

BUILDING THE KINGDOM: USING SOCIAL GOSPEL, PROCESS THEOLOGY, AND
LIBERATION THEOLOGY TO DEFINE CHRISTIAN PROGRESSIVISM

by

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(Under the direction of Sandy Martin)

ABSTRACT

The question of defining Christian progressivism is not one tackled very often by seminary students or academic scholars. While there are strands of liberal Christian thought throughout theological scholarship, none have been identified as progressive. In this thesis I seek to identify the traits of Christian progressivism as outlined by Social Gospel Movements, process theology, and liberation theology. These schools of thought introduce to theology concepts that allow for a progressive worldview to emerge. I seek a definition of Christian progressivism based on the traits shared by these paradigms.

INDEX WORDS: Christian Theology, Progressive Christianity, Liberation Theology, Process Theology, Social Gospel, Feminist Theology, Black Theology.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION.....	5
CHAPTER	
1. THE KINGDOM NEARS: SOCIAL GOSPEL REVITALIZING THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH.....	9
2. ALL CREATION IS CO-CREATION: PROCESS THEOLOGY AND THE DOCTRINE OF GOD.....	24
3. IS THERE ROOM FOR HOPE? PROCESS THEOLOGY'S IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR FUTURE.....	48
4. NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN: LIBERATION THEOLOGY AS CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PRAXIS.....	58
5. HOW FAR IS HEAVEN? CHRIST AS LIBERATOR.....	70
CONCLUSION.....	89
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	94

INTRODUCTION

What is Progressive Christianity? Progressivism is marked by a belief in the power of human social progress. Progressives are enthusiastic supporters of forward-thinking social structures which seek to advance human flourishing through the intentional influence of human social institutions. Progressive Christians are those that distinguish themselves from secular humanists by arguing that this approach is synonymous with the teachings of Jesus and the mission of the global church.

The first school of thought in support of this ideal that we shall analyze is the Social Gospel Movement. Social Gospel is defined by an interpretation of the Christian gospel which emphasizes the establishment of just social structures that seek to create an egalitarian social order based on Christ's teaching. The second we shall analyze will be process theology. Process thought begins as a new cosmological framework established by Alfred North Whitehead in his book *Process and Reality* in 1929. It establishes that reality is marked by processes unfolding rather than static entities as it has been for much of Western philosophical history. As a result, process theology adapted from this framework establishes that God is involved in all processes and while God has a primordial nature, God also holds a consequent nature interacting with creation and taking part in the processes that unfold. The implications of this weigh heavily on Christian theology. When taken to their fullest logical extension, the implications point to a more active role for humanity in carrying out God's plans for

creation. Finally, liberation theology is a paradigm for Christian theology established by Gustavo Gutierrez and the second Latin American Bishops Conference in Medellin, Colombia in 1968. Gutierrez followed up with the first work titled *A Theology of Liberation* in 1971. This school of thought is marked by an interest in uprooting systems of oppression which work to keep the poor marginalized. On a macro scale this is done by way of economic policies from rich countries that establish monetary colonialization on poor countries. It is done on a micro scale by way of systematic oppression of the poor by the rich and powerful in each society. In both cases, liberation theology advocates for direct political and civic engagement on the behalf of the poor by the church and for the church to disavow relationships with the rich and powerful in solidarity with the poor. All three schools of thought call for direct involvement in political and civic lives of the poor and marginalized to bring about more just societies. The term social Christianity is also used to refer to these sorts of movements. It often overlaps with the Social Gospel but is also broadly applicable to our discussions here.

Constructing a working definition of progressive Christianity has become increasingly necessary in light of recent political shifts in America. Christians have been largely seen as a monolith in America. The danger of obfuscating Christian beliefs that are characteristically progressive is that such beliefs may be covered up in wider theological discourse between Christians and secular culture. This results in real world danger of structuring our social institutions in such a way that only conservative elements of Christianity will have a say. Progressive Christians have not been taken seriously in theological or political discourse as of late. Causes that they champion may go without wider secular support if Christians are largely seen as a conservative

monolith. Conservatism within Christian theological discourse tends to support the politics of the Christian Right and represents a growing movement aiming to establish strictly traditional biblical interpretations within theology and establishing social structures which aim to influence our institutions according to such biblical interpretations. Progressive Christian beliefs and doctrines are seen as heterodox from this perspective. From the progressive standpoint conservative doctrines are an inaccurate or outdated reflection of biblical interpretation at best and a harmful take on biblical tradition that negatively affects many aspects of the human quality of life, relations with other communities, our environment, and misaligns the mission of the church with an unhealthy focus on personal conversion, personal piety, and restrictive moral codes at worst.

The threat of Christian conservatism to our environment and our quality of life has spurred me to reflect on what it means to call oneself a progressive Christian. Many modern global problems have workable solutions that are simply not endorsed by the greater public because of the influence of conservative American Christianity. Climate change denial and a lack of care for our only planet has increased as a growing apocalyptic worldview has entrenched itself in largely Protestant, evangelical communities. This form of conservatism also threatens the rights of marginalized people including LGBTQ+ individuals, women, migrants, and marginalized individuals including the homeless and the poor. With growing Christian conservatism comes encroaching dogmatic attitudes regarding social norms and rules that govern our interactions, lifestyle choices, and quality of life.

Progressive Christians find themselves between a rock and a hard place. Faith provides them with hope for a better future, but theological discourse keeps them on the backfoot defensively searching for biblical evidence that social causes are worth pursuing. I explore how faith can provide that hope when so much of church history has been embedded in this sort of conservatism. How can there be room for Christian progressivism within theological discourse when many Christians declare the Bible to be clear on so many of the subjects that progressives care about? For conservative Christians the views on such subjects have long been worked out by traditional theism and classical theology. These may include the human relationship with the environment, the goals of the gospel, the church's mission on earth, or even the relationship between humans and the divine power. The last subject in particular touches on further topics related to lifestyle choices and moral codes for living. Modern Christians involved in social movements such as feminism and political activism ask if there is any other way? How can we develop a progressive Christian theology while maintaining fidelity to the Christian narrative and traditions?

I begin with roots of progressive Christianity in the Social Gospel (1870-1920). The Social Gospel marks a unique evolution in theology as it is where we begin to see one of the defining traits of progressive Christianity: using historical and contextual critical methods to interpret Scripture and church history to unpack some of the assumptions made about the church's purpose. The concept of the kingdom of God comes into view during this time. The question begins to get asked as to how we can build a just society for humans. How much can Christians influence institutions to commit to constructing just moral structures? As an ultimate vision for the church, the

kingdom of God concept requires constant revision and assessment of church practices to keep in line with what Social Gospel considers the mission of the church. In both liberation theology and Social Gospel church history is assessed critically to orient and re-orient theology in the direction of establishing this kingdom.

These questions get picked up subsequently by process thinkers. They question basic assumptions regarding divine power assessing Platonic metaphysics as insufficient for constructing a consistent Christian cosmology. Early Christians were heavily influenced by Neoplatonism when forming early theology. One belief in particular informed the metaphysical/cosmological framework from which future theologians would work. The distinction between a realm of change and a realm of the eternal where God resides has been embedded in Christian thought since almost the beginning. Process thought questions this tenet of theology and begins to unpack divine power in this way. Where traditional theism has lent credence to the view of an unchanging, distant God, process thought sees a co-creative growing immanent God that is very much involved with creation. The implications of this thought touches on the very concerns progressive Christians have for the gospel, Christ, our understanding of divine power, and the purpose of creation. If many of the tenets of Christian theology we have taken to be static and sourced in divine revelations turn out to be historical developments instead, then perhaps we can come to new understandings that apply to our time better. This opens room for theological discourse to tackle the changing needs of the poor and marginalized in modern societies.

The restlessness toward revitalizing theology in such schools of thought as the Social Gospel and process theology signify what we are all really thinking as modern

humans. How can we be freer? Why do we yearn for more freedom if God has already decided for us through divine revelation how we are to carry out our lives? What is the purpose of our existence if life is only a grand moral test from God? Does God sanction and support the power structures that keep many people oppressed? How can there be great suffering and evil if God loves us and wants the best for us? All of these questions concern progressive Christians because at our core we find ourselves questing for liberation. Gustavo Gutierrez takes many of these questions on when he developed liberation theology. According to liberation theology the reason oppressed communities worldwide yearn for more freedom is because this is the divine call to all of us.

The significance of pulling together these strands of Christian thought is that they each express a shared vision for humanity in light of the gospel. They seek to keep theology faithful to its core usage throughout church history while also becoming more aware of time and place. Theology is not a book handed down from heaven, but a struggle to understand and direct the church toward the goal of the gospel. Namely, this is the establishment of a just society. Many questions will have to be answered as these schools of thought do not simply ditch the old ways of doing things but instead open our eyes to a reframing that is in accordance with the rest of our body of knowledge, both religious and secular. This new way of doing theology will need to consider modern science, social tools used to analyze societies, and the increased call for liberation coming from oppressed people as learn more and more about the injustices inflicted on them. At times, from Christians themselves. How can we reconcile what we know now about forms of injustice with a loving God? We must begin by embracing change as a fundamental aspect of the universe.

CHAPTER 1

THE KINGDOM NEARS: SOCIAL GOSPEL REVITALIZING THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

The Social Gospel movement, sometimes called social Christianity, arose during a time in American history marked by increasing industrialization and movement to urban centers. The social changes that resulted led to massive poverty in the cities of the North. Protestant churches there were some of the only institutions alleviating social ills and responding to the needs of the poor. Coming out of a period of revitalization and placing an emphasis on personal conversions, the church felt unequipped to handle growing calls for economic and social justice.

At the same time, philosophical shifts in Europe ushered in an age of liberal theology. Existentialist concepts introduced by thinkers such as Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768 – 1834) and Soren Kierkegaard (1813 – 1855) emphasized personal experience as the grounds for religious belief while Kant held a critical idealism which questioned theological investigating beyond our personal experiences of religion. These critiques overturned a speculative German idealism exemplified by thinkers like Hegel which attempted to deploy the concept of a grand narrative explaining all the developments until then in philosophy and Christian theology. What resulted was a renewed focus on historical sources in theology. Though religious faith had been grounded in experience by Kierkegaard and Schleiermacher, those experiences still

were appropriated in each historical setting with specific Christian historical events responsible for their development. As scholar James Livingston puts it, "The rejection of philosophical speculation went hand in hand with a concentration on the empirical and historical."¹

German liberal theology took up historical criticism of the Bible. Christopher Evans says, "Many German scholars increasingly delved into the life setting of the scriptures, employing social science methodology to flesh out the historical context of the ancient world."² The study of church history gained ground with the influence of German historians including Johann August Neander who in turn taught Philip Schaff. Schaff, a Swiss immigrant to America, would become faculty at Union Theological Seminary. Here he played a major role in influencing Social Gospel thinkers by showing them the importance of studying church history to understand the church's doctrinal development.³ This focus also spread by way of the waves of American Protestant thinkers who went to Germany to study theology. Perhaps none other than Albrecht Ritsch had the widest influence among these thinkers.

Albrecht Ritschl would play a major role in influencing the Social Gospel thinkers. German Idealism in Schleiermacher through his idea that to interpret doctrine correctly we needed to understand religious experience led Ritschl to stress the importance of the concept of the kingdom of God as a historical Christian movement. This became one of the teachings of the Ritschlian school in German theology. Its influence would

¹ Livingston, James, *Modern Christian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Vatican II* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 246.

² Evans, Christopher, *The Social Gospel in American History* (New York: NYU Press, 2017), 59.

³ Evans, 59-60.

reach from 1875 to World War I as it influenced many Social Gospel theologians and ministers from the US.⁴ Basic tenets of this school of thought included a practical conception of religion, the contrast between religious and theoretical knowledge, the use of the kingdom of God as the regulative principle of Christian dogmatics, and the tendency to limit theological investigation to the contents of religious consciousness. Ritschl believed that Christ's work consisted of three things; "Christ's being God's instrument of redemption through the forgiveness of sins, the re-establishment of human communion with God, and the founding of a human community of reconciliation."⁵

According to Ritschl, Christ's death is redemptive not by virtue of the fate of dying, but rather "His willing acceptance of the death inflicted upon Him by His adversaries as a dispensation of God and the highest proof of faithfulness to His vocation."⁶ Ritschl places emphases on Christ's work for his community. It is the way his life demonstrated care and reconciliation through his works in the community that make his death redemptive. We will see this idea carried forward in both process and liberation theologies later.

Ritschl believed Christianity is primarily a social religion. Livingston says, "Salvation is always a social fact mediated through the Church, conceived as the community of believers."⁷ Christ's purpose was to create and foster a community. Salvation is always attained within the context and confines of the community. "The

⁴ Livingston, James, *Modern Christian Thought*, 246.

⁵ Livingston, 253.

⁶ Livingston, 254.

⁷ Livingston, 255.

individual is reconciled to God through Christ in the community founded by Christ.”⁸ This ties salvation to Christ’s mission to form a new religion through a new community tasked with continuing his ministry. This new community would continue in the hopes of becoming the eventual kingdom of God. Ritschl used the idea of the Kingdom of God to explain the moral dynamic present in salvation. Livingston summarizes, “The ethical realization of the Kingdom is rooted in the motive of love of God and one’s neighbor.... For Ritschl, Christianity is not principally a good already gained for the individual, but a social ideal yet to be realized.”⁹ This idea is carried forward by the Social Gospel movement. What distinguishes it from other schools of thought is the belief that the social order of humans can always be improved. It is not an empty progressivism as its opponents have alleged, but rather a foundational belief that we must bring about the Kingdom of God ourselves instead of awaiting it to come artificially and deposit itself on top of the current world we find ourselves in. Rather, it is an optimistic hope that sees the Gospel as a work to be finished rather than something to be believed in at an intellectual level only. Although German Idealism’s influence on Protestant theology would come under scrutiny after the events of World War I, it influenced a great deal of Social Gospel thinkers. Evans says, “Its idealistic view of the individual corresponded with the perspective that individuals could change the course of history, working in creative partnership with God.”¹⁰

Justo Gonzalez calls the Social Gospel “one of the most significant contributions of the United States to the development of Christian thought.”¹¹ Heavy industrialization

⁸ Livingston, 255.

⁹ Livingston, 256.

¹⁰ Evans, Christopher, *The Social Gospel in American History*, 64.

¹¹ Gonzalez, Justo, *A History of Christian Thought* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 382.

and urbanization under capitalism created harsh, unequal social conditions for many of the working poor. Gonzalez points out, "Churches seemed content with continuing the task of calling individuals to repentance and conversion, often claiming that the conversion of individuals was sufficient for the restructuring of society."¹² According to Gonzalez, the Social Gospel Movement's greatest and most impactful advocate was Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918).¹³ He was the son of a German Baptist professor and pastor for eleven years in a slum in New York City. While there he saw extreme poverty and great social injustice in the community. These experiences helped lead him to developing the Social Gospel. He drew on German liberal theology, the Ritschlian school in particular, and his experiences with extreme poverty in the industrial US.

Though he grew up under the pietistic influence of his father, he studied liberal theology under Ritschl. Evans credits theological developments such as God's immanence and the developing sense that the primary goal of Christianity "was to translate its teachings into sustained work for social reform."¹⁴ Unfortunately the church of the time held to a popular theological strand known as premillennialism that kept it from meaningfully committing to social reform. Evans explains:

With its pessimistic theology and belief that any form of social amelioration was doomed to fail, premillennialism seemed antithetical to the spirit of the modern age. "The apocalyptic hope has always contained ingredients of religious force and value," Rauschenbusch conceded, "but its trail through history is strange and troubled reading. It has been of absorbing fascination to some Christian minds, but it has led them into labyrinths from which some never emerged." Rauschenbusch observed that the ongoing appeal of various forms of apocalyptic theology was a major reason why the "kingdom hope" of the Social Gospel had not caught on at a popular level in America.¹⁵

¹² Gonzalez, 382.

