God pledged special favors of protection, offspring, and status to the chosen people, who in turn promised obedience and worship.

Although the histories and prophetic works of the Hebrew Bible say that Israel failed to honor God as she promised, God, the initiating party to the covenant, never dissolved it. Its ongoing validity is attested by Paul in Romans 11, where he compares the Gentile Christians to a branch grafted onto the tree of Israel, and in Romans 11, Ephesians 1, and Galatians 4, where the adoption by the Spirit is contrasted to the natural heirs of the bloodline. The promise given to the patriarchs belongs now to Gentile Christians as well. God's

promise is not void, then, but valid in an even greater expanse than human imagination could surmise.

Second, the doctrine of eternal security teaches us that salvation is God's work and not ours. If God saves, God can be trusted to be faithful to save whatever the future may bring. Our actions and attitudes as creatures, vile though they may be, do not compel God to turn away from us. The great Reformed theologian Karl Barth allowed no one to exceed him in serious consideration of the divine word of rejection. He made the dual realities of election and rejection the centerpiece of his theology. But when he concluded that rejection is a shadow-reality, and that God's freedom and power mean that God's *Yes* to creation overcomes even the most real, serious, and devastating divine *No*, Barth was giving voice to the principle behind eternal security. The sin, death, and evil that God overcomes in salvation do not suddenly become invincible when they affect us after conversion. God goes on working in the lives of believers, even when God's activity is invisible to all. As we are powerless to save ourselves, we are equally powerless to damn ourselves. God alone saves, and what God saves stays saved.

These two precepts guide process theology in its consideration of the security of salvation. First, God's faithfulness consists in God's eternal and unwavering purpose to foster beauty and intensity of feeling with the cooperation of creatures. God can be trusted to do everything in God's power to bring about this result. Process thought is often stigmatized as a theology of divine change—with the implication that the God of process theology wavers and waffles. What process actually asserts is that God responds to the realities of the world and creatively utilizes all available resources to meet its contingent needs, all the while steadfastly pursuing the unchanging divine will. This unchanging, primordial aspect of God includes the decision to include creatures in the divine fellowship—the determination to elevate and empower us. Thus the decision to save belongs to the eternal fount of Godhead, not to contingent responses to creaturely reality. The process God is faithful to keep God's promises, which are grounded in the divine decision to be God for us.

Second, our salvation is secure because it is not our work, but God's. Again, process thought is misunderstood as a doctrine of human power and divine weakness. Our ability to co-create the future

is finite; it is limited by the accident of the data available to it, effective (on its own) only in the moment, unable to achieve cooperation or solidarity with others, dead and impotent as soon as the moment passes. God's salvation, however, means that our contributions are preserved and re-energized for each new moment. My life becomes part of God's glorious renewal of the world in God's self. To the extent to which process thought reminds us that our salvation is given to us and does become our own, through its focus on the creativity and accomplishments creatures are capable of in this system, it does reclaim theological talk of the power of the saved individual. But that ownership simply consists of the continuation of the value of my life in God's everlasting creative adventure. Without God's decisive action to offer salvation (in the lure to participate in the divine plan) and complete salvation (in the taking up of the result of my life into the divine consequent nature), my power would be irrelevant and of no avail.

Conclusion

Eternal security, though not a hotly debated topic in process circles, is a doctrine that process thinkers would do well to think through. It reminds us of the order of salvation, and the roles played in it by divine and creaturely participants. Its magisterium leads us to meditate on God's promise, God's faithfulness, and God's power to save. When considered in the context of a process understanding of human creativity, the doctrine invites us to examine our commitment to the divine will and places a renewed emphasis on spirituality and discernment. Thus Calvin's hopes are fulfilled, although in a form he never would have imagined: the doctrine confirming God's exclusive power over salvation frees us to act boldly and decisively in our proper sphere of human creativity.

Further Reading

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