¹³ Gonzalez, 382-83.

¹⁴ Evans, Christopher, *The Social Gospel in American Religion*, 79.

¹⁵ Evans, 105.

The same focus on apocalypse characterizes the Protestant Church's theology today as well. Along with this focus on an apocalyptic vision the church also tends to focus on personal conversion and a personal view of sin. Rauschenbusch spent much of his writing advocating for a different view of salvation, the church's mission, sin, and faith in institutional change brought about by the church's influence.

Rauschenbusch took from Ritschl a sense of corporate, or communal, sin along with the importance of the Kingdom of God toward redeeming humans from sin. Thus, he concluded that it was not enough to convert individuals or use philanthropy to alleviate injustice. Rather, "It was necessary to affect the very order of society, its laws and institutions, in order to provide a more just environment for human life," as Gonzalez puts it.¹⁶ In *Christianity and the Social Crisis* Rauschenbusch argues that the old prophets, especially those to which Jesus felt a close kinship, were distinguished from normal religious conviction to seek righteousness. Rauschenbusch notes, "We have seen that their religious concern was not restricted to private religion and morality but dealt pre-eminently with the social and political life of their nation. Would they limit its range today?"¹⁷ This is an indication that what concerned Social Gospel the most was the realm of the political and social justice. Much of the pushback against Social Gospel movements have been that they are too political or naively progressive. Rauschenbusch would contend, however, that the central emphasis of the Gospel message is precisely involved with the political because this is how we bring about social justice and hence the kingdom of God. He also argues Jesus was prophetic for

¹⁶ Gonzalez, Justo, *A History of Christian Thought*, 383.

¹⁷ Kerr, Hugh, *Readings in Christian Thought* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 258.

his vision of the kingdom of God. Jesus advanced a vision of how life could be that restructured what anyone thought religion should be concerned with primarily. Jesus wanted to build the community and looked beyond his own death to the kingdom. This way of living ran counter to the way the powerful wanted others to live. He says, “He nourished within his soul the ideal of a common life so radically different from the present that it involved a reversal of values, a revolutionary displacement of existing relations.”¹⁸

Rauschenbusch held that the church’s primary goal should be to tackle moral degradation through systemic change. Notably, he is speaking here of a sense of communal sin. Instead of focusing mostly on personal conversion, the Church should work to also influence institutions and create vast social reform. He says, “The demoralization of society...ought to appeal most powerfully to the Church, for the Church is to be the incarnation of the Christ-spirit on Earth, the organized conscience of Christendom.”¹⁹ He identifies social problems as the current threat to the church. If the church lags on alleviating these sorts of ills, then it risks becoming increasingly socially irrelevant, especially among younger generations. To me, this is more than a sober assessment of the times, it is prophetic. This is the state of the church today both Protestant and Catholic. It is in a battle for its own soul as conservative elements fight to keep the focus of church teachings on personal piety and a sense of individual sin, whereas the progressive elements fight to bring social justice to the church’s attention along with a sense of communal sin. In referring to the goals of the Social Gospel Rauschenbusch turns to the sort of salvation it concerns itself with. He writes, “Its chief

¹⁸ Kerr, 259.

¹⁹ Kerr, 259.

interest is concentrated on those manifestations of sin and redemption which lie beyond the individual soul. If our exposition of the superpersonal agents of sin and of the kingdom of evil is true, then evidently a salvation confined to the soul and its personal interests is an imperfect and only partly effective salvation."²⁰ While this does not wholly dismiss the significance of personal salvation, it does remind us that it is a smaller portion of the sort of redemption that Christian should be concerned with. To me, this indicates a directive to care at least as much about the communal elements of sin as the church has about personal piety. Livingston summarizes his view on individual and communal sin, "When viewed in the perspective of the Kingdom of God, theology will make much less of individual sins. Rather Christians will reserve their horror for those in high places who use powerful lobbies to defeat poverty legislation and factory laws and for nations who set the world at war because of their colonial ambitions."²¹ It is not the case that Rauschenbusch dismisses individual sin, however. He views it as secondary to reforming society. Without widespread social reform, the individual cannot be fully healed.

Rauschenbusch's influence lived on in the mind of a young Martin Luther King Jr. In his final book *A Theology for the Social Gospel* Rauschenbusch attempts to establish a theological basis for the Social Gospel. In it he uses the term *beloved community* to describe an actual movement. Evans says, "Rauschenbusch asserted that the beloved community was impossible to achieve unless the realities of Jesus's radical spirit changed individuals and social structures."²² This term would go on to live in the work of

²⁰ Hudson, Winthrop, *Walter Rauschenbusch: selected writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 155.

²¹ Livingston, James, *Modern Christian Thought*, 264.

²² Evans, Christopher, *The Social Gospel in American Religion*, 121.

Martin Luther King Jr. as he used it to describe the future of an ideal interracial American society. Evans identifies Martin Luther King Jr. as the heir to the Social Gospel Movement and the embodiment of its legacy. He says, "...a new American revolution of social change would occur that represented the crowning achievement of the Social Gospel Movement in American history. The figure who served as the embodiment of that legacy was Martin Luther King Jr."²³ MLK Jr. would go on to use the historical critical method in his analysis of Scripture. He would go on to use the kingdom of God idea to help the Civil Rights Movement envision a future society marked by racial, economic, and social justice.

King grew up in a segregated South in Atlanta, Georgia. He grew up in the black Ebenezer Baptist Church. He worked in his father's ministry and took on his theological education initially at Crozer. He would go to Boston University for his Ph.D. He made the hard choice of returning to the South during segregation and Jim Crow, however. He reasoned he couldn't fight racial injustice without being in the communities where it was worst. He preached as pastor at Dexter Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama then with his father at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. King chose to pursue a liberal theological education because he was interested in solving the problems all around him. It was natural for him to see the connection between the church's mission and social justice. His church had been involved with directly helping the poor in his community. His family sent him to Morehouse College. He subsequently went north to pursue a liberal theological education.

²³ Evans, 163.

MLK Jr. in 1960 wrote about his arrival at the Social Gospel and his rejection of some of the tenets of liberal theology during his education. He would say about liberalism that it naively believed in the natural goodness of human nature. He feels that there should be a more intentional push toward the common good than what liberalism suggested.²⁴ King writes, “The more I observed the tragedies of history and man’s shameful inclination to choose the low road, the more I came to see the depths and strength of sin. My reading of the works of Reinhold Niebuhr made me aware of the complexity of human motives and the reality of sin on every level of man’s existence.”²⁵ King admitted prior to this that he fell in love with liberalism. It gave him hope for a new theology that supported his sense of moral idealism. However, upon closer inspection it was lacking. This reading from Reinhold Niebuhr who was known to reject elements of liberal theology but accept with it a communal sense of what sin was, influenced King greatly. MLK Jr. goes on to say, “Moreover, I came to recognize the complexity of man’s social involvement and the glaring reality of collective evil.”²⁶ In this recollection King notes that his main concern during college was with social ethics. He notes that growing up in Atlanta, he was deeply aware and concerned with racial justice and its corresponding “twin” of economic justice.²⁷ It was through this concern that once he entered seminary he became deeply interested in Social Gospel.

Howard Thurman, an African American minister working in San Francisco, wrote *Jesus and the Disinherited*, an influential book that asserted the need to understand

²⁴ Kerr, Hugh, *Readings in Christian Thought*, 385.

²⁵ Kerr, 385.

²⁶ Kerr, 386.

²⁷ Kerr, 386.

Jesus' teaching as primarily about reaching out to the poor. Evans says, "Thurman drew close parallels in the book between Jesus's mission to serve the marginalized and the historical plight of African Americans."²⁸ Thurman drew from his Social Gospel education at Morehouse College in Atlanta during the post-World War II period. He then studied at Rochester Theological Seminary where Rauschenbusch had been during his time.²⁹ Thurman mentored Martin Luther King Jr. when he became dean of the chapel at Boston University while MLK was student there in 1953. Benjamin Mays also played a role in mentoring King as the president of Morehouse College. It was Mays who introduced King to Walter Rauschenbusch. King adopted Mays's opposition to theological conservatism, according to Evans.³⁰ When he left Morehouse, he went to Crozer in suburban Philadelphia, then to Boston for his PhD studies. The Social Gospel influence at these institutions helped shape MLK's thought. MLK was also shaped by the role of Social Gospel institutions across the South. This included the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Highlander Folk School, and the National Council of Churches.³¹

While the influence of Rauschenbusch on King is indicated by his sense of the church's mission in the current place in history, he rejected a gradualist approach that characterized early Social Gospel thinkers. King would later call this a sense of optimism that he did not share. Niebuhr largely influenced King to not hold faith that human nature would Christianize institutions the way Rauschenbusch believed it would.³² In addition King shared with the early Social Gospel thinkers "a belief in

²⁸ Evans, Christopher, *The Social Gospel in American Religion*, 165.

²⁹ Evans, 165-66.

³⁰ Evans, 177.

³¹ Evans, 179-80

³² Evans, 181.

redemptive suffering," according to Evans. Much like how Jesus suffered for radical social change, the Christian committed to the same would also likely need to be prepared to suffer as well. Evans says, "King's belief that God partnered with humans in the process of changing society strongly reflected the legacy of the Social Gospel. He saw the zeitgeist at work in the twentieth century driving persons of color toward the realization of freedom and justice."³³ King would go on to find this influence necessary for the issues of economic justice and the Vietnam War as well in the last days of his life.

There are further examples for this potential crossover of doctrines. In "Letter from Birmingham Jail" King writes about his frustration with the white church. What is most striking is how King makes his argument noting that their goals don't align with his understanding of the gospel. He argues that their sense of justice is flawed in that it never considers the daily experiences of half the population simply because they do not suffer themselves.³⁴ King points out that the law is not universally just and not necessarily that which coincides with good morals. There is a disparity between just and unjust laws. This conviction is driven by King's sense of social justice. He justifies this view based on the writings of Aquinas, Augustine, and Paul Tillich. King writes, "How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust."³⁵ Here I believe

³³ Evans, 181.

³⁴ Placher, William, *Readings in the History of Christian Theology Volume 2* (Louisville: John Knox Press), 187-88.

³⁵ Placher, 187.

King is appealing to a sense of universal human dignity. He cites Tillich in writing, "...sin is separation. Is not segregation an existential expression of man's tragic separation?"³⁶ He further extends his argument in writing, "An unjust law is a code that a numerical or power majority compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself. This is a *difference* made legal."³⁷ This analysis blends theological arguments with social concern. It represents a marriage between Christianity and social justice. It also provides hope for the possibility that theology can support the Social Gospel. He even does this with his interpretation of Revelation, a book often used to do the opposite and ascribe the apocalyptic view that keeps Protestant churches from meaningfully committing to social justice. In one of his papers, he writes:

John could talk meaningfully about the New Jerusalem because he had experienced the old Jerusalem with its perfunctory ceremonialism, its tragic gulfs between abject poverty and inordinate wealth, its political domination and economic exploitation. John could see this old Jerusalem passing away and the New Jerusalem coming into being.³⁸

MLK had an awareness and utilized the historical-critical method in his studies during college. In this example King writes about Revelation and the way in which John could see a coming Kingdom of God that does not celebrate inequality but rather social justice. Ironically, this take on Revelation shows that antithesis to social action and the incorporation of a book on apocalypse is not necessary in theology. Another way is possible if we draw out the nuance of this by looking at this portion of Scripture through historical analysis.

³⁶ Placher, 187.

³⁷ Placher, 187.

³⁸ King Jr., Martin Luther, "The Vision of a World Made New" in *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr. Volume VI: Advocate of the Social Gospel* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2007), 182-83.

While he disagreed with Rauschenbusch on the point that any one system of the economy or society will be the solution to social problems on par with the kingdom of God, he took from him a sense in which the concern of Christianity should be about the collective social justice it was producing rather than just the individual's salvation. King writes:

The gospel at its best deals with the whole man, not only his soul but his body, not only his spiritual well-being, but his material well-being. Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them and the social conditions that cripple them is a spiritually moribund religion awaiting burial.³⁹

This parallels Rauschenbusch when he contends that the church will lose its social relevance to new generations if it does not turn to social justice as its goal. MLK Jr. was intentional when it came to his vision for the church. The black church represented new possibilities for bringing social justice to the front of the moral conscience of America at large. He shares this conviction with Gustavo Gutierrez in believing that their particular community could teach something new to the rest of the global church communities. Lewis Baldwin argues that King, much like Rauschenbusch, saw the biggest hurdle to a Social Christianity being the church itself and its conservative tendency to stick to an orthodoxy that conformed. King saw in leaders like Billy Graham, for example, a fear of change. Baldwin says, "King insisted that it was a myopic Christian orthodoxy that too often led some of the most prestigious white churches to be indifferent to struggles for social uplift, to proclaim that revivalism and getting people saved were the panacea for

³⁹ Kerr, Hugh, *Readings in Christian Thought*, 387.

the nation's ills, and to seek pastors who were entirely safe on social and political questions."⁴⁰

MLK Jr. carried the torch forward for the Social Gospel into the Civil Rights movement and thus the American conscience as well. If there is a Christian progressivism that can be sorted from the last two hundred years of church history, the Social Gospel will have earned its place in it due to his efforts and the work of those that inspired him. We will see threads that parallel other threads within process thought and liberation theology as well. We will see a wide set of influences along the spectrum from academic to grounded in the daily toil of the political and social analysis that many religious thinkers and theologians belonging to classical systems of theology would consider too close to the secular, muddled issues that fill the lives of marginalized people and the poor. However, I believe that what many of these schools of thought hold in common is the need for the church to return to the common person's life with a renewed vision of the gospel and Christ's mission. Otherwise, the church risks irrelevance to the modern person.

⁴⁰ Baldwin, Lewis, *The Voice of Conscience* (New York: Oxford, 2010), 163.

CHAPTER 2

ALL CREATION IS CO-CREATION: PROCESS THEOLOGY AND THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

Theology is strongest when it takes into full view the work done on the ground. One of the reasons traditional theism has such a strong influence on Christian theology is that the most fundamental tenets, which are cosmological, metaphysical, structural, have mostly gone unchallenged. With every great new doctrine, exception, change that progressive Christians ask and yearn for the traditional theist can point to the dome that is these basic structures and deny that any new direction is worthy of pursuing. Process thought has identified problems at the base of traditional theism which left unchecked, leave us intellectually unable to argue for anything new or creative in theology. This chapter will lay out the basic structure of process thought. The next chapter will apply them to theology by way of showing that the implications of structural change in theology will yield new doctrines much friendlier to the progressive causes of social justice, the preferential option for the poor, and the kingdom of God among many others.

Process philosophy started with the mathematician Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947). It held a wide influence as the implications of its cosmological picture touch on many disciplines including math, philosophy, theology, ecology, and many scientific disciplines as well. Among his students, Charles Hartshorne, took it up to

identify and resolve many of the problems, some of which we've already identified, with traditional theism. Put succinctly, process philosophy says all life is in process in that it changes and develops, and that God participates in this process.

The late John Cobb, who has been considered one of the prime students and developers of process philosophy after Hartshorne, compares existentialism to process philosophy in helping define it. Existentialism connects the personal individual experiences of humans as responding subjects to how process thought understands these experiences and their meaning as "high-level exemplification of reality in general."⁴¹ Human daily experience parallels and hence connects us to ultimate reality.

Process philosophy rejects the Platonic ideal of the forms and the separation of reality from the realm of the eternal where the divine resides. It also rejects on this basis the ontology of essentialism that has also been adopted by early Christian theology. Early Christians, heavily influenced by Greek philosophy and Neoplatonism, adopted this and incorporated it into doctrines established about the divine nature and human nature. Aquinas along with many others developed this into the idea of substance. Each living thing and inorganic object is essentialized by an ideal we cannot fully see. These ideals reside, much like Plato's heaven where the forms reside, in God's mind.

In contrast, Whitehead identifies what we call individuals as actually being a society or a collective set of individuals.⁴² Cobb utilizes the metaphor of a film reel. What appears to be a continuous flow of moments is really many scenes chained together into an unfolding process. Even each scene can be divided further into more processes unfolding. This of course is where the metaphor breaks down. A person

⁴¹ Cobb, John B, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 13.

⁴² Cobb, 13.

passes through time serially ordered from moment to moment, but the actual real entities are the individual experiences we pass through. We are conditioned to identify each experience as an individual but even then, this is a categorization we impose to understand our experiences.

Carol Christ, feminist thinker and student of John Cobb, defines the fundamental aspect of process thought:

The universe as a whole is changing in a continual process of evolution. The world is filled with free and creative individuals related to each other. To a greater or lesser degree, all individuals, including human beings, other animals, cells, atoms, and particles of atoms, exercise creative freedom. Goddess/God is fully involved in the changing lives of every individual in the universe and evolution of the whole. Creation is co-creation.⁴³

Carol Christ uses feminist language to identify God. This is one of many implications of this fundamental cosmological principle when applied to theology. She is stressing God's divine nature as being expressed in both feminine and masculine aspects with this language. Hartshorne and Whitehead also mean something different when referring to "God" than traditional theism. They object to the classical traits of "perfection" that are adopted under the doctrine of God. Process theology when applied to the doctrine of God rejects all of them and in their place provides alternatives that align with a co-creative God.

The shifts in views required for process theology in this regard are significant.

Carol Christ sums up the image process theology objects to:

The image is hierarchical, based in ancient and feudal notions of kingship-God is above the world and rules it like a king. It is patriarchal, based in notion of the father' power as supreme and unchallenged. It is racist-the heavenly Father is white, while sin and evil are dark and black. It is dualistic, separating the world into above and below, higher and lower, earth and heaven, time and eternity, good and evil. God's realm, heaven and eternity, is both higher and better than

⁴³ Christ, Carol, *She Who Changes: Re-imagining the Divine in the World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 45.

earthly reality. If we are good, we will live forever with God. Finite life is not accepted. Morality is based upon hope of reward and fear of punishment, the assumption being that human beings will do good and avoid evil only because of God's promises and threats.⁴⁴

Her analysis comes originally from Hartshorne and his identification of six traits of divine perfection that process theology rejects. He calls them theological mistakes. Carol Christ identifies them, "God is perfect and therefore unchangeable, omnipotence, omniscience, God's unsympathetic goodness, immortality as a career after death, and revelation as infallible."⁴⁵ These serve as ways to think through a better theological position. We must note here that these are not views that point to any specific theologian's analysis but rather as a way of contrasting with the views that result from such theological implications. Classical theology would argue, of course, that these are not the true conclusions that early theologians were trying to make. However, we must take seriously as Hartshorne did that typical Christians do not assess the complex theological arguments when incorporating these into their worldviews. Often, the most simplistic explanations rise to the surface. Thus, I believe criticism of classical theology from process theology applies even if early theologians were not arguing as such in the full extension of their ideas. Theology is more than what we argue in the intellectual setting where theology is typically practiced or taught. It is also what the most common person comes away with when they hear it.

The first opens us up to the question of how God can love us at all. "If God cannot change, then how can God be intimately involved with the creation and the creatures, whose very nature it is to change, to come into being and to pass away...? If

⁴⁴ Christ, 26-27.

⁴⁵ Christ, 33.

God cannot be intimately involved with the changing world, then what can it possibly mean to say that God is love?"⁴⁶ Process theology accepts the biblical notion that God is love. Yet, this insight found throughout the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament contradicts the characterization of God as unchangeable. The solution from traditional theism is unsatisfactory for our conception of love. We will explore this in the next chapter.

God's omnipotence creates problems with identifying all things that occur with God's will. Two problems arise. First, there is no room for human freedom. Traditional theism typically gives up human freedom for the sake of preserving God's omnipotence. Human freedom is an illusion. All choices have already been made when we consider God's omnipotence is paired with God's omniscience. If God controls all aspects of history and knows all past and future events, then there is nothing left that has not already been determined under traditional theism. This opens up the problem of evil. We witness and experience great suffering. We notice life is often short and painful for many people. How can we reconcile this with a God who loves us and controls the outcomes of all events in history? The solution to this from traditional theism is to say all things eventually work toward the good. Life is seen as a moral test and the trappings of evil exist to teach us how to be moral and virtuous. Carol Christ suspects this idea serves a psychological purpose for humans.⁴⁷ When we feel anxious about the future it may be comforting to believe our anxiety is small in relation to all that God knows about how things will turn out. Process thought questions the implication of this, however. If we give up an open future, then do we also give up hope to change the status quo, to

⁴⁶ Christ, 33-34.

⁴⁷ Christ, 40.

change our fate? If God is unsympathetically good, why should we bother to enact any sort of change in our lives or the lives of others? This problem highlights the issue with adoption of the Platonic ideal that God resides in a higher realm. All the changes we witness are only apparent to us in the lower realm. God is not concerned with our daily problems. This influence is evident in the sort of Deist movement that characterizes God as a clockmaker who sets the clock and allows it to run with little interference. It emphasizes a distant God.

The focus on God being present in a higher realm, a consequence of Platonic influence on early theological development, has led to a concept of the afterlife as totally separate from this life where we can gain residence in God's realm. The consequence of this is an attitude that this life is less meaningful at best or totally worthless, at worst. Even more, this life is often considered a test as a response to the problem of evil. We are rewarded for our mortal suffering with heavenly residence. Carol Christ points out that this is not a consideration in Jewish or feminist theology.⁴⁸ Feminist theologians typically consider our embodied-ness a good. According to this view, the belief that the afterlife should be our focus detracts from this life.

Divine revelation is considered infallible in traditional theism. If God does not change then as the source of our divine knowledge, that body of knowledge also does not change. Regardless of its mediation through prophets, Scripture, or theological development, it is crystallized for all time. This raises several problems. One of which is that it relieves us from having to make hard decisions ourselves and become responsible for them. In addition, it compels us to force others to orient themselves

⁴⁸ Christ, 40-41.

according to revelation. We use it as a code for how to conduct ourselves with severe rigidity. Hartshorne points out that this is incompatible with the fragmented nature of knowledge that comes through an imperfect body.⁴⁹ The most apparent issue with this is that it flies in the face of our typical observations about the world. Information changes and we typically receive it second-hand. How can anything be true for all time if history alters everything about our lives? Carol Christ suspects here too that there is psychological appeal to this conception of truth.⁵⁰ Rather than making tough choices with limited information and becoming responsible for those choices and their outcomes we can rely on codes or doctrines attained through divine revelation.

Process theology rejects this idea on the basis that change is not only characteristic of creation but a fundamental aspect of God as well. Even our sense of what is good can shift with time and place. Carol Christ says of goodness, "Goodness too is not a state, like sitting still and being quiet. Goodness is one way to approach the changing world. Goodness has more to do with taking account of the changing needs of others, as well as one's own..."⁵¹ Goodness requires wisdom to know when to apply what one knows and when to seek out other information that may affect our decisions. What is good in one situation may be a great evil in another. This view is rejected by traditional theism on the basis that change is itself a mark of evil, or to be avoided. Carol Christ points out it was Plato who initially rejected change:

In traditional western thinking, change is given an exclusively negative evaluation.... To put it simply, for Plato change equals death and decay. Since the body is the location of death and decay, the human body and all bodies were found lacking. Plato found change so problematic that he imagined divine power

⁴⁹ Christ, 42-43.

⁵⁰ Christ, 43.

⁵¹ Christ, 46.

existing totally apart from the changing world, as we have seen. God not only did not have a body; he was also separate from all bodies.⁵²

This is even more troubling when you consider the pyramid of beings developed by medieval European theology. In this metaphor God was understood to stand at the top of the order of creation with each creature falling into its own place in the hierarchy. This had man below God, women below man, and all other animals below them followed by inorganic matter. This led to theology and philosophy placing emphasis on men as rational animals and relegating women to the changing part of creation. Carol Christ says, "Hers was the body that grew larger in pregnancy and then smaller again, hers was the body from which milk and menstrual blood flowed, hers was the body that stopped bleeding and became old. She was the one who cared for the children and tended the sick and aging. His was the mind that contemplated the unchanging God."⁵³

In contrast process thought takes the concept of an evolving world seriously. It embraces change as a fundamental aspect of the world. As Carol Christ says, "Its goal is to transform philosophy in light of modern scientific knowledge, especially evolution, and to provide a new way of thinking about divinity, humanity, and the world (understood as the whole universe) in light of it."⁵⁴ If the world is co-created rather than created at an instant with no change required, then God works from within the world rather than apart from it. There are many implications of this but one significant one is that we are not accidental but rather necessary to God. Rather than being created in an instant *ex nihilo* there has always been some of creation existent alongside God working with God to create more of the world. This also implies that the various changes we experience

⁵² Christ, 47.

⁵³ Christ, 50.

⁵⁴ Christ, 51.

such as birth, death, and growth are processes which God participates in. In addition, rather than believing in a static set of codes or laws passed through divine revelation, Hartshorne and other process thinkers believed in science. Scientific laws are relative to our place in time and space and change based on new information.

Process theology believes creation is a fundamental aspect of the universe alongside freedom. Both God and creation participate in this as a divine act. Freedom is not just the ability to choose new options. It is limited to the options allowed by the past. However, this does not mean freedom is merely synthesizing past elements into the future. Rather creativity is also at play. It allows for novelty among the synthesis of options. Creation is a relationship between the individual and the world. There is continual feedback and influence between them. Creation is always co-creation in this sense. We affect what we create and in turn are affected by the created things in our further exercise of freedom and creativity. Creation is participation in a divine act. God creates with us. As Carol Christ says, "The creative freedom of Goddess/God in process thought is not that of a God who exists alone and created the universe out of nothing. Rather it is the co-creative freedom of a divine power involved with all other individuals in the universe."⁵⁵

Returning to Whitehead and Hartshorne on identifying the fundamental entities of the universe, we find that Whitehead understood that experiences and enduring things were really series of entities and not separable themselves.⁵⁶ Each moment of experience is related to the chain of experiences in its series. Relations do not secondarily characterize these occasions of experience but are primarily how they

⁵⁵ Christ, 63.

⁵⁶ Cobb, John B, *Process Theology*, 19.

function. John Cobb says, "Whiteheadian process thought gives primacy to interdependence as an ideal over independence. Of course, it portrays interdependence not simply as an ideal but as an ontologically given characteristic. We cannot escape it."⁵⁷ This also extends to each of us. "Humans are understood as essentially belonging to a community. Process thought supports the relational, communal thrust of the Biblical view of God and humanity while extending this to include the rest of the world."

Through the concept of objective immortality, our experiences live on to influence the future, adding importance to each experience in the present. This also implies that the past influences the future through incarnation in it. We influence each other by entering each other. This integrates cause and effect. Where previously, the West thought that changes made to individuals were only artificial as in not entering into the essence of the individuals themselves, Whiteheadian process thought teaches that interrelations are internal to things⁵⁸. This implies a distinct way in understanding how God relates to and influences the world, via interrelation with the world. The past may be essential to the individual and in many ways help determine the bounds by which the present individual may act in accordance with influence from the past, but it does not do so deterministically.⁵⁹ The individual may choose how to carry out and present actuality. They may still have room to maneuver according to their own decision. The implication of this is that the environment has great influence on the individual in becoming "liberated" or in self-determining a greatest possible future involving self-actualization, while not totally determining the path which the individual takes. If we want individuals to

⁵⁷ Cobb, 21.

⁵⁸ Cobb, 23-24.

⁵⁹ Cobb, 24-25.

be ultimately liberated, then we must take great care to provide the best possible conditions for that in the environment in which the individual finds themselves. Cobb points out three implications of this.⁶⁰ First, no actuality is completely self-concerned. Egoism is not possible. Second, concern for the future is a variable we should consider. Morality aims to increase concern for the future and makes actualizing God's purposes for the world possible. Third, an occasion must anticipate how the rest of the world will perceive it to maximize its impact on the future. There can be no crystallized code for how to act when these are true. Nuance, wisdom, and interdependence on past events and the community we find ourselves in are all factors at play.

There also exists a sense of novelty within the process. Each occasion may bring in something novel to add to the experience based on divine influence. The divine may take its view of all possible actualities, even ones not before realized, and use those to influence new occasions. Cobb claims this adds to the richness of all experience.⁶¹ With regard to novelty Cobb elaborates, "God-relatedness is constitutive of every occasion of experience. This does not restrict the freedom of the occasion. On the contrary, apart from God there would be no freedom.... It is God who, by confronting the world with unrealized opportunities, opens up a space for freedom and self-creativity."⁶² Further, he adds "...far from sanctioning the status quo, recognition of essential relatedness to this God implies a continual creative transformation of that which is received from the past, in the light of the divinely received call forward, to actualize novel possibilities."⁶³ Rather than characterize God as omniscient in the sense that God knows all outcomes for all

⁶⁰ Cobb, 27.

⁶¹ Cobb, 28.

⁶² Cobb, 29.

⁶³ Cobb, 29.

time, God knows what has occurred and will occur. God is experiencing change with us and participates in constructing the future with us. God is wise. Cobb quotes Whitehead here as well in saying "The pure conservative is fighting against the essence of the Universe."⁶⁴

Process theology takes seriously the notion that God is love. Love by our experience and by psychology is tied to sympathy. We feel with the pain of those we love. Love requires a give and take with shifting feelings based on growth in the relationship. Despite love being tied to sympathy, classical theism has held that God's love to us is in tension with the Greek concept of God being impassible or passionless in order to be in sync with classical notions of perfection. Cobb uses examples from Anselm and Aquinas's writings reflecting the tension in theology between God's perfection and God's love.⁶⁵ They both resolved that God only seemed compassionate toward us and that in actuality God was following a plan dispassionately. God's actions are not compassionate and God does not think of us with sympathy from God's perspective while to us God only appears to be sympathetic to our daily struggles. This notion of love has extended into the analysis of *agape* love that Christians have pointed to as the core of the understanding of Christian love. It is characterized as an outpouring of goodwill. Charity has come to be connoted with this sense of outgoing goodwill. According to Cobb, this is missing the core element of sympathy and responsiveness to the loved one that we know as love in our everyday life.⁶⁶ Cobb says:

This perverted view of love as purely active goodwill is due in large part to the long-standing notion that this is the kind of love which characterizes the divine

⁶⁴ Cobb, 29.

⁶⁵ Cobb, 44-45.

⁶⁶ Cobb, 46.

reality. This traditional notion of love as solely creative was based upon the value judgment that independence or absoluteness is unqualifiedly good, and that dependence or relativity in any sense derogates from perfection.⁶⁷

Cobb argues that relativity and dependence are required for those who love to be informed and responsive to the needs of those they love. As much as there is a perfect absoluteness in the divine nature's ethical commitment to actualize good, one must also see the divine need for perfect relativity and responsiveness in carrying out the good and in loving humans. Cobb says, "While traditional theism spoke only of the divine absoluteness, process theism speaks also of 'the divine relativity' (this is the title of one of Hartshorne's books)."⁶⁸

Hartshorne wrote more about the relative divine nature of God or what he called the concrete actuality of God and what Whitehead would call the Consequent Nature of God.⁶⁹ Hartshorne considered "consequent" to mean the same as "relative." As a consequent of God's responsive nature, God relates to each of us. Whitehead considered God to have omniscient knowledge in the Consequent Nature by knowing all things that were knowable at any point in time God find's God's self in presently. However, the content of that knowledge was not simply an impassioned knowledge of the facts of the present moment but a sympathetic knowledge of them according to how the world's beings felt about the facts of the moment as well. Cobb says, "Hence, it is not merely the content of God's knowledge which is dependent, but God's own emotional state. God enjoys our enjoyments and suffers with our sufferings. This is the kind of responsiveness which is truly divine and belongs to the very nature of

⁶⁷ Cobb, 46-47.

⁶⁸ Cobb, 47.

⁶⁹ Cobb, 47-48.

perfection."⁷⁰ Cobb argues that sympathetic responsiveness is why the creative acts of God within history are considered sacred. It characterizes God's love to respond to the injustices that target the fullness of life for humans. To be in sync with that divine nature is to also be for the liberation of those who are oppressed.⁷¹ Luke 4:18 supports this view. There it says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."⁷²

Theology struggled to argue for the divine creativity of God once it compartmentalized God's acts in history to be more second-hand or relegate God to a primary cause that nature mediated. Once the Enlightenment began to create the idea that all acts could be explained through nature, it was hard to say any miracles or divine acts primarily caused by God had occurred. Cobb says the consequence of this resulted in Deism.⁷³ Even further, the twentieth century made it unintelligible to say that God had total control of history through primary or secondary means at all. Horrendous evil opens God to the problem of evil. Cobb traces theology's views from Barth to Bultmann to Bonhoeffer to Tillich and finds that in response to the problem of evil they would largely rather exclude God causally from the world rather than say God is in direct ways totally in control.⁷⁴ He further argues, "When the leading secular thinkers then see that the leading theologians have provided no intelligible means for speaking of God's

⁷⁰ Cobb, 48.

⁷¹ Cobb, 48-49.

⁷² Luk 4:18-19 NRSV

⁷³ Cobb, John, *Process Theology*, 49-50.

⁷⁴ Cobb, 50.

activity in the world, they are confirmed in their suspicion that this belief belongs to the myths of the past."⁷⁵ Cobb seems to be arguing here that the way for process thought to recover the conviction that God's creativity is involved in history is to show that human activity aligns with God's divine nature when it characterizes love. The human desire to liberate the oppressed and stop injustice comes from the need to act with what we perceive to be the divine nature.

While the Bible implies in many places that God is not in total control, the association with Early Greek concepts of divine perfection meant the Bible has been interpreted in this light. Human freedom was thus only apparent. Process thought by contrast, sees God's creative activity in the world as responsive to it. Process thought holds that any divine creative influence must be persuasive, not coercive.⁷⁶ God can present an "initial aim" that if actualized would be the best possibility for an occasion, but the occasion may choose to actualize another possibility. While this means there is risk involved, it also means evil is not incompatible with God's beneficence toward all creatures. This parallels how humans ought to conduct their actions. We ought not to try to control others but be persuasive. This schema removes the idea that to control others is to share in divine activity since God does not produce coercive force through creativity but rather persuasion.

Cobb points out the implications of divine love being characterized as persuasive.⁷⁷ It alters how we understand power thus changing our one-to-one relations with each other. The I-Thou relation is changed implying that we would see God

⁷⁵ Cobb, 51.

⁷⁶ Cobb, 53.

⁷⁷ Cobb, 54.

differently and understand better how God interacts with us to push us to better outcomes for our self-actualization. On a grander scale, it also alters how global societies interact with each other through international political relations. Humans looking to share in divine power would understand this differently.

God's creative love is persuasive, not controlling. This means each action God takes with respect to creation is a risk. God does not immediately know the result. Thus, process theology characterizes God's creative love as adventurous. This stands in contrast to God being seen as the ultimate supporter of the status quo.⁷⁸ Christians are told not to rebel against unjust governments or to upend the social order as God is in full support of those he has put in power. Historically, anyone opposed to despotic or tyrannical rule has also found themselves opposed to the church for this reason. Cobb argues, "In fact, as some theologians have argued, the more difficult the circumstances, the greater the opportunity for developing moral qualities such as patience!"⁷⁹

In response, process theology says God is the source of order, but there are qualifications to this support of order.⁸⁰ God is the source of order in the sense that God is the source of novelty for ideas that have been dominant to create order. As the novelty wears off and no longer serves to increase enjoyment, they must be overwritten with new ideals maintaining a new order. Process theology believes God's main goal is to increase the enjoyment of life in the creation. Order is used to aid in that goal but novelty is also. These two ideas in tension with each other are used to balance out increasingly just systems of order. As more complexity is introduced into the process,

⁷⁸ Cobb, 58.

⁷⁹ Cobb, 59.

⁸⁰ Cobb, 60.

new systems that are more able to facilitate justice occur. No one system is allowed to maintain order for too long before God aims to bring about newer, better systems of order through creative transformation. Cobb argues:

Since God does not control the details of any worldly process, the existence of a given state of affairs does not imply that God willed it. Further, since God encourages the actualization of novel possibilities as a means to maximizing creaturely enjoyment, continuation of a state of affairs that originally resulted from a high degree of conformity to God's aims may not express God's present will.⁸¹

Thus, while God is the source of order, God is also the source of upending that order for the furtherance of God's aim, the further enjoyment of life by creation. Whitehead also maintains that God's love is adventurous in the sense that God is experiencing the process in God's own life and enjoying the adventure with us.⁸² In this way God is invested and passionate regarding the fluctuations and changes the universe undergoes along with the experience of history that we undergo.

Returning to the problem of evil, we can see how God allows evil; however it is because of the nature of God's love as persuasive and because of human freedom that evil exists and not as a moral lesson for humans. Evil is a necessary risk that comes with God's love. While traditional theism claims all evil is only apparent, that everything works toward the good, process theology claims evil is really unrealized potential. God exercises persuasive power in pushing events toward the good but evil occurs when there is deviation from this from creation. The difference in these positions is that evil is not necessary according to process theology. It exists as a possibility because it must in order for God to practice persuasive creative love toward us, but it is not necessary in

⁸¹ Cobb, 60.

⁸² Cobb, 61.

the sense that God wills it under God's control to teach us moral lessons like under traditional theism. Cobb and Whitehead share the view that God's aim is to maximally increase creation's enjoyment. God thus stimulates chaos in order to bring about increasingly complex forms of order. This process is only possible if God's aim is to maximally increase enjoyment and not to eliminate all suffering. Process theology thus shares with traditional theism the sense that all that occurs in history ultimately works toward the good. However, it does not trivialize suffering by making it necessary for the greater good. It is rather, a deviation from what God intends in each instance.

Cobb summarizes the necessary link between the possibility for intrinsic good with the possibility of intrinsic evil using several examples.⁸³ One condition for enjoyment is the ability to receive feelings into oneself related to the experiences of others. If feelings others give us are harmonious, we experience them as good but this possibility may mean that negative feelings of suffering are passed onto us as well. We may even decrease our capacity for absorbing the feelings of others as a result of experiencing too much discord. Similarly, our cells allow us to experience the enjoyment life has to offer. We drink, eat, have sex, and use our bodies to have enjoyable experiences in our interactions with the outside world. Yet, this possibility also comes with the risk of experiencing suffering from the lack of these things or from our bodies receiving from the environment that causes discord within us. Cobb says, "...we see that the development of beings with the capacity to enjoy significant values, and to contribute significant values to those beyond themselves, necessarily meant the development of beings with the capacity to undergo significant suffering, and to

⁸³ Cobb, 72-73.

contribute significantly to the suffering of others beyond themselves."⁸⁴ In the same way this interpretation of divine reality should influence our own risk-taking. Should we risk discord and suffering to bring about a greater existence, a greater world? This would be in line with God's aim to increase enjoyment maximally risking the possibility of deviation and evil outcomes.

Cobb argues that the result of increasing complexity through the process necessitates an increase in freedom.⁸⁵ As more complex data and elements enter the picture, more possibilities for actualization arise. We can practice greater freedom because of an increase in choices from arising complexity. God risks deviation from God's initial aim because of increasing complexity and increasing our freedom. Yet, this is a necessity for the increase in enjoyment that arises from increasingly complex forms of order. Carol Christ reflects on this as she says, "Process philosophy can help us to reflect on the problems we face as we attempt to co-create a richer and more joyful world. Insofar as process philosophy leads us to identify multiple causes for the world's problems, process philosophy can also help us to recognize the need for a multiplicity of solutions."⁸⁶ Carol Christ suggest that process philosophy must become a political philosophy to do so. Her solutions range from feeding the poor to getting involved in the political process. These might be unsatisfactory answers for those accustomed to relying on a concept of divinity that already holds all the answers and has decided for all time the outcomes to our choices, but process theology believes the responsibility lies with us. If the church's mission is currently to aid the poor and bring about justice for

⁸⁴ Cobb, 73.

⁸⁵ Cobb, 73.

⁸⁶ Christ, Carol, *She Who Changes*, 190.

everyone, then we must be willing to use our tools at hand, in some cases social analysis, to find solutions unique to our place in history. There are no easy answers because we are the body that carries out the divine will. The doctrines provided here by process thought are in line with the Christian notion that we are an extension of the body of Christ working co-creatively with God to construct an increasingly better world.

Process theology finds itself in line with Christ's insight and life. The doctrine of creative-persuasive love is based on Christ as the incarnate exemplar of such a doctrine. Cobb summarizes Whitehead's view of Christ as a life that affirmed God's immanence not held up by abstract formulized thought but through descriptions of "immediate pictures."⁸⁷ Christ used stories and metaphors that were directly available to the audience of the time. This is why we can mine his words almost endlessly for understanding and come away with more and more each time. Our own setting highlights specific aspects of his teachings and brings to light the elements that are the most relevant at the time even if the original context is not immediately understandable to us now.

While God is understood to have a Primordial Nature that is unchanging (God will always use creative transformative love, will always co-create, will always bring increasingly complex forms of order to the universe, will always aim to increase our enjoyment of life), the incarnate nature of God participates in the change apparent in the universe and is the face of God we see when we interact in responsive love with God. Whitehead identified the Primordial Nature of God with the Logos. Logos moves through the world shifting order from chaos and who's initial aim is the greatest enjoyment for

⁸⁷ Cobb, John, *Process Theology*, 96-97.

the occasion and for subsequent occasions. Christ represents the incarnate Logos. This is not just Christ the person proper but also incarnate in the people who choose God's aim for the world. As Cobb says, "Christ is most fully present in human beings when they are most fully open to that presence."⁸⁸ Christ represents the Logos incarnate in the sense that Christ represents creative transformation, the needed element for growth according to Whitehead. Novelty is not only emphasized but required for any growth to occur in the various processes that characterize progress in the creation. Cobb says, "Creative transformation is the essence of growth, and growth is of the essence of life. Growth is not achieved by merely adding together elements in the given world in different combinations."⁸⁹ Cobb says, "[growth]...requires the transformation of those elements through the introduction of novelty. It alters their nature and meaning without suppressing or destroying them....Creative transformation is involved in all human responsive love."⁹⁰ Additionally, all human endeavor is marked by this love that Christ represents. Cobb argues:

Original thinking in science and philosophy, original art in all its forms, original styles of life and social organizations, all witness to the peculiarly effective presence of Christ. All involve a novelty that is not mere change but the creative transformation of what is received from the past. None of these are to be seen as pure and unambiguous instances of Christ's presence.... But the history of science, philosophy, art, life-styles, and social organization is the history of repeated creative transformations. This means that Christ is in no wise limited to the sphere of 'the religious' as this is conventionally understood.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Cobb, 99.

⁸⁹ Cobb, 100.

⁹⁰ Cobb, 100.

⁹¹ Cobb, 101.

We can see Whitehead's influence here on Cobb. Whitehead was himself a mathematician. It intrigues me that Whitehead sought to build such a philosophy as process thought. It led him to have respect for all other human endeavors.

According to the paradigm set by process thought, the life of Christ is effective in the same way that past events pervade the future. We've already highlighted how the past lives on in objective immortality by entering into the present and future. Christ's life similarly created a force from which future analysis of his teachings would create change. This was not the only way in which his life is significant, however. As Cobb says, "The life of Jesus was an important event, and its repeated reenactment and remembrance has strengthened its field of force."⁹² Paul writes of Christ's life in this way. It created a force impacting the surrounding lives of people proximate to his own. However, it also affects us from the past through his teaching. Christ often spoke in paradoxes or in contrasts. As Cobb says summarizing Niebuhr, "He makes our virtue questionable and assures us in our sinfulness. By reversing our self-evaluation he opens us to creative transformation." Christ affects change in us from the past through his sayings and teachings. Christ uses contrasts and paradoxes to describe the essential structure of existence

In our own present human experiences, we inherit from our past memories and experiences which carry us forward through our decisions. We construct self-identity this way from the elements of our past. However, added to this is the divine presence represented by the initial aim of the Primordial Nature of God, the Logos, and through the incarnate Christ, the creative principal of transformation. Cobb says:

⁹² Cobb, 103.

This aim is at what would be best in each moment in terms of a wider view of the consequences than we ordinarily take. There is a tension between oneself and one's experience of what ideally would be, between what one is and the rightness in things that dimly discerns. Hence the divine presence is experienced as an other, sometimes recognized as gracious, often felt as a judge.⁹³

Jesus represents something different than this, however. The divine is not "othered" by the self-expression of Jesus in his life. Jesus participated in life as a human. Jesus was guided, much as we are in imitation, by divine agency within him and by his own past. Jesus calls for us to participate in the same creative transformation he underwent as a human in life.

The love that God has for us is persuasive in its power over us. It is not ruled by punishment or mandates. It takes the essential risk that we may choose otherwise. If this persuasive love that affects creative transformation comes from Christ, the Logos, the Primordial Nature of God then it stands to rule that the creation also must live this way. For us to truly share in the divine essence we have to exercise the same restraint that is guided by persuasive love that spurs growth. We must keep ourselves from practicing a love that is only seemingly caring, only seemingly kind while using manipulative forms of coercion to actually control the object of our love. To love in the divine way is to allow, no, to encourage the object of our love to be a subject and use their freedom to choose the best for themselves and the world around them.

A common social criticism of progressive viewpoints is that they are often too stargazing to be taken up by those that live a normal, mundane life. This criticism says that the common person has too many daily worries to realistically consider such lofty concerns as the future or social progress. This can be considered, using a wider

⁹³ Cobb, 105.

metaphor, as putting the Kingdom of God aside to take care of one's own house. To this, Cobb might argue that creative transformation is something already embedded in human love. As he says:

One major direction of that transformation is toward the broadening of the anticipation of the future that is to be affected by one's actions. This broadening of horizons does not destroy interest in one's private future or in that of those with whom one is more immediately concerned, but it sets these narrower concerns in a wider context within which they are transformed. The interest in the larger whole puts interest in more limited aspects of the future in a new light and gives them a new role.⁹⁴

The work toward the Kingdom of God does not leave the work of the common person in trying to carry out a good, fulfilling life aside but rather adds significance to it. The Kingdom is one in which all people will live in social and economic equality. That only has significance in so far as we are concerned with the daily worries of the poor, marginalized, and common people.

⁹⁴ Cobb, 100-101.

CHAPTER 3

IS THERE ROOM FOR HOPE? PROCESS THEOLOGY'S IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR FUTURE

The church is a loaded term often used by laypersons to refer to the diversity of segments that collectively incorporate the global Christian movement. Even when sectarianism and division characterize it, to the typical person we are judged as a monolith. Thus, I make no distinctions in this chapter except where they are super applicable. In my section on the Social Gospel, I referred to Protestants because they were the ones mainly responsible for liberal theology in the post-Civil War period. However, even Catholics took up the Social Gospel. We will see in our dissection of liberation theology that it was mainly a Catholic development in Christian theology. These divisions however are relatively unimportant for identifying a Progressive strand of Christian thought. They become even less relevant when we consider that the kingdom of God image cast by the Social Gospel and subsequent progressively Christian movements involves all humans regardless of their professed religious tradition. Regardless, an exploration into how we define “the church” is necessary for identifying who is tasked with taking up the gospel mission passed on by Christ and exemplified by his life and ministry.

What constitutes the church proper has been a question of debate through Christian history. Whitehead recognizes the marks of the church being the preaching of

the Word and the practice of the sacraments. Yet there is an additional sense in which the church also is represented by the community in which it finds itself situated. Modern secular definitions of what constitutes a church tend to also wish to include elements of community. Whitehead offers a line of reasoning here from within process thought.

When Whitehead says that events in the past pervade the future he means in a "constitutive" way that the past creates the bounds for the future. As Cobb explains, "It is really present in each of these events. Subsequent events do not choose whether or not to be partly constituted by this event. They decide only how to take account of it. How a successor incorporates its predecessor effects the potency of that predecessor in still later events."⁹⁵

While most preceding events decline in terms of how weighty that influence is on subsequent events, we have the combined power of Christ's life and the church which was directly born out of the force his life created. As Cobb puts it, "Thus the church is the community that is consciously dedicated to maintaining, extending, and strengthening the field of force generated by Jesus."⁹⁶ This is what is behind the metaphor of the church becoming the body of Christ. By the logic of process theology, the church is the incarnated force generating a future based on the life of Christ which is the Logos incarnated to carry out the initial aim of the Primordial Nature of God.

Many Christians throughout our history along with the more recent Social Gospel movements have called its ultimate form the Kingdom of God, the beloved community. As we have distinguished this is far from just a vision of the future. It is the mission of Christ taken up by the people in the church community. It has evolved to include all

⁹⁵ Cobb, 107.

⁹⁶ Cobb, 107.

marginalized groups and even reached dialogue and creative transformation with other religious traditions. This mission is political and mundane in its aims, but radical in its efforts and outreach to those aimed at changing social structures and thus the world.

This is right in line with the process philosophy conception of increased complexity. As the church evolves it will come to include many more individuals that have traditionally stayed outside its scope. Societies at large mirror this concept as well. According to Leslie Muray, another student of Cobb at Claremont University in California, interdependence characterizes communities much as it does individuals. He says:

Process thinkers, while wanting to preserve the gains made in the heightened Western sense of personhood, feel the sense of community has been virtually lost in industrialized society.... As small towns, small firms, inner cities, in spite of and at times, in their own way, because of gentrification, decline, and suburban lifestyles became increasingly mobile, privatized, and fragmented, the loss of the sense of community is more acute.⁹⁷

For process thought, the individual is always an individual-in-community. This makes any definition of “the church” difficult to pin down. This is more an indictment of our traditional western language handed down from more atomic, isolationist understandings of the self where we idolize independence over interdependence, however. Muray says:

The community of which an individual is a part is also a part of the individual. The self is a social-relational self as the entire past is constitutive of the becoming of a momentary experience, as the subjective immediacy perishes, that momentary experience enters into the self-constitution of other selves and momentary experiences. While distinct, the distinction between the individual and the community is not absolute, the more I participate in the community, the more of an individual, in the sense of a richer, larger self, I can become.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Muray, Leslie, *An Introduction to the Process Understanding of Science, Society, and the Self* (Lewiston, NY: E Mellen Press, 1988), 41.

⁹⁸ Muray, 42.

While this may make defining the strict boundaries of a given community like the church difficult, this is a strength for Christianity. Muray says, "For process thinkers community is where one's unique personhood in its creative freedom is accepted and affirmed, and where one finds a sense of belonging, rootedness, and intimacy." This is why the kingdom of God will be much more than just the church. The church in its mission to bring about the just society will need to be in relationships with those who also take up that mission. It will need to keep its ear on those who make up the marginalized that are the target for Christ's liberation. Rather than thinking about how the church will incorporate these types of people into its corpus, we should be thinking in reverse. How will we join in solidarity with the poor and marginalized in *their* communities where we may also find fulfillment? Finally, this leads us also to think on how we can structure the communities and institutions around us to meet this mission. Muray says, "If the communities in which we live shape us profoundly, if the social institutions of which we are a part are also a part of us, the organization of our communities and social institutions is of paramount importance."⁹⁹

While the church is an example of this sort of community that could be formed with an alternate vision for personal identity, it would still need to evolve to achieve it fully. The kingdom of God is such a version of this evolved to its ultimate form. Cobb gives us a description of what that could possibly be:

The environment that is the true body would extend beyond it to all human beings and to all creatures. The sense of mutual participation with all life and even with the inanimate world would radically alter the way we treat the environment.... When we have existentially realized that we are continuous with the environment, that the environment is our body, then we will find new styles of life appropriate to that realization.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Muray, 43.

¹⁰⁰ Cobb, John, *Process Theology*, 116.

Cobb does not believe this sort of future is assured. God takes great risk at the cost of granting us the sort of freedom that makes such a vision possible. We may destroy ourselves rather than find fulfillment in each other in community. The greatest hurdle is the church itself. Social Gospel thinkers, process theologians, and liberation theologians have argued exactly this. Doctrinal transformation must occur in order for us to alter the course. However, this is a strength of Christianity. Opposing doctrines are an opportunity to evolve the church, according to process thought. Cobb says, "When Christians experience the clash of received doctrines, both with one another and with ideas coming from without, as an opportunity for purification, enrichment, deepening, and transformation of their heritage, they participate rightly in the church."¹⁰¹ Whitehead argues that the church must be open to Christ in the sense that they must be open to ideas and doctrines to which the natural inclination has been to protect themselves. This description of creative transformation in the church matches us quite well with the concept of faith being a critical reflection on praxis that we will come upon when exploring liberation theology. Whitehead similarly claims that creative transformation of the church does not merely accept whatever doctrines or truths come about but reflect critically on their meaning discerning them with the past and traditions in view.¹⁰²

Other doctrines and other religious or secular traditions are an opportunity for the church to evolve as well. The church is encroached in its power to act as a transformative force by modern Western culture on the one hand with "its art, science, philosophy, historical scholarship, and movements for liberation. On the other side,

¹⁰¹ Cobb, 131.

¹⁰² Cobb, 131.

there are the other great cultures and religious Ways of the world, with their profoundly different insights and ways of salvation."¹⁰³ The movement for the liberation of women is a great example of a point of tension in which the church has an opportunity to evolve and undergo creative transformation. While the secular feminist movement are effective at pointing out the male dominated society and institutions, they also point to the same male-dominated structures within the church also. Cobb says, "...perceptive women have seen that the overwhelmingly male character of theological ideas, images, and language have played and continue to play a central role in the oppression of women and of the feminine aspect of all people."¹⁰⁴ Writing in 1976, Cobb could see clearly a problem we are still struggling with today.

Feminism is only one area where creative transformation could occur. Each area of potential growth has its own nuances and issues, however. The problems are complex and require tough lasting solutions because the power structures implicit in our language, ideas, and doctrines not only keep us from seeing such problems but also have these problems embedded in their foundations. We will see when we discuss liberation theology that this is why liberation theologians call for the "uprooting" of such structures in the strongest terms. Cobb attempts to identify by way of using feminism as an example just how this works:

The need is both to liberate women to be themselves and to play their roles in society freely as human beings, and to liberate the feminine principle in both women and men. But the relation between these two goals is complex, and women rightly fear that men, in seizing onto the latter, may co-opt the movement for their own healing without making the further changes required if women as women are to enter fully into society. Only when women attain an equal place

¹⁰³ Cobb, 131.

¹⁰⁴ Cobb, 132-33.

with men in a society that honors the feminine principle equally with the masculine one will the needed changes have been achieved.¹⁰⁵

When we consider how in traditional theism God is often seen as a supporter of the status quo, that male language and traits are placed above feminine ones, and when our language only speaks in these terms, we come to realize how embedded injustice is in our communities and our churches.

There is hope, however. We face extinction. Whether we lose our planet or go to war with ourselves and annihilate the human race, we face existential deletion. The whole of our achievements, our mark on this universe is at stake and so we must get this right. We must not allow the forces of apocalyptic thinking within the church to win the day. We must not allow pessimism and fatalism to seal our fate before we even try. This is why I endorse process philosophy as a fundamental aspect of Christian progressivism. It's marriage with science and a realistic view of our interdependence with each other and with nature will allow us to measure the impacts of our actions on the planet and each other without closing our ears. We must not entrench ourselves in sectarianism but be willing to venture into the spaces where each battle for our existence is being fought. We must get political.

The whole of Cobb's analysis has been made in light of the threat to human survival. He says of this global threat, "If the churches refuse to be transformed in the light of this crisis, they will be denying the most basic call of God, the call to life itself."¹⁰⁶ Cobb points out that the West has taken on the tradition of a shortened time scale for Earth. In the past the Earth was believed to have been created merely a few hundred

¹⁰⁵ Cobb, 133.

¹⁰⁶ Cobb, 143.

years before the Bible. The Apocalypse always seems imminent throughout Christian history. This shortened time scale endangers us inasmuch as we continue to seek only short-term solutions to global problems regardless of the cost to future generations. Christians have historically called for more exploitation of natural resources as solutions to human problems. We have disregarded nature by rendering it only as important as it suffices to meet our human needs. The emphasis on humans being the only creatures among creation that matter because of our moral sense encased within traditional theism is at play here. Cobb points out a few examples:

Any proposal to limit population growth by government regulations so as to make possible a viable future is quickly criticized for its threats to personal liberty, if not on the moralistic grounds that any interference with reproductive processes is 'sin.' Any concern for the welfare of animal species other than the human is quickly written off as sentimental and as insensitive to the pressing needs of human beings. At most what is accepted is an idea of stewardship that in fact reduces all that is not human to a means to human ends.¹⁰⁷

The maximal enjoyment of life that is God's initial aim calls for us to preserve the enjoyment of animal species as well and to do so maximally. We do this not on the basis that animal enjoyment feeds into human enjoyment, but for the sake of the other species' enjoyment and survival. Likewise, history does not solely belong to the realm of the human but nature as well. Nature has a history. Science allows us to study nature in such a way that we can conceive of it as a process still being carried out. Cobb says, "Far from being endlessly repetitive and cyclical, as the dualists have liked to think, life on this planet, and even the cosmos as a whole, has been in constant nonrepetitive movement."¹⁰⁸ Nature's history also is intimately connected with our history. Continents evolving, weather changing, species evolving and dying out all affect us in enormous

¹⁰⁷ Cobb, 147.

¹⁰⁸ Cobb, 149.

ways. "What process theology seeks is a form of human-historical progress that simultaneously allows for the meeting of real human needs and for the renewed development of a rich and complex biosphere." Process rejects destruction of the environment done for the sake of only human enjoyment to the detriment of other species' enjoyment and to the detriment of future human enjoyment. Process rejects proposals to return to a previous way of living which could not sustain current populations and would leave many to starve. Instead, process accepts the view that "science guided by imaginative vision can find ways whereby a relatively large (though certainly limited) human population can enter into new and finer forms of enjoyment that are compatible with sharing the earth with many other species."¹⁰⁹

This is why we need to believe in an open future. We will need to overturn the traditional theist tenets that teach us that there is no hope, and that God has already decided and controlled the outcome. Cobb sums it up when he says: The momentum of our present destructive patterns of production and consumption is overwhelming. If we care deeply about the future of the planet, we are tempted to despair. If those who despair care the most and understand the best, then indeed, there is little hope,, for if we despair, we will not participate responsibly in what needs to be done....If we are to act with the necessary urgency, we need to believe that there are possibilities open in the future that will carry us through our present crisis. But if we are told instead that there is in fact no real danger, that all is in the hands of a good and omnipotent God who will care for us, the then urgency disappears. Confident Christians look with complacent serenity at the activists and chide them for their anxiety. Christ, they assert, overcomes anxiety with the assurance that all will be well.¹¹⁰

The middle way is to accept both divine grace and human responsibility. Responsibility is not zero sum. Creaturely action spur creative transformation because it is sourced in divine action. This is why we cannot rely on confidence that God will solve these problems for us. There is no divine action separate from creaturely action according to

¹⁰⁹ Cobb, 149.

¹¹⁰ Cobb, 156.

this paradigm. God acts and works through us. There is a hazard in this, of course, that humans may choose to act other than what God persuades them to do. This is necessary, according to process theology because it means any coming crisis is not inevitable. Process theology believes in the open future. The important distinction from other free will defenses that may be offered is that the future is not open through a trick of perception. It is not open because we are unable to discern what will occur or accurately predict with the correct model. It is actually open. Humans may decide the course of events collectively and through choosing to follow the divine will or choosing otherwise.

There is a sense that God is also imaginative. God creates visions for us to follow. If we choose to follow them, we can attain new insights, creativity, and ideas that will guide us to solutions. We can allow this sort of novelty to add something necessary to the elements of our experience. God is thus the "ground of hope."¹¹¹ Cobb says, "Trusting God is not assurance that whatever we do, all will work out well. It is instead confidence that God's call is wise and good."¹¹² Thus, we return to our doctrine of God coming full circle. God must be seen as wise rather than all-powerful.

¹¹¹ Cobb, 158.

¹¹² Cobb, 158.

CHAPTER 4

NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN: LIBERATION THEOLOGY AS CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PRAXIS

Gustavo Gutierrez, credited by many with founding liberation theology, explores the meaning and purpose of theology in his initial work *A Theology of Liberation*. He was educated in Western European seminaries and became a priest in Peru during a tumultuous period of Latin American history. He is known widely for questioning modern theology's origins, purpose, and vision. He established a theology with liberation of oppressed people at the center. Here, we will go over his theology as it developed around this goal. Although he questions traditional systematic theology, we will see this did not take away from how thorough and deep his theology was. What is the place of theology, how do the modern demands of the marginalized people in Latin America impact the church's mission in every part of the globe, and what is the relevance of the gospel in light of such questions? We will explore these questions.

Gutierrez believed the widespread poverty and economic and social injustice present in Latin America created an opportunity for the Catholic Church to notice the *signs of the times* as defined by Vatican II. This rather political moment created a chance for the church to shed a light on issues surrounding social justice and refresh the church's mission to stand with the poor and marginalized. Gutierrez believes the

demand for liberation means more than recognition of the poor, as the church suggested, but a call to uproot the systems of oppression that keep poor and marginalized people everywhere oppressed by the wealthy and the nations that hold the wealth of the world. Gutierrez links the mission of the gospel with the methods of theology and ultimately, with the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Gutierrez regards faith and theology as both arising from the ground of activity in the Christian life. He did not believe it arises from academic speculation or intellectual grounds, but rather he characterizes it as an organic outgrowth of the Christian life. As he says, "Theology is intrinsic to a life of faith seeking to be authentic and complete and is, therefore, essential to the common consideration of this faith in the ecclesial community. There is present in all believers- and more so in every Christian community- a rough outline of a theology."¹¹³ Where traditional theology wants the assurance of divine revelation and often leans on authority for its foundation, liberation theology instead seeks to use theology to serve the life of the Christian. This is a ground-up view of theology rather than a God's eye view of theology. While theologians would be tempted to call this a weakness in liberation theology, Gutierrez sees this as a strength instead, that it finds its ground in the concrete actions of the believer and is thus able to reflect continually and revise itself according to that reflection. In addition, this is not a blind or isolated reflection, it is *critical* reflection on praxis. Gutierrez believes that faith creates a sort of pre-understanding in the believer as they begin to act.

Gutierrez does not see this as a break with traditional theology, however. He argues that this is consistent with traditional theology as an outgrowth, or development

¹¹³ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. John Eagelson and Caridad Inda (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 3.

of it. He does this by pointing to the purpose of theology as it has been defined in church history. Gutierrez outlines that classical theology takes on two traditional tasks. Each development in theology breeds further development and so none of these historical tasks of theology are nullified by modern developments. Rather they each arise from a specific historical moment when they are deemed necessary for furthering our understanding.

According to Gutierrez, two tasks of theology are categorized as classical: Theology as Wisdom and Theology as Rational Knowledge. Theology once held the task of presenting wisdom transcendent to the realm of worldly concerns. It took on a monastic character and was the privilege of those living a cloistered life to discover in deep contemplation.¹¹⁴ It incorporated Neoplatonic idealism in stressing a metaphysics that held a transcendent sphere from which all things came, and all things returned as the ultimate reality. Gutierrez argues that this made the reality of this earthly existence contingent.¹¹⁵ In doing so it did not value this life enough, he would argue. Thus while this understanding of theology served the church in its time, it required something more as the church's influence and presence grew.

Theology and spirituality later went through a split as Theology began to take on a more scholastic role of acting as the arbiter of rational knowledge. It left spirituality to the side as consolidating the church and creating consistency in doctrines became the church's chief concern. According to Gutierrez, using Aristotelian categories Thomas Aquinas and Albert the Great considered it a "subaltern science." Gutierrez argues

¹¹⁴ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 4.

¹¹⁵ Gutierrez, 4.

Aquinas saw theology as "an intellectual discipline, born of the meeting of faith and reason."¹¹⁶ Theology after the 13th century, especially after the Council of Trent, become much more systematic and discerning. Gutierrez claims it served three functions for the church during this period: "to define, present, and explain revealed truths... to examine doctrine, to denounce and condemn false doctrines, and defend true ones... to teach reveal truths authoritatively."¹¹⁷

These functions are perhaps why the church, according to Gutierrez, becomes more rigid or dogmatic in its approach to theology over time. Much is at stake for theology during this time as Christianity spread and many different schools of thought arose with each culture and kingdom it touched. While this sort of focus on intellectual rigor and doctrinal consistency served the church then, theology must adapt to fit the needs of the church now. In particular, the Catholic Church was evolving in its understanding of its own mission. The aims of Vatican II called for a response from the Catholic Church to modern global problems. This response to the "signs of the times" required a change in the purpose of theology. While it may be tempting for Gutierrez to root his sense of the purposes of theology in this demand, he instead turns to much more historical reasons for crafting his definition of theology.

Theology as *critical reflection on praxis* is a definition that Gutierrez does not come up with on his own but rather credits its intellectual origin to Augustine and the *City of God*. It is here that theology first contends with the real-world implications of a historical occurrence. In this case, the sacking of Rome left a large political void and

¹¹⁶ Gutierrez, 5.

¹¹⁷ Gutierrez, 5.

Christians were blamed for it. Augustine took this up and felt the need to use theology to clear Christianity of the downfall of Rome.¹¹⁸

One way Gutierrez's view of theology is differentiated from classical understandings of theology is the implication that it must always be read in context of the historical moment from which it springs. Gutierrez's analysis traces this practice throughout church history. He argues that beyond Augustine using the historical moment to assert the purpose and definition of theology this continues in the 12th century with the growing realization of a union between acts of contemplation and active teaching.¹¹⁹ Knowledge gained from contemplation was not just appropriately learned in isolation but also meant to be shared among Christians and the wider world. Revelation thus becomes more than that which is attained in contemplation, as it had been historically understood to this point, but also that which is transferred through the holy act of teaching. This is a necessary development to the realization that revelation has an anthropological dimension.

Eventually, Vatican II validates this and takes the concept further by announcing that the role of the church is to resist power structures and be in service to humanity.¹²⁰ Here, it is established that the church and its people are to look for the "signs of the times" in discerning the church's proper mission. This offers the opportunity for revealed truths to not just be accepted intellectually but to also be used through the praxis of the church community. Intellectual analysis is not discarded but instead used to "afford

¹¹⁸ Gutierrez, 5.

¹¹⁹ Gutierrez, 6.

¹²⁰ Gutierrez, 7.

greater clarity regarding the commitment."¹²¹ This is the entry way for a new understanding of the gospel as liberation, according to Gutierrez's framework.

Liberation Theology marries the current historical moment with political consciousness and makes relevant the mission of the gospel through how the church serves the poor and marginalized as a result. Gutierrez notes how Marxism, among other sociological tools, is responsible for elucidating the church's impact on the world at large as in general it works to consider the significance of human activity in shaping the world. This leads Gutierrez to consider the eschatological dimension in theology. If the gospel calls for us to be in communion with each other and with God as its basic tenets then human action in history must reflect this growing commitment as well.¹²² Here, he points to the rise of orthopraxy, the focus on right action as opposed to orthodoxy, the focus on right belief. A focus on orthopraxy is not meant to make orthodoxy irrelevant but rather to focus the Christian life around how truths play out through the actions of the church. Reducing theology to orthodoxy misplaces the emphasis of Christian life on the acceptance of certain truths, which can always be disputed and argued over, notes Gutierrez.¹²³

Gutierrez's ultimate point in discussing this trajectory of theology, is to lead us to the conclusion that the Christian life has evolved in such a way that it has come to understand serving the gospel primarily means creating communion with God in service to others. This is why theology is critical reflection on praxis, communion with others is not a step taken in solitude away from others, such as in contemplative theology, nor is

¹²¹ Gutierrez, 7.

¹²² Gutierrez, 8.

¹²³ Gutierrez, 8.

it taken in the classroom as an intellectual exercise, such as in scholastic theology. Rather, it is done in the field, on the ground where the people that the Christian community services live. Gutierrez also interprets the gospel this way as a result. He says, "By preaching the Gospel message, by its sacraments, and by the charity of its members, the Church proclaims and shelters the gift of the Kingdom of God in the heart of human history."¹²⁴ This represents a shift of focus for defining theology. It is not that which produces pastoral activity or charity or service to others by way of doctrinal justification, rather it is reflection upon those things which occur in the Christian life already, which is composed of both pastoral activity and charity. Going beyond the typical boundaries of the church means also attentiveness to the transformations of the world. Gutierrez says, "By keeping historical events in their proper perspective, theology helps safeguard society and the Church from regarding as permanent what is only temporary. Critical reflection thus always plays the inverse role of an ideology which rationalizes and justifies a given social and ecclesial order."¹²⁵ Theology corrects in both directions as he also argues that it keeps pastoral activity from being reduced to "immediatism" or activism by "pointing to the sources of revelation."¹²⁶ Theology serves a double prophetic function. It seeks to interpret historical events considering the plan of God. It defines and redefines Christian commitments throughout history considering service to others. Gutierrez says, "Theologians will be personally and vitally engaged in historical realities with specific times and places. They will be engaged where nations, social classes, and peoples struggle to free themselves from domination and

¹²⁴ Gutierrez, 9.

¹²⁵ Gutierrez, 10.

¹²⁶ Gutierrez, 10.

oppression by other nations, classes, and peoples."¹²⁷ We can see where Social Gospel and liberation theology intersect. To both schools of thought theology serves the church's mission, which is the kingdom of God, rather than justify the mission in an intellectual way. It is still critical and uses history to determine the correct course for the church, but it does not wait for academic validation to act. Theology supports those already in the field in service to the communities which the church serves. The cycle of praxis and reflection on praxis expresses the critical aspect without needing to retreat to isolation or intellectual exercise to do so.

This sort of hermeneutic does not negate the other two purposes of theology, as wisdom or rational knowledge, but rather further elaborates on them. The truths that have resulted from theology serving those purposes historically in the church are reflected upon in light of current events and the transformations of the World. Gutierrez therefore is not creating a new theology but theology as critical reflection on praxis is a new way to do theology. It is not just a tool of analysis, according to Gutierrez, it is involved directly in shaping human history. He says, "Understood in this way, theology has a necessary and permanent role in liberation from every form of religious alienation- which is often fostered by the ecclesiastical institution itself when it impedes an authentic approach to the Word of the Lord." Liberation is tied to the gospel and theology because the church is called to respond to its actions with the world and the world is filled with poor and marginalized people demanding liberation. The gospel guides the missions of the church but is also informed and directed by the shifts occurring in history in the world.

¹²⁷ Gutierrez, 10.

Gutierrez turns to the situation of the poor and poor nations that call for liberation in clarifying the church's mission. liberation theology, much like the Social Gospel, seeks to bring about the kingdom of God as a just society on Earth. Getting there means directing the efforts of the church toward the poor and breaking ties with the rich and powerful. This is made difficult by the policies and systemic forces employed by the rich. The world's rich nations employ a tactic known as development to send aid to "underdeveloped" nations, as they are known. Gutierrez sees problems in this scheme and elaborates richly on how the church is responding to this.

He points out that the concept and term *development* has come to be pejorative in the poverty-stricken Latin America and across the world. This is because even after many decades of application, poorer countries have not *developed* as nothing has changed for the poor in those countries. Gutierrez says,

The poor countries are becoming ever more clearly aware that their underdevelopment is only the by-product of the development of other countries, because of the kind of relationship which exists between the rich and the poor countries. Moreover, they are realizing that their own development will come about only with a struggle to break the domination of the rich countries.¹²⁸

According to Gutierrez, this is an extension of the social, political, economic, and cultural dependence imposed by the oppression of social classes. Gutierrez claims liberation is a more appropriate response to this inequality than development. He says, "Only a radical break from the status quo, that is, a profound transformation of the private property system, access to power of the exploited class, and a social revolution that would break this dependence would allow for the change to a new society...."¹²⁹

Gutierrez uses the term "uproot" throughout his work to suggest that this change to the

¹²⁸ Gutierrez, 17.

¹²⁹ Gutierrez, 17.

status quo must be radical implying that development is a way to create the semblance of change without altering the system in any substantial way. Gutierrez says, "The goal is not only better living conditions, a radical change of structures, a social revolution; it is much more: the continuous creation, never ending, of a new way to be human, a *permanent cultural revolution*."¹³⁰ The scope of liberation is not merely spiritual but a total change to society at large. Gutierrez laments that theology has historically avoided touching on topics that include politics or the confrontations between social classes. It has until now focused on telling oppressed people that their liberation lays in another life.

Gutierrez believes that the gospel is centered on liberation. He points to Paul in support of this in Galatians 5:1, "For freedom Christ has set us free."¹³¹ Paul here refers to freedom from sin. However, Gutierrez extends his analysis when he says, "To sin is to refuse to love one's neighbors and, therefore, the Lord himself."¹³² Sin here is a breach of the relationship with the Other and God. While this interpretation focuses on individual sin, Gutierrez argues here that in no way does this negate the structural problems that cause humans to be unequal. Instead, it points to a basic component of communal sin, a base rejection of the Other and therefore God. He uses a quote from Bonhoeffer to argue that freedom is really freedom to love another. Bonhoeffer says, "freedom is not something man has for himself but something he has for others.... It is not a possession, a presence, an object... but a relationship and nothing else."¹³³

¹³⁰ Gutierrez, 21.

¹³¹ Gutierrez, 23.

¹³² Gutierrez, 23.

¹³³ Gutierrez, 23.

Gutierrez concludes that liberation is really about communion with God and with other human beings. It brings about the condition that the gospel is aimed at.

Catholic critics have pointed out that liberation theology is too immediate, that it is too narrowly concerned with a material liberation. To this Gutierrez claims there are three levels on which to understand liberation. This concept is deeper and more nuanced than a term only designated for a short-term freedom from oppression. First, liberation "expresses the aspirations of oppressed peoples and social classes, emphasizing the conflictual aspect of the economic, social, and political process which puts them at odds with wealthy nations and oppressive classes."¹³⁴ This focuses on the present situation in which the poor have spoken and begun to act as the agents of their own lives. This situation is what the signs of the times alluded to in Vatican II are pointing to. The Catholic Church is to become aware of and attentive to this situation.

Second, there is liberation understood historically. Humans determine the trajectory of their destiny. Liberation is a process leading to the eventual "creation of a new humankind and a qualitatively different society," as Gutierrez puts it.¹³⁵ This can be understood as the concept of the coming of a Kingdom of God. The gospel points to this as the mission of Christians, their *telos* to place it in Aristotelian terms.

Lastly, he points to the contrast between development and liberation. While the first world focuses on development as the target for oppressed nations, this covers up the Biblical sources for liberation. Christ is understood here to represent the freedom from sin which causes our separation. If Christ liberates us then we can live in

¹³⁴ Gutierrez, 24.

¹³⁵ Gutierrez, 24.

communion with humanity and therefore God, the basis for all human fellowship.¹³⁶

Gutierrez explains that these are not three different levels overlaid on each other but rather interdependent understandings of liberation which support each other. Gutierrez believes this defends from strict spiritual interpretation of liberation which avoids the real-world implications and harsh realities for a sort of asceticism. It also keeps from short term political solutions that do not really get at the root of the problem.¹³⁷ While critics may be tempted to point out liberation theology's approximation to Marxism and label it as an *immediatism*, this understanding of the levels of liberation at play, keeps liberation theology from succumbing to this, in my view.

In summary, Gutierrez understands theology's purpose in light of the demand for liberation from the oppressed which calls the church to action. Theology's job is to discern the values of aspects of the Christian life toward liberation. It should correct aberrations in the Christian life that are taken in exchange for immediate political action. This is a defense against the charge of immediatism that liberation theology often encounters from Christian critics.¹³⁸ Gutierrez clarifies that this also requires "an awareness of the need for self-liberation."¹³⁹ Furthermore, he claims, "It is not a matter of 'struggling for others,' which suggests paternalism and reformist objectives, but rather of becoming aware of oneself as not completely fulfilled and as living in an alienated society."¹⁴⁰ It is only on this basis that one can come to relate to the poor and take up their struggle in solidarity.

¹³⁶ Gutierrez, 25.

¹³⁷ Gutierrez, 25.

¹³⁸ Gutierrez, 81.

¹³⁹ Gutierrez, 82.

¹⁴⁰ Gutierrez, 82.

CHAPTER 5

HOW FAR IS HEAVEN? CHRIST AS LIBERATOR

Turning to salvation and Christology, Gutierrez believes that classical theology has not done enough work on defining the mechanics of salvation. If salvation or redemption are understood based on Christ's ministry, then what did Christ do to redeem us and what are we redeemed from? While classical theology says salvation is centered on Christ, it has not described how this occurs without use of cultural metaphors from Europe. We have already indicated in the chapters on process thought how doctrines of God and of Christ affect the way Christians believe they share in divine action.

Doctrines influence how Christians relate to others and can alter the way we wield power or influence to achieve goals. Here too, liberation theology is mindful of how systems of power wield coercive power tied to a doctrine of God that makes God out to be a controlling parent. Many of these metaphors from European culture leave God as a cruel judge or king needing satisfaction for a crime to which Christ pays the price on our behalf through his suffering on the cross. Another during the medieval era views God as a lord to whom the peasantry owed a price which Christ paid with his life given in exchange for our inability to pay the debt. The consequence of using these metaphors is that traditional power dynamics are applied. Liberation theology chooses to use the metaphor of Christ as a liberator from oppression. Many liberation

theologians will even use the ancient Christus Victor metaphor that views Christ's descent into hell as a spiritual victory over evil and the power of death. We needn't go that far to see that Christ's purpose is to redeem us from suffering.

Like the Social Gospel thinkers and process theologians believe, the social and economic injustice of the modern era causes great suffering to the primary target of Christ's ministry, the poor. This significantly alters the doctrine of salvation from a focus on the question of salvation from hell to one where we observe the forces that bind us in oppression and ask how God liberates us from such forces. Liberation theology, much like the Social Gospel views the church's mission as coming directly from Christ's focus on the poor. What is required is a radical revolution, an uprooting of oppressive systems of power. In light of this, there is a sense in which all humans, not just believers, will come to partake and live in such a just society. This is the mission of the church. The implication of which is that we shift focus from personal conversions creating a just society to becoming involved in overturning unjust systems of power that keep all humans from living their fullest lives.

Gutierrez accepts the modern concept of universality. I must admit, I am unclear which sense of this he means. There exist two possibilities. The first is that he means we all have access to salvation universally in the sense that we are each extended the choice to join in communion with God, as Gutierrez has put it. The second is universality in the most direct sense that each person will be saved and counted as believers. Consistency with the rest of the theological structure he has built thus far leads me to believe he means the latter but is speaking vaguely perhaps because of the official position of the Catholic Church which prefers the former over the latter interpretation.

He is clear, however, on the conditions for salvation. Gutierrez says, "persons are saved if they open themselves to God and to others, even if they are not clearly aware that they are doing so."¹⁴¹ Thus I feel Gutierrez has in mind for a personal, spiritual salvation and a salvation aimed at saving all people through the eventual establishment of the kingdom of God on earth.

Gutierrez characterizes the traditional view of salvation as viewing this life as a moral test, much like process theology does. A person either says yes or no to communion with God from this perspective. He cites Mt. 25:31-46 as evidence that Jesus specifically made acceptance of others a condition for salvation. These verses are remembered as the "least of these" verses wherein Christ describes the condition for entering heaven being reliant upon how one treats the poor and strangers. Gutierrez sees this as accepting or rejecting communion with other humans, the marker of one's willingness to be saved, or liberated. This is tied to liberation as salvation, but more specifically to the building of the kingdom of God. Gutierrez says, "They reject union with God insofar as they turn away from the building up of this world, do not open themselves to others, and culpably withdraw into themselves (Mt. 25:31-46)."¹⁴² He clarifies further, "Salvation is not something otherworldly, in regard to which the present life is merely a test. Salvation-the communion of human beings with God and among themselves-is something which embraces all human reality, transforms it, and leads it to its fullness in Christ..."¹⁴³ The Kingdom of God is the ultimate goal of the gospel in his paradigm. Christ's sacrifice and the church's mission are defined by this "fullness."

¹⁴¹ Gutierrez, 84.

¹⁴² Gutierrez, 85.

¹⁴³ Gutierrez, 85.

Gutierrez characterizes salvation as being more about this life and reality than some other reality or afterlife. He says, "The absolute value of salvation-far from devaluing this world-gives it its authentic meaning and its own autonomy, because salvation is already latently here."¹⁴⁴ He thinks this is a strong response to atheism. He points out that atheism's allure is that it respects this life and does not care for or consider an afterlife. He says atheists "are not interested in an otherworldly salvation... rather they consider it an evasion of the only question they wish to deal with: the value of earthly existence."¹⁴⁵ Gutierrez considers the traditional view of salvation as personal piety insufficient in responding to this concern. Rauschenbusch and late Social Gospel thinkers saw a harmful obsession with maximizing personal conversions in the Protestant church. They were asking how can the church also focus on defending the "least of these" as well?

The focus on personal conversion skewed the medieval and Renaissance church's mission. It enabled colonialism in the name of converting the natives that Europeans encountered. Alternatively, the view that there is universal grace making salvation possible universally is the "quantitative" approach to salvation. This view developed during the church's history as a response to pagans and the concern that they may never encounter the rites of the church. This concern was mostly pre-Modern, post-Enlightenment and so was the concern of late classical theology. The turn to what Gutierrez has outlined here regarding salvation is the "qualitative" approach, which seeks to enrich the view of salvation by clarifying that the focus of salvation is universal human communion with God and the rest of humanity. This is at the heart of liberation. It

¹⁴⁴ Gutierrez, 85.

¹⁴⁵ Gutierrez, 85.

is at the heart of the prophetic concept of human history building up the kingdom of God. For Gutierrez salvation is historical. It is a long play at building the kingdom of God. Gutierrez then turns to the story in the Bible as proof.

Gutierrez points to the story in Exodus of the liberation of the Jews from Egypt as evidence of the link between salvation as liberation and direct political action. He says, "The liberation of Israel is a political action. It is the breaking away from a situation of despoliation and misery and the beginning of the construction of a just and comradely society. It is the suppression of disorder and the creation of a new order."¹⁴⁶ The story of the gospel is interpreted in this light as the fulfillment of the same mission but extended to all of humanity. He says, "The work of Christ in a new creation. In this sense, Paul speaks of a 'new creation,' that is to say, through the salvation Christ affords, that creation acquires its full meaning (cf. Rom. 8)."¹⁴⁷ Gutierrez sees the struggles of humans against oppression to be actions that are in accordance with the prophetic understanding of the gospel through the concept of the Kingdom of God.

According to Gutierrez, the situation in Latin America is the result of sin, not just an accident of history. He says, "An unjust situation does not happen by chance; it is not something branded by a fatal destiny: there is human responsibility behind it.... This is the reason why the Medellin Conference refers to the state of things in Latin America as a 'sinful situation,' as a 'rejection of the Lord.'¹⁴⁸ He further interprets this to not just be an indictment of individual choices and sins but an indictment of the whole system that allowed this. This is consistent with his view of sin as communal in nature. Sin is the

¹⁴⁶ Gutierrez, 88.

¹⁴⁷ Gutierrez, 90.

¹⁴⁸ Gutierrez, 102.

absence of the fellowship between all humans promised by the gospel. It represents anything that gets in the way of that. Sin has systemic causes rooted in oppression under this view. Gutierrez clarifies, "Sin is evident in oppressive structures, in the exploitation of humans by humans, in the domination and slavery of peoples, races, and social classes."¹⁴⁹ Sin is the root of social injustice, the root of alienation. Alienation is really the basis for all other sins. It separates humans from God and from other humans and fractures the possibility of an eventual Kingdom of God. Communion is that which Christ brings us into with God. This is the way in which Christ is said to conquer sin. Sin here is interpreted to be the negation of love. Thus, liberating actions, actions taken to manifest the Kingdom of God, are in line with the gospel. They are the real mission of Christ's ministry and thus the church's as well.

The goal of liberation theology is to make clear how the church can take part in this mission. In his article written in 1988 "Expanding the View" he specifies some of what this looks like. Gutierrez reflects on the reality that the situation of the poor in Latin America requires a complex understanding of the social dynamics in Latin America. The strong oppress the weak through power structures. The church has also historically played a role in this oppression through its relationships with those in power. So, to be in solidarity with the poor is to attend to their specific needs. This is not to divorce the commitment to the poor from strictly Christian practices but to add to the breadth of practices Christians must take on to truly commit to solidarity with the poor. This means that understanding the poor and their situation is less theoretical and more about living in their communities and in solidarity with their situation.¹⁵⁰ He says, "If there is no

¹⁴⁹ Gutierrez, 102-3.

¹⁵⁰ Gutierrez, xxx.

friendship with them and no sharing of the life of the poor, then there is no authentic commitment to liberation, because love exists only among equals."¹⁵¹ Gutierrez makes clear here that theology is at the service of the Christian community and who it serves and that it comes second as a phase after living out the Christian life in community with those that the church serves which the poor are a privileged party to this service. This stands in contrast to theology being the primary conversation regarding God abstracted from the Christian life itself. Theology done in isolated contemplation or as an academic exercise under the guise of intellectual speculation is not a living theology. It does not touch the ground where the church's primary work is located. This work is amongst the very people it serves. It includes daily involvement in the politics, culture, and conditions of the poor and marginalized. Here, we can see how process theology can serve to clarify how sharing in divine power means using persuasive creative transformation rather than coercive manipulation or control.

We will look at two examples of theologies of liberation so that we may better understand how liberation theology shifted the discourse globally around the church's mission. The first is by Edward Antonio in his article "Black Theology." In this piece written for the *Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* in 2007 he articulates the origins of black theology through reading of James Cone, one of the founders of Black theology. Cone is responsible for setting the categories that later black theologians will adopt to elaborate on the nature of theology and blackness. Cone is responding to classical theology but also redefining the approach through the concept of liberation and blackness.

¹⁵¹ Gutierrez, xxxi.

The second piece is from feminist theology. While black theology adds the dimension of race to the understanding of the gospel, feminism adds a much more universal dimension missing from theology. This dimension centers on gender but also questions all modes of oppression and attempts to incorporate discourse from other theologies of liberation. Feminist theology has connections with a revitalized spirituality across its communities. It has also intersected with other faith traditions such as Buddhism. This raises questions that all progressive Christians will have to account for in their understanding of the church's mission concerning plurality, gender politics, language, culture, and systemic oppression and suppression of such topics.

While we touched on some of the roots of black theology when we discussed the Social Gospel, black theology continued to evolve after the Social Gospel Movement. Edward Antonio identifies two possible routes for discussing the origins of Black theology. One way is to find it in the struggle of Black Power and Civil Rights in the 1960s.¹⁵² This is a political reflection on black theology. The other is to point even further historically to the roots of the struggle in slavery and Jim Crow racism. He summarizes the second way when he says, "Black theology represents not just a faddish attempt to redefine Christian teaching in the light of the demands of the social and political forces of the 1960s but a critical search for a historically black Christian form of reflection on issues of racial justice and liberation."¹⁵³ Black theologians use slave narratives from Christian slaves and history from this time onward to represent the origins of Black theology. Antonio says these are not mutually exclusive and the approach he takes in this article is to discuss the themes of black theology with a critical

¹⁵² Christopher Rowland, *Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2007), 79.

¹⁵³ Rowland, *Cambridge Companion* 79.

distance to black theologians themselves. He recognizes that black theology has not been an intellectual exercise, but part of the social struggle. Like Gutierrez, he seems to recognize that theology is done while one is already in the field involved in the struggle one reflects on to do theology.

Antonio focuses on James Cone. This is because, as he argues, Cone is who most schools of black theology agree on as the one who introduced it in academic circles. He is credited with setting the categories for the development of black theology within the academy. He cites two definitions of Black theology. First, the one given by the National Conference of Black Churchmen in June 1969:

Black Theology is a theology of liberation. It seeks to plumb the black condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the black community can see that the Gospel is commensurate with the achievement of black humanity. Black Theology is a theology of 'blackness.' It is the affirmation of black humanity that emancipates black people from white racism, thus providing authentic freedom for both white and black people. It affirms the humanity of white people in that it says No to the encroachment of white oppression.¹⁵⁴

You can see similarities here with Gutierrez. Liberation is for everyone even if it seen by through the lens of a particular people's oppression. The focus on a particular people's oppression does not detract from anyone else's condition, but rather teaches us through a particular historical moment experienced by a particular community the way to liberate everyone. While in their infancy, theologies of liberation tend to focus on the oppression of one particular community, later in their development they often touch on systems of global oppression that apply to other communities as well. Christ's life and mission is seen through this lens of lifting the conditions that oppress people. Thus, Christ is viewed in black theology as a liberator as well.

¹⁵⁴ Rowland, 81.

Cone with Wilmore defines black theology in a different way that still shares commonalities with the first definition according to Antonio. Cone says:

Black theology, therefore, is that theology which arises out of the need to articulate the religious significance of [the] Black presence in a hostile White world. It is Black people reflecting on the Black experience under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, attempting to redefine the relevance of the Christian gospel for their lives.¹⁵⁵

Antonio argues that both definitions link the black experience to redefining the gospel's meaning for black lives. Second, white racism is a reality that defines both blacks and whites and their experience when these people encounter each other. It has been a global reality occurring in vastly different societies across the planet. Here, we can see the interconnected nature of the oppressor with the oppressed. Racism harms the oppressor as well. In this way, liberation is not just for the oppressed but also for the oppressor. In black theology, just as in any other theology of liberation, the kingdom of God or the *beloved community*.

Sociologists and philosophers have begun during this period to understand academically how black people have been defined as less than white people throughout human history and how this seeps into language and culture to reinforce and help establish systems of oppression. Antonio points out how race has been a central theme of Western Philosophy since its inception, and it is Western Philosophy that created racial recognition as a central theme for understanding the self in the Modern era. He lists Kant, Hegel, Hume, Voltaire as such post-Enlightenment thinkers though the list is far from exhaustive, in my view.¹⁵⁶ His point ultimately, is not that Black Theology is just a critique of white racism, but that it is also born from the systemic discrimination that

¹⁵⁵ James H. Cone, *Black Theology Vol. I* (New York: Orbis Books, 1979), 468.

¹⁵⁶ Rowland, 82.

the modern black experience has always been subject to. What it means to be black, the focus of Black Theology, comes directly under this context and setting.

Cone believes theology is born from the social, political, and economic conditions under which their originators find themselves. Therefore, it is not universal speech about God but limited to its context historically.¹⁵⁷ This may come as a shock to classical theology which views itself as based on eternal divine revelation. Cone claims that theology is always born from a historical moment. Its formation, the purposes it serves for the church, and the formation of doctrines it produces are all affected by the historical moment in which theology finds itself. Its formation highly depends on the social class the speaker of theology belongs to.

According to black theology, the value of the gospel relies on a reflection of the struggle for racial justice. Theological reflection clarifies the purpose of the gospel. Progress to black liberation becomes the measure of how far we have come to establish the kingdom of God.¹⁵⁸ We interpret and re-interpret theology according to the historical moment we find ourselves in. Revelation, according this paradigm, is always an event that comes through a historical moment. It is interpreted considering that historical moment. This denies that revelation has a universal crystallized meaning. Each place and time will produce its own development in theology according to its setting and historical moment. Process thought's understanding of how each event is the product of the limitations set by the past combined with human choices comes to mind here for me.

¹⁵⁷ Rowland, 83.

¹⁵⁸ Rowland, 84.

Antonio points out that according to Cone, one cannot separate theology from its origin. Cone uses the metaphor of the slave and slave master. Each will adopt a different theology. Antonio says the way theology develops from the theologian hinges on "whether he/she speaks - even through elected silence - on behalf of the oppressor or the oppressed."¹⁵⁹ This is a hard line as well. Cone clarifies that they are not even seeing the same reality and extends this analysis to the black church and the white church. How can they take on the same vision of the church's mission if they do not even agree on its foundations? Furthermore, Cone attributes such differences to opposing "mental grids." Summarizing Cone's thoughts Antonio says:

The argument here is that if we want to know why the white American apprehension of the reality of the Gospel has not theologically appropriated the question of colour or racism as a central problematic in its consciousness...we must look not to the content of white theology, that is, its assertions about God humanity, etc., but to the social presuppositions which determined its shape and form. We must look to its social connections; to the goals and aspirations it serves.¹⁶⁰

Cone connects biography directly to theological perspective. He does not mean the theologian's individual biography but the collective biography of which the theologian is a product. Whereas liberation theology has been able to identify the sources of oppression as class or capitalism, Black theology introduces race or blackness to the conversation. These are not mutually exclusive. They are interconnected.

When analyzed historically, the concept of blackness reveals the ways in which Western civilization has always juxtaposed white with black, or good with evil. Black has always had an association with "ugly," "evil," or "all that is undesirable."¹⁶¹ It is this

¹⁵⁹ Rowland, 84.

¹⁶⁰ Rowland, 85.

¹⁶¹ Rowland, 87.

understanding that creates the perspective from which white theology has always understood blackness. It is under this hostile terminology and understanding that black theology seeks to redefine the gospel. It is this context under which black narratives are understood. Antonio says, "In other words, what is at stake when we talk about blackness is nothing other than the being or humanity of black people."¹⁶² Though its focus is blackness, black theology still emphasizes the interconnected nature of human societies. Not only through the connection between the oppressor and the oppressed but also through what is revealed when we peel back and discuss the systems of power, culture, and language that enforce and reinforce oppression. These aspects affect all human communities affected by these forms of oppression.

There is an explicit connection in Cone's thought between "blackness" as both a symbol of oppression and liberation and the way in which Christian theology understands the *imago dei*. If we are made in the image of God as humans being in freedom, then Cone argues that theology should focus on the relational aspect rather than the ontological aspect of that.¹⁶³ Antonio clarifies, "since the image of God in man ultimately means liberation, and since liberation is achieved in relational rather than in ontological categories, man's real nature is revealed whenever man attempts to overthrow the powers that oppress him."¹⁶⁴ Cone took seriously the existentialist dictum that "existence precedes essence."¹⁶⁵ Thus, what is primary in the understanding of our own nature is the act of rebellion against systems of oppression that limit our freedom

¹⁶² Rowland, 87.

¹⁶³ Rowland, 88.

¹⁶⁴ Rowland, 89.

¹⁶⁵ Rowland, 90.

rather than an understanding that we are beings already built with the possibility for freedom in some theoretical sense.

When understood through the lens of blackness, Cone identifies Christ's experience as an oppressed individual as the ultimate reason why his redemption works precisely on the basis of his blackness. Not that Jesus is black, but that he understood blackness in light of social-historical oppression and liberated people from such conditions. Antonio says, "Hence, when Cone declares, as he frequently does, that Christ is black, it is the idea of Christ's identification with the suffering of blacks caused by racism which is in the foreground, and not primarily the racial category of blackness."¹⁶⁶ Thus much like liberation theology identifying the struggle of Latin Americans against their oppressors as a continuation of the gospel mission to bring about the Kingdom of God, Black theology as a theology of liberation identifies the struggle of blackness against oppression with the same gospel message.

Feminist theology continues the conversation around interconnectedness in the struggle for liberation. To an even greater degree, feminist theology connects communities oppressed by systems of power. Feminist theology finds itself at the intersection of gender, race, class. Feminist critique of systems of power may begin with questions around gender, women's rights, sexual politics and language, and liberation of those oppressed by systems that enforce traditional views of those issues, but its goals are much wider. The dynamic of liberating both the oppressed and the oppressor are at play here. When the oppressed are liberated new possibilities for liberation open up for those in power as well. This requires a critique of all aspects of power.

¹⁶⁶ Rowland, 99.

Mary Grey in the article “Feminist Theology: A Critical Theology of Liberation” establishes feminist theology as using intersectionality to establish a more universal dimension to our understanding of sources of oppression and thus also possibilities for liberation. Feminist theology is a global theology. It argues not just for the liberation of women but for the full transformation of societies. In this way it is unique as a theology of liberation. One might consider that it is an evolution in our understanding of the interconnected nature of our struggles. Some theologians have even argued that it goes beyond Gutierrez’s liberation theology.

Grey traces the origins of feminism to secular efforts to establish women in spheres of power that traditionally held men and overturning societal rules that kept women from doing so.¹⁶⁷ This occurred from the 19th century onward and resulted in white women earning the vote, according to Grey, which resulted in a schism in feminism. Mujerista and womanist feminist schools of thought do not trace their trajectory in the same way. They largely see themselves abandoned by mainline feminism. Grey laments that this rift has yet to heal.¹⁶⁸ This is an area where liberation and feminist theologies could evolve. The discourse is ongoing.

Further developments in feminism came along which added dimensions of oppression to feminism’s sociological analysis. One such development has been separatist feminism rejecting the submission/domination archetype and rejecting traditional notions of power instead opting for an alternative woman-defined culture. It refuses to use traditional tropes of women gaining power, through the control of the

¹⁶⁷ Rowland, 106.

¹⁶⁸ Rowland, 107.

family or child-rearing, or through romance¹⁶⁹. It instead sees the value of women in different terms questioning, for example, women's inheritance rights throughout the world.

Socialist feminism adds the dimension of class to the critique. Grey argues that when it does, it reveals that the structure of the value of work for men and women are not considered equally. As Grey says, "Women are productive and reproductive and the whole area of housework and child-rearing, of responsibility for the home and care for the elderly, should be taken into the struggle for juster structural relationships between men and women."¹⁷⁰ What all this revealed was the gender-blindness present in all disciplines to that point including theology. This was a call for feminist Christian thought to begin to account for its own gender-blindness in these areas.

In the same way black theology used the image of God to argue that systems of racist oppression go against human nature, women also consider that it also goes against gendered forms of oppression. Traditionally, classical theology relegated the subservience of women as an inherent truth and part of human nature, according to feminist critics of theology. This really justified the subjugation and victimization of women throughout history embedding it in God's plan for humanity in general.¹⁷¹ Theology's task is "to uncover the theologies and institutional practices which perpetuate the injustices inflicted on women and deny their full human subjectivity; and constructively, to create a liberated and liberating theology."¹⁷² Again, here, we see that the task is for theology to interpret and re-interpret doctrines that it has treated as

¹⁶⁹ Rowland, 107.

¹⁷⁰ Rowland, 107.

¹⁷¹ Rowland, 107.

¹⁷² Rowland, 108.

universal. The oppression of women teaches us about the goals of the gospel and thus the church's mission much like how the oppression of Latin Americans taught us about oppression by class and black theology taught us about oppression by race.

Catholic feminists note Vatican II as having been the entry point for feminist theology. This developed into organizations in Europe for feminist theology that ultimately began to include Jewish and Muslim theology as well.¹⁷³ In the Southern parts of the world including Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia EATWOT (Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians) was established to encompass theologies developed by third world and marginalized theologians. Feminists in Latin America and Africa among other places were not taken seriously, however, until the Fifth Conference in New Delhi.¹⁷⁴ It was there that women forced their influence on the final statement by the conference. Grey quotes Clause 7, "Just as the experience of the Third World as a true source for theology must be taken seriously, so also must the common experience of women in their liberational struggle be taken seriously."¹⁷⁵ The EATWOT Women's Commission set out to begin a dialogue between first and third world feminists which it achieved in 1994 in Costa Rica after this.

Conservative critics of feminist theology often use the incarnation of Christ as a justification for male dominance. However, as Grey says, "Feminist theology stresses the fundamental importance of the incarnation of God in Christ as human, rather than Christ as male... where the symbolic force of Jesus as suffering brother in the struggle, regardless of his gender, is a more empowering symbol."¹⁷⁶ Here as in other liberation

¹⁷³ Rowland, 108.

¹⁷⁴ Rowland, 109.

¹⁷⁵ Rowland, 109.

¹⁷⁶ Rowland, 113.

theologies, the suffering of women helps reinterpret the gospel. Feminist theology questions the divinity of Christ as male. If God is male, then this presupposes that the structures which keep women dominated are justifiably held in place. Grey elaborates here, "it would be false to suppose that feminist theologians simplistically replace a Father with a Mother God. Rather, the many strands of feminist theology tend towards imaging God as relational-the Trinity is conceived as a God in dynamic movement, as the archetype for just relationality."¹⁷⁷ The act of calling God Mother, for some feminists, is not another essentializing of God but rather the recognition of the nurturing aspects of God that were present but looked over all along. Others would rather go further than this image in recent times as they recognize that traditionally feminine characteristics are also problematic. Regardless, process theology comes to mind here. Carol Christ also saw the opportunity to reframe divinity in light of a new cosmological understanding. Liberation theology could adopt this possibility to open liberation to more oppressed people. This would empower that movement.

Finally, in addressing pluralism and universality within feminist theology, Grey argues that this is a strength of feminist theology of liberation. Grey says, "Feminist spirituality (-ies) rejects all dualistic splits between matter and spirit which dogged traditional spiritualities. It is embodied...."¹⁷⁸ Feminism's roots in both the secular and religious allow it to encapsulate a more universal experience of embodied-ness. This may result in spirituality that lays outside the scope of Christian theology. Process theology shares this with feminist theology. Both emphasize embodiedness. Through the notion that creation is essential the body of God, the kingdom of God concept is

¹⁷⁷ Rowland, 113.

¹⁷⁸ Rowland, 115.

thought as the ultimate celebration of embodiedness. This is also stressed in its Christology where it emphasizes that the church's mission is known by how Christ carried out his life on earth. We are the embodied continuation of that process. To conclude, Feminism offers to liberation theology as Grey says, "The implications of contextuality, diversity, pluralism, and the global need for justice..."¹⁷⁹

Liberation theology's influence is felt in many grassroots movements across the planet that endorse rights and equality for marginalized groups. It has even gone beyond the bounds of what is considered the Christian world and found dialogue with those of other religious traditions such as Buddhism. The richness of this theology for informing how Christians should use and spread the gospel makes it a strong candidate for forming the basis of a progressive Christian worldview.

¹⁷⁹ Rowland, 118.

CONCLUSION

Progressive Christianity is a growing movement that seeks to establish the gospel message firmly in the struggle to better the lives of the poor and marginalized. Whether it is by influencing social institutions, standing in solidarity with the poor, or encouraging dialogue across different global faith communities, the means shift with the times, but the mission remains the same. The goal of Christ's teaching is to bring about a more just social order that allows each human to flourish to the best of their potential.

Acknowledging the faults of each of these schools of thought included in this thesis is a necessity if Christian Progressivism is to evolve. Creative transformation is only possible if we can be forthright and honest about the directions we must go in. Cobb acknowledges the fault of process theology and the needs for it to engage with others:

Looking back, many of us who stand in the tradition of process thought must recognize that quite unconsciously our work has largely expressed our position as white, middle-class, North American males. No doubt it still does. Even when the distortion introduced into our perceptions by this sociological situation was pointed out to us, we were slow to acknowledge it. Even now we tend to universalize judgments that are in fact shaped by quite particular and limited cultural experience. To force us to further self-criticism we need more external criticism, especially from Black, political, and Latin American theologians.¹⁸⁰

These areas of potential growth come with uncomfortable conversations. As progressives, we must continue through the process until we have refined our faith according to the mission we are called to carry out. Feminist critiques, racial critiques,

¹⁸⁰ Cobb, John, *Process Theology as Political Theology* (Westminster: Westminster Press, 1982), 152.

and class critique must not scare us. We must listen. Every movement discussed in this thesis has room to grow.

What each of these movements share provide hope for the future of Christian doctrine supported by a living theology. There is a chance to get this right. Ironically, schools of thought marked by resistance to systematic theology can come together to provide a new way to understand God, the church, the church's mission, and the gospel. Our language around theology betrays the elements I have introduced here. It's hard to define the church when we are using understandings of identity marked by relationality and interdependence. It is hard to define the church's vision when it changes with the times. It is hard to define the boundaries of the Christian community when it has become global and intersected with other religious traditions in its aims to liberate the oppressed and lift up the marginalized. This is made tougher when we consider the ultimate form of the church to be a beloved community marked by the fulfillment of the self-expression of every human individual. Yet, we must work to continue to define these terms again and again. We must be able to continually revise these terms and be willing to throw away the ones that no longer serve the purposes of the gospel.

The roots of each school of thought I have dissected in this paper are rooted in a unique hermeneutic that make the definition of faith given by Gustavo Gutierrez possible. A faith that is critical reflection on praxis must be able to discern the signs of the times to better clarify the church's mission. The socio-historical view of Christianity as a movement born from the impact of Christ's life and teaching from the Social Gospel roots of this Christian progressivism provides the key. Theology was viewed as serving

the mission of the church, not the other way around. Thus, doctrinal formation is meant to serve the needs of the church in fulfilling its current mission. The mission at the time of the development of the Social Gospel was perceived to be the aid "of the oppressed classes in their struggle for justice."¹⁸¹

"Theology must be formulated in terms of the social mind of the time," says Cobb.¹⁸² The justification for this exists in how we understand the Christian community as a living community. It undergoes shifts and changes as it crosses history. Cobb says, "The question is not whether there will be changes but whether these changes are responsible developments in response to new challenges."¹⁸³ This process of interpreting the Bible and directing the Christian community is theology's task and it does not involve absolutizing any portion of Scripture or crystallizing our understanding of its interpretation. Rather, as Cobb says:

The test of our present judgments is not their confirmation to any Christian absolute but rather whether they have developed responsibly through Christian history. How we are today to address oppressive social systems is not to be decided by an appeal to a Biblical absolute but by our shared reflection on what we are now called to do as Christians.¹⁸⁴

Christian progressivism acknowledges that to understand a movement, we must study its roots. While at times examples and pieces from the past such as in Scripture are particularly relevant and worth conforming to. However, most of the time this will require some flexibility. We must practice creative selection. "Such a view of the hermeneutical task is a fully political one. It carries the historical critical approach to its full conclusion,

¹⁸¹ Cobb, 22.

¹⁸² Cobb, 22.

¹⁸³ Cobb, 48.

¹⁸⁴ Cobb, 48.

while supporting a partisan stance."¹⁸⁵ The church cannot be afraid to sully itself with the daily work required to keep an honest and straight path toward the mission. The very field where people labor to become free and liberated from oppression that keeps them from realizing their fullest selves is exactly where we need to be.

Christian progressivism is marked by a hope for the future. It is not an empty hope blindly trusting a distant controlling God. Rather, it is faith in our own movement and communities. It is a faith based on interdependence and relationality. It stands in stark contrast to the Apocalyptic worldview held by many Christians today, particularly those caught up in Evangelical movements influenced by Calvinist beliefs or those that in general stick dogmatically to the traditional theism of the past and its doctrine of God. A sense of doom and gloom pervades those churches whose congregations vote in orientation toward, behave as if, and discuss a creation that is fated to destruction. In the strongest terms they share views more akin to an apocalyptic cult than a religious tradition called to become the steward of creation. The increased obsession with Revelation, the doctrine of salvation morphing into spiritual fire insurance through an emphasis on conversion, the calls to puritanical beliefs, judgments, and behaviors have all laid waste to our sense of hope.

Within this drive to an apocalyptic view of creation lies traditional theism and all its problems. The various problems pointed out by the process theology of Whitehead and Hartshorne that plague traditional theism render it unable to respond in a meaningful way to modern problems. To the problem of evil this view says that all evil is only apparent and a lesson of moral rigor for humans. To problems of ecology this view

¹⁸⁵ Cobb, 51.

looks down on animals and other created beings as subservient to humans and of less value in the maximal enjoyment of life. To problems of social and economic equality that plague many populations globally this view says that this life is of little import and nihilistically claims it will all end in fire and disaster anyway. Why bother with improving anything if this life is a test, creation ends in fire, and God is simply running a simulation for us to pass a moral exam?

The tenets of such movements within Christianity have resulted in this historical moment we find ourselves wherein religious dialogue has been reduced to a zero-sum culture war. The only reason given for wanting to be a member of the church is to assure one's place on the correct side of history. Such concerns for winning a religious tug of war between those who consider themselves orthodox and those on the outside or margins find the church becoming increasingly irrelevant to secular culture. The church under this thought paradigm is unable to meaningfully respond to daily concerns about home, food, health, etc. that common people are forced to focus on daily. The church under this paradigm is unable to respond meaningfully to social and economic inequality, natural disasters resulting from ecological destruction, warfare, tyranny, or increasing dependence on lifestyles that abstract from human experience and creativity in the form of AI, technocratic oligarchy, or digital forms of control wielded by increasingly complex power structures. These issues are not worth the church's attention when its primary focus is on the afterlife and conversion.

In response to this, progressive Christian thought claims there is hope. Hope is important to consider for all the modern concerns listed above. Without hope there is no drive to evolve or to continue the process. What these churches and movements with

traditional theism at their center take for hope in a better moral order is really a form of nihilism that claims life is of significantly less value than the afterlife. It lays our hope at the feet of a God that remains behind a veil with mysterious and even unknowable aims. This God holds impossibly far off standards for moral order and rigidly sticks to them to support the status quo. How can we yearn to be free to enjoy the gift of life under this paradigm? We cannot. There must be another way.

